

**Performers with learning difficulties and issues of
identity, resistance and collaboration:**

‘No More Hiding Behind the Curtain’

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Summary

This research focuses on the performing arts lives of four performers with learning difficulties, who were all employed by the Razor Edge Theatre Initiative and had been involved in performing arts for many years - as either actor, musician or dancer. The researcher was a joint director of this organisation.

The research proposes the use of performing arts methods in inclusive research with artists with learning difficulties. It demonstrates the potential for performers with learning difficulties to explore, reflect on, embody and communicate their thoughts and feelings through their art and thereby contribute to disability research. Performing arts methods become a tool for collecting data, for enabling participants to contribute their views, for presenting findings. The practice-based approach offers an alternative to methods involving verbal interviewing and written representations and contributes to the debates in the literature about finding ways to include verbally less-articulate individuals.

In an attempt to build on the work of other inclusive researchers a research process evolved where very little was preordained, in order to leave room for the artists to influence the direction of the research. Collaboration with the artists to develop research that was transforming and useful for them as developing artists became a central concern.

Development of an artistic identity can be a means for people with learning difficulties to challenge reductive notions of learning difficulties, as is evidenced by the Disability

Arts movement. By foregrounding their claims to an artistic identity and focusing on the participants' skills and ambitions as artists, the stories in this research project emphasise the multi-faceted and transient nature of the artists' identities, as well as their abilities to use their skills as a means of reflection and expression.

Artists with learning difficulties need opportunities to develop their skills. The struggle to achieve recognition as an artist can be connected to lack of effective inclusion policies, lack of funding, and to exclusive academic values and aesthetic perceptions based on notions of normal/abnormal. Performers with learning difficulties have to forge their own pathways, create their own opportunities with non-disabled allies in the arts. This they do in the context of theatre, music and dance companies that comprise an artistic community aiming for inclusion. The research suggests that opening up access to Higher Education in performing arts may enable performers with learning difficulties to make contributions to aesthetic developments and debates and to use their art to contribute to disability research.

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Chapter One

Introducing the research project

The Project in Brief

In this thesis the reader will find an account of a research project carried out with four performers with learning difficulties, which has resulted in the production of stories about their lives in performing arts.

Following a presentation of the research aims and broad agenda, the thesis will lay out the theoretical framework for the research, reflecting the position of the researcher and the theoretical arguments that have guided me. In relation to this, the reader will find discussions around the social model of disability (Oliver 1990, 1996, 2009, Shakespeare 2006, Thomas 2007), the social construction of learning difficulties (Goodley 2000a, 2001, McVittie et al 2008), the writings of the educationalist, Paulo Freire (1993, orig publ. 1970) and the theatre practitioner Augusto Boal (1979, 1995, 1998, 2001), as well as literature about the self-advocacy movement (Chappell et al 2001, Goodley and Armstrong 2001) and Disability Arts movement (Vasey 1990, Barnes 2003a, Heart 'n Soul 2007).

The discussions of these writers will serve to show that my perspective is coloured by a belief that people with learning difficulties have been disadvantaged by the label of 'learning difficulties', which has been bestowed by clinical experts (Beart 2005), is based on a medicalisation of disability (Oliver 1996, Oliver and Barnes 1998, Oliver 2009) and on a relational comparison to a mythical 'norm' (McVittie et al 2008). The

research described in this thesis should be seen in the context of people with learning difficulties in the self-advocacy and Disability Arts movements, who are grouping together to challenge reductive notions of the label 'learning difficulties' and lay claim to their rights as full citizens (Goodley 2000a, Chappell et al 2001, Heart 'n Soul 2007). This thesis attempts to show that there are performers with learning difficulties who, through their art and their artistic identity, are speaking out for themselves and presenting their identity as people behind this label (Karafistan 2004).

Access to training to develop the knowledge and skills to become recognised as a professional performer is a key issue for aspiring performers with learning difficulties (Razor Edge 2004). The thesis examines recent disability legislation and its limitations in enabling people with learning difficulties to access performing arts training. It shows how aspiring performers with learning difficulties, such as the participants in this research, are having to forge their own pathways, with the help of their non-disabled allies (Heart 'n Soul 2007) and it examines some of the aesthetic perceptions (Conroy 2003, Kupperts 2003) that may affect attitudes to these performers and perpetuate their exclusion (Anjali 2007). It examines the artistic communities that attempt to nurture the talents of performers with learning difficulties.

The reader will see that the development of an inclusive methodology has been at the centre of this project. Ideas, from authors who propose methodologies to make research accessible and useful to disadvantaged groups, are introduced, including discussions about research with indigenous peoples (Tuhiwai Smith 1999), inclusive research with people with learning difficulties (Boxhall et al 2004, Townson et al 2004) and the use of performance ethnography with African American groups (Denzin 2003).

The heart of this thesis is exposed here, with a focus on dialogic, collaborative approaches to research and to the production of knowledge, which draw on feminist perspectives on research, as put forward by Oakley (1981). Notions of the independent researcher are rejected, as well as notions of the independently achieving individual. On the contrary, creative collaboration (John-Steiner 2000, Sturges 2008), to develop skills and produce knowledge, is seen as a means to enable participation in education and research - by individuals who have previously been excluded from both (Chappell 2000, Boxhall et al 2004).

The research process described includes the use of performing arts methods to enable the performers in this study to speak out for themselves, in their own ways, foregrounding their claims to an artistic identity, and adding their voices to an emerging history of people with learning difficulties, as told by themselves (Atkinson and Walmsley 1999, Atkinson 2004).

The main focus is on the process of developing one story, in particular, into a short performance. The evaluation of this process (in Chapter Five) and the analysis of the performance (Chapter Seven) show how exploration and presentation of ideas through dance enabled both performer and audience to access levels of emotional depth that served to deepen understanding of the artist's concerns about his life. This deepening of understanding applied to the performer, in being able to embody and interpret events in his own life and to the audience, in being able to 'get inside' another person and his response to his experience of the world. This reinforces Shusterman's (2006) view of the body as our means of experiencing and acting on the world and Alexander's (2008) view of coming to know through the body.

The resulting story, presented as a performance (involving a dance, a poem and visual display material), shows how a performer with learning difficulties can produce a sophisticated personal reflection on his life, through the use of performance techniques, that contributes to social understanding - of people with learning difficulties and their relationship to an artistic identity. The story, along with the audience responses to it, demonstrates how claiming an artistic identity can be an act of resistance to negative connotations associated with the label of learning difficulties, which is traditionally based on measurements of inability (McVittie et al 2008).

Although lack of resources has meant that only one of the four stories upon which this thesis is based was fully developed into a performance, all four stories presented involved the use of dramatic techniques to begin to develop reflections on the performing arts lives of the participants. In particular, the main story at the heart of the thesis shows the potential for researcher collaboration with performers with learning difficulties, to produce in-depth and powerfully affecting accounts. It is posited that this could further our knowledge of how to enable performers with learning difficulties to present their own interpretations of their experiences as artists in a disabling society. In so doing, it will facilitate artists with learning difficulties to contribute to the generation of socially useful knowledge, through personal experience accounts, which provide a direct route to social understanding through empathy and engagement with individuals in society (Goodley 1996).

Presenting the Findings

The representation of the performance material in a PhD thesis has been problematic, and this is discussed. Initially, it was deemed acceptable, by the examining university,

to submit the thesis with the DVDs placed in the appendices rather than in the main body of the document. Although I was not altogether happy with this, I was prepared to proceed with this compromise. However, in the final event, on the recommendation of my examiners, I was able to move the DVDs to the front of the thesis. I see this as a positive step that allows me to encourage the reader to view the discs as an integral part of the research, whilst the written thesis acknowledges that even a film of a performance differs from the actual 'live' performance events that took place (Cognigni 2003).

The four stories presented in the thesis are not descriptive, chronological accounts of the lives of the tellers, but reflections on their histories, identities and aspirations, told through a kind of collage of mixed media – performance and/or text and photographs. These collages represent a degree of interpretation of events. This applies particularly to the story that has been fully developed to a performance presentation. Building on these interpretations, and on the quest to create an inclusive research process, a method of analysis was devised to enable the researcher to be guided by the artists' concerns – i.e. what they believe their stories are telling us.

The result is a powerful testimony to the ability of one particular individual to use his artistic skills to embody his thoughts and feelings, present these through performance and assess the meaning of the story for himself and the audience. Thus, he establishes his artistic identity and asserts his right to interpret his own history and to claim his own future as he sees it. He also advocates for other people with learning difficulties to exercise the same right. The three other stories, although not as developed, provide reinforcement for the issues that arise in the main story.

The reader will find that the structure of the thesis follows a mainly traditional approach, although the actual research process was not so neatly packaged as such an approach might at first suggest. The process is introduced as an inductive one, where the contributions of the participants with learning difficulties were instrumental in guiding the direction that the research took from day one and, consequently, very little was preordained by the research design. At the heart of this was a desire to enable the performing artists with learning difficulties to influence the research, as researchers before me had aimed to do (Boxhall 2004, Boxhall et al 2004, Williams et al 2006, Abell et al 2007, Leighton 2009). I also wanted the participants to be able to use it to further their own interests, in the spirit of Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) view of indigenous research (in the case of my/our research, to assert their artistic identities and promote their artistic work).

Layout of this Chapter

In this chapter, I will briefly address the significance of the research, introduce the specific research questions, describe the origins of the project and begin to discuss some of the ideas around methodology that have been a driving force for me. I will then provide a summary of chapters two to eight. In addition, later in this chapter, I will describe the research setting, explain my use of certain terms in the thesis and make some initial statements about my researcher stance.

What is the significance of this research project?

There are three main aspects to the project that I believe make it a significant contribution to inclusive research with people with learning difficulties (Walmsley

2001, 2004). The first relates to use of performing arts methods as a tool for collecting data. The second relates to presentation of findings through performance media and the third draws attention to development of an artistic identity as a means for people with learning difficulties to challenge reductive notions of learning difficulties. In respect of these three aspects, I build on the writings of Goodley (2000b), Goodley and Moore (2002), Leighton (2003, 2009), Hatton (2009), Wooster (2009), Calvert (2009), Hargrave (2009), Eckhard and Myers (2009). These writers have variously written about the engagement of people with learning difficulties with performing arts, the effectiveness of drama as a means of people with learning difficulties presenting their views and experiences and performing arts as a means of establishing or challenging disability-related aspects of identity.

Firstly then, this research project focuses on performing arts methods as a research tool for accessing the thoughts and feelings of people with learning difficulties who are involved in performing arts. The thesis shows how methods based on dramatic games and exercises can be an effective means of enabling performers with learning difficulties to reflect on their lives and express their views to researchers. It shows the potential for the use of dance to explore, deepen and express an individual's emotional and intellectual response to events in his/her life. In this way, this research addresses some of the issues raised in the literature about research with verbally less-articulate subjects (Booth and Booth 1996, Chappell 2000, Walmsley 2001, Aldridge 2007, Brooks and Davies 2008).

Secondly, the research draws attention to the potential for the presentation of life stories through the medium of performance. It points to the ability of performers with learning difficulties to use their skills as artists to present their own stories (Leighton

2009), thus dispensing with the need for the researcher to find ways of representing research participants' words. This approach goes some way to addressing the problems of representation raised in the literature about life story research (Goodson and Sikes 2001). Research subjects can present their thoughts and feelings with their own bodies and voices. In this way, the research builds on performance ethnography (Denzin 2003), where the words of research participants are literally presented in a performance by the researcher(s).

By creating performances of life stories, the potential exists to make these available to audiences outside academic communities and to reach other individuals with learning difficulties, for whom the written word may not be as accessible as performance - "This is showing more than words could ever show" (Julie, quoted in Goodley 2000b p503). Preston (2004) reminds us that using theatre to share stories can also encourage dialogue about change.

The third aspect of the research involves looking at the potential for individual artists, through performance, to reconstruct their identity in relation to disability (Leighton 2009, Eckhard and Myers 2009). Striving for recognition as an artist can be part of a struggle for status and acceptance and a means to assert the right to define one's own history, identity and future, as the stories presented in this thesis show. They also demonstrate how the identity of 'artist' for people with learning difficulties can be part of creating resistance to oppression and disadvantage.

Research Questions

I started the research by establishing a focus on the four participating artists and their lives in performing arts, with the intention of enabling the participants to create the specific research agenda. In Chapter Four I show how the participating artists helped me to develop this agenda and how they made contributions that informed the direction and focus of the research and the methods used. Through their contributions they enabled me to focus the research on the following three questions:

1. What are the stories of a group of performing artists and educators with learning difficulties who seek to become professionals in a disabling society?
2. What do the stories contribute to our understanding of 'learning difficulties' and issues of identity and resistance?
3. How does the use of performing arts methods in the research process enable performing artists with learning difficulties to contribute to the generation of knowledge and understanding?

Hence, the first question is concerned with personal experience and individual lives, the second relates to how learning difficulties is constructed and the third concerns research methods/methodology.

Origins of My Approach to this Research Project

“We hope that the way this book is made – not just what it states – may question any preconceptions about its subject.”
(Berger and Mohr 1975, back cover)

In the early days of considering how to approach my research, I remembered a book I had read many years before and had been inspired by. I decided to re-read it and was immediately struck by its approach to telling a story. The book was *A Seventh Man* by John Berger and Jean Mohr (1975), which tells the story of adult male migrants leaving southern Europe in the 1970s in search of employment in the north. Their purpose was to earn sufficient money to improve the quality of life for their families. Every seventh man in the populations of southern Europe was a migrant at the time, and the story unfolds, weaving together the experiences of these individuals into one notional character, *A Seventh Man*.

Using written narrative, poetry, photos, factual information and analysis, it struck me that this mixture of media and styles for presenting the subject was powerful and evocative, enabling the reader to experience and understand the story of another in different ways. In embarking on research, focusing on the experiences of a group of performers with learning difficulties I knew and respected, I wanted to do something similar – to enable others to speak out from the page, through more than just words. Why? Because words were not necessarily the strongest means of reflecting on or communicating ideas for those whom I wanted to engage in the research.

As the research progressed I began to see the limitations of trying to communicate the story of performers through the two-dimensional page – a dilemma faced by other

researchers before me (Goodley and Moore 2002). I wanted the artists' stories to 'come alive' through the performance media that 'made them tick' – music, dance and theatre. I wanted them to be able to tell their own stories, using the medium that is their strongest means of expression - performing arts.

Dilemma

As a student, wishing to submit a thesis for examination at a university, this presented some dilemmas. How was I to enable the performing artists with learning difficulties to access the research process, influence its direction and contribute their ideas to it in their own ways (i.e. through performing arts), while satisfying the demands of the academy for a written account of the process and demonstrating the academic rigour required to achieve a PhD? The essence of this dilemma was not unique to me. In the literature on inclusive research it is clear that other researchers have had to consider how to make the research process accessible to individuals with learning difficulties while fulfilling academic requirements (Chappell 2000, Walmsley 2001, Burke et al 2003, Booth and Booth 2003, Aldridge 2007).

As I will later outline, I failed to make all aspects of the research process accessible to the artists (for example, their engagement with the academic literature), with the result that collaboration centred on the setting of the research agenda, creating the stories and, to a certain extent, interpretation of the stories. The placing of the stories in a theoretical and historical context was done by me. In addition, I was informed by the university that it would not be a straightforward matter to include the performance aspects of the project in the main body of the thesis. The actual writing up of the research project caused me further problems, as I will now explain.

Problems in Structuring the Thesis

The research process itself did not follow clear-cut stages from devising the research questions to carrying out analysis. On the contrary, research questions emerged as I went along, key literature was discovered during fieldwork and the fieldwork continued right up to putting the finishing touches to the thesis. Analysis was taking place continually, during fieldwork, and the emerging themes influenced the direction of the research and the methods used. I sometimes only realised the true significance, of chunks of fieldwork already carried out, as I discovered relevant accounts in the literature. For example, I came across John Steiner's (2000) book on creative collaboration when I was some way into the process of working on one performer's story. This book then had a significant impact on evaluation of the research process.

Fisher and Phelps (2006), writing about action research, refer to the difficulties and dishonesty of attempting to fit such a messy research process into a neat, conventional, thesis structure. They argue for the right to present a chronological, narrative account (of research projects that attempt to work with participants inductively), with the literature woven into the account in the order it was read. Ironically, I did not discover the Fisher and Phelps (2006) paper until after I had already done much of the writing up, but it alerted me to the need to highlight key moments of breakthrough in the research process and to try to be honest about the real order of events.

Ultimately, I am not sure I would have chosen to re-present the research process with a chronological narrative, because of the dangers of falling into a long-winded, 'blow by blow' description of events (Fisher and Phelps 2006, p160). However, the Fisher and Phelps paper caused me to re-examine my thesis to correct any sense of implying the

process comprised a neatly ordered, pre-designed series of events. Consequently, I hope the reader will find in the thesis a sense of a journey undertaken with the research participants, a ‘follow your nose’ search for ways to include the artists in the research process – in other words, an inductive process, where very little was preordained by a fixed research design.

Representing Performance Material in an Academic Thesis

Morwenna Griffiths, in her writings on research for social justice, comments, “Strategies are needed to listen to quiet, less powerful, voices.” (Griffiths 1998, p96). For myself and the team of artists who were involved in this project this came to mean exploring ideas in a practical fashion, using drama exercises and visual materials and allowing people to speak out in different ways – through words, photographs, dance, music, and drama. Consequently the stories unveiled in this thesis can be described as a collage of multi-sensory media. This has resulted in some fragmentation of their presentation i.e. some parts of the stories are included in the text-based body of the thesis while others are presented on DVD.

I will argue in the thesis that the stories embody the individuals’ reflections on their experiences (Schon 1991, Goodson and Sikes 2001) and contribute to knowledge and understanding about artists with learning difficulties. I will posit that one of the artists’ stories in particular (Robert Belcher’s dance, poem and visual material presented on DVD) should be seen as contributing to the generation of knowledge in its own right, and therefore should be viewed as part of the main body of the thesis. As I have said, initially this element was placed separately, in the appendices, which I utilised for inclusion of material that appeared at the time to be more risky, in terms of its

acceptability within conventional academic requirements for a PhD thesis. The removal of the DVDs from the appendices to the front of the thesis is, I believe, a significant step, as they are no longer consigned to a place used for additional material to the main body of work. The next step would perhaps be to include live performance as part of the thesis.

Researchers before me have encountered difficulties in getting non-standard material accepted as a valid contribution to academic argument. For example, Goodley and Moore (2000) attempted unsuccessfully to gain recognition from the academy, for their accessible conference paper on people with learning difficulties and performing arts. They draw attention to the divide between disability activism and disability studies, the former being concerned with useful, accessible research material, which can further the political agenda of disabled activists, and the latter requiring rigorous academic texts. Aldridge (2007), using photographs as a means for enabling people with learning difficulties to contribute to research and present their views, identified the need to reconcile use of accessible methods that provide access to individuals' inner worlds with the requirements of academia - where researchers' written interpretation of data is valued and "conventional and 'scientific' research methods have tended to have more credibility than less conventional, user-led approaches" (Aldridge 2007 p13).

The stories make important statements that cannot be captured 'on the page'. In my opinion, Robert Belcher's story in particular comprises a powerful testament from an individual who is advocating for himself and other artists with learning difficulties. Therefore I have struggled to get his alternative representation into the thesis somehow albeit with a feeling that less credibility may be conferred upon it – in contrast to my

words in this thesis - through the assessment process. However, the transfer of the DVDs to a position in the front of the thesis was, I believe, a step by the academy towards recognising the role of performance media in enabling the artists to contribute to this research project. I hope doctoral students will be able to build on this in future.

Cogni (2003) attempts to answer the demands of the academy by including a form of documentation in her actual performance. For me, this raises the question of what constitutes knowledge. Welton (2003) asserts that conventional academic practices of reading and writing privilege 'viewed' over 'felt' experience and states:

“I will argue that academia must thus engage with this knowledge on its own sensory terms (of ‘feeling’) and not vice versa.” (Welton 2003 p1)

Winter et al (2000) ask questions regarding how new approaches are judged in relation to doctoral research, raising the question of what constitutes new knowledge in practice-based research, referring particularly to researching one's own professional practice and “specifically with doctorates awarded for a ‘thesis’ reporting an inquiry, rather than the collection of reflective exercises which may constitute for example, a doctorate in Education” (Winter et al 2000, p25). Perhaps this is not directly related to the research represented in this thesis, but I feel the question it raises, regarding what constitutes knowledge, is worth noting, because it has a bearing on the inclusion of performing arts material - on material that is based on 'feeling' (Welton 2003 p1).

The production of subjective, practice-based knowledge is bound up with a focus on the uniqueness and complexity of a particular context (Green in Winter et al 2000, p30). The uniqueness and complexity of the knowledge produced in this thesis is bound up with the particular stories produced and *how* they were produced and

therefore I believe these stories should all be viewed as part of the main body of the thesis.

Other Ways of Communicating

The artists in this research project, as well as using spoken language, have employed performing arts techniques, to explore, reflect on and communicate their thoughts, feelings and opinions. In my view, this is no less valuable than reflection and communication through words alone. This perspective is borne out by the works of Boal (1979, 1995, 1998, 2001) and demonstrated by other researchers (Goodley and Moore 2002, Leighton 2003, Alexander 2008).

Howard Gardner (1993) writes of 'multiple intelligences' to refer to the diverse ways in which human beings come to know, understand and communicate in this world. According to Gardner (1993) some of us are more developed in one area of 'intelligence' than another e.g. in logical mathematical thinking, linguistic intelligence or bodily kinaesthetic. It seems appropriate that we should use those areas we are confident in, to develop our thinking and communicate our thoughts to others. I believe this is what four artists with learning difficulties have done in this research project.

Other Ways of Telling

The research process has taken me on a long journey of discovery, with many wonderful moments of clarity inspired by the participants and, equal moments of disappointment when I realised that I could not achieve everything I wanted to, either

because of lack of resources (especially time), because of my own naiveté and incompetence or because of constraints imposed by the location of this work within the academy. But I have always come back to the book that started me off, confirming for me that there are other ways of telling a story, of generating knowledge and communicating it, than words alone.

I hope, therefore, that this thesis will be viewed in its entirety – that is, that the DVDs will be given due attention. I hope that the thesis will contribute, in some small way, to strengthening a case for inclusion of performance material in an academic thesis, and that the non-verbal, performance aspects will be viewed as a valid means of enabling artists with learning difficulties to contribute their views and experiences to academic debate.

Arnold Wesker (1976), the British playwright, refers to “words as definitions of experience” (actually the title of his book). I would like to reverse this and consider experience as giving meaning to words. In setting in context the stories of the four research participants around which this thesis is constructed, in presenting and interpreting their stories, I have tried to find ways to enable their experiences and their reflections to come through and give meaning to my words.

A Research Project about Methodology

As it progressed, this project became increasingly about methodology. For me, this relates to arguments developed in Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) book *Decolonising Methodologies*. Tuhiwai Smith writes of research with indigenous peoples and the need for oppressed peoples to begin to write their own accounts of their history.

According to Tuhiwai Smith, there is a colonial legacy of exclusion of indigenous peoples' perspectives from research ethnographies. Instead, systems of representation and classification have been developed by Western researchers, which have maintained discourses of power and continue to contribute to indigenous peoples' subjugation. The history that has emerged from this is one that assumes the right to define the 'Other', in order to control them (Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

Certain useful parallels can be drawn between this view of indigenous peoples and people given the label of learning difficulties. Systems of classification have also been developed in relation to people with learning difficulties, which focus on inability and represent them as inferior (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Borthwick 1996, Beart 2005, First Initiatives 2008). Their lives are frequently controlled by others, and they are disadvantaged as a result of the label attached to them (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Goodley 2000a). In addition, firsthand accounts of people with learning difficulties have been few and far between in Western research and it is claimed that their history has also been largely written by others (Goodley 1996, Atkinson 2004, French and Swain 2006). This version of history can be seen to be one of dehumanisation, of turning people into case studies, for use by clinical and welfare professionals, who seek to classify their 'condition' and modify their behaviour (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Gillman, Swain and Heyman 1997, Goodley 2000).

The research presented in this thesis proposes a methodology to enable performers with learning difficulties to develop, present and reflect on their own accounts. It recognises that there is now an emerging history of people with learning difficulties that is told by themselves (Atkinson 2004), and the stories presented in this thesis should be viewed in this context.

More than this, however, the research demands recognition for other ways of contributing to knowledge and understanding - through the use of methods, derived from performing arts techniques, to develop and present research material. It is a research project that is about enabling performers with learning difficulties to contribute to research about people with learning difficulties. It is about how their contributions can be valued, how they can have a voice. It is concerned with their participation in different aspects of the research process, from control over the research agenda and taking on aspects of the researcher role to expressing and presenting their thoughts and feelings in ways that are accessible and meaningful for themselves and their 'audience'. It builds on the body of work in disability studies that has aimed to collaborate with people with learning difficulties to enable them to speak out through a research process which they have an investment in and some control over (for example Mitchell et al 1997, Roets et al 2004, Townson et al 2004, Williams et al 2006, Brooks and Davies 2008).

Whose Voice? Who benefits from research?

This research is also about who benefits from participating in research. Research is powerful and has traditionally benefited the researcher and the knowledge base of the dominant group in society (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, p176). Tuhiwai Smith reminds us that it has the power to overlook, distort, and exaggerate, to draw conclusions based on assumptions, hidden value judgements and misunderstandings and that it can either extend knowledge or perpetuate ignorance (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, p176).

In relation to this, I am only too aware of my own tendency to give weight to statements that fit my own agenda, as someone who believes that people with learning difficulties are disadvantaged. Therefore researcher reflexivity is of the utmost importance, in order to be as honest as possible about the influences affecting a research project (Goodson and Sikes 2001, p52). It is important to acknowledge these influences, particularly, as with this project, when there is no attempt to present an objective account of the findings. Instead, this research represents the subjective view of the participants. The result is a multi-voiced account (Denzin and Lincoln 1994), with my own voice represented in the written thesis and, to a certain extent, in the artists' stories.

If the research is truly multi-voiced (Denzin and Lincoln 1994), then hopefully it will also benefit all the participants. In Chapter Eight, I look at to what extent the research participants can be said to have benefited from this research and whether participation in it has been emancipating for them, in the sense of challenging disadvantage, as outlined by the emancipatory research paradigm (Oliver 1992).

Difficulties Facing the Researcher

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) draws attention to difficulties facing the researcher who attempts to embark on a research process that works for indigenous participants. These difficulties have resonance for me in my research with the four artists with learning difficulties. The researcher must negotiate the agendas of both the academy and of the community being researched. On the one hand the research must be seen to be rigorous, theorised, valid, and on the other, it needs to be useful, friendly and just (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, p140). I interpret this latter part to mean that the research should

be accessible to participants, have meaning for them, be of some use in their lives and to their 'communities' and not misrepresent them through hidden prejudices.

Tuhiwai Smith warns that the research activity is transformed when the researched become the researchers – questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, people participate on different terms (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, p193). As Williams et al (2006) notes, when roles of those involved in a research project change, when there is a blurring between the roles of researcher, participant, practitioner, a shift in power is also implied. In my experience of this research project, the researcher needs to be receptive to these potential differences and flexible in finding ways to incorporate them, as I will discuss in chapters four and five.

Did I succeed in sharing control?

All of the issues I have raised so far in this chapter are ones that have arisen in relation to research with four performing artists, from initial agenda setting, to finding appropriate ways to develop and present the research material. I have tried to follow an inductive process, to allow the artists space to place their concerns in their own ways, to follow up issues that were important for them, not to make assumptions, or preclude what they would express and how they would participate. At the same time, I am aware that I have placed the research in a social, historical (see Chapter Three) and theoretical context (see Chapter Two) that represents my own perspective, which has informed the interpretation of the stories.

The resulting accounts represent varying degrees of success in my aim to enable the artists to have control in the research process. Later on, I make the claim that the research relationship with one participant was a collaborative one, with reference to the work of John-Steiner (2000) and I discuss why this was not fully achieved with the other three participants.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter Two lays out the theoretical framing of the research. I consider current theoretical debates in the area of disability studies and how these relate to people with learning difficulties and to the development of an inclusive, social theory of disability (Abberley 1987, Thomas 2007). I examine discussions around the social model of disability, outlined by Oliver (1996, 2009) originally put forward by him in the early 1980s. These include challenges to the materialist analysis of disability, which foreground issues of identity and disability (Shakespeare 1996a) and the lived experience of disability (Crow 1996, Morris 1998).

I examine the arguments for a social theory of impairment (Abberley 1987, Thomas 2007) and, in relation to the latter, I look at the view that 'learning difficulties' is socially constructed (Goodley 2000a, 2001, McVittie et al 2008), that it cannot be pinned down as simply a fixed, medical impairment, and that any attempt to do so is in danger of expressing a view of learning difficulties aligned with an individual model of disability or what Goodley (2000a) refers to as a 'deficit model' of learning difficulties. I look at how these arguments have influenced decisions relating to my research.

The research process takes place in the context of arts education, and in relation to this, the chapter includes an examination of the writings of the education theorist and practitioner, Paulo Freire (1976, orig publ 1974, 1993, orig publ. 1970). There is an exploration of the relationship between learner and teacher and Freire's view of education as active, ongoing and transforming. This informs my collaborative approach to research, in which the artists and I are finding our way together and learning alongside each other.

The theory and practice of the theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal (Boal 1979, 1995, 1998, 2001) further informs this process. I examine Boal's notion of theatre as a weapon for change and transformation. I relate this to the artists' ongoing striving to take control of the creative process, to establish an artistic identity, to take on leadership roles and become active in the generation of knowledge and understanding about performing arts and learning difficulty.

The chapter finishes with a look at two movements, which further inform how the research is viewed. The first is the self-advocacy movement, through which people with learning difficulties are establishing a collective identity to speak out against their disadvantage and exclusion (Goodley 2000a, Goodley and Armstrong 2001). The second is the Disability Arts movement, through which disabled people are confirming their artistic identities and inspiring other disabled people to speak out against exclusion (Vasey 1990, Barnes 2003a, Heart 'n Soul 2007).

Chapter Three seeks to provide a background to the stories by setting them in context in relation to the cultural, educational and political climate. It includes an examination of historical and current policies and practice in performing arts training, as well as

recent government legislation that relates to disabled people and education. In this chapter, I put forward a case to show how people given the label of learning difficulties are disadvantaged, in relation to access to education and training in performing arts. I define the specific barriers experienced and the gap that is evident between policy and practice in this field. The chapter includes a discussion on aesthetic perceptions and how this may impact on disabled people who seek training in mainstream performing arts programmes.

In addition, I look at how organisations of people with learning difficulties, in Disability Arts and arts education, have attempted to provide alternative pathways. I argue that exclusion from mainstream training results in performing artists with learning difficulties having to forge their own pathways, with the help of their allies.

In Chapter Four, I focus on the methodology that has guided this research, and methods used. The chapter begins by defining the research as a qualitative inquiry, an interpretive project, akin to the type that Denzin and Lincoln (2008) describe as 'pick and mix' research, using a wide range of interpretive practices in an interactive approach, foregrounding the reflections of the research subjects.

In this chapter, I examine the relationship of this research project to inclusive research documented in the literature (e.g. Chappell 2000, Goodley and Moore 2002, Boxall et al 2004). I look at how people with learning difficulties can take a relationship to the academy and the generation of knowledge. There is a discussion around issues that affect people with learning difficulties in relation to accessing the research process, such as acknowledging power imbalances (Aspis 1999) and dealing with theoretical

arguments (Walmsley 2001). In addition, I look at how this research relates to emancipatory, disability research (Oliver 1992, Barnes 2003b).

The research is defined as narrative inquiry and in relation to this, I examine life stories as a means of empowerment for people with learning difficulties (Atkinson 2004), how these stories can challenge stereotypes (Wang 2006) and help us to gain historical and social understanding of this group (Goodley 1996). I consider how these stories might make a contribution to the emerging history of people with learning difficulties, as told by themselves (Atkinson 2004). In addition, I address the question of who writes up or presents a life story, from the personal accounts of individuals, considering discussions in the literature (for example Atkinson and Walmsley 1999, Goodson and Sikes 2001). The non-linear nature of the narratives presented in this thesis is considered in relation to Berger and Mohr (1995) and their use of photography to tell a story.

The research is also defined as ethnographic study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), which involves researching my professional practice (Radnor 2002) and has something in common with performance ethnography (Denzin 2003, Alexander 2008). The project is also viewed as research that is “agitating for change” (Goodley and Moore, 2002) and aligned with the goals of critical research (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000).

Chapter Five looks at the process of developing accessible methods for a group of artists with learning difficulties, whose choice of expression is performing arts. This chapter can be seen to contribute to the findings of this research, in that it relates to my third research question about the use of performing arts methods. It explains how I have taken an inductive approach, using dramatic exercises and physical image work

to enable the artists to reflect on and express their thoughts and feelings. It involves a description and evaluation of the process of carrying out the research and creating the stories together, including examples of practical exercises and an examination of ethical issues related to inclusive research.

The major part of the chapter is concerned with evaluating the individual processes of working on each artist's story. This includes an in-depth examination of the process of working with one of the participants, Robert Belcher. I examine interviewing as a process of empowerment, drawing on two views in the literature, which (as I realised with hindsight) have a bearing on my approach – Oakley's (1981) presentation of the dialogic interview and Denzin's (2003) exploration of the 'performative interview'. I then move on to consider Robert Belcher's use of his body to explore, reflect, express and communicate his thoughts and feelings, describing his work with the dancer, Jennifer Irons, towards creating the dance that became a central part of his story.

I consider the roles Robert Belcher and I each took in the process of developing his story and the contributions we each made. I attempt to accurately describe and evaluate our working relationship and I look at the methods used to enable Robert to contribute to the evaluation of the process. In endeavouring to be transparent about who really did what, I hope to contribute to some of the discussions about research relationships in inclusive research with people with learning difficulties, as outlined by Walmsley (2004).

Following the detailed evaluation of the collaborative nature of the research process to develop Robert's story, I compare the processes of developing the other three stories. The chapter ends with a discussion of ethical issues.

Chapter Six presents the four stories. Robert Belcher's story, *No More Hiding Behind the Curtain* is presented first. This involves the viewing of the performance of his story, presented on DVD. Part of the story (Robert's poem) is also presented in text form in this chapter. Walter Davis's story, *In The Future...* is then presented in the form of text and photographs, while David Warren's story, *David "Britain's got Talent" Warren: My Story* and Vincent Wolfe's story, *A Story of Vincent Wolfe: My Professional Life as Actor and Drummer*, require a viewing of DVDs, capturing text, photographs and music. David Warren's story also includes a written account. Clear instructions are given regarding when to view the DVDs.

In Chapter Seven, I present analyses of the four stories. First, an interpretation of Robert's story, is based on his own identification of the most important themes contained therein. I present my own reservations about attempting to represent and analyse a live performance on the printed page, drawing on arguments from the Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP) literature, for example Stewart (2001) and Cologni (2003). I express my concerns about pushing the researched person into the background, by foregrounding my own preoccupations (Goodley et al 2004). I show how I came to reject the pursuit of a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1999, orig publ 1967), in favour of devising a means to include Robert in the analysis process, through the use of performing arts based methods.

The chapter presents an interpretation of Robert's story, using a framework of five headings drawn from his own reflections on the story. This interpretation portrays Robert as transcending the label of learning difficulties through his art (Hatton 2009, Karafistan 2004 p 277), transcending standard ways of communicating (Blumenfeld-

Jones 2009, p63), through his dance and taking a leadership role to challenge the arts and education communities to include him and other artists with learning difficulties.

I use the headings developed through collaboration with Robert, to analyse the remaining three stories. The three artists concerned also contribute their own feelings about what is important about their stories.

I go on to claim that the research relationship, between Robert and myself, was a creative collaborative one (John-Steiner 2000). In relation to this, I examine how our working relationship can be described as 'creative collaboration', put forward by John-Steiner (2000), which is built on mutuality and support. I examine how David Warren describes his approach to creating music in creative collaborative terms. I look at the role the Razor Edge Theatre Initiative played in nurturing this way of working and how it enables a capacity approach (Goodley 2000a) to including performing artists with learning difficulties in the research process.

Chapter Eight, the final chapter in this thesis, is concerned with drawing conclusions and lessons from the research and considering possible future developments. Here I return to the question of access to Higher Education for performers with learning difficulties, the opportunity to take part in aesthetic debates and contribute to academic arguments. The thesis ends with the words of the four artists.

The Research Setting

I will now briefly outline the immediate context in which the research was carried out.

The research focuses on a group of four, male (I will examine the issue of gender a little later in this chapter) performing artists with learning difficulties (one musician, one actor, one actor/musician, one dancer), who were all employees of the Razor Edge Theatre Initiative. Razor Edge was a small, performing arts organisation, reliant on charitable funding and was set up by myself and my colleague, Mike Ormerod, in 1998. Mike and I became the joint artistic and education directors of the company. The four artists were engaged for specific projects from 1998 and then employed continuously from 2004 – 2006, completing the Razor Edge Team, with Mike and myself.

The main objective of Razor Edge was to establish a course in Higher Education (H.E.) for aspiring performers with learning difficulties, involving new approaches to teaching and creating performance (developed with the four artists).

The style of working together in Razor Edge was akin to that described by John-Steiner (2000) as creative collaboration. I discuss this further in Chapter Seven in relation to the potential for setting up a collaborative research relationship and suggest that it may be that collaborative practices are a characteristic of theatre companies, which could be capitalised on by researchers wishing to focus on inclusive research.

To begin with, fieldwork took place in Razor Edge's hired rehearsal space, initially at Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama, secondly at the Oval House Theatre and, finally, in a church hall, all of which were in S.E. London. Later on, after the closure of Razor Edge in 2006, the research meetings continued on a one-to-one basis, at my home or in the church hall. Occasionally, I visited the artists' homes.

As will become clear in Chapter Five, focusing research around my own professional work proved to have both advantages and disadvantages. Familiarity with research participants meant a head start in terms of getting straight down to business, but my dual role as Joint Artistic and Education Director and researcher caused problems, especially given that Razor Edge was struggling to survive as an organisation. The ensuing climate of uncertainty had repercussions for the stability of the research process and the sharing of control with participants, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

All Male Participants

I decided to focus this research on the Razor Edge Team, who happened to be four men, to give them space to tell about their work and how they felt about it. With hindsight, I could have looked beyond Razor Edge, to include at least one female participant, but I believe this would have caused a number of practical difficulties.

To involve a performer from another company would have meant considerable additional administration and liaison, e.g. identifying an individual who was interested, available and able to travel to our rehearsal base. Very often research sessions had to be rescheduled at short notice to fit around Razor Edge work and sometimes they were cancelled for considerable periods because of funding crises. This was difficult enough to manage with research participants from within the company, let alone going outside it.

In addition, including external performers would have meant integrating any new artist into an already existing group, in the context of Razor Edge's working day, but not as

part of the professional company. Razor Edge was allowing me to use resources for the research project and this would have caused difficulties.

If I had wanted to have a truly representative sample of performers with learning difficulties it would have been better to start with a new group of artists and focus on building group rapport. Although I can see the value of this approach, it is not what I wanted to do and I would not have been able to give sufficient time, or use Razor Edge resources, to carry out such a project.

In addition, in the tradition of life history research, I make no claim to objective generalisability for this research, being more concerned with the ability of the data to enable us to understand subjective experience (Goodson and Sikes 2001). I do, however, agree with Boal (1995) that when we are talking about an individual case “...we are also talking about the generality of similar cases and we are talking about the society in which this particular case can occur.” (Boal 1995, p40) I would also have needed to consider how many people from ethnic minority backgrounds, with additional impairments etc. should be included, as well as perhaps the extent to which different cultural backgrounds, including language, religion etc. were represented. In any future research I might embark upon I would certainly bear in mind the need to actively recruit women participants. But, I acknowledge that this research is not aiming to be representative of all performers with learning difficulties.

An Explanation of Terms used in the Thesis

I am aware that choice of language and terminology in writing about disability can be a factor in identifying where a writer’s allegiances lie. In this thesis, I attempt to distance

myself from any view of disability that could be associated with individual (medical or personal tragedy) models of disability (Oliver 1996, 2009). In relation to this, I consider it useful to provide some brief explanations of certain terms I use in the thesis, such as ‘professional’ and ‘learning difficulties’ and discuss important issues arising. Hopefully this will help to avoid any misunderstanding.

It is also true that this research project has one foot in the performing arts ‘camp’ and for the layperson it may be useful to explain my use of the terms ‘artist’ and ‘educators’.

‘Learning Difficulties’

As outlined in Chapter Two, I align myself with the view that defines disability as being of social and material origin (Oliver 1996, 2009). I have chosen to use the term ‘learning difficulties’ in my thesis and not ‘learning disabilities’ because, along with proponents of the social model (Oliver 1996, 2009, Finkelstein 2001b, Barnes 2003b, Thomas 2004), I believe that these individuals are disabled by society, not by a fixed, medical condition and, therefore cannot possess disability as if it were some innate quality.

I am also following Goodley and Moore (2002) who draw attention to the right of individuals to self-define and, like them, I acknowledge that the term ‘learning difficulties’ is the preferred term of the international self-advocacy movement (Goodley and Moore 2002, notes about language and terms).

The four artists have chosen their own terms to self-identify in their stories and in their lives. Often they refer to themselves as people with learning disabilities, sometimes with learning difficulties. One individual has stated on more than one occasion that he prefers to be called 'normal'. Another refers to himself as having Down's Syndrome, as well as having learning disabilities, while yet another individual uses the term 'mental handicap'. The term 'mental handicap' is rejected by the other three artists, as it is by many self-advocates, for its negative connotations (Goodley 2000a).

Identification with an oppressed group, known by a label, can bring about a change in how people see themselves and can be a catalyst for challenging their oppression and standing up for their rights (Oliver 1996, 2009). However, not all people with impairments self-identify as disabled (Shakespeare 1996a, Thomas 2007) and not all people with learning difficulties identify with the terms 'learning difficulties' or 'disabled' (Goodley 2000a, Beart 2005). As I will examine in Chapter Two, there are arguments to suggest that 'learning difficulties' is a socially constructed concept and that it is coupled with a negative, incapacity view of those individuals who are perceived to 'possess' it (Borthwick 1996, Gillman et al 1997, Goodley 2000a). Aspis (1999) and Goodley (2000a) remind us that individuals are given the label of learning difficulties by clinical and welfare professionals, whether they want it or not.

In my professional experience, many disabled and non-disabled individuals involved in companies of performers with learning difficulties, tend to use the term 'learning disabilities' For written examples, see Mind the Gap (2008) and Corali (2008).

From discussions I have had, it would appear that the use of the word 'disabilities' in this case is seen as being progressive, moving away from the stigma of the label 'mental handicap' and seeming to associate the user with the disabled people's

movement. My feeling is that performers with learning difficulties have been influenced by non-disabled company members in this, but I have no evidence to offer. I have also noted the desire to disassociate from the historical classification of pupils in segregated education e.g. severe learning difficulties (Humphreys, K. 2001, Dfes 2001, 2002, Special Education Support Services 2008).

Deciding on which term to use can be a minefield, because, as Shakespeare (2006 p 33) claims, there is a degree of 'disability correctness' that has arisen in relation to disability terminology. Therefore, although I have explained the reasoning behind my own choice of terms, I agree with Shakespeare that quibbling about which term is correct is a diversion and not as important as someone's underlying values.

Whichever term is chosen, it is important to remember that we are attaching a label to a human being and that this will have consequences, because terms used relate to identity. Attaching a label can cause other aspects of someone's identity to be lost (Branfield 1999, Slater 2004), as I will discuss further in Chapter Two. Once the label has been attached, there is a danger that people with learning difficulties can be seen as a homogenous group, with "assumptions of deficit that are pinned to their very identities" (Goodley 2000a, Preface). There is a danger that the low expectations that follow can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As I will show in Chapter Seven, the artists taking part in this research project are asserting identities, through their art that transcend the learning difficulties label and the negative connotations that can accompany it.

‘Professional’

The term ‘professional’ can be seen to have particular connotations in the literature about people with learning difficulties i.e. it often refers to clinical and other ‘experts’, who intervene in their lives (Gillman et al 1997). The care and welfare professions are seen as part of a legacy of identifying disabled people as different, as people who cannot work and need to be cared for (Oliver 1996, Finkelstein 1998, Thomas 2007) The objectification of people with learning difficulties by welfare professionals as ‘case histories’ has been noted (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Gilman et al 1997). There is an association with the medical profession, the personal tragedy approach to impairment, the search for ‘cure’ (Oliver 1996) and the ensuing focus on needs rather than aspirations (Finkelstein 1998, p29).

There is now some evidence of a focus, in the care professions, on individual choice and assessment of individual quality of life (Schelly 2008). The disabled people’s movement recognises that autonomy is an important part of any assessment of quality of life and its campaigns for independent living and control over allocation of personal assistance are part of a struggle for independence (Boyle 2008). But how has this affected the relationship of professionals to the lives of people with learning difficulties?

In recent years - with the advent of person centred planning and direct payments - independence, choice and control have become a focus of government policies in relation to people with learning difficulties (Finlay et al 2008). However, according to Finlay et al (2008), there is a contradiction between these policies and those relating to health and safety and risk assessment. A lack of resources and skills, as well as

restrictions imposed by regulations and inspections, make it hard to successfully implement day to day choice and control for people with learning difficulties in residential care. This can be seen to perpetuate the disempowering role of professionals in their lives (Finlay et al 2008).

The participants in this research project refer to themselves as professionals in the context of their performing arts activities. Other performers with learning difficulties have expressed the wish to be acknowledged as professionals (Canby et al 2009). My use of the term 'professional' in this thesis acknowledges this, which I believe is connected to their aspirations to achieve status and recognition through their work as performing artists.

Tomlinson (1982) posits that performance gives the performer power. He backs his assertions by describing the development of the Graeae Theatre Company in the 1970s, from work that he began at Hereward College in Coventry. Working with disabled students, he discovered that theatre was an effective means for them to communicate their experiences of living with impairments and disability. With the students, he developed performances exploring the nature of living with disability and went on to create the professional company, Graeae, which now describes itself as Britain's leading disabled-led theatre company (Graeae 2008).

Tomlinson notes "in the first instance, performance gives the performer power" (Tomlinson 1982, p10), that through performance disabled people are able to attract attention and recognition and are seen to be in control of a particular medium – performance. They are able to exert a certain power over the audience, at least for the duration of the performance, and can use their performances as a means of

enlightening and educating non-disabled audience members. For Tomlinson's students, this was a new experience, a new positioning of themselves in terms of status and the opportunity to speak out about their experiences.

Tomlinson's arguments can be applied to the Razor Edge artists in their roles as workshop-leaders, performers and developers of new learning methods. As members of the Razor Edge Team, they had the status of company employees, earning professionally-related wages for the first time. They were able to develop and use skills, which earned them recognition for their accomplished artistry (e.g. as musician or dancer), afforded them a powerful means of expression and put them in positions of control and leadership. In addition, they were required to develop certain attitudes to their work, recognised as essential to becoming a performing arts professional (Mountview 2006), for example to strive to improve their skills, to work co-operatively and be punctual.

Unfortunately, as I will show in Chapter Three, opportunities for people with learning difficulties to train to become professional performers are few and far between. However, the research participants' stories show that they aspire to have the same opportunities to train, to practise their skills, earn money and be regarded as professional, as their non-disabled peers.

My use of the term 'professional' is not without reservations, however. As Blumenfeld-Jones (2009) points out (in his critique of Howard Gardner's definition of bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence in relation to dancers) there is a danger of creating exclusivity – meaning only certain people, with the traditionally accepted bodies and

skills, can achieve being a dancer, a professional. This argument can be applied to actors.

For disabled performers, who are members of the Improbable Theatre Company in the US, 'professional' refers to ensemble working, giving support to each other and "a level in the quality of performances both onstage and backstage" (Erik, company member quoted in Eckard and Myers 2009 p71). It also means having the opportunity to develop the skills to present challenging work:

"It means acquiring knowledge, so that we can present challenging work. Work that makes people think. Maybe disturbs them. That can get us to grow and transcend ourselves." (Eckard and Myers 2009 p71)

I believe, at the heart of the Razor Edge artists' expressed wish to be regarded as professionals, is a desire for status and recognition, for being seen as efficient, accomplished and having the right attitude, as well as a desire to achieve what others appear to have. Therefore, despite my reservations, this thesis and the stories of the artists argue for the right of aspiring performing artists with learning difficulties to fulfil those aspirations through training, to claim an artistic identity and be recognised as professionals as defined above.

'Artists' and 'Educators'

My use of the terms 'artists' and 'educators' is derived from Razor Edge's alignment with the aims of arts education, as outlined by companies such as Theatre Royal Stratford East (2008), Oval House Theatre (2009), and Half Moon Young People's Theatre (2008). The stated aims of these companies' arts education departments/teams

include using theatre inside and outside formal education to enable young people to develop creativity and to reflect on and understand how their lives are shaped, as well as working with specific excluded groups and addressing inequality and disadvantage:

“We have a commitment to fostering new talent, addressing inequality and giving a creative voice to those who are rarely heard.” (Theatre Royal 2008)

In this thesis, I use the term ‘artists’ to refer to those involved in performing arts and I use the term ‘educators’ to mean those involved in teaching in this context, whether in formal education or outside it. The Razor Edge Team members were both educators, involved in developing new learning methods and teaching workshops, and artists who were employing their performing arts skills (music, drama, dance) to do this.

The Researcher – My Background and my Researcher Stance

In order to be transparent about the influence of my own perspectives on this research I feel it is useful to briefly outline my own background and preoccupations.

In my many years spent as a performer, director and teacher in community and educational arts work I was steeped in the ethos of using theatre as a ‘tool’ to develop critical consciousness (Freire 1976), to foster creativity, develop co-operation and imagination and as a means of expression. In the companies I worked for, participation by young people in Theatre in Education programmes was seen as a rehearsal for life (Boal 1979), where conceptual knowledge and understanding could be transferred into real-life situations.

I see myself aligned with the type of theatre described by Harpin (2010), examining the work of the theatre director Peter Brook's International Centre for Theatre Research (CIRT) and Stepping Out Theatre, who are "...consciously engaged with the socio-political efficacy of theatre" (Harpin 2010 p40) and see "the potential of theatre as a space of ethical negotiation and socially relevant dialogue" (Harpin 2010 p56).

Harpin states:

"...these two companies are not only developing the aesthetic possibilities of performance, but also attempting to initiate ethical change beyond the stage door." (Harpin 2010 p40).

My expectations of artists with learning difficulties were (and still are) high. In *Razor Edge*, I expected each artist to contribute to the creative output and take responsibility as a company member. In turn, I expected to have to give the artists space to develop ideas.

I believe, from my 27 years experience in working in community and educational performing arts, that artists with learning difficulties can make a valuable contribution to the worlds of performing arts and education. However, I consider that artists with learning difficulties are unjustly excluded from proper training opportunities in the performing arts, because of deficit models of learning difficulties, as I will examine in Chapter Three. In the thesis I will show that these excluded artists have to forge their own pathways, with the help of allies. I see myself as such an ally.

Consequently, my position, in relation to this research, is biased. I believe that people with learning difficulties are disadvantaged by a disabling society – that, in common with people with physical and sensory impairments, they face economic and social

barriers that are disabling (Abberly 1987, Oliver 1990, 1996, 2009, Valuing People 2001). My position as a researcher is partisan, in that I wish to use my research skills to oppose disadvantage and further the interests of the research participants and the wider community of artists with learning difficulties, which fits with a view of disability research as set out by Oliver (1992).

Following on from the above, it is important to me that this research is of some specific use to the participating artists, because I see myself as their ally in furthering their struggle to establish their artistic identities and challenge reductive notions of learning difficulties. I hope they may be able to use the stories they have developed to promote their careers and their artistic identities, for example by showing/performing them as part of a developing portfolio - to provide “access to a stage from which their authentic voices and stories can be heard” (Eckard and Myers 2009).

I have made no attempt to adopt an objective position in this research, but I have tried to be ‘transparent’ and interrogate my own role and my consequent influence upon the outcomes of the research. I have made an attempt to account for myself, despite the concern expressed by Leighton (2009) that this very act risks placing the researcher in a superior role, while putting the participants with learning difficulties into a passive one.

I have also done my best to listen to the participating artists and allow space for their reflections to come through, building on the work of Griffiths (1998) in educational research. This approach also connects with the use of Lifeworld as an emancipatory methodology (Hodge 2008), where the researcher ‘brackets’ her own experience, in a bid to foreground the views of the participants. I address these issues again, when I

examine the research methodology and process in more detail, in chapters four and five.

Personal Quotes used in the Thesis

I have used quotes throughout the thesis, from named individuals, for example, from audience feedback to two performances of the main story and from email exchanges where I sought particular information. In every case I have sought and received permission to quote in my thesis, either before seeking comment or after receiving it.

In the next chapter I consider the theoretical arguments that have influenced the direction of this research, that frame my belief in a capacity view of people with learning difficulties and connect to my search for an inclusive methodology.

Chapter Two

A Theoretical framework

Having outlined the research project as a whole in Chapter One and briefly described the focus for Chapter Two, I will now turn my attention to a more in-depth examination of the theory that underpins this thesis.

This chapter outlines the theoretical positions framing the research project. In order to do this, I draw on literature relating to the social model of disability (Oliver 1990, 1996, 2009, Barnes 1998, Oliver and Barnes 1998, Finkelstein 2001b, Shakespeare 2006, Thomas 2007) and the development of a social theory of disability (Abberley 1987, Shakespeare 2006, Thomas 2007), including materialist approaches (Oliver 1994, Finkelstein 2001b, Thomas 2004, 2007), but taking into account writings about the inclusion of personal experiences of disability (Shakespeare 1996a, Watson 1998, Swain and French 2000, Shakespeare and Watson 2002), including feminist authors (Morris 1998, Thomas 2004) and authors who draw on post-structuralist views (Corker 1998, Goodley 2000a). I also examine literature relating to the social construction of learning difficulties (Goodley 2000a, 2001, McVittie et al 2008). I look at the works of educationalist, Paulo Freire (1976, 1993) and theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal (1979, 1995, 1998, 2001), who regarded education and theatre, respectively, as potential tools of empowerment and transformation. In addition, I examine ideas from the Disability Arts movement (Vasey 1990, Swain and French 2000, Barnes 2003a, Heart 'n Soul 2007) and self-advocacy movement (Goodley 2000a, Chappell et al 2001, Goodley and

Armstrong 2001), both of which demonstrate the potential for people with learning difficulties to group together to resist exclusion.

The Social Model of Disability

In my research I take the view that people with learning difficulties have the right to participate fully as citizens in society, but that society has consistently excluded these individuals. This basic stance has, in recent years, been taken by government (in Chapter Three I examine to what extent this view is acted upon), as can be seen in the white paper, *Valuing People*:

“People with learning disabilities are amongst the most socially excluded and vulnerable groups in Britain today.” (*Valuing People* 2001, p14).

I see this view as incompatible with an understanding of disability, known as the individual, personal tragedy or medical model of disability, which locates the problem of exclusion within the individual (Oliver 1996, 2009, Barnes 1998, Oliver and Barnes 1998). Rather I have taken as a starting point the stance of the social model of disability, namely that individuals are excluded from full participation, not by their own impairments, but by a disabling society (Oliver and Zarb 1989, Oliver 1990, 1996, 2009).

This basic stance, taken by me, is compatible with the development of a social theory of disability that sees disability as an oppression, recognises the social origins of impairments and opposes “the social financial, environmental and psychological disadvantages inflicted on impaired people” (Abberley 1987 p175).

The disabled people's movement that has grown in the last forty years (represented by activist groups and organisations, co-ordinated by the British Council of Disabled People and individual activists e.g. the actor and co-founder of Graeae Theatre Company, Nabil Shaban and the academic, Mike Oliver 1990, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2009) has shown that many disabled people are actively seeking to knock down the barriers that have kept them excluded for so long. The rise of organisations in the 1970s that were controlled by disabled people themselves, such as UPIAS and the BCODP (British Council of Organisations of Disabled People, which became the British Council of Disabled People, and is now known as the Disabled People's Council) was a fundamental part of the struggle for change (Oliver 1996, 2009). In developing a collective identity, many disabled people began to have a voice that spoke from their own interests, rather than others speaking on their behalf (Campbell and Oliver 1996, Oliver 1996, Finkelstein 2001a, 2001b). Through this process these individuals began to develop a positive identity, the collective context providing an environment for the process of transforming consciousness (Oliver and Barnes 1998).

Whilst the distinction between impairment and disability has supported many disabled people to fight for their rights, for people with learning difficulties it is problematic, as it assumes that learning difficulty is purely a biological phenomenon, a static condition of intellectual impairment, unaffected by social and environmental factors. It has been argued that the social model and the disabled people's movement have excluded people with learning difficulties and that accounts of their experiences have been largely absent from the debates and literature in disability studies (Chappell 1998, Chappell, Goodley and Lawthom 2001, Boxhall et al 2004). There is a danger of seeing these individuals as 'stuck' and unable to develop and contribute because of intellectual impairment (Borthwick 1996).

The demand for written, theoretical presentation of ideas has certainly been problematic for people with learning difficulties and whilst in recent years there have been a growing number of accounts presented through/with non-disabled allies (Atkinson and Williams 1990, Mitchell et al 1997, Stalker 1998, Atkinson and Walmsley 1999, Rodgers 1999, Goodley and Moore 2002, Burke et al 2003, Townson et al 2004, Atkinson 2004, Boxall et al 2004, Abell et al 2007), care has been needed to ensure that these accounts are not dominated by the latter. Given these difficulties, the question arises of how people with learning difficulties can take a relationship to the social model, participate in disability studies research and find a place in the disabled people's movement.

Attempting to address these questions, in my own research practice, has led me to consider other ways of enabling participation than through verbal enquiry and creating written accounts, thus building on the work of Goodley (2000b), Goodley and Moore (2002), Booth and Booth (2003), Leighton (2003), Denzin (2003) and Roman (2009). Whilst not ruling out the possibility of involvement through verbal and written accounts, I have begun to explore the use of other methods with the four artists involved in this research project, built on our professional performing arts experience together.

Disability and Identity

The term 'disabled' can be seen to apply to a wide range of individuals, from a variety of backgrounds e.g. class, gender, age, sexual orientation etc (Shakespeare 1996a, 2006). The literature is packed with writings about different impairment groups e.g.

those with physical impairments, sensory impairments, chronic illnesses, learning difficulties. It can be seen to relate to those born with impairments, those whose impairments arise through accidents and those who develop impairments in old age. Whilst some of these people self-identify as 'disabled' many do not (Shakespeare 1996a, Watson 2002, Shakespeare 2006).

Branfield (1999) calls for the disability movement to include all disabled people and to be controlled by people with a lived experience of disability, in order to fight collectively against their oppression and exclusion. She does this whilst acknowledging, like Vernon (1998), that disabled people are not a homogenous group and can themselves be oppressors in different contexts. Each disabled person has his/her own unique experience connected with different roles in society:

“Our identities are an amalgamation of many interweaving, overlapping and sometimes conflicting subject positions. They are not static, nor are they fixed. As such, our identities as disabled people are fluid and, irrespective of our impairments, can be transient.”(Branfield 1999, p401)

In the last ten to fifteen years there has been a call to examine the individual experiences of disabled people and include the diversity of those experiences in a renewed social model, recognising that disabled people have multi-identities and diverse experiences of disability and impairment (Crow 1996, Shakespeare 1996a, Morris 1998, Vernon 1998, Watson 1998, Branfield 1999, Watson 2004, Shakespeare and Watson 2002, Thomas 2007, Ostrander 2008), although the social model can be seen to have arisen directly from experiences of disabled people in the 1970s and never to have actually excluded personal experience of disability (Oliver 2009).

However, the problem for people with learning difficulties is that their identities are not seen as multi-faceted and fluid (Bogdan and Taylor 1976, Atkinson and Williams 1990 p8, Beart 2005). Once the label of 'learning difficulties' has been attached to an individual, all aspects of their existence seem to be judged in relation to this label. A person is no longer son, daughter, brother, student, black person, consumer or citizen first, but 'learning-disabled'. Everything else flows from this. The person labelled as having 'learning difficulties' is seen as unchangeable because this condition is deemed of medical origin. The assumption is that there is an inability to learn because of mental impairment, and that particular behaviour emanates from this condition (Goodley 2000a). Therefore the imposing of this label can be seen to give rise to an 'incapacity' view of the individual concerned (Hatton 2009). The hazard of having a label attached has been noted by individuals so-classified, as can be seen in this comment by an individual given the label of learning difficulties:

“The problem is getting labelled as being something. After that you're not really as a person.”
(An Insider's View in Bogdan and Taylor 1976)

When the psychologist David Rosenhan lied his way into a mental hospital in 1972, claiming to hear a voice saying 'thud', he experienced a similar phenomenon. Once he had been diagnosed as schizophrenic everything else about his life was interpreted in relation to this (Slater 2004).

Learning Difficulties as a Static Condition

As long as the label 'learning difficulties' is interpreted simply to mean a natural impairment of the mind it can be viewed as a static entity, which means that individuals clinically diagnosed as such (Beart 2005) can be seen to have a limit to their learning ability, defined by the medical condition of learning difficulties.

Following on from this, people so-labelled can be viewed as deficient and exclusion can then be seen as emanating from this deficiency, rather than from a disabling environment (Goodley 2000a). This 'deficit' approach, as it has come to be known (Goodley 2000a), actually has much in common with the individual or medical model and results in the pathologising and objectifying of people with learning difficulties (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Gillman et al 1997, Goodley 2000a).

Gillman et al (1997) argue that this client group has become objectified as 'cases' and 'problems', not affected by past experience and life events and, therefore, without history. Histories of these 'cases' are owned by professionals and agencies, locked away in files as professional 'tools' to be used only in the diagnoses of so-called 'challenging behaviour'. This objectification results in the dehumanising of people with learning difficulties:

“It could be argued that whilst the Disability Movement has fought the colonisers of disability (e.g. medical and allied professions) for the right to define disability on their terms, the fight against the colonisers of learning difficulty is of a different order; it is a fight against the denial of humanity itself” (Gillman et al 1997 p690)

Dehumanisation of people with learning difficulties is not a new phenomenon, nor the notion of 'lesser intelligence' that is regarded as characterising this medical condition

(clinically defined as having a low IQ) along with ‘challenging behaviour’ and ‘**social incompetence**’ (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Borthwick 1996, Goodley 2000a, Beart 2005). Borthwick (1996) draws our attention to Dr. Down’s theory of people with learning difficulties, or ‘idiots’, as people who are ‘lesser beings’, whose **development** has been halted somewhere in the evolutionary process, along with other so-called, ‘inferior’ races of people. Of course, this can then be seen as wholly accounting for **the** low IQ scores for such individuals. Borthwick points out that although this view has been challenged in relation to black people and IQ, questions have not been raised about the environmental/cultural effects on people with learning difficulties. Neither have additional physical impairments such as hearing loss been taken into account. **He** comments that:

“Any conceptualisation of intelligence that does not allow for the influence of these factors.... is fatuous; conversely, one that did make such allowances would be so weak as to have relatively little content.” (Borthwick 1996 p408)

The doctrines of the early Catholic Church can also be seen to have played a part historically in confirming the status of people with learning difficulties - as ‘**irrational beings**’ and ‘**innocents**’, who sin without intention of malice (Stainton 2008). In this view, like children or animals, individuals are seen as not able to manage their own affairs, needing to be guided by wiser people and punished when erring, in order to learn how to behave. Following the classical Greek view, human value is associated with reason and people with intellectual impairments are seen as lacking reason (Stainton 2008). Consequently, a two-tier value system is created. Bestowing charity upon ‘such unfortunates’ is seen to serve the function of improving the status of the giver in the eyes of God (Stainton 2008).

Even amongst other disabled people there is still a tendency to view people with learning difficulties from a medical perspective:

“People with learning difficulties face discrimination in the disability movement. People without learning difficulties use the medical model when dealing with us. We are always asked to talk about advocacy and our impairments as though our barriers aren’t disabling in the same way as disabled people without learning difficulties.” (Aspis, S. quoted in Campbell and Oliver 1996 p97)

Challenging a Static or Medical Model of Learning Difficulties

Goodley (2000a, 2001) challenges the medical categorisation of learning difficulties and received ideas about so-called ‘challenging behaviour’/ ‘maladaptive functioning’, ‘social incompetence’ and ‘lesser intelligence’ and indicates that the historical, political and socio-cultural origins of these attributes “have been extensively exposed” (Goodley 2001 p213). He points out that the conception of learning difficulties as a biological deficit has been challenged many times in the literature:

“What should concern us is the mystifying fact that so many social scientists ...do not regard mental retardation as a social and cultural phenomenon. I say mystifying, because nothing in the probabilistic world of social scientific reality is more certain than the assertion that mental retardation is a socio-cultural problem through and through.” (Dingham 1968, quoted in Goodley 2001 p212).

Once this challenge is issued it leads us to ask questions about prejudice, low expectations and lack of experience or opportunities, all of which, in my professional experience, may accompany the attaching of the label of ‘learning difficulties’.

Defining ‘learning difficulties’ medically is problematic. Understandings of the term change, according to cultural and historical contexts. Sections of the population can

suddenly become 'normal' when official delineations between 'retarded' and 'normal' are adjusted. For example Goodley draws attention to the category of 'borderline retardation' being dropped from the Manual of Terminology of the American Association on Mental Deficiency (Goodley 2000a p41).

Although some individuals can be shown to suffer from particular syndromes or conditions, others cannot (Grove and Dockrell 1999). Up to one third of people with learning difficulties have no established cause or bio-medical diagnosis for their learning difficulties (Boxall 2007 p7, citing Emerson et al 2001). However, even when someone can be shown to possess a specific medical condition such as Down's Syndrome, and psychologists then correlate this with certain intellectual incapacities, it is difficult to define precisely how this equates with learning difficulties, as people with Down's Syndrome can be seen to have widely varying levels of I.Q (Grove and Dockrell 1999 p231-232) and diverse upbringings. Environmental variations have been shown to affect cognitive development and performance in children labelled as having learning difficulties (Grove and Dockrell 1999 p228). Couple this with low expectations, which in my professional experience are frequently encountered in relation to people with learning difficulties, then the accuracy of this clinically defined category becomes questionable.

Shakespeare (2006), taking issue with the social model distinction between impairment and disability, warns that those who understand disability (including learning disability) as purely socially constructed are in danger of denying the biological existence of impairments and consequently of misrepresenting the everyday experiences of disabled people and the restrictions they suffer (Shakespeare 2006 p39-40).

It seems to me it will always be difficult to completely extricate disability from impairment in relation to learning difficulties. But, if environmental factors can be shown to affect the ability to learn in individuals with Down's Syndrome (Grove and Dockrell 1999), and difficulty learning cannot be totally correlated with this specific physical impairment, how can it be accurately equated with less specific impairments, with learning difficulties that have no bio-medical diagnosis? (Boxall 2007 p225). As Vygotsky (2000) and Freire (1976, 1993) indicate, learning is an ongoing relationship between developing individuals and the changing social and material world. More importantly, if we focus on mental impairment as equalling a static condition of learning difficulties, surely there is a danger of emphasising the inability in individuals so-labelled, rather than looking for ways that develop their ability to learn and participate?

I believe Boxall (2007 p225) has a practical solution. She suggests that in relation to people with learning difficulties it is more useful, building on Barnes (1998), to refer to perceived impairments and to distinguish between those perceived impairments and disability. Following this, it is possible to focus on a social model interpretation, which as Barnes (1998) indicates is:

“first and foremost a focus on the environmental and social barriers which exclude people with perceived impairments from mainstream society.” (Barnes 1998 p78)

Taking this approach places the onus firmly on researchers like myself to work towards the inclusion of people with learning difficulties in research that challenges a medical model view of 'learning difficulties'.

The stories presented in this thesis show four artists challenging reductive notions of learning difficulties built on medicalisation, by foregrounding their artistic identities and abilities and asserting their potential for change and transformation. I reiterate Goodley and Moore's (2002) comments about the performers with learning difficulties who were involved in their research project:

“It will become increasingly apparent that performers and the associated roles and meanings attached to this identity challenge the derogatory meanings that are assigned to the label of learning difficulties.”
(Goodley and Moore 2002, notes about language and terms)

The Development of a Social Theory of Disability, which Acknowledges the Social Aspect of Impairments

According to Thomas (2007), discussions in disability studies have been driven by three main strands of scholarship – materialist, feminist and post-structuralist. Each of these approaches has contributed to wide-ranging debates, which have had an impact on the attempts to develop a social theory of disability. Thomas asserts that the development of a sociology of impairment has been seen by many academics as essential to creating a meaningful theory of disability, which takes into account the social expression of impairments and/or the social construction of impairments (Thomas 2007). Aspects of these debates inform my own perspective, outlined above, in relation to people with learning difficulties and the ability of the four artists to participate in this research project.

In my view, building on the writings of Abberley (1987), Borthwick (1996), Chappell (2000), Goodley (2000a, 2001), Thomas (2004, 2007), Boxall (2007), it is possible to acknowledge the possible or perceived existence of intellectual impairments - although they cannot always be accurately clinically diagnosed (Grove and Dockrell 1999, Boxall 2007) - but to question how social and environmental factors affect learning ability, how such impairments are manifested and viewed in society, how dualisms of normal/abnormal are conceived and, consequently, how notions of learning difficulty are constructed.

Abberley, as far back as 1987, whilst coming from a materialist perspective, took issue with the notion of natural impairment in relation to disabled people in general and proposed that any theory of disability would need to take into account the complexity of impairment, its relation to the material and social world and the social and historical contexts in which impairment is created and/or is apparent.

“...for disabled people the biological difference, albeit as I shall argue *itself a consequence of social practices**, is itself a part of the oppression.” (Abberley 1987 p164)

*my emphasis

In arguing for impairment to be seen as socially constructed, it cannot be a reason to deny material conditions of the body or physical experiences of impairment:

“Claims about the social origin of impairment, however, are directed at the explication of the social origin of what are material and biological phenomena, and should be understood not as dissolving these material elements into attitudes or ideas, but rather as pointing to the inextricable and essential social elements in what constitutes a material base for ideological phenomena. Thus such a view does not deny the significance of germs, genes and trauma, but rather points out that their effects are only ever apparent in a real social and historical context, whose nature is determined by a complex interaction of material and non-material factors.” (Abberley 1987 p169)

Once again, this reiterates the view I take in relation to the four artists participating in this research. Placing high expectations on the artists' ability to participate, despite the label of learning difficulties, means actively looking for methods to enable their participation. The possible existence of biological difference is not denied, but is not a good enough reason to exclude, particularly as it is difficult to specifically and exclusively correlate this with the social manifestation of learning difficulties (Grove and Dockrell 1998, Goodley 2000a, 2001).

Returning to Abberley's placing of "non-material factors", "attitudes or ideas" are given more weight by some academics. Post-structuralism has become a driving force in the social sciences (Thomas 2007). Using post-modernist perspectives, researchers have attempted to dismantle dualisms such as abnormal/normal and biological/social and have encouraged the development of social constructionism, enabling the examination of disabling discourses (Corker 1998). However, Hughes and Paterson (1997) promoting a phenomenological understanding of impairment, warn that post structuralism presents the dangers of going to the other extreme and reducing the body and impairment to a set of post modernist discourses. I tend to agree. They argue for the development of a sociology of impairment that recognises impairment as a meeting of biology and culture.

In the disability movement, concern has been expressed that the distinction between impairment and disability has caused the former to remain in the reductionist domain of biology and medicine, which has created a disembodied notion of disability. For some time, there have been proposals to place impairment firmly on the agenda of discussions about disability, acknowledging the lived experience of impairment (Crow 1996, Morris 1998) and even the disadvantage that it can cause in itself (Shakespeare

and Watson 2002, Shakespeare 2006), although other academics claim that impairment was never actually excluded from debate in the first place (Branfield 1999, Oliver 2009). Barnes (1998) and Oliver (2009) remind us that the social model grew out of the direct experiences of disabled people and that there is extensive literature dealing with personal experiences. Barnes (1998) suggests, however, that much of the early material produced by disabled writers was not widely available in public libraries or academic institutions and that this resulted in academics in the eighties and nineties going over the same ground, rather than building on what went before (Barnes 1998 p77).

Finkelstein (2001a) acknowledges the link between impairment and disabled people, but states:

“Having an impairment is a prerequisite for being a disabled person but having an impairment cannot cause a person to become disabled.” (Finkelstein 2001a p8)

Again, this returns us to social disadvantage as the cause of disablement.

Finkelstein is concerned that a preoccupation with examining personal experiences should not focus on an ‘inside out’ approach i.e. the individual experiences of facing social restrictions, but that the social model ‘outside in’ approach is maintained, i.e. focusing on “the oppression resulting from social barriers” (Finkelstein 2001a p13). Feminist writers, however, have been forceful in their insistence that the personal is political and that the experiences of living with disability cannot be left out of the equation in any meaningful theorising of disability (Morris 1998, Thomas 2007). I believe this is also an important starting point for including people with learning

difficulties in research and that the personal experiences of individuals can inform our understanding of the social world they are part of (Boal 1995 p40) and therefore the social barriers and disablement they face.

In focusing on lived experience of disability, like Shakespeare (2006), other researchers feel that neither the medical or social models fully account for how individuals experience the complexity of disability, inclusion or exclusion (Simmons et al 2008). Each person is unique in this and class, culture, attitudes etc, and the unique intersection of these experiences in each individual, play a part (Ostrander 2008).

Some academics in disability studies have called for the dismantling of the divisions of 'normality' and 'impaired', by viewing impairment as a continuum. Impairment is seen as a condition of humanity, not confined to certain individuals (Shakespeare and Watson 2002). This is not to deny that some people are obviously disabled by society, while others are not, but as has been pointed out by Finkelstein, level of impairment does not always correlate with level of disability (Finkelstein 2001a). Factors such as class can alleviate the effects of disability (Shakespeare 1996a). Branfield (1999) in examining transient identities, reminds us that disabled people can also become oppressors in other contexts.

Shakespeare (2006) claims that the social model biological/social distinction between impairment and disability is an oversimplification of the everyday experiences of disabled people. He does acknowledge the power of the social model stance historically as a political tool, which turned traditional notions of disability on its head, but he asserts that disability is actually a complex interaction between individual and

structural factors (Shakespeare 2006 p55). He draws attention to the complex interrelations between impairment and disability, and he goes further than Abberley, deconstructing the impairment/disability dualism and identifying aspects of impairment that can disable individuals. For example, pain and/or the nature of impairment may cause restriction of activity, which may not be alleviated by the removal of environmental or cultural barriers. However, Oliver (2007) suggests that Shakespeare does not have a proper understanding of the realities of impairment, which has led to a fundamentally flawed and dangerous position (Oliver 2007 p232).

Shakespeare calls for a social theory of disability to be built on an interactionist view, which acknowledges that disability is a complex interaction between individual and structural factors (Shakespeare 2006 p54-67). But, as Oliver (2007) points out, he does not explain in depth what this would mean and, as Sheldon (2007) indicates:

“The use of the term disability to describe ‘the whole interplay of different factors which make up the experience of people with impairments’ (p58) makes explanatory critiques of disabled people’s maltreatment hard to formulate, and thus undermines any attempts at social change.” (Sheldon 2007 p210)

Oliver (2009 p57) reiterates that the social model is a practical tool, not an idea or a concept, and too much time has been spent discussing it rather than using it as it was intended, as a tool to promote social and political change.

Whilst recognising that Shakespeare has a point, I tend to agree with Sheldon and Oliver; for me, in my research, focusing on social disadvantage as the cause of disablement is a clear and useful starting point. It means the onus is on me to find ways to include the four artists, rather than automatically assuming an inability to participate on the basis of intellectual impairment. I can see what Oliver means when he says that

Shakespeare's is a dangerous position that when taken into the area of policy and practice "has the potential to affect people's hard-won lifestyles and even their lives."
(Oliver 2007 p231).

Focusing on Socially-related Disadvantage

Thomas (2004), also writing about developing a sociology of impairment calls for a return to the social relational view of disability:

"...what has been lost is an understanding that disability only comes into play when the restrictions of activity experienced by people with impairment are socially imposed, that is, when they are wholly social in origin. Such a social relational view means that it is entirely possible to acknowledge that impairments and chronic illness directly cause some restrictions of activity. The point is that such non-socially imposed restrictions of activity do not constitute 'disability'." (Thomas 2004 p580)

The social model was built on a materialist view of exclusion being the result of a history of disadvantage under the economic policies of western capitalism (Oliver 1994, Finkelstein 2001b). To tackle this disadvantage requires political action and in order to achieve this it was seen as necessary to separate issues of social oppression from the personal world of impairment and medical interventions:

"The social model originally underplayed the importance of impairment in disabled people's lives, in order to develop a strong argument about social structures and social processes." (Shakespeare and Watson 1996 p298)

Finkelstein points out that the social model is not a theory of disability:

"The social model does not explain what disability is. For an explanation we would need a social theory of disability." (Finkelstein 2001a p11).

Branfield, however, believes that it is important not to water down the impact of political action within the disabled people's movement and that there is a danger that the academic arguments and the development of the theory may do this, especially if this is dominated by non-disabled people (Branfield 1999). Thomas (2004) has, I believe, a very practical approach to the problem which I summarise here: – acknowledge that impairment stems from an interaction of biology and culture and can cause disadvantage, but, in order to change disabled people's lives, focus on oppression that is wholly socially created. However, her conclusions in Thomas (2007) suggest that she has modified or expanded this view into a more inclusive approach, whilst still taking a basically materialist/feminist stance:

“...in any real social setting, impairments, impairment effects and disablism are thoroughly intermeshed with the social conditions that bring them into being and give them meaning. The materiality of the body is in a dynamic interrelationship with the social and cultural context in which it is lived. Moreover, the impaired body is changing and dynamic: whether or not the impairment is 'fixed' (chronic illnesses, for example, are usually marked by flux and change), the body is constantly ageing. The distinctions made between impairment and disability (disablism) cannot, therefore, be mapped onto familiar biological/social or natural/cultural dualisms, nor should impairment be sidelined as an irrelevant category. In my view, this demands of disability studies that it engages in the full theorisation of the 'impaired body' and its relationship with disablism.” (Thomas 2007 p137)

Whilst this does sound a bit like 'having your cake and eating it' to me, it is a stance that does not necessarily conflict with the view that disability is social-relational and that it is this that the disabled people's movement should focus on in order to effect political change. I feel sympathy with her stance, albeit from the perspective of a non-disabled person. For my part, I am interested in what is a useful approach to take for this research – how people with learning difficulties can be viewed as individuals with agency and the ability to change, who can be included in the development of knowledge and understanding.

Who Gets Left Out?

There is one more point that I would like to explore here. In relation to people with learning difficulties, taking into account only disadvantage that is wholly socially created, becomes problematic when we are talking about individuals who are seen as having more profound levels of impairment.

It is easier to see how the social construction of impairment applies to people classified as having 'mild learning difficulties' and how such individuals might be included in a movement to dismantle socially oppressive barriers in order to change their lives. With people classed as having more 'severe' or 'profound' learning difficulties, there is a danger, as Goodley (2001) points out, that they are left out of the equation. It is easy to be drawn into differentiating between levels of learning difficulty impairment, which can have uncomfortable results:

“...some elements of humanity are open to sociological investigation ('mild learning difficulties'), while some are left in the realms of static, irreversible, individualised biology ('severe learning difficulties')." (Goodley 2001 p213)

He proposes:

“For a more inclusive position, I would suggest that we need to enter into a dialogue about the possible and perhaps necessarily exaggerated social origins of the 'learning difficulties impairment' per se. (Goodley 2001 p213)

While this might seem to lead to a rather distorted view, I believe it could be more useful to start from this premise, as it enables us to challenge assumptions that some individuals are 'stuck' in a place assigned to them by clinical diagnosis. If the latter happens, it becomes more difficult to look beyond simply providing care and services

– care and services based on professional assessment of need, rather than individual choice. There is also the problem of deciding where to draw the line and who draws it.

Simmons et al (2008) propose that a reconceptualisation of profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) is needed that goes beyond a static deficit approach to one that draws on Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts. Here, a person is not seen and assessed in relation to linear targets of progression, but the metaphor of a rhizome is used, to enable a view of the individual as reaching out and connecting to the world and the people in it in many different directions (Simmons 2008 p738).

A ‘plane of immanence’ is visualised, which is defined as a surface of virtual possibilities, any of which may be expressed as reality by an individual, through interactive relations with others (Simmons et al 2008, p738). In this way it is possible to move beyond a view of the individual with PMLD as a fixed recipient of care and therapy. Whilst I am not completely convinced that we really need these metaphors to enable us to stop seeing people with learning difficulties as static, ‘deficit’ individuals, who can only ‘be’, not ‘become’, I can see that it could help to enable changes to practice. In my view, this perspective could also usefully be applied to anyone.

An Inclusive Approach

From a basic social model stance (Oliver and Zarb 1989, Oliver 1990, 1996, 2009, Barnes 1998), I take the view that it is important not to locate the problem of disablement within the individual with learning difficulties (Goodley 2000a). It is vital to see people with learning difficulties as having the capacity to learn and develop and not set out to judge through a set of preordained expectations about abilities and

behaviour, emanating from a fixed, medical, clinically diagnosed condition, based on a dualism of abnormal/normal (Borthwick 1996, Goodley 2000a, Beart 2005). In dismantling the normal/abnormal dualism it is possible to see all individuals as travelling on a journey (not necessarily linear) towards achieving their aspirations.

People with learning difficulties are given a label by the medical/clinical professions and consequently are disabled by attitudes, prejudice and the social barriers they face (Goodley 2000a, Beart 2005). Although it is important to acknowledge that disadvantage may also arise from impairments (Shakespeare 2006), impairments can be seen to be, at least partly, of social origin or construction (Abberley 1987). The label of 'learning difficulties' is itself problematic, in that it can be seen to be connected to a complex set of social and environmental factors, not purely to a fixed medical condition (Goodley 2000a, 2001). It could be more useful therefore to refer to perceived impairments (Boxall 2007) and focus on how understanding of the term 'learning difficulties' is constructed in our society (Goodley 2000a, 2001, Stainton 2008).

In incorporating into the theoretical stance of this research understandings of 'learning difficulties' as a social construction, it becomes possible to see people with that label as subjects rather than objects, who can be active in telling their own stories, rather than needing to have their 'cases' presented for them by non-disabled professionals. It follows from this that people with learning difficulties have the potential to participate in research as collaborators with academics and theorists, making a contribution to the development of knowledge and understanding about 'learning difficulties' and transforming their own identities. This is the stance I have taken in this research and is the position that has guided my choice of methodology. It builds on accounts in the

literature of ‘researching together’ (Townson et al 2004, Chapman and McNulty 2004, Roets et al 2004, Williams et al 2006, Abell et al 2007).

The research presented in this thesis is also located in the worlds of performing arts and education and there are certain approaches here that are useful to consider. They include education theory put forward by Paulo Freire (1976, 1993) and theatre practice developed by Augusto Boal (1979, 1995, 1998, 2001). These approaches inform my choice of methodology and they contribute to the premise that through collaboration with non-disabled allies, artists with learning difficulties can not only participate, but also be a driving force, in the telling of their own stories and the transforming of their own lives.

An Act of Transformation

The work of the great Brazilian educationalist, Paulo Freire (1976, 1993), was based on this very approach of collaboration, which involved teachers working alongside learners as subjects:

“To alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (Freire 1993 p66, orig publ.1970).

Freire’s approach offers a useful basis for working alongside artists with learning difficulties in arts education and research. He has much to say that reinforces and enriches the social model approach, rejecting any notions of oppressed people as victims and objects and elevating them to the rightful position of subjects in their own liberation (Freire, 1993, orig publ. 1970). In doing so he recognises the power of education as a tool for transformation. His approach is built on the active participation

of learners who are seen as subjects addressing issues relating to their concrete reality, which enables them to develop a critical awareness of their relationship to the material world. Education is seen as being about questioning the world, not adapting to it. In this sense it is not normalising, but liberating:

“Any attempt to manipulate people to adapt them to this reality (quite apart from being scientifically absurd, since adaptation implies the existence of a finished static reality - not one which is being created) means taking from them their opportunity and their right to transform the world. Education cannot take this road. To be authentic it must be liberating.” (Freire 1976 p146, orig publ.1974)

Lessons can be learned by non-disabled educators and supporters working with people with learning difficulties, as well as would-be inclusive researchers. Freire cautions that the education process must involve teachers working alongside learners, travelling the journey of discovery together. True collaboration results in new learning on both sides. Any approach that is about handing down knowledge is bound to end in objectification of the learner and amount to cultural invasion:

“Is the act of knowing that by which a subject, transformed into an object, patiently receives content from another?” (Freire 1976 p97, orig publ. 1974)

and

“Cultural invasion, which serves the ends of conquest and the preservation of oppression, always involves a parochial view of reality, a static perception of the world, and the imposition of one world view upon another. It implies the ‘superiority’ of the invader and the ‘inferiority’ of those who are invaded, as well as the imposition of values by the former, who possess the latter and are afraid of losing them.” (Freire 1993 p141, orig publ.1970)

His view is that we need to recognise that people are basically beings who know and that “knowledge begins with the awareness of knowing little” (Freire 1976 p117, orig publ.1974).

Using Freire's theoretical writings to underpin my research enables me to take a 'capacity' approach to the artists with learning difficulties, acknowledging their ability to learn and recognising their role in challenging oppressive barriers, as voiced by the research participant, Robert Belcher, in the story presented in this thesis:

"People with learning difficulties can do it,
give people a chance
There are new ways of learning" (Robert Belcher's poem)

It has served to remind me that I am also travelling new paths and that we have been on a journey of discovery together, where I have neither alone nor always been leading the way. It enables me to view the artists with learning difficulties as people who are "inconclusive historical beings engaged in a permanent act of discovery" (Freire 1993 p117). In this way people with learning difficulties can be seen as capable of taking their place in the struggles of the disabled people's movement, in redefining the label of 'learning difficulties' and making significant contributions to research.

In this research, performing arts practice provides the vehicle for aspects of collaboration. Therefore, it has been important to take an artistic theoretical stance, as well as pedagogical approach, which is compatible with the social model and the social construction of learning difficulties.

Theatre as a Weapon for Fighting Oppression

"I believe that all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theater so that the people themselves may utilize them. The theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it." (Boal, 1979 p122, orig pub 1974)

It is no co-incidence that Augusto Boal in 1974 named his first book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, following the publication of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970. As a contemporary who worked with Freire on literacy campaigns with peasants in South America in the 1970s, Boal's approach to theatre is very similar to Freire's approach to education. Theatre is seen as a tool for transformation. Boal is most well known for the technique he developed in the 1970s, Forum Theatre, which enabled audiences to intervene in the dramatic action and explore alternative ways forward.

Forum Theatre was developed by Boal while he was working on the literacy campaigns with peasants in Peru in the 1960s. It meant that he could enable people to reflect on their own part in the world and to rehearse for action in their own lives - theatre became a 'weapon' for developing critical consciousness in an oppressive political regime and a rehearsal for action in the real world. He went on to develop his work, using these techniques, at the Arena Theatre in Brazil and to take his forum practice into projects with many different groups of people internationally. In the 1990s, he extended these methods to focus on enabling ordinary people to change legislation, through participating in Legislative Theatre projects (Boal 1998).

Central to Boal's work is the statement that "in transforming we are transformed." As Boal says "You don't have to be a poet to write a poem, but when you write a poem you become a poet" (lecture delivered at Cochrane Theatre, London 2004). This approach has much to offer people with learning difficulties. It recognises that in the process of learning we are continually transformed and that human beings change and develop as they interact with the material and social world and effect changes upon it by their actions. Participation in theatre becomes a vehicle for self-exploration, for

exploration of the material and social world and transformation. Boal sees his theatre as ‘unfinished’ (Boal, 1979) as Freire sees education as ongoing, “durable” (Freire 1976 p153, orig publ.1974).

Similarly, this research is about an ongoing process of personal and artistic change. The artists involved are challenging the very meaning of the label ‘learning difficulties’ and redefining their identities in the world through developing roles as professional artists and educators and striving to take control of the creative process. The artists have not arrived at a fixed point – their identities and their art are in development. The four artists are transforming themselves and, in so doing, changing our understanding of the label of ‘learning difficulties’.

People with Learning Difficulties are ‘Transforming’ Themselves

People with learning difficulties are themselves grouping together in contexts that offer opportunities to redefine their identities and challenge their oppression. There are two areas in which this is happening that are pertinent to artists with learning difficulties and to my theoretical stance. They demonstrate the potential for people with learning difficulties to contribute to the disabled people’s movement and to the development of a disability theory that includes their experiences of disability.

Disability Arts

Like the disabled people’s movement, the Disability Arts movement has its roots in the activism of the 1970s (Roman 2009). It emerged from the work of a small number of individual disabled artists and organisations of disabled artists, providing an alternative

to the negative images of disabled people prevalent in popular culture (Barnes 2003a, Koppers 2003). It is informed by the personal experience of disability (Sutherland 2006) and is also seen as an expression of disability culture (Vasey 1990):

“In a nutshell Disability Arts is simply the creative expression by disabled people of what it is to be a disabled person. This expression, which usually aims to create change, can be undertaken on a professional or amateur/voluntary basis: what’s important is that it is by disabled people about being disabled.” (National Disability Arts Forum (NDAF) 2007)

and

“Disability art is the development of shared cultural meanings and collective expression of the experience of disability and struggle. It entails using art to expose the discrimination and prejudice disabled people face.” (Barnes 2003a p13)

If the collective context provides an environment for the process of transforming consciousness (Oliver and Barnes 1998) then working together in the context of Disability Arts has begun to provide such a vehicle for artists with learning difficulties, to transform themselves and take part in the disabled people’s movement. Vasey (1990) describes the inspiration disabled people derive from participating in Disability Arts:

“ As with all the best civil rights movements, the art that emanates from the disability movement is challenging and inspires people within it to keep going. It reflects what the movement is all about and it gives us the confidence we need to be effective and make the changes that we need.” (Vasey 1990 p1)

A performer with learning difficulties articulates the importance of inspiring others:

“Some of the people watching us are disabled people and they’ll be thinking ‘I wish I could do that.’ We’re teaching people how to be strong, and it’s important that they can create their own stuff. The don’t have to copy us but we show them how we do it and they can do it in their own way.” (Pino Frumiento, performer with Heart ‘n Soul, quoted on Heart ‘n Soul website 2007)

Swain and French (2000) claim that Disability Arts draws in people who would not otherwise engage in political action. They claim that involvement in the Disability Arts movement enables individuals to collectively affirm their positive identity, expressed through visual and performing art forms. They call this the ‘affirmative model’, which “is borne of disabled people’s experiences as valid individuals, as determining their own life styles, culture and identity.” (Swain and French 2000 p578). They go on to state:

“Embracing an affirmative model, disabled individuals assert a positive identity, not only in being disabled, but also being impaired. In affirming a positive identity of being impaired, disabled people are actively repudiating the dominant value of normality.” (Swain and French 2000 p578)

If received images of disability and impairment can be challenged by disabled performers (Kuppers 2003, Barnes 2003a) this has been demonstrated time and again by performers with learning difficulties in companies such as Mind the Gap (www.mind-the-gap.org.uk), Anjali (www.anjali.co.uk), Heart ‘n Soul (www.heartnsoul.co.uk) and by the artists involved in this research.

Heart ‘n Soul use the term ‘Learning Disability Arts’ in reference to work by artists with learning difficulties that has been about finding a voice and getting it heard.

However, where this differs from the wider disabled people’s movement is that this work has necessarily involved collaboration with non-disabled artists:

“The emerging art was dependent upon a true collaboration between the non-disabled and learning disabled artists. Yes, it was about teaching skills and techniques but it was centered on the key understanding that the work was mutually creative and inclusive.” (Heart ‘n Soul website 2007)

Perring (2005) questions the role of non-disabled people working with performers **with** learning difficulties, as I will discuss in Chapter Seven.

According to Roman (2009), Disability Arts is not just about disabled artists who can participate in the cultural domain, but "...they are creating it, shaping it, stretching it beyond its tidy established edges." (Roman 2009 p7). In his analysis of a Disability Arts, culture and scholarship series, *The Unruly Salon*, he describes how disabled and non-disabled academics and artists came together to perform and/or watch and discuss, negotiating and sharing a 'third space' for engaging in an exchange of ideas. He examines how boundaries between artists and academics became blurred. He describes how disabled and non-disabled artists and scholars 'grew' and relates this to a politics of 'speaking with' rather than for (Roman 2009 p6).

Roman sees the potential for disability art, to "speak truth to power" (Roman 2009 p8), through the "making of truths by disabled people that challenge non-disabled representations" (Roman 2009 p1). If it challenges power with visions of the "material quality of equality and difference" it can transform itself into an art that is part of a transformative body politic, creating visions of social justice:

"...from art that happens to be by people with disabilities to art that comes from the experiences of an unruly mind-body politic of people with impairments that claims to be part of a socially transformative body politic and stakes out multiple spaces for doing so, working for our vision of social justice as disabled citizens." (Roman 2009 p8-9)

The research project described in this thesis should be seen in a similar vein to Roman's descriptions. In claiming artistic identities the four artists are challenging clinically defined, deficit notions of learning difficulties, and presenting a glimpse of

how the future might be for them in a just society. Roman's claim that the interdiscipline of arts and disability studies benefits qualitative methodologies (Roman 2009 p12), is also, I believe, borne out by this research project.

The combining of scholarship and arts in a research project, through the collaboration of the four disabled artists with myself, a non-disabled, student academic, reinforces the observations made by Roman (2009). However, in order to find a voice through the arts it is necessary to develop the skills to communicate through an artistic medium. This has implications regarding training opportunities, which I will focus on in Chapter Three. Until there are more leaders with learning difficulties in the arts there will always be a danger of dominance by non-disabled allies. There is a danger of theorising being done exclusively by the latter and agendas being hijacked. But, if artists with learning difficulties can find contexts in which to develop their skills, hopefully they will grow in confidence to set their own agendas and make their own contributions to the development of theory.

Self-advocacy

Some artists with learning difficulties are also involved in the self-advocacy movement. Here too they are redefining their identities and challenging how they are perceived, both individually and collectively (Goodley 2000a). The growth of the self-advocacy movement has offered opportunities for individuals to work together, presenting a different understanding of the label 'learning difficulties' (Goodley 2000a, Chappell et al 2001, Goodley and Armstrong 2001):

“... experience and expertise...constitute a body of knowledge that can be fruitfully drawn upon in reviewing notions of ‘learning difficulties’.” (Goodley 2001 p 210)

The contributions made by people with learning difficulties through the self-advocacy movement has been acknowledged:

“People with learning difficulties may be ‘doing’ the social model, although not writing about it or articulating it in a theoretical language.” (Chappell, Goodley and Lawthom 2001 p49)

Chappell et al emphasise that there is a need to develop innovative research practices “which capture doing as well as rhetoric” (Chappell et al 2001 p49). I believe (inspired by Tomlinson 1982, Goodley 2000b, Goodley and Moore 2002, Denzin 2003, Roman 2009), that contributions can be made through arts practice, which has been the starting point for this research. Relationship to the material and social world can be explored and expressed through the arts media (Atkinson and Williams 1990, Leighton 2003, Barnes 2003a, Taylor 2005). Placing an emphasis on the development and expression of ideas through action/practice means that practice is not only a context for expressing ideas, but also a process of reflection (Schon 1991).

A practical, performing arts-based approach, in collaboration with scholars, can provide a vehicle for the inclusion of the reflections and experiences of disabled people in the development of disability theory (Roman 2009). I believe, building on the work of Goodley and Moore (2002), Leighton (2003), Heart ‘n Soul (2007), this approach can be extended to include people with learning difficulties.

Conclusion

The social model and the development of disability theory, writings on the social construction of impairments (and specifically 'learning difficulties') the works of Freire and Boal combine together to offer a useful theoretical underpinning for this research. Drawing on writings about the potential for transformation - through the arts, education and collective environments - highlights the potential contributions individuals with learning difficulties might make through practice. These approaches enable me to regard the four artists from a 'capacity' rather than a 'deficit' perspective, to acknowledge their potential for transforming the world and for being transformed.

Together the theories explored challenge the notion of 'learning difficulties' as a static entity and allow for individuals so-labelled to take their rightful place in the everyday struggle to change attitudes, transform their own identities and knock down the disabling barriers that prevent full participation in our society and specifically, in research projects.

Taking from the above, this research project places individuals with learning difficulties in the role of 'expert' in relation to their own experiences. In my view, research that includes people with learning difficulties should be aiming to enable them to contribute to their own emancipation, rather than assuming that learning difficulties is simply a medically or clinically-defined impairment of the brain, which requires others to carry out this act for them. This research has aimed to enable the artists to contribute, through artistic practice, to a body of knowledge about learning difficulties and the social barriers experienced by these individuals. It has also aimed to enable them to challenge attitudes and prejudice and ultimately to effect changes in

the world that are emancipating for them. In this way, my intention in collaborating with these artists is not merely to enable the articulation of personal experiences of disability, but to speak out against oppression and to draw attention to the social aspects of this oppression.

In the next chapter I examine the context in which artists with learning difficulties involved in this research are striving to develop their artistic talents and establish themselves as artists. I look at the pathway into the performing arts for individuals with learning difficulties, including the history of training for these individuals and how policies, funding and cultural attitudes have affected access to training. I describe how Razor Edge, with the artists involved in this research, attempted to redress the balance and challenge the performing arts education world to include programmes for students with learning difficulties. I discuss how people with learning difficulties have been taking action to demand the right to training and careers in performing arts. The chapter provides a socio-historical context for the research and the stories produced by it.

Chapter Three

Policy and Practice in Performing Arts Education

In Chapter Two, I referred to the need for artists with learning difficulties to have the opportunity to develop their artistic skills, in order to effectively contribute, through their practice, to the Disability Arts movement and to research practice. In this chapter, I examine the lack of performing arts training opportunities for students with learning difficulties – looking at recent history and the current situation. In examining the reasons for this lack of opportunity, I look at the gulf between policy and practice in relation to the government's agenda for inclusion. The chapter places the work of Razor Edge and the team of artists with learning difficulties in a wider context, in order to highlight their relationship to current perceptions, policies and practice in the performing arts and performing arts education.

In illuminating the barriers faced by aspiring performing artists with learning difficulties, this chapter demonstrates the resistance that is evident in the work of these artists, who refuse to accept exclusion as a foregone conclusion. It contextualises the stories of the artists with learning difficulties involved in the research project and shows how such individuals may be forced to choose a very different pathway from their non-disabled peers in attempting to achieve recognition as artists. Striving for an artistic identity is part of the personal history of each of the individuals involved in the research project and this chapter sheds light on their fight for status and inclusion.

What do artists with learning difficulties want?

Several years ago, a graduate with learning difficulties, of a course in performing arts that I was involved in setting up and running, once commented that training should offer students the chance to become “professionals in the real world”. Indeed as far as he was concerned that is exactly what he was – a professional in the real world.

Tom, the graduate in question, was one of a group of five learning-disabled artists whom I consulted in 2000, in the process of setting up Razor Edge. They were asked what they felt should be on offer to people like themselves who might wish to pursue education and training for a career in the performing arts. Four of these artists have been involved in this research. Their responses, several years ago, seemed to articulate clearly, even then, their vision of a professional artistic identity:

- “Good, strong training, Monday to Friday every week for three years”
- “To be able to get paid work”
- “To be able to teach and support others”
- “To be able to run our own company”

In this chapter I will show how artists with learning difficulties have had to forge their own pathways with the support of organisations like Razor Edge, because they have been excluded from the traditional pathways into the performing arts professions. I will show how they have been excluded, not only by the requirements of academic achievement, but also by traditional notions of aesthetics in performance. I will show how they have been let down by government policies to promote inclusion. Artists with learning difficulties who pursue an artistic career despite these barriers

demonstrate resistance and determination to achieve their dreams and place themselves on the artistic map.

Who are these artists?

As well as the artists involved in this research, I have worked with a number of individuals over the past twenty-five years, who have aspired to an artistic identity - in arts workshops, in adult education, in special schools, on pre-vocational and vocational courses in F.E, in companies made up of performers with learning difficulties and in integrated companies.

There are many companies in existence in the UK that are made up of (or include) disabled artists. These include Heart 'n Soul, Carousel, Lawnmowers, CandoCo, Graeae Theatre Company, Mind the Gap, Shysters, High Spin Dance, Blue Eyed Soul, Anjali, StopGap, Corali Dance. International companies include L'Oiseau-Mouche, Axis, Danza Mobile (for information on these companies, see their websites, or the Disability Arts online website, listed in the bibliography). A number of these companies are comprised of artists with learning difficulties – actors, musicians or dancers. The annual, London-based Exposure Festival demonstrated clearly (until the organiser, London Disability Arts Forum, lost its funding in 2008) that there were a variety of companies, including some of the above, demonstrating a range of skills and performance media.

These companies, by their very existence, have shown that disabled people in general, and artists with learning difficulties in particular, can contribute to the artistic life of our society. Some of these companies would describe themselves as being part of the

Disability Arts movement discussed in Chapter Two. Many of these companies existed before recent government policy initiatives to promote inclusion. They continue to exhibit their work, with some, such as Heart 'n Soul and CandoCo, touring internationally to great acclaim and they continue to lead the way in challenging the status quo through their practice and their lobbying. However, many of the artists with learning difficulties, involved in these companies, have not received training on a recognised course, are not paid wages and there is continuing debate about their status as professionals (later in this chapter I will look at the steps being taken within British Actors Equity to address the latter).

Access to Training for Aspiring Artists with Learning Difficulties

The history of performing arts training for people with learning difficulties is located firmly in the voluntary sector, i.e. outside mainstream education and training, (including the independent drama schools). It has fallen to theatre companies to develop innovative and accessible training opportunities (Calvert 2009). Exclusion from mainstream training has been the clearest indicator of a different pathway for aspiring performing artists with learning difficulties. In 1999 my colleague, Mike Ormerod, and I submitted a paper to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment. We wrote:

“Currently it falls to a few arts organisations and theatre companies to provide specialist training. Due to limited funding resources these are either one-off initiatives, or short (for example 10-12 weeks) part time courses, and are very often characterised by inadequate resources and lack of progression routes.”
(Kappes and Ormerod 1999 clause 2.2)

Tom and the four research participants followed a path through special schools, into specialist pre-vocational education in Further Education (F.E.) (except for David Warren, who went directly from school to adult training centre) and they took part in arts leisure activities. In looking for opportunities to develop their interests in performing arts, they were unable to apply to existing H.E. courses, because of their lack of academic qualifications. They each secured a place on a unique three-year course for performers with learning difficulties, *Theatre Arts Course Greenwich (TACG)* delivered by Mike Ormerod and myself. *TACG*, based in a community college and boosted by European funding, supported several individuals to enter performing arts companies and as a result, Tom went on to work with a well-known children's theatre company, as well as with Razor Edge.

At first glance, *TACG* could have been seen to provide a blue-print for access to training for people with learning difficulties i.e. a specialist programme - a substantial training outside the usual academic restraints, tailored to the needs of this group and delivered by specialist practitioners. However (although it was based in a community college) like the voluntary sector courses (e.g. Strathcona's and Heart 'n Soul's) it suffered resource problems and closed through lack of funding after the first three years. As well as lacking the resources to be sustainable, my colleague and I felt that courses outside H.E. were not recognised by the profession and did not further the aim of inclusion (Kappes and Ormerod 1999). We believed that to achieve recognition and sustainability courses needed to be established within H.E. Razor Edge was founded to achieve this.

In 2000 Razor Edge undertook some informal research to review remaining training opportunities in the performing arts voluntary sector. Whilst discovering that a few

companies, made up of performers with learning difficulties, were able to offer some on-the-job training, we concluded that:

“It is evident that although there have been some interesting developments in the area of training in recent years, there are still few opportunities open to students with learning disabilities, particularly opportunities to train to a professional level.”
(Razor Edge 2001 p15)

The situation did not improve over the next few years. When Mencap launched its arts strategy in 2002, training was one of the focuses (Mencap 2002). They envisaged their role as a supportive one, spreading information about training, lobbying, assisting the arts council in reviewing opportunities. It seems that the setting up of training was seen as the responsibility of companies, but in my professional experience, companies like Razor Edge were struggling to identify funding to support and/or sustain their projects.

Access to H.E. Level Training

In 2003, Verrent carried out a review of the independent H.E. sector performing arts schools, where students were funded through the *Dance and Drama Awards (DADA)*. Her report (Verrent 2003) stated that employers who might wish to employ artists with learning difficulties could find few trained artists to consider. Verrent came to the following conclusion about the inclusion of disabled students:

“Full inclusion in the mainstream is still the long-term aim, but it is recognised that this situation is not going to be reached without the successful implementation of a range of interim measures.” (Verrent 2003 p59)

Recommending that partnerships be set up between the schools and disability-specific companies/organisations, the report noted “..alternative training provision for learning

disabled dancers and actors is required.” (Verrent 2003, p60) It also acknowledged that:

“The main impairment category, for which access is unlikely to be provided by schools in the short and medium term, and where companies can be found to provide such placements, is for people with a learning disability, and it is suggested that this is where the initial focus for the apprenticeships is focused.” (Verrent 2003 p64)

In this way, the onus was back on companies to provide. Although a possible way forward, if companies could identify funding and make the learning experience fruitful, this was in danger of avoiding the issue of the fundamental right to access mainstream education.

In 2004 the gap in training provision was still acknowledged as a problem by companies in The Network (of companies working with and for people with learning difficulties in the performing arts). In addition to Razor Edge there were other companies who attempted to address the issue. Anjali, a dance company based in Banbury, began setting up courses for aspiring dancers with learning difficulties, keying into the Further Education (F.E.) funding and accreditation. Mind the Gap (MTG) in Bradford, continued to develop their apprenticeship training course and began working with a local F.E. college. A few courses also began to emerge inside F.E. e.g. in the London area in Lambeth, Bromley and Redbridge – the latter being run by a theatre company, Spare Tyre. Tim Wheeler, MTG’s artistic director, informed me that sustainability was still an issue. Being at F.E. level, courses were mainly accessible to local students, as programmes outside H.E. did not qualify students to apply for government student loans, *DADA* or *Disabled Students Allowance (DSA)*.

Despite keying into the nationally recognised qualifications framework, companies were still falling short of the academic requirements to access H.E. Even *TACG*, which achieved the highest levels of the Open College Network (OCN) accreditation (used by companies because of its flexibility) did not succeed in this. *TACG* did not require students to take the academic basic skills modules that would have kite-marked the course as an 'Access' (to H.E.) programme. Existing H.E. performing arts courses required levels of academic ability that continued to exclude students with learning difficulties and consequently there were no obvious educational progression routes for these students.

In 2005, however, Verrent's recommendations were acted upon, with MTG beginning to work with the independent drama schools, towards finding a way of including students with learning difficulties. MTG, which was already running courses, began to introduce one or two week residencies at the schools, as part of the training, where disabled and non-disabled students could work together.

Alongside the MTG initiative, but separate to it, Razor Edge, who had already begun building partnerships with H.E, was beginning to develop a learning model based on a multi-sensory approach to learning. This would involve methods that used team teaching by performers with learning difficulties. Reflection would take place through and in practice (Schon 1991). The aim was to create a model of learning that was developed with artists with learning difficulties and geared to the requirements of these students. It was envisaged that non-disabled students might also wish to learn in this way and might join the course once it was established. This approach was seen as an alternative to adapting existing courses to integrate individuals with learning

difficulties into traditional learning set-ups. The new model was acknowledged by education professionals:

“...not so much that Razor Edge is a company working with people with learning difficulties so much as what you’re offering is a form of learning. It’s a model of learning. I think that’s the exciting thing.” (Chris Hewitson – Disability Discrimination Act Research Projects Manager, Learning and Skills Development Agency, on the Razor Edge DVD 2006, *Edge of Inclusion*)

The model was developed with the four artists with learning difficulties involved in this research, who were employed with funding from the National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (nesta). The company was looking for a partner to establish a course in H.E. based on this model. Although Razor Edge found a H.E. partner, it was unable to access government funding to enable the course to run and the project was finally abandoned in 2006.

Establishing a Partnership with H.E: the story of Razor Edge’s endeavours

My colleague, Mike Ormerod, and I have argued that in order to provide good quality and sustainable opportunities it is essential to ‘embed’ training and education for all students in the ‘mainstream’ (Kappes and Ormerod 1999). This can be seen in the wider context of inclusion in society. If education is part of the process of becoming integrated as a citizen (Oliver 1996) then segregated education is not going to solve the problem of exclusion.

For this reason, Razor Edge spent six years working towards setting up a course in H.E. The company was aware that statutory funding at this level was attached to validated programs, such as honours degrees. This would mean proving that the

learning model enabled students to meet the basic principles outlined in the degree 'benchmarking' for dance and drama. Working with academics, it hoped to be able to do this and to access additional funding for its model through the government's widening participation policy, supplementing this with private trust and foundation money.

Initial discussions began in 2000 with a number of performing arts schools and university departments and as a result, in late 2001, the company began working with the Assistant Principal Academic at Rose Bruford College (RBC) a small (but nationally recognised) H.E. performing arts college in Kent. The company worked closely with the assistant principal towards making a case for a degree programme, but the partnership ended in early 2005 for a number of reasons. Firstly, a change of personnel meant that the project lost its academic champion. Secondly, additional widening participation funding was not available to it. Thirdly, widening participation policy put the focus on funding foundation degrees. The partnership proceeded down this road before collapsing in 2005.

The Razor Edge/RBC foundation degree was taken to London Metropolitan University (LMU) (RBC was too small to validate its own degrees). It fell at the informal committee stage for two significant reasons 1) because Razor Edge could not guarantee the additional funding required to run the programme for the first five years and 2) there were concerns that there was no evidence to show that people with learning difficulties could study to this academic level. When a request was made for the opinion of an educational psychologist, Razor Edge came to the conclusion that a medical model approach was being used to attempt to assess the learning potential of

this group.

Once the foundation degree fell, RBC was unable to commit the required level of staff time to the partnership and Razor Edge resigned itself to having to raise private funds to set up a pilot to 'prove the case'. After initial discussions with LMU, the company turned to the independent H.E. sector, where it found a willing partner in Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts, one of the schools involved in the Verrent report. The principal of Mountview, Paul Clements, made his feelings clear:

“And it did seem to me to be the most exciting and innovative demonstration of the possibilities of human rights that I'd encountered in this area.” (Paul Clements on the Razor Edge DVD 2006, *Edge of Inclusion*)

It seems to me no co-incidence that Razor Edge found such a warm welcome in the Principal of Mountview. I believe that the time was right for Mountview, with the participation in the Verrent report and the existence of the Special Education Needs Disability Act (*SENDA*), which I will examine later. Policy and practice seemed to be positively linked at this point. However, equally important, Paul Clements did not take a medical model approach, but believed in the basic human right of all people to access education. He would reiterate this time and again in his conversations with myself and my colleagues. The experience of Razor Edge had shown more than once, the importance of individual champions prepared to challenge the status quo. Without this, it was difficult to make progress, despite existing policies relating to inclusion.

This time, the partnership decided that the multi-sensory model would be piloted and developed into a diploma of Higher Education (Dip H.E.) which it considered would

be more flexible than a foundation degree. It engaged the support of the University of Middlesex for this purpose. Paul Clements prepared to take the 'case' to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for H.E. and ask them to:

“...rinse your imaginations now and see whether we can place this course - which quite obviously will not have standard, conventional, academic outcomes - but let's see if we can locate it within the higher education framework.” (Razor Edge DVD 2006, *Edge of Inclusion*)

The Razor Edge project was endorsed by many academics in universities throughout the country, including the University of Cambridge. It was evident that the potential was there for academia to value the learning of individuals who could not achieve “standard, conventional, academic outcomes”, but the model was expensive and the funding was not forthcoming. Although Razor Edge raised nearly half a million pounds towards developing the learning model and establishing a partnership, it was unable to find sufficient private funds to cover the whole pilot and government funding was not available. Despite the growing support in academia, despite widening participation policies, and despite taking its case to ministerial level, the company was unable to extract any money from government to support a pilot. In 2006, after further funding research, the company accepted that the programme was unlikely to ever be fully funded and was forced to abandon the project just before recruiting the first cohort of students. As Paul Clements commented:

“The fact that it wasn't able to run for lack of money was a tragic, tragic disappointment.” (Razor Edge DVD 2006, *Edge of Inclusion*)

It is clear that the establishment of such an innovative and challenging initiative needed government support that was not there. With hindsight, it is possible to see that

there were several factors working against the successful outcome of a project of this nature:

- There was no government funding to support a pilot to test out ideas and 'prove' the case
- Government policies on widening participation focused funding on foundation degrees, which gave little flexibility to H.E. institutions interested in looking for a way forward to include students with learning difficulties
- Despite policies related to inclusion, there was a lack of funding to support institutions to explore partnerships with companies like Razor Edge
- Individuals in positions of power, prepared to act on inclusion and challenge the academic restraints, could only go as far as funding would allow

In 2006, The Arts Council of England, in recognition of the lack of access to performing arts training for disabled actors generally, and their consequent lack of profile or status in the profession, engaged Graeae Theatre Company, a company of disabled actors, to work with three drama schools, towards understanding the issues (particularly attitudinal issues) that caused barriers to inclusion in training (Dacre 2009). The project was called *Into the Scene* and involved a number of discussions and workshops to explore aspects of actor training and the potential for inclusion. Ten months into the project Dacre interviewed Graeae's Alex Bulmer, the co-ordinator. Bulmer confirmed that teaching could be made inclusive, but the real problem lay in

the assessment procedures. For this, it would be necessary to go to the external validation boards. Talented disabled actors would need to be offered a pathway that met their needs as developing artists and could be judged in assessment (Dacre 2009).

Razor Edge had, with its team of performers with learning difficulties, begun developing a learning model that could potentially fulfil these criteria for students with learning difficulties. The company had an H.E. champion, and had the support of many academics, but ultimately, it lacked government funding support.

During the period that Razor Edge was attempting to develop its training programme and open the doors of mainstream education, there were several government policy initiatives that came into existence. These policy developments, relating to education and citizenship, should have supported companies such as Razor Edge and education institutions who wanted to work towards developing a model of inclusion in H.E. for these students, but I believe they failed to support aspiring artists with learning difficulties and their allies to make real progress.

Policy and its Effect on Practice

In recent years there have been several policy initiatives aiming to address inequality and to support disabled people in general, and those with learning difficulties in particular, to access mainstream education and to participate as full citizens. These include, *Valuing People* 2001, *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA)* 2001, *The Future of Higher Education* white paper 2003, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) *Strategic Plan* 2003-2008 and 2006-11, the *Disability*

Equality Duty (DED) 2006 and the revised targets for Valuing People in Valuing People Now: A New Three-Year Strategy for people with learning disabilities 2009.

These initiatives have been much criticised, by Mencap, British Institute of Learning Disabilities and SKILL (National Bureau for Students with Disabilities) for their inability to actually create real opportunities and therefore to affect real change (BILD 2001, Heddell 2003, Skill 2003a, 2003b). Although it seems clear to me, from my own experience, that institutions were having to begin to address issues of accessibility, they were not supported by policies to carry this through for people with learning difficulties. Policies were not backed up with sufficient funding to enable real change to happen. I believe that there were basic flaws that meant the policies were not as effective as they could have been in supporting the practice being carried out by companies like Razor Edge.

Consequently, artists with learning difficulties remained in a position of having to forge their own pathways, outside mainstream education, with the support of allies like Mike and myself. For the four artists involved in this research, asserting an artistic identity in this context takes on the character of resistance and struggle against exclusion.

Valuing People

Valuing People (Department of Health 2001) was the first white paper for thirty years focusing specifically on learning disability and exclusion. With its promotion of people with learning difficulties as full members of society, its focus on the “right to a decent education” and developing a “more inclusive education” (Department of Health 2001

clause 2.2 and 3.14), it should have made a real difference to artists with learning difficulties seeking training to develop their artistic identities. However, it was criticised for its inability to deliver, due to lack of funds, by Mencap, British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD) and others (Pring 2001, BILD 2001, Heddell 2003, Care Plan 2003)

Valuing People was designed to establish a framework for the delivery of health and personal social services for children and adults with learning difficulties in England (Hatton et al 2006). This is a significant factor for students with learning difficulties as it meant there was no requirement to create a framework focusing specifically on education and therefore no funding available to support educational projects like Razor Edge's (verified to me by Linda Jordan, London Regional Advisor, *Valuing People* Support Team in a telephone conversation in 2004). *Valuing People* had no 'teeth' to support companies like Razor Edge working specifically to open the doors of H.E. to students with learning difficulties.

The Department of Health's Learning Disability Research Initiative carried out research to establish the best way to evaluate the national impact of *Valuing People* and made various recommendations, including a need to focus on life experience outcomes for people with learning difficulties (Hatton et al 2006).

However, by spring 2007, The Care Services minister, Ivan Lewis, had admitted that many of the partnership boards (set up to work with people with learning difficulties to implement *Valuing People*) had ground to a halt and that the government was preparing a 'refresher' document to 're-energise' implementation of *Valuing People* (Taylor 2007 p1). David Congdon, Director of Public affairs for Mencap welcomed

this, as long as it included “proper targets”, “proper timescales” and “proper funding” (Taylor 2007 p1). It remains to be seen whether this will happen or whether *Valuing People* will remain mere political rhetoric.

Unfortunately, research published a year later (Riddington et al 2008) confirmed, like Cumella (2007), that the partnership boards had no real authority, no statutory framework and no power to make decisions about allocating resources or about policy strategies. Partnership board meetings tended to be about local authorities disseminating information, raising awareness regarding policies, taking questions and consulting. It has been suggested that the government is using partnership boards, and indeed, new public management in general, to manufacture consent for public policy (Riddington et al 2008 p664). It seems to me that the right to a decent education for people with learning difficulties is not such a priority after all.

However, a consultation document published in 2007, entitled *Valuing People Now* (Department of Health 2007), aimed to assess the shortcomings of the 2001 white paper, and in 2009 (Department of Health 2009) new targets for the next three years were outlined. Included in these was a commitment to supporting *all* people with learning difficulties into paid work. It is difficult to comprehend what is really intended by such a statement – or rather, given the achievements so far, the word ‘political rhetoric’ comes to mind once again.

Policy in relation to Education

Policy developments specifically related to education and training for all disabled people are represented in the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA)* 2001 and in the government's strategy for widening participation set out in *The Future of Higher Education* white paper 2003 and the Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE) strategic plans for 2003-08 and 2006-11. Unlike *Valuing People* these policies were not focused specifically on people with learning difficulties.

The most important of these for disabled people generally, the *SENDA*, made it illegal to discriminate against disabled students in the provision of education, training and other related services in England, Wales and Scotland. The act was an amendment to the *Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)* 1995. In relation to accessing H.E. a key issue in the *SENDA* was the concept of 'reasonable adjustment'. Skill (National Bureau for Students with Disabilities) indicated that:

“...one of the justifications for less favourable treatment, and one of the criteria for determining whether or not an adjustment is 'reasonable', will be the maintenance of academic or other relevant course standards” (Corlett (for Skill) 2004 p2)

This presented the likelihood that people with learning difficulties would remain excluded on the basis of low academic achievement. There was no requirement to offer alternative courses for people with learning difficulties that could qualify for statutory funding. The focus on foundation degrees as the answer for more vocationally oriented students did not solve the problem for people with learning difficulties, as academic achievement remained an issue. Even the introduction of the National Vocational

Qualifications (NVQs) which Razor Edge investigated as a potential pathway, presented the problem of learning basic skills, including literacy and numeracy, connecting in with the government's drive to improve these skills (F.E news 2004, QCA website 2007).

If Razor Edge and Paul Clements had acted on the plan to go to the QAA (see p88) to convince the academy that the learning model would not only address the needs of students with learning difficulties, but would fit within a H.E. framework, then the struggle for a professional, artistic identity might have been partly won. The Razor Edge model, however, gave rise to a level of support requirement (both learning and pastoral) that demanded high levels of funding (Razor Edge 2005) that the company could not secure. The valuing of different ways of learning was only half the battle – the rest was down to funding. Skill pointed to the lack of sustainable funds from the government through HEFCE to back up policies and really support institutions to open their doors to disabled people (Skill 2003a, 2003b) (although the Higher Education Funding Council Wales had made some commitment to ongoing funding). For Razor Edge the burden of raising funds for a pilot rested with them. Paul Clements agreed with Skill:

“...the government have launched this very strong agenda about widening access and participation, but they're not actually supporting it with... government funds.” (Paul Clements interviewed on the Razor Edge DVD 2006, *Edge of Inclusion*)

In addition to the issue of reasonable adjustment in the *SENDA* and the lack of funds to widen participation for this group, Skill drew attention to a basic flaw in the whole strategy for widening participation, namely that there was not actually specific recognition of the under-representation of disabled students in H.E. (Skill 2003a,

2003c) (again this was not the case in Wales), let alone a recognition of the rights of people with learning difficulties to access H.E.

Disability Equality Duty

The *Disability Equality Duty (DED)* 2006, a further amendment to the DDA, has put new pressure on institutions, including H.E. institutions, to deliver for disabled people. It applies to forty-five thousand public bodies, and requires organisations to be proactive in making provision for disabled people. In relation to education, it specifically mentions F.E. and H.E:

“...to take account of the *particular barriers** to achievement for disabled pupils and learners....to help widen participation and retention in further and higher education.” (DRC 2005 p5) (* my emphasis)

The “particular barriers” for people with learning difficulties are academic achievement as it is currently conceived and the fact that funding is not available to support alternative models of learning.

The *DED* Code of Practice, laying out the duty, was written and produced by the Disability Rights Commission (DRC 2005). Their introduction makes plain that the code starts from the premise that exclusion is due to attitudinal or environmental issues and is not an inevitable result of impairment or medical condition (DRC 2005). It quotes the government’s aim as laid out in its report *Improving Life Chances of Disabled People*:

“By 2025, disabled people in Britain should have full opportunities, and choices to improve their quality of life and will be respected and included as equal members of society.” (DRC 2005 p2)

One can't help wondering if this was meant to include people with learning difficulties and if it was, what practical steps were envisaged to enable this group to access pathways into careers that require high levels of vocational training and study. Despite the reference to “particular barriers”, “reasonable adjustment” is once again mentioned in the DED and it is possible that this will continue to provide justification for excluding these students, unless funding and student support is provided to enable the development of alternative learning models. Skill (2007) comments:

“A truly equal society should recognise people's different needs, circumstances and aspirations, and should ensure that there are no barriers to allow individuals to reach their potential.” (Skill 2007 p3)

Expectations need to be raised as to what these students might achieve if given the chance, rather than continuing to measure them against current notions of academic potential, as my colleague, Mike Ormerod, points out:

“In my opinion, it is not expected people with learning difficulties will achieve high levels of skills. I don't think the *SENDA* really even considers that people with learning difficulties could want to access H.E. ... The individuals we have worked with respond to high expectations and with appropriate learning methods, can develop their skills and their ability to reflect on their work.” (Mike Ormerod, Joint Director, Razor Edge, from field notes)

In April 2009, a new bill, the *Equality Bill*, began to be debated in parliament, with a view to it becoming law in 2010 (see www.equalities.gov.uk). This law will replace several separate pieces of equality legislation – many different aspects of equality will come under one umbrella. It remains to be seen what difference it will make to aspiring artists with learning difficulties.

Lack of Funding is a Continuing Issue

Lack of funding, to support education programmes that do have high expectations of this group, has continued to play a part in excluding them from training in the performing arts. In 2007 two drama courses in Leeds closed in a wave of cuts to F.E. provision for people with learning difficulties, causing the course tutor to comment:

“it’s because they think no one will be an actor. Everyone has to aspire to shelf stacking or dog grooming.” (Curtis 2007, quoting Vicky Ackroyd)

In 2006 and 2007, respectively, the Anjali and CandoCo dance courses closed, putting an end to two very important opportunities at F.E. level, open to aspiring dancers with learning difficulties. The CandoCo course ran from 2004 – 2007, was accredited by the Open College and offered places to disabled students only, including students with learning difficulties (although there was a level of academic requirement that may have excluded some dancers with learning difficulties). The company states:

“However, changes to Learning and Skills Council funding meant that the grant for this activity was redistributed to learning institutions.” (CandoCo 2009 at www.candoco.co.uk)

Once again a company offering opportunities not available in mainstream institutions struggled to achieve sustainable funding. The company now provides places for two apprentices per year.

In 2008, The Lawnmowers Theatre Company, based in Carlisle, succeeded in its bid to the BIG Lottery and, as a result, was able to set up its physical theatre apprenticeship course, accredited by the Open College. Following training, apprentices would “stay

within the company” (Lawnmowers 2009) but it is unclear exactly what this will mean and whether the scheme will be sustainable in the long term

One small success story, in 2007, gave some grounds for hope. MTG, who had continued to run their ten-month training programme for six students with learning difficulties, was able to secure an amount of funding relating to widening participation, via the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) who had taken responsibility for the *D&DA* (previously *DADA*). Mountview took over co-ordinating the course, with two-week residencies taking place in four schools and the rest of the programme taught at MTG (MTG website 2007). The course was advertised as open only to actors with learning difficulties who already had professional experience. During the residencies, students were taught by the schools’ staff, alongside non-disabled students who opted to take part. The programme was recognised as being within the realms of H.E. learning and students were able to receive Disabled Students Allowance. In addition, MTG began to formalise the course into a document to be taken to the QAA. However, funding again caused problems. In July 2009 I received this email communication from Vicky Ackroyd of MTG:

“Unfortunately Staging Change is not running this year as we weren't able to bid into the LSC's Widening Participation fund, due to changes in the specification. We are currently trying to create another model with schools, that is more cost effective, but that is a work in progress!!

We didn't get the course validated at HE level, but it's certainly something we're still considering.

In terms of the company generally, we haven't escaped the 'current climate' and a colleague and myself have been made redundant.” (Vicky Ackroyd in an email to me, July 2009)

It would seem that the struggle continues.

In the Wake of Inclusion Policies

Although policies can be seen to play a part in providing leverage for activists and raising awareness in institutions, there is the question of whether real change can ever be achieved through policy (Oliver 1996). If they are not backed up by adequate and sustainable funds to educate and to enable practice to develop, they will remain ineffective. Razor Edge attempted to knock down the barriers that exclude people with learning difficulties from mainstream training and a pathway into the profession, but found that funding was not available to back policies. Other companies struggled to keep F.E. level courses going and it remains to be seen whether MTG can revive its training linked to H.E.

In 2007, after six years of new government policies, Verrent's follow up report, about access to the independent H.E. schools, still did not paint a good picture for aspiring artists with learning difficulties. Although the report acknowledged the "establishment of a number of robust relationships between theatre companies and providers" (Verrent 2007 Appendix 1) in relation to access for disabled people generally, it also pointed to the continued exclusion of people with "more significant learning needs":

"On the whole, those with less visible impairments appear to be able to be easily incorporated into the teaching practices within the schools. Those with *more visible impairments, more significant learning needs** and greater physical access requirements are still excluded." (*my emphasis) (Verrent 2007 clause 7)

In addition to policy issues, Verrent's reference to those with "more visible impairments" raises another factor that may play a part in the continued exclusion of

people with learning difficulties – namely that looking or sounding obviously disabled may be a cause for concern amongst the performing arts education establishment, where there is perhaps an emphasis on bodies that fit into a traditional schema of learning performance techniques. If this is the case, then the struggle of people with learning difficulties to assert an artistic identity involves overcoming further obstacles, based on perceptions and attitudes. A look at this issue will further contextualise the stories of the four artists.

Recognising a different artistic identity

In August 2000 Anjali, a dance company made up of dancers with learning difficulties, was commissioned by the Royal Festival Hall to create a new work to be premiered as part of the *Blazing Dance Festival*. In addition to presenting their performance, Anjali hosted a debate with professionals in Disability Arts, and with funders and critics, entitled *Beyond a Sympathetic Response*. The debate was a move to raise issues about how audiences viewed dance by people with learning difficulties. Anjali tours original work and has run training courses in dance. The company states its aim:

“... to extend the boundaries of contemporary dance by developing a new aesthetic which embraces power, technical achievement and strong visual imagery.” (Anjali website 2007)

Others have picked up on the company’s intention:

“The company asks us to challenge our preconceptions about what dance is and how we look at it.” (Leask 2000 www.guardian.co.uk)

Leask also claims that:

“The company challenges the existing stereotype in dance - one that is obsessed with "perfect" bodies and virtuosic technique - by presenting us with differently abled bodies who excel in honesty, humour and sensuality.” (Leask 2000 www.guardian.co.uk)

The debate about challenging traditional notions of aesthetics has been present for some years amongst companies who work with artists with learning difficulties, as well as amongst other disabled artists (e.g DV8 Physical Theatre, who describe the company’s work as inherently questioning the traditional aesthetics and forms in modern and classical dance www.dv8.co.uk) and amongst academics and non-disabled supporters. It is an important factor in relation to how performers with learning difficulties are regarded.

Like Anjali, Razor Edge also saw itself as part of the move to challenge stereotypical approaches to creating (and studying) performance. In 2001 the Razor Edge Team contributed to a conference in H.E. at the London Metropolitan University, called *Shifting Aesthetics*, where the focus was on access to performing arts education for aspiring disabled artists. The *Finding the Spotlight* conference in the following year developed the theme and papers were presented that questioned how disabled performers were viewed by audiences (Kuppers 2003, Conroy 2003) and how different ways of viewing are connected to the acceptance of disabled performers - “...access is aesthetic as well as institutional...” (Jenny Sealy, Artistic Director of Graeae Theatre Company, in Conroy 2003 p1)

Kuppers (2003) explicitly connects material access to the arts, for disabled people, with a culture’s conceptions of what art is. She posits that disabled artists need to create art that shows up the so-called ‘natural’ practices in everyday life as actually

being constructed. In this way it is possible to challenge the conception of what is 'normal' and what is acceptable in artistic presentations. She states:

“I am interested in art that challenges the ideas of normality, and in art that shows up the thinking about things taken for granted...” (Kuppers 2003 p4)
and

“I firmly believe that we need to keep rattling the cages of 'recognised art practice'. Social change can also mean aesthetic change.” (Kuppers 2003 p4)

Kuppers (2000) suggests that naturalised concepts of physicality, seen as appropriate to specific dance techniques, particularly those emanating from the practice of ballet, can be challenged by disabled dancers. She posits that adopting a constructionist view of the body and of disability enables dancers to open up understandings of their own bodies, of body regimes and their placement in our culture. Companies who adopt this approach can enhance our understandings of the diversity of embodiment and offer new possibilities in performance (Kuppers 2000 p129).

Artists with learning difficulties, such as the Anjali dancers and the participants in this research project, can challenge received notions of what art is and what is 'normal' by their performances. This may mean the presentation of different bodies that do not conform to naturalised notions of an actor's body or the 'dancerly body' (Kuppers 2000). It may involve different ways of moving, different voices.

Some actors with learning difficulties do not achieve, by traditional measurements, technical excellence in voice work. In my experience physical impairments, or lack of ability to grammatically phrase in a 'normal' manner, may affect these individuals' ability to articulate in a traditionally accepted way. However, if a performer communicates effectively in the context of the performance and can be convincing to

an audience, this should not be a reason to exclude him/her (any more than censoring different accents is acceptable). The performer's speech will simply differ from that which spectators are used to hearing – an unintentional part of the performance experience, unique to that individual's performance persona.

Conroy (2003) draws attention to the difference between intention in performance and aspects of performance that are not intentional e.g. the presence of an individual's particular impairment. She quotes a metaphor from Roland Barthes:

“If I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or on the window-pane. At one moment I grasp the presence of the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparency of the glass and the depth of the landscape; but the result of this alienation is constant: the glass is at once present and empty to me, and the landscape unreal and full.” (Barthes, 1993:123-4 quoted in Conroy 2003 p2)

If we learn to accept the two aspects of viewing and that they come around in turn (what Barthes calls the 'turnstile' of form and meaning) then we can accept the unintentional presence of impairments in performance (I see this as akin to being asked to accept a black actor in a part that we might assume to be white or that is not overtly written as black). On the other hand, the performer may of course wish to use difference to explore new artistic ideas and challenge perceptions of 'normality'.

Grace (2009) goes beyond the idea of subversion, which she says can be seen as emphasising the 'sub' relationship to the 'dominant' in society. She suggests that creating different genres, which explore new notions of presence and absence on stage, of performance time or duration and which focus on relationships in performance, can provide a dramaturgy for disabled performers. For example, in creating her dance

installation, *No Wonder My Spine Cries*, she sometimes needed to withdraw because of lack of energy (due to her impairment) and the audience were left with ‘poetic images which enabled them to engage with an experience of something being performed – “...even if this was their own sojourning between chairs and documents and texts” (Grace 2009 p19). For example, she included a set of photographs of her dance performance, related to the poem on display, that was the focus of the installation. Grace produces a score to guide her dancing, rather than a choreography, which enables her to interpret it as her health allows. In the piece described, she engaged the audience in creating aspects of the installation, by asking them to take photographs that represented their own interpretations of the poem. She stored these in viewable documents within the installation.

The question of a different aesthetic is, however, tricky. As Conroy points out “both staggering virtuosity and awful bad acting can cause us to concentrate on the performer’s body.” (Conroy 2003 p2) I remember seeing the dancer David Toole leaping around the stage in DV8’s production of *Can We Afford This* in 2000, about perfection and pretence. I was not so much distracted by David’s lack of legs as struck by his sheer amazing ability to inhabit the space in a different way (described in one review, as “disorienting virtuosity” (Mackrell 2000). This is what Kupperts describes as using difference as tools for reinventing social space (Kupperts 2003 p13).

How do we then ensure that the demand for a different way of viewing is not an excuse for poorly executed performance, but rather the taking up of an exciting opportunity to develop new forms and content? As Razor Edge discovered, this presents a challenge to develop alternative approaches to learning and to creating performance. Mike Ormerod, Joint Director of Razor Edge comments:

“ Well, I think whilst it’s good to talk about a new aesthetic, whatever that aesthetic is, it has to stand up to scrutiny. But it may mean that performances are not just churning out the old expected traditions. It’s quite exciting really. I mean, it means that we can experiment and invent and artists can find their own ways of creating and performing - that’s what performance should be about – about articulating your own voice and we can challenge received notions of form and content. Well, certainly the music that David Warren develops and plays stands up as far as I’m concerned.” (Mike Ormerod, Joint Director of Razor Edge – extract from field notes)

Hargrave (2009) posits that performers with learning difficulties are “always placed (negatively) in relation to a perceived ideal and judged accordingly” (Hargrave 2009 p42). He examines three pieces of work by companies of performers with learning difficulties – Mind the Gap’s *On the Verge*, the Australian company, Back to Back’s *Small Metal Objects* and a collaborative production of *Pinocchio* by Shysters and Full Body and The Voice with York Theatre Royal. In attempting to assess what the impact of these performances are, at one point Hargrave uses Barthes’s idea of punctuations, or small tears in the ‘fabric’ of the performances. These are the moments when, for example, the performer, Jez Colborne, takes longer than we would expect a traditionally trained actor to take, to zip up his jacket on stage, or to pour sugar into his cup. Hargrave refers to being able to “see the joins created in rehearsal” (Hargrave 2009 p42). And yet, after initial irritation, he finds that this “dis-precision”, as he calls it (p42), has a certain eloquence and is enjoyable in a way he has not experienced before.

Hargrave’s description reminds me of Bertolt Brecht’s approach to theatre (Brecht 1959) and his theory of alienation, where the audience is not totally lost in the world of the performance, but retains an awareness of the actor and his/her intention in playing the role. It also conjures up Barthes’s glass window again, referred to by Conroy (2003

p2). It is an awareness of difference from that which we normally expect, and, as Hargrave reminds us, new things that we come to find attractive are often alien and unattractive at first. Ultimately, for me, a performance does not have to be an example of virtuosic technique to be both affecting and effective, but it does have to have intention, skill of delivery and passion. Through these a performer's presence can engage me and take me on a journey of discovery. Hargrave recognises that:

“What these works celebrate is the uniqueness of the individual that might ultimately override the question of virtuosity in their performances.” (Hargrave 2009 p49)

However, production of performances by artists with learning difficulties involves collaboration with non-disabled individuals. There have been concerns raised that the involvement of non-disabled artists can result in the presentation of ‘normalising’ performances, where performers with learning difficulties are directed to create a parody of normality (Leighton 2009, Hargrave 2009) and perhaps those who are perceived as most ‘able’ to do this, are hired. The danger of creating a hierarchy of disability is obvious, resulting in Verrent’s picture of “those with less visible impairments being easily incorporated” (Verrent 2007 clause 7). But, as Hargrave (2009) asks, who or what can constitute a pure vision of art or disability? He points out:

“It could be argued that for learning-disabled theatre to exist in pure form, it would be necessary to dissolve all input from non-disabled artists.” (Hargrave 2009 p52)

Wooster (2009) in examining the work of Odyssey Theatre (an inclusive community theatre group run by Hijinx in Cardiff), considers to what extent a directorial overview should be imposed to create a piece of art that fulfils audience expectations. In

stressing the importance of process over product and in accepting all contributions as valid, there is a danger of eliciting the question ‘is it art?’. However, he argues that if we accept that inclusive theatre will look different from existing theatre, just as an inclusive society will look different from the present one, then we have a basis for valuing this work. Whilst accepting we all exist “at different points on the disability spectrum” (Wooster 2009 p89), he posits that people with learning difficulties are not “just like everyone else” (p89) and that:

“We should relish and validate the difference and facilitate an engagement which allows each of us to contribute according to our comparative disabilities and rewarding each of us according to our needs.” (Wooster 2009 p89)

Although I find it difficult to take issue with this statement, because the aim of enabling everyone to contribute is the basic tenet of any really constructive devising process, I am also aware that there is a danger of stressing difference and making a ‘special’ case for artists with learning difficulties. In the end, for performers with learning difficulties and their non-disabled collaborators, these debates raise questions about what we, as artists, want audiences to bring to our performances, what our intentions are and whether they are successfully communicated to our audiences by our skills of presentation. This applies to performances by people with learning difficulties, by any other disabled performers or by inclusive groups. Otherwise, there is a danger of always “playing catch up” (Hargrave 2009 p38) or being viewed as “good considering she’s disabled” (Wooster 2009 p87) or, in attempting to create new aesthetic approaches, provoking the question “is it art?” (Wooster 2009 p87).

Richard Hayhow, the director of the Shysters Theatre Company, a company of actors with learning difficulties, based in Coventry, goes to the other extreme:

“Some other companies whose actors have learning disabilities try and make their actors “normal”: we try to keep them different.” (Hayhow, quoted in Karafistan 2004 p265)

According to Karafistan (2004), in her evaluation of the work of the Shysters, the uniqueness of the individual can bring to the stage an experience that is both accomplished and unpredictable. She describes how the performers’ harnessing of their emotions, borne out of their own experiences, make for the creation of powerfully affecting performances, which intentionally do not draw on traditional notions of naturalism, of theatre as dialogue, as representing everyday life. The performers often present the absurd and surreal, using ‘different’ physicalities. She describes the result:

“The actors’ manipulation of the audience’s emotions was accomplished and unpredictable, and this is a hallmark of the Shysters’ style. You cannot sit comfortably, for you have no idea where the rollercoasters of emotion will take you next: you need to be prepared at every turn to be faced with fragments of yourselves on stage.” (Karafistan 2004 p278)

Is Hayhow, as a non-learning disabled director, imposing his own view of a learning disability aesthetic, or is he enabling the company to arrive at a place where they are using their own natural creativity to create alternative, challenging theatre? Karafistan certainly seems to think so and, yet, she also draws attention to the “need within the company to be seen and accepted as normal.” (p274) and that “ this contradicts the feeling that what makes theatre interesting is what is different and unique about people” (p274).

Perring (2005) writes about musicians who have experimented on the edge of

technique, or with anti-technique and have devised processes to access the intuitive, as opposed to following preconceived or familiar approaches to music-making. They exist in the context of a history of artists who have challenged orthodoxies in music, for example free jazz. Perring posits that these challenges have opened some musicians to the musicality of some people with learning difficulties, which might be overlooked by virtuosic traditions (Perring 2005 p181).

When asked what he thought people with learning difficulties could contribute to the arts, Paul Clements, Principal of Mountview, replied, “by being themselves”. (Razor Edge DVD 2006 *Edge of Inclusion*). He acknowledged that it is performers who are the key to bringing the experience alive for the spectators. Perhaps we will arrive at a point where artists with learning difficulties are accepted for who they are and what they bring to the performance experience and are not excluded by notions of ‘normality’ – social or artistic. Then it may be accepted that these artists have a right to access training that is geared to their learning requirements and to claim an artistic identity of their own choosing, not one dictated by non-disabled professionals.

Artists with learning difficulties, and those who collaborate with them, need to be clear what ‘standing up’ to scrutiny means. We need to know what we are asking audiences to bring to viewing our performances “beyond a sympathetic response” - perhaps an openness to diversity, an acceptance that there is more than one way to ‘skin a cat’. Hopefully this can lead to an acceptance that difference doesn’t need to get in the way and may even enhance the spectator experience. It may provide refreshing, new ideas that challenge our expectations and cause us to rethink notions of ‘natural’ ‘normal’ and ‘art’. Then we may begin to realise the potential for innovation offered by diversity of embodiment in performance.

Whately (2007) suggests that aesthetic priorities (in H.E, in relation to dance) might actually change if more disabled artists were participating. Perhaps this would also be true for actors, dancers and musicians with learning difficulties. The more trained performers there are, the more they may be able to contribute to creating new visions of art and disability. This brings me back to the question of how to enable access to training in H.E. in the first place.

What are people with learning difficulties doing to effect change?

Artists with learning difficulties (and their allies) are grouping together to make change happen. They have not ceased to make the demand for opportunities to be enabled to follow an 'arts life'. In addition to the emphasis on training and the courses set up by companies, there have been various initiatives in recent years by people with learning difficulties in performing arts (and in the arts generally) to raise awareness amongst non-disabled professionals and to politicise aspiring artists with learning difficulties themselves.

For example, artists with learning difficulties in Mind the Gap have run two conferences – *Show and Tell* in 2006 and *CAST* in 2007 looking at the work of people with learning difficulties in the performing arts and what they need in order to access employment and move on.

Other initiatives, related to the arts in general, have been set up. These include Artslife, an organisation run by people with learning difficulties that attempts to find

opportunities for those who wish to pursue the arts in general; the *Oskar Bright Film Festival* that presents films by people with learning difficulties; *In the Frame*, a conference run with people with learning difficulties at the Tate Modern in 2005, looking at access to the visual arts.

In 2007, a very important move was made, to obtain recognition of professional status for actors with learning difficulties. It was led by a freelance director, Frances Rifkin, and the Lawnmowers, a company of actors with learning difficulties based in Newcastle that Rifkin had worked with. As a result of their activism, the actor's union (Equity) agreed to begin discussions about union membership for these performers. This was a significant move as it meant taking into account a major difference for these actors, namely that they were mostly unpaid¹. The fact that Equity, despite this, was prepared to begin this debate, was a major step forward for actors with learning difficulties in their quest for recognition of professional artistic status. In 2009 discussions were still ongoing and Equity were considering the possibility of offering learning disabled performers who were on benefits student membership status.

In 2010 Stephen Spence, Assistant General Secretary of Live Performance, informed me that, after considerable discussion, a decision had been reached. Actors with learning difficulties from three companies had requested to join Equity and were to be

¹ In my professional experience, parents/carers have often been reluctant to allow individuals to come off their state benefits for short periods of employment in the arts because of perceived or real difficulties of getting them reinstated. Companies other than Razor Edge have also found payment could mean disruption of state benefits (Karafistan 2004 p274). Companies who had grown up not being able to pay their actors proper wages for performance projects, made clear at the *Show and Tell* conference, that they were unable to secure the increased levels of arts funding required to do this. Razor Edge was able to employ its team for two reasons. Firstly it engaged a state benefits consultant to work with the employees and parents/carers to negotiate their way through the benefit's system. Secondly, it secured funding from Nesta because they were interested in the development of the new learning model with these artists.

granted student membership status, which is currently granted to those attending recognised performing arts schools. This move involved the union making reasonable adjustment to its criteria for recruitment, i.e. its definition of professional, defined as being on an Equity contract and paid professional wages for the job. In order to join, each performer would be required to obtain a letter from his benefits agency, acknowledging awareness of his work with a theatre company. Future applications by performers with learning difficulties to join the union would involve each case being looked at on its own merit. However, discussions still need to happen regarding graduation from student to full membership status.

Whilst this is a major step forward, until the question of graduate membership is resolved, it means actors with learning difficulties are still not being recognised as professional. Student membership implies they are perceived as being aspiring professionals, or on their way to becoming professionals. Whilst this may be an accurate description for some, for others it fails to acknowledge the experience and skills they have gained over their years of working in the profession, as well as any training they may have undertaken. However, there are other issues here, such as companies being able to obtain a level of arts or other funding to pay professional wages to all actors. In addition performers with learning difficulties need to be able to get benefits easily reinstated once their employment ends. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, the latter is seen as a major impediment to receiving wages.

The Lawnmowers, who initiated the discussions with Equity, have been very proactive in promoting employment of performers with learning difficulties. Their initiative entitled *The Real Project* looks at barriers into employment. This, and *Breaking Down the Barriers*, their plans for developing and trialing a model of good organisational

practice in the employment of artists with learning difficulties, is outlined on their website (www.thelawnmowers.co.uk 2009)

These initiatives are about continuing to bang on the door of the establishment to achieve training opportunities and recognition for aspiring and established artists with learning difficulties. They are gaining support from allies throughout the arts and education establishments, as can be seen in this quote from a Cambridge academic:

“...but sometimes alternative, creative ideas can also be a way through and the alternative can become the norm... can become the way forward. And sometimes the establishment has got it wrong ...we have to keep banging on the door.” (Lesley Dee, Senior Lecturer, Education Faculty, University of Cambridge on Razor Edge DVD 2006, *Edge of Inclusion*)

Conclusion

The reasons for the exclusion of aspiring artists with learning difficulties from mainstream pathways into the performing arts are complex. Issues of aesthetics, perceptions of difference, availability of funding, approaches to and valuing of learning all play a part. Government policies that promote inclusion in words can be seen to have failed to specifically support aspiring artists with learning difficulties in practice.

Aspiring artists with learning difficulties and their allies, however, are not giving up. The response has been one of continuing resistance in the face of adversity. It is evident in the actions that they and their supporters have been forced to take, to attempt to carve out a route to a recognised artistic identity and it is evident in the actions they continue to take to “bang on the door”.

They continue to seek out the educational opportunities to develop their skills and find their own 'voice' as artists. Despite policy initiatives, they are still excluded from the mainstream pathways into the performing arts professions. They have been forced to forge, with the support of their allies, alternative pathways, involving learning 'on the job' in companies and/or attending short part-time courses to develop their skills. However, with the discussions about recognition of the professional status of actors with learning difficulties by Equity the door is being pushed open just a little more. Performances by companies like Anjali continue to educate audiences in relation to aesthetic diversity. MTG continues to work towards inclusion of artists with learning difficulties in H.E.

The right of these artists/aspiring artists to claim an artistic identity is, perhaps, being slowly recognised. Although policies have sometimes seemed like empty rhetoric, accompanied by insufficient funds to make them effective, perhaps their very existence has emboldened people with learning difficulties and their allies to challenge the status quo and bang harder on the door. They demand to access careers in the performing arts and establish themselves on the artistic map.

In the words of Tom:

“We want to be professionals in the real world.” (Tom, quoted in *Razor Edge Business Plan 2005*)

In the next chapter, I focus on the methodology informing this research, particularly issues related to inclusive research and life story research..

Chapter Four

Methodology and the Research Process

This chapter focuses on the methodology applied to carrying out the research with the artists with learning difficulties. Whilst defining the project clearly as a qualitative research study, it indicates that within this paradigm, it cannot be neatly pigeon-holed into one specific approach. It shows how the research is aligned with the goals of critical research (Kincheloe and McLaren 2000) and research for social justice (Griffiths 1998) and can be seen as an example of researching into one's own professional practice (Radnor 2003). The research is also discussed in relation to emancipatory disability research and to inclusive research with people with learning difficulties (Walmsley 2001, 2004).

The project, which is defined as an example of narrative research, draws on the literature about life history research and is examined in relation to life story research with people with learning difficulties. There is a discussion about its relationship to practice as research in performance (PARIP). The ethnographic aspects of the research are discussed, including its relationship to performance ethnography (Denzin 2003) and Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) perspectives on decolonising methodology.

The chapter goes on to describe some of the methods developed, using performing arts techniques, to maximise the contributions of the artists and highlights the inductive nature of the process.

Choosing a Methodology

My approach to choosing a methodological framework was based on the question ‘what is going to be the most useful to me in carrying out my aim?’ – i.e. to enable a small group of individuals with learning difficulties to speak out for themselves in ways that enabled them to feel confident. I knew I would be focusing on subjective meanings and engaging directly with the understandings of participants (Goodley undated). I immediately knew that I was not concerned with objectivity and that I was therefore not drawn to using forms of observation or measurement associated with a quantitative approach (Silverman 2000). Rather, following Goodley and Moore (2002) I wanted to find ways to include people with learning difficulties in the study and give voice to their views:

“There is a need to describe and analyse the self-reflections of people living with disablement in their own terms.” (Goodley and Moore 2002 P23)

I needed a research design that would enable me to work from the concerns of the artists, without the constraints of a fixed agenda and that would allow the participants to reflect on their own work and explore and express their own ideas about their lives in performing arts. Furthermore, I needed a design that would leave room for emotional responses and allow for the use of a range of methods, including performing arts techniques in dance, music or drama - to explore, develop and capture emotional and intellectual responses.

All of this pointed clearly to the need for a qualitative research process (Denzin and Lincoln 1994 2000 2008, Silverman 2000, Goodley and Moore 2002, Goodley et al 2004). Whilst acknowledging the wide range of approaches and methods within

qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) put forward a generic definition in the following statement:

“Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.”(Denzin and Lincoln 2008 p4)

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) describe eight stages of qualitative inquiry in research, from traditional methods of investigating the ‘Other’ (e.g. in anthropology), to the more recent ‘pick and mix’ approaches of researchers, who often use “a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices” (Denzin and Lincoln 2008 p4) in order to gain a better understanding of the cultures they inquire into. They describe the evolution of the creative, interpretive researcher, who is aware that research is an interactive process, that it has political implications and, who often creates non-linear, fluid, interconnecting images and representations, to tell the stories of the people and their worlds that they are researching.

In following this approach, I was aware that I would be bringing my own interpretations to the research, grounded in my own experiences of the world and my own political understandings. As such, I have entered into the research with my “assumptions on the table” so that “no one is confused concerning the epistemological and political baggage” I bring with me (Kincheloe and McLaren 2000 p292).

I have chosen to frame the research with the works of Freire (1973, 1976) and Boal (1979, 1995, 1998, 2001), which have governed my own artistic and education endeavours for the past twenty-five years, and the social model of disability, which presents a clear political bias, with the claim that disabled people are an oppressed group (Abberley 1987, Oliver 1996, 2009). Consequently my clear intention has been to contribute to the emancipation of people with learning difficulties (albeit in a small way) in the context of a society that I believe disables them and discriminates against disabled people (Oliver 1990, 1996, 2009, Oliver and Barnes 1998). More particularly, I have sought to expose the inequality and injustice that is prevalent in the worlds of education and the arts and find ways, through the research, of changing the participants' relationships to this. I see this as research that is "agitating for change" (Goodley and Moore 2002) and is aligned with the goals of critical research (Kincheloe and McLaren 2000).

Including People with Learning Difficulties in Research

There is a notable lack of people with learning difficulties involved in research carried out in the academy (Chappell 2000, Boxall et al 2004). Boxall et al (2004) point out that whilst other disabled people have been involved in H.E. and in the production of knowledge about disability, this is not the case for people with learning difficulties. As long as they remain excluded from the academy, they remain excluded from the process of generating knowledge that relates to learning difficulty (Boxall et al 2004).

Generating knowledge about people given the label of learning difficulties without their participation is to turn them yet again into objects and case histories to be studied

by 'experts' (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Oliver 1992, Gillman et al 1997), not to mention the enormous potential for getting it wrong.

There are academics that have sought to include people with learning difficulties in their research (Booth and Booth 1996, Mitchell et al 1997, Stalker 1998, Rodgers 1999, Goodley 2000, Goodley and Moore 2002, Booth and Booth 2003, Boxall et al 2004, Williams et al 2006, Brooks and Davies 2008) and their writings provide a foundation on which to build. In recent years, the search has intensified to find ways that allow a more collaborative/co-operative process, with academics and people with learning difficulties researching together (Townson et al 2004, Chapman and McNulty 2004, Roets et al 2004, Abell et al 2007, Johnson 2009, Garbutt et al 2010). People with learning difficulties are also getting involved in research through People First (Chapman and McNulty 2004); see also Central England People First, an organisation run by people with learning difficulties that has its own research team, at www.peoplefirst.org.uk. All of these accounts of the processes involved raise important issues for debate, which I will examine in this chapter, and they show that inclusive research is not an easy path to forge.

Emancipatory Research

There have been debates in the literature over the past ten years (Keirnan 1999, Chappell 2000, Walmsley 2001, Gilbert 2004), concerning the extent to which research carried out with people with learning difficulties can achieve, or should attempt to achieve, the goals of the emancipatory research paradigm put forward by Oliver (1992). Oliver states:

“Disability research should not be seen as a set of technical, objective procedures carried out by experts but part of the struggle by disabled people to challenge the oppression they currently experience in their daily lives.” (Oliver 1992 p102)

In his historic paper, Oliver argues for research that serves the emancipation of disabled people. In order to do this, the social relations of research production are changed, with disabled people taking control of the process. This view of disability research is overtly political, with the academic researcher invited to put his/her skills at the disposal of disabled people and their organisations in their struggle against oppression. The research agenda becomes a means to challenge “the disablism ingrained in the individualistic consciousness and institutionalised practices of what is, ultimately, a disablist society” (Oliver 1992 p112).

Barnes (2003b) restates the case for the emancipatory paradigm and draws attention to the need for disabled people and their organisations to control the commissioning/funding of research, in order to have real power over the process - from the original agenda-setting to dissemination. In this way, disabled people can ensure the usefulness of the knowledge produced in the struggle against oppression:

“In essence, emancipatory disability research is about the empowerment of disabled people through the transformation of the material and social relations of research production. In contrast to traditional investigative approaches, the emancipatory disability research agenda warrants the generation and production of meaningful and accessible knowledge about the various structures – economic, political, cultural and environmental – that created and sustain the multiple deprivations encountered by the overwhelming majority of disabled people and their families.” (Barnes 2003b p6)

The research is expected, therefore, to have “some meaningful practical outcome for disabled people” (Barnes 2003b p12).

Oliver and Barnes's proposition for emancipatory disability research raises issues about the independence of the researcher (Barnes 1996, Shakespeare 1996b).

Shakespeare (1996b), whilst agreeing with Barnes (1996) that the positivist notion of an objective or neutral researcher is a myth, reserves the right to retain academic independence and to be reflective and critical. He differentiates between accountability to disabled people's organisations and accountability to research subjects. He believes that it is important to enable participants to have "some control over the process, over their words and over their participation" (Shakespeare 1996b p116) and not use methods that obscure their voices. The question of the right of the disability researcher to be more than a facilitator of the research process has also been raised specifically in relation to research with people with learning difficulties and the generation of theoretical arguments (Walmsley 2004).

Shakespeare (1996b p116) expresses reservations about the potential for research to achieve major change and argues for a "division of labour" between activists and academics. However, Williams et al (2006) point out that Action Research can lead to action that disseminates local issues and has an effect on wider policy and practice. Service-users with learning difficulties can contribute to and benefit from this, through inclusion in Action Research projects.

The emancipatory research paradigm is underpinned by the social model of disability - the view of disability as a production of historical and social factors. Research with people with learning difficulties, however, has been shown to have a historical association with the theories of normalisation/social role valorisation (Chappell 2000, Walmsley 2001). Walmsley (2001) shows how this has produced a good deal of research built on the role of researcher as citizen's advocate, focused on improving

services, aimed at enabling individuals to lead as 'normal' a life as possible and develop valued social roles.

In addition, the social model and the disabled people's movement have been seen to exclude people with learning difficulties (Chappell 1998, Chappell et al 2001).

However, as Walmsley (2001) indicates, many researchers, in recent years, have attempted to "rise to the challenges posed by emancipatory research" (Walmsley 2001 p187). The process of collaboration, and the non-disabled researcher's role in this, has been focused on by researchers with and without learning difficulties, who wish to take steps towards achieving a more equitable research process (Townson et al 2004, Chapman and McNulty 2004, Groets et al 2004, Williams et al 2006, Abell et al 2007). Inclusive research can be a means of people with learning difficulties agitating for change in their lives (Johnson 2009).

Collaboration with an oppressed group goes hand in hand with Freire's approach and relates to his view that knowledge cannot be imposed on individuals or 'handed down' (Freire 1976), but that people must be given opportunities to develop critical consciousness and the chance to empower themselves, both individually and collectively (Freire 1993, orig publ. 1970, Oliver 1992, 1996 p147).

In this research project, my intention has been to collaborate with a small group of artists with learning difficulties that I have worked with as professional colleagues. The aim in doing this has been to enable them to have a voice in generating useful knowledge and understanding about being a professional artist and educator with learning difficulties in a disabling society. My reason for wishing to generate this knowledge, in line with the principles outlined for social justice research by Griffiths

(1998) is in order that it can be used to educate others about the exclusion of students with learning difficulties from performing arts higher education and as ammunition to increase opportunities to enable people with learning difficulties to access careers in the performing arts.

It is hoped that this research will show how performers with learning difficulties can reflect, express and communicate their thoughts and feelings through the use of performing arts techniques. It is intended that the research will demonstrate how, through this process, artists with learning difficulties can transform their identities and challenge reductive notions of the label of 'learning difficulties'. I hope that the research will also have some practical use for each of the individuals involved.

I am aware that these are my aims and, although the artists may be seen in their stories to support my intentions, the focus for them has been on telling their stories. I already had an academic agenda when I embarked upon the research, an agenda that I have continued to explore and develop through examining the literature. This has influenced the research process, along with the contributions of the artists. I have not enabled the artists to access the literature.

In the sense that this research has aimed to enable a group of people with learning difficulties to use research as a means for taking part in generating knowledge about their lives and their relation to the social world, as a means for having a voice and making a contribution to political change, it has taken an emancipatory approach. I am aware that it has fallen short of enabling people with learning difficulties and their organisations to have full control over "the material and social relations of research

production” and may be more realistically described as ‘participatory research’ (Zarb 1992).

Participatory research with people with learning difficulties is evaluated in the literature in the context of an emerging emancipatory paradigm (Rodgers 1999) and has been described as both a pragmatic compromise (Chappell 2000) and an intermediate stage (Gilbert 2004). It is an attempt by researchers to include the voices of people with learning difficulties (people with less articulate voices) and still fulfil the demands of the academy for intellectual rigour. Walmsley (2001, 2004) prefers to use the term ‘inclusive research’ to cover the range of studies with this aim.

In Chapter Eight, I discuss whether this research project can be seen to have been empowering or emancipating for the artist Robert Belcher. To what extent it will contribute to the emancipation of people with learning difficulties more generally, will be judged by others. I prefer not to make claims I cannot justify and therefore have ultimately chosen to describe it as ‘inclusive’ research (Walmsley 2001, 2004). I am aware, however, that this brings its own problems. As Townson et al (2004) and Chapman and McNulty (2004), working on a research project together, point out, the label of ‘inclusive research’ often obscures who actually does what. Research that is only partly inclusive is partly rejecting (Townson et al 2004 p73). With this in mind I consider the issues that affect meaningful inclusion in the process.

Barriers to Inclusion in the research process

In proposing that disabled people have a right to participate in the whole process, from setting the agenda through planning, carrying out the research and dissemination

(Oliver 1992, Moore et al 1998, Barnes 2003b), it is important to acknowledge the reasons that this does not always happen, in order that lessons may be learnt for the future. It is easy as a researcher to fall into the trap of thinking that you are being inclusive, only to realise with hindsight that this was not always the case. As Gilbert (2004 p304) indicates, a particular technique may be participatory, but it does not mean that the whole process is participatory. Moore et al (1998) draw attention to the potential for material, structural, ideological or institutional barriers to participation.

In my case, participation was certainly affected by lack of time to include individuals in all decisions and by lack of experience on both sides. The closing down of the organisation we all worked for (Razor Edge) put severe limitations on my ability to fully collaborate with all the artists and develop all four stories into performance presentations.

There can also be issues of power and control in relation to the researcher and the group/s who are the focus of the research. As Williams et al (2005) point out it is necessary to be constantly vigilant in relation to not taking complete control of the research, especially if the researchers with learning difficulties look to you to bring expertise and to take the lead, and if there are time constraints and pressures to produce outcomes.

In examining my own position in the team, it was not difficult to see that the power balance was tipped very much in my favour – as director, teacher, PhD student, non-disabled person. I was also seen at times, by parents and carers, as being in loco-parentis. In addition, I live independently and, by and large, am able to make my own decisions about what I do and when and how I do it. I was the person who introduced

the idea of research and was in a position of leadership. As I was a director of Razor Edge the team were used to looking to me for leadership and I was accustomed to providing it.

The individuals participating in the research project came from a variety of backgrounds, with differing levels of independence and all requiring some level of support to travel, make decisions and generally manage their lives. They had varying levels of verbal articulacy, limited literacy skills and no academic background. Like Williams et al (2005), I did not want to assume that they could not engage with the literature, if I could make it accessible, but I was soon out of my depth in this respect and failed to do so. I also needed to keep a focus on doing my PhD and meeting the academic requirements for this. The task of getting to grips with the literature myself and enabling the team to access it was just too overwhelming for me. In addition, I did not have any other supporters – it was just me and the team – and my first priority was to ensure that the artists could be in control of what they wanted to tell the world about themselves. Consequently, my energy was focused on enabling them to be in control of telling their stories.

Like Walmsley, Aspis draws our attention to the dangers of not acknowledging existing power imbalances:

“Using the language of ‘equal partnership’ leaves the power relationships between disabled people with the learning difficulties label and other groups of people intact; dominant cultural attitudes are left unquestioned and unchallenged.” (Aspis 1999 p177)

As outlined in Griffith's 'principle 5 of Social Justice research' – "Strategies are needed to listen to quiet, less powerful, voices" (Griffiths, 1998, p96). This has been my guiding principle. But Griffiths draws attention to the need to consider what 'having a voice' is intended to mean. The voice that engages in critical reflection and leads to critical consciousness (Freire 1993) becomes a political voice. In relation to this, it has been important to contextualise the voices of the Razor Edge group of artists with learning difficulties in the wider political voice of disabled people. As I explained, I struggled with making this aspect of the research process accessible for the team of artists with learning difficulties. Dealing with access to theoretical arguments and generating theory without falling into the trap of over-simplification (Shakespeare 1996b) or ending up saying "very little" (Walmsley 2001, p202) can be extremely difficult. Walmsley warns of the dangers:

"My fear is that inclusive researchers are so fearful of saying things which people with learning difficulties cannot follow that they say very little, leaving the field of theorising to others, including disabled scholars, with little or no commitment to inclusion." (Walmsley, 2001, p202)

Chappell (2000) also draws attention to the dilemmas faced by inclusive researchers, to the need to generate useful theory without excluding people with learning difficulties and justifying this on the basis of intellectual impairment. She points to their exclusion from the academic community, where research is carried out:

"...partly because the exclusive and competitive nature of the education system discriminates against disabled people, and partly because intellectual and developmental impairments mean that people with learning difficulties are unlikely to possess the intellectual skills deemed necessary for educational success." (Chappell, 2000 p41)

Walmsley (2001) suggests that we accept that people with learning difficulties need allies to carry out research, whilst clearly acknowledging the power imbalance that exists (Walmsley 2001). She proposes that we avoid obscurantist language and recognise the contributions of people with learning difficulties for what they are, not for what we wish they could be (Walmsley 2004 p69). This seems a sensible approach.

The point for me was to try and create a research process that acknowledged the social construction of learning difficulties, but did not deny the implications for these individuals in relation to accessing the research process. I wanted to do this without focusing on intellectual impairment as justifying exclusion, to find a way to enable this group to access the heart of knowledge generation about their own experiences and about the world we live in and to give myself space to contribute to (and learn from) the process.

As Brooks and Davies (2008) observe, it takes time to include people meaningfully. Understanding what research is and, practising the skills for carrying it out, are important for participants with learning difficulties. If you don't know what research is or how to do it, it is hard to participate fully. Tackling this was difficult for me, as I wanted to work inductively - allowing the direction of the process to be influenced by the artists and to emerge organically from our work together. Consequently, I didn't know exactly what form the research would take, what methods we would draw on or develop.

On the one hand, this approach meant that the artists were influencing the process and, to a certain extent, we were learning and finding our way together, but on the other

hand, it meant that the overview was mine and therefore I maintained a higher level of control than I would have wished.

There was another factor that affected my ability to include the artists i.e. inexperience and ineptitude on the part of the researcher. As someone learning to carry out research for the first time, in a demanding context, and trying to make sense of the literature for myself, I was not always able to judge how best to make the process inclusive.

In the final event, I feel the result has been a collaboration to produce one of the stories included in this thesis and a partial collaboration to produce the other three, whilst the overall process has been more in my control.

The research has required a flexible use of methods that I/we have selected or developed as appropriate to each stage of the process. There has been a need to experiment with what Booth and Booth (1996) call unorthodox methods. It has meant that it has been essential to find methodological 'tools' that would engage individuals whose choice of expression was performing arts, in order to enable their meaningful participation.

The placing of the research in a wider context and the analysis of the data has remained largely in my domain. However, there has been analysis of their own stories by individuals, in the process of creating them, which influenced my own interpretations of the material. With Robert Belcher's story I attempted to design the analysis so as to allow him to guide my interpretive journey and participate in the process. Also, an examination of the stories reveals that there is a developing critical

consciousness in each individual, while the stories themselves have an evaluative function (Booth and Booth 1996 p57) in relation to each individual's artistic life.

Narrative Research

The Power of Stories

As someone immersed in the world of theatre, I am bound to acknowledge the power of stories - the power to engage us with characters and change attitudes (Somers 2006 p346). Stories seem to be a natural medium for accessing other people's lives, because we constantly engage with narratives, both fiction and non-fiction, in the news, in books, in TV soaps, dramas, documentaries, films etc. They have been used to impose morality e.g. in the Bible, to persuade us to give to charity or to convey historical events in dramatisations. When we go to the theatre we suspend our disbelief and allow ourselves to be caught up in the world of another for the duration of the telling of a story. As a former Theatre in Education performer I used stories to enable young people to engage with events and issues way beyond their own concrete experiences, to participate in those events through drama and to develop new knowledge that they could apply to their own world.

We are used to being tellers of stories, as well as listeners; we make up stories for our children, we recount events to our friends. Our lives are made up of stories and our identity is made up of our stories about ourselves:

“...our self identity is a story we tell ourselves about who we are” (Somers 2006 p346)

Somers, following Novitz, goes on to say “we are constantly editing and extending our personal story” and that this personal story “has the potential to be influenced by significant ‘other’ stories to which we relate strongly.” (Somers 2006 p346). We can extend our own stories by relating to other people’s stories, when they resonate with our own:

“Stories appeal to our own positions in life resonating as another’s story collides with our own.” (Goodley 1996, p336)

This ‘resonance’ relates to the power of empathy (Somers 2006 p347), and engagement with the personal through empathy can give us a direct route to social understanding (Goodley 1996).

Life Stories as a Means of Self-Empowerment

“In a dream the dreamer wills, acts, reacts, speaks, and yet submits to the unfolding of a story which he scarcely influences. The dream happens to him. Afterwards he may ask another to interpret it. But sometimes a dreamer tries to break his dream by deliberately waking himself up.” (Berger and Mohr 1975, A Note to the Reader)

The act of creating life stories can be a way of ‘waking up’, recognising the meaning of events for oneself and taking control of one’s life. In relation to life story research with people with learning difficulties, Atkinson (2004) confirms that the process can enable individuals to recall, recount and review their lives and that the act of telling their stories, of becoming ‘expert witnesses’ in their own lives, can be an empowering process (Atkinson 2004). She writes of the development of self-worth and the affirming of one’s identity. Referring to Thompson she comments:

“The capacity of people to remember, and recount, who they have been and to know where they have come from, helps shape their sense of self in the present.” (Atkinson 2004 p698)

Part of this process involves recognising oneself in relation to others. Through reflection on the past and in the narrating of one’s story, an individual comes to understand himself in relation to others and this affirms his self-identity, as Meininger (2006) points out:

“He is not an isolated individual, he is a son, a brother, a husband, a father, a friend. The road to myself is a road that inevitably runs by the other.”
(Meininger 2006 p184)

Meininger asserts that the process results in more than an expansion of our self=knowledge: through reflecting and narrating one’s story, a transformation takes place, a changing of the relation of self to others. It seems to me this could be said to be about owning a past in order to own a future. From the experience of knowing who we are in relation to others, and how we have become that person, I would assert that we have a good basis from which to make decisions about the future and that this is a transforming and empowering process. Atkinson discusses this empowerment in relation to inclusion:

“Historical awareness – of one’s own history and the history of others – is an important step towards empowerment and therefore, towards inclusion.”
(Atkinson 2004 p700)

Through reflecting on and recreating their life stories people with learning difficulties can challenge the portrayal of themselves as case histories (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Gillman et al 1997), victims or people who ‘can’t do’. Or as Atkinson puts it they may be seen as “part of a ‘resistance movement’ where people with learning difficulties

have co-constructed their personal and shared histories” (Atkinson 2004 p700). The stories in this research represent resistance to imposed identities and a celebration of lives and aspirations in relation to chosen identities.

In their narratives, the artists make a bid for inclusion as artists in the performing arts and education world and as a result, their stories are placed on the historical map.

However, there is a danger of making claims that go way beyond the capabilities of this research project and I would not wish to suggest that the material conditions in the team’s lives have been changed by it. With this in mind, in Chapter Eight I discuss the extent to which the stories can be said to have changed the artists lives.

Life Stories as a Contribution to History: Insider Views

“History is owned and documented by those in power, and invisibility and silence are cornerstones of oppression.” (French and Swain 2006 p384, quoting French and Swain 2000 p160)

It has been acknowledged that there has been a lack of personal voices of people with learning difficulties in historical documents (Goodley 1996, Atkinson 2004, French and Swain 2006). People have been reduced to case histories (Gillman et al 1997) while it is the perspectives of parents, carers and professionals that have been frequently articulated (Goodley 1996, Atkinson and Walmsley 1999). Life story research with people with learning difficulties provides an attempt to redress the balance through its attention to insider perspectives:

“ A history of people with learning difficulties is now emerging as articulated and understood by the people themselves.” (Atkinson 2004 p700)

Goodley (1996) argues that this provides us with opportunities to transform our historical understanding and analysis, that we have a direct route to social understanding through experiencing empathy and emotional engagement, through internalising personal elements of the stories. Wang (2006 p85) asserts that insider perspectives can subvert expert traditions and challenge stereotypes, by providing new representations and this can be part of a continual process of striving towards social justice.

I believe that taking part in life story research has enabled the artists with learning difficulties to challenge received notions of ‘learning disability’ and assert other aspects of identity. Listening to personal stories of people who have been identified as having learning difficulties can help us to engage with their experiences and develop new knowledge and understanding. Without this personal aspect, this understanding of individuals’ worlds, as experienced by them, we cannot adequately construct theories about the interaction of individuals with the social world (Goodley 1996).

Who tells the story?

I have already looked at the importance of hearing the voices of people with learning difficulties, rather than those of parents, carers, professionals, ‘experts’. But there is still the question of who actually writes/shapes/tells a story from the personal accounts of individuals.

Atkinson and Walmsley (1999) note that when people with learning difficulties tell their own stories they tend to stress the everyday, ordinary experiences, rather than 'difference', but when others edit and collect these autobiographical accounts, for research purposes, they tend to portray individuals as victims of oppression (Atkinson and Walmsley 1999 p210-212). Atkinson attempted to reverse this trend in her research with older people with learning difficulties, by focusing on aspects of 'normal' life, rather than difference, but found that individuals revealed experiences that were actually 'different'. However, in the telling of their own stories these individuals became "survivors of an oppressive system" rather than victims (Atkinson and Walmsley 1999 p212).

Roberts (2006) seems suspicious of individuals who tell either their own or others' stories. He remarks that we need to be careful, in creating a story, that there is 'sound evidence underwriting its authenticity' (Roberts 2006 p345), otherwise we could be deceived, accepting bogus interpretations when they fit our expectations or preferences. Audiences/readers need to bring critical faculties to their viewing of stories. But what is authenticity? Goodson and Sikes (2001) point out that life history research is an interpretive research process and French and Swain (2006) remind us that no historical source is an objective account. They reiterate the value of personal experience accounts in contributing to discussions around the social model and warn that distance from experience can actually be the cause of inaccuracy and distortion (French and Swain 2006 p385).

Goodley (2000) presented two narratives in relation to the life story of Joyce Kershaw, an adult with learning difficulties. One was his own written version and the other was written by Joyce after she rejected his account of her life as she had told it to him.

Joyce was unhappy with his writing style; she had wanted him to “write it like I would” (Goodley 2000 p61). Goodley made the choice of placing his own narrative in the appendix.

I decided I did not want to write up the individual stories in this research. Why? I wanted to allow individuals the space as artists to present their lives in their own ways and not necessarily through written accounts, because written accounts would require a level of writing skill that would leave me in control. More importantly, the artists themselves were extremely clear that they wished to present their stories in some other way, with one exception – Walter – who was unsure.

In the final event, I only partially realised my aim. I was able to complete the process with Robert Belcher, but only partly with the other three participants. This was dictated by circumstances i.e. the closure of Razor Edge, resulting in a withdrawal of resources. I also underestimated the amount of work and resources that needed to go into realising even one of the projects as a performance. However, Robert’s story, developed in collaboration and presented by him, is testimony to the effectiveness of this approach and can be contrasted with the other three stories, in terms of depth of reflection, impact on audience and degree of empowerment.

In all four cases, my contributions influenced the process in three ways - 1) the stories evolved from discussions, when my input sometimes influenced the direction of the conversation and the contribution of the participants 2) we took part in drama activities in order to explore ideas together – the nature of drama is about exchange of ideas 3) I would often be the one to suggest or choose themes to follow up. In the case of Robert’s story, I began to arrange his words into a prose poem. Although this meant

very little tampering with his actual words, or the order in which he said it, I was the one to recognise the shape of a poem emerging.

The process of working with Robert could be defined as creative collaboration (John-Steiner 2000) and I will examine this more closely in Chapter Seven. With the other three stories I took a greater degree of control, in relation to the presentation or 'telling', which I will outline later. For me, each final product has a different 'feel' relating to the extent of the collaborative approach. There is a real sense that Robert's story belongs to him. He was clear about this - "Our project, my story". The importance of being able to present his story himself should not be underestimated and is explored in Chapter Seven, along with its impact on the audience.

How does this research differ from other narrative research?

I am aware that I didn't set out with the specific intention to carry out narrative research. I wanted to find out what the team wanted people to know about what they do and who they are. As the research progressed, a sense of people on a journey began to emerge, of individuals with a history - some of it a common history - an identity and aspirations for the future. These individuals were emerging artists in the context of Razor Edge, with its aim to create a pathway into the performing arts professions for people with learning difficulties. It became clear that the research could tell the story of the journeys being undertaken in this context.

The resulting 'stories' are not linear descriptions of events in lives and if we view these stories in the classical sense of having to have a beginning, middle and end, they do not fit. However, not all stories adhere to such a form and as Ochs and Capps (2001)

point out stories can have dimensions that leave them open-ended and do not follow neat temporal patterns. In addition, they propose a view of personal experience narratives that suggests these “do not present objective comprehensive accounts of events but rather perspectives on events” (Ochs and Capps 2001 p45).

The individual stories in this research follow this pattern in the sense that they are intellectual and emotional responses to the individuals’ own lives. They are statements about identities and aspirations as artists and feelings about past experiences. For Robert (and to a certain extent for Walter, David and Vince) the research has enabled him to undergo a process of working out what artistic life means to him, where he has come from and where he is headed. This is what Booth and Booth (1996) refer to as the evaluative function in narrative research.

Much of what has been described in the literature about narrative research has been about narrated or written stories (Atkinson and Walmsley 1999, Goodley 2000, Ochs and Capps 2001, Goodley et al 2004, Atkinson 2004, French and Swain 2006, Meininger 2006). There have been some examples of narrative research that employ other means than purely writing e.g. *Know me as I am* (Atkinson and Williams 1990) a collection of artwork and writings by people with learning difficulties. This research focused on narration, poetry and visual art by people with learning difficulties, telling us stories and giving us insights into their lives. Booth and Booth (2003) used photography to enable a group of mothers with the label of learning difficulties to tell their stories. Berger and Mohr explored the narrative potential of photographs (Berger and Mohr 1995) and used this approach in their research. Drama was used to explore and present the life stories of elders in Taiwan (Wang 2006). Denzin (2003) shows that

performance ethnography employs a variety of performance forms to present the words of the research participants.

The stories in this research are expressed through a mixture of media. They are 'collages' of individuals' personal, intellectual and emotional responses to their lives. Sometimes this is done through words, sometimes through photographs or drawings. Sometimes individuals present themselves through their art e.g. David Warren's music compositions. Robert Belcher used dance to recall and explore themes that he perceived to have affected his life in performing arts.

The collages do not necessarily contain descriptions of events, and yet I believe they do each tell a story about the lives and the experiences of the subjects. They cannot be said to be comprehensive autobiographies, especially as they are focused on the artistic aspect of the individuals' lives. They may also be more fragmented than many written narratives, where there is a certain ordering and making sense of one's life in the telling of it to others (Goodson and Sikes 2001), but they evoke a narrative, none the less. Perhaps they are actually more true to life, in the sense that our thoughts and experiences are often fragmented.

Berger and Mohr, describing the narrative potential of photographs (Berger and Mohr 1995 p286) refer to the gaps in continuity that are present in any story. In written and narrated stories the listener fills in the gaps to provide the continuity, using her own experiences and knowledge about the world. Take the simple statement "The dog came out of the forest" and add a follow-on statement "The man had left the door open" and the result is the listener filling in the gaps - a narrative has begun (Berger and Mohr 1995 p284):

“Every narrative proposes an agreement about the unstated but assumed connections existing between events.” (Berger and Mohr 1995 p284)

Berger and Mohr go on to say:

“A story is not simply an exercise in empathy. Nor is it merely a meeting-place for the protagonists, the listener and the teller. A story being told is a unique process which fuses these three categories into one. And ultimately what fuses them, within the process, are the discontinuities, the silent connections, agreed upon in common.” (Berger and Mohr 1995 p286)

As an audience viewing the stories in this research project we fill in the gaps, bringing our own experiences and knowledge about the world. Whether we meet with the protagonists and tellers, agreeing upon “the silent connections” may depend on our own experiences, the artist’s final choice of material, the way it is presented and the skill with which it is done. My hope is that viewers/readers have their assumptions challenged by the stories in this research and leave enriched with new knowledge.

There are of course dangers of being duped when we are asked to intuit beyond what we are shown. And if personal stories can mislead us into believing what we want to believe (Roberts 2006 p344) they may be, as Sontag says of photographs “...invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy.” (Sontag 1979 p23). However, there has been no attempt to claim objectivity in this research. The claim I make is that allowing people to speak for themselves is likely to actually give a more authentic account, than trying to speak for them. As an artist I agree with Somers - “effective and able artists constantly confront the moral issues which arise from their depictions of the world.” (Somers 2006 p348). I believe that I have striven to practise this in this research – ensuring that the personal accounts conform to my interpretation of

'authentic', through checking facts, checking that individuals are communicating what they really want to say, giving space for individuals to articulate their views and feelings in their own ways, placing events in context and continuously interrogating my own role.

Ethnographic enquiry

I did not begin this research with the intention of telling the individual stories - this is something that emerged during the group research sessions with the artists, which I will describe later. I started simply with the intention of carrying out an ethnographic study (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). At the time, this seemed to be the most useful starting point to research into my professional practice (Radnor 2002). Researching into my professional practice meant it would be different from the kind of study that Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) describe in three major ways.

Firstly, as Joint Artistic and Education Director and co-founder of Razor Edge, I was already immersed in the culture of performing arts, Disability Arts, arts education and the company itself. I was not, therefore, entering into an alien culture for a limited period of time as observer/participant or participant/observer. I had full access to personnel and documentation and to the team of artists with learning difficulties, who were able to give their independent consent to participating in the research. Our common culture, our firmly established roles as collaborating colleagues (John-Steiner 2000) and our professional respect for each other meant that the rapport and the trust necessary to enable people to speak freely were already in existence. As Radnor points out, this is one of the positive aspects of researching into one's professional practice:

“Given this common culture, the issue of gaining entry into the particular environment of the research participants and initiating a rapport should be less problematic than it would be going into an alien environment. The climate of interaction and the researcher’s attitude and approach to the people in her study should convey to these people the confidence that they are going to be listened to without prejudice.” (Radnor 2002 p32)

Even after Razor Edge closed down, I was able to continue the research with the individuals concerned, because of my long-standing relationships with them and their parents/carers and supporters. In addition, I had instant access to material through my insider knowledge and experience. However, researching my professional practice also had its difficult sides in relation to the split focus of trying to wear my researcher’s hat and my director’s hat at the same time. It was also difficult for the artists to carry out their work and research into their work, particularly as some research sessions duplicated as work sessions.

Secondly, like Goodley, who, in telling Gerry’s story used information that “emerged from a long-held involvement with people with learning difficulties...” (Goodley et al 2004 p72) I knew I would be able to draw on a wealth of experiences to enrich the research data. I had known and worked with people with learning difficulties in different arts and education contexts for over 20 years and the team participating in the research had been my students and then my colleagues, over many years, from before I started the research. As well as using data gathered from field notes, tapes, interviews, I knew I would be able to draw on anecdotes, photos, videos, and discussions I had had with people with learning difficulties, if I wished to. In the final event, I did not much use this resource, as I was more interested in foregrounding the artists’ views of their own experiences.

Thirdly, I did not intend to simply participate, observe and record. I intended to include the artists and this resulted in specific sessions together, focused on research. I think initially I had the view that we would all become ethnographers together in a wonderfully equal and enthusiastic adventure! I was soon disabused of this delusion, as my description of the process later in this chapter will reveal.

Aspects of the research have something in common with performance ethnography (Denzin 2003, Alexander 2008). This approach to research goes further than the researcher immersing herself in the world of the researched and creating an account of it. It requires a rejection of any idea of objective observer, intellectual superiority or researcher expertise. The researcher learns from the researched, through participating in their culture and by this means, he/she is able to embody the experience of living in that culture - a way of almost literally 'putting yourself in their shoes'. The researcher(s) presents the world of the researched through performance. The actual words of the individuals in the culture researched become a text for performance and I will discuss this later in relation to Robert's poem.

The aim of performance ethnography, is to de-code another culture (Alexander 2008) and to expose oppressive structures. It has been seen particularly as a way of resisting the subjugation of minority cultures by the dominant culture, or of indigenous cultures by western values (Denzin 2003). It is a marriage of performance studies and ethnography (Alexander 2008), which can be seen as a tool for education and social change. What I am interested in is its potential for reaching outside the academy, using performance as a means of communicating research findings.

Finally, my intimate knowledge, of the culture of Razor Edge that the team were shaping and being shaped by, my personal and professional knowledge of the artists, my knowledge and experience of the worlds of arts and education, as well as my observations and reflections during the research period, have all assisted me in contextualising the stories in the thesis. This represents mainly my perspective as researcher, as ethnographer, using text to communicate, which highlights once again the power relationships in the research. However, my hope is that the voices of the artists come through in the stories and elsewhere. In order to achieve this, I designed a practical, performing arts approach to the research sessions with the artists.

Practice as Research

My initial intention, in presenting the research, was to adopt a 'creative thesis' model i.e. 'creative work' plus exegesis (Fletcher and Mann 2004, Milech and Schilo 2004). This would have entailed presenting the stories through the medium of performing arts, as part of the thesis, in line with an approach being adopted by some universities who have engaged with Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP).

PARIP was a research project, based at the University of Bristol, looking into the nature and academic implications of performance practice as research, focusing on drama and theatre studies in the university. Its call for practice to be seen as evidence of research has inspired discussions about this relationship (Stewart 2001, Milech and Schilo 2004), which can be seen as building on Schon's view - seeing the carrying out of practice as involving its own process of reflection and analysis (Schon 1991).

Given that that the creative component of my thesis might not be viewed as research into arts practice, it was not seen as appropriate to place any practical artistic versions of the stories in the main body of the thesis. A compromise was arrived at, which as I have said, enabled me initially only to include these in the appendices. In the final event I was able to place them in the front of the thesis.. Limited resources have also meant that these aspects have not been developed to their full potential (although this may happen in the future) and, as previously explained, three of the stories have remained a collection of writings, photos, drawings and music recordings. Robert's story, however, was developed into a touring performance.

Including the Artists with Learning Difficulties: Use of appropriate methods

In order to facilitate maximum engagement by the team, I wanted to use techniques based in the performing arts education traditions, but I also wanted to be able to have verbal discussions to find out people's opinions and to enable further reflection on certain themes. However, I was aware, from our work together, that some members of the team found it hard to engage with discussions unless they were preceded by a practical approach to exploring ideas. Sitting still and discussing for lengthy periods – more than twenty minutes – could result in Vince nodding off, David impatiently looking at his watch and Robert remaining silent. Goodley and Moore (2002) noted similar problems in their research with performers with learning difficulties. Like them, I had observed that the situation was improved if the subject for discussion was of particular interest to the individual, but I found that contributions were maximised if there were practical activities to act as a catalyst to inspire thoughts and feelings and practise expressing them.

My approach of using theatre and drama as a means of presenting and exploring ideas and as a catalyst for discussion is grounded in the work of companies producing Theatre in Education (TIE) throughout the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s. Examples of such companies include Greenwich Young People's Theatre (GYPT) and the Cockpit TIE Company (both of which I worked in). These two companies used the methods respectively of the practitioners Augusto Boal (1979, orig. published 1974) and Dorothy Heathcote (see Heston's undated PhD thesis) to enable the active intellectual, emotional and often physical participation of young people in the drama and engagement with decision-making in an interactive process. The different approaches to creating TIE programmes for young people were much debated and developed in the forum of the Standing Conference of Young People's Theatre (SCYPT), which produced the *SCYPT Journal* each year (some of which are now archived at Bishop Grosseteste University College in Lincoln).

Following the 1988 Education Reform Act, TIE as a free service ceased to exist; the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS) meant that Local Education Authority funding was no longer available and schools made their own decisions as to whether to spend their budgets on visiting TIE companies and whether this fitted in with National Curriculum requirements (Bennet 2005 p21). Companies were forced to adapt and develop their work in order to survive (Bennet 2005 p21). Although many companies, like GYPT and the Cockpit, were forced into downsizing or closure by the dawn of the millennium, there is still a great deal of work in existence today, building on these foundations, in young people's companies such as the Half Moon YPT and Blah Blah Blah. One only has to look at the journal *Research in Drama Education* to see that there are plenty of companies and projects that use theatre and drama to enable people of all ages to actively explore issues and events (see for example Munier and

Etherton 2006, O'Connor et al 2006, Haddon 2006, Harpin 2010. See also Bennet 2005 for articles by TIE practitioners). Theatre work influenced by Augusto Boal continues in Brazil and in other countries, including England e.g. in Cardboard Citizens, a theatre company running projects with homeless people.

Using my own experience of working in TIE I developed the approach of using drama in my research in the form of games and improvisations to initiate discussions and/or as exercises in their own right for finding out views. One example, 'The Identity Game' was a simple game played in a circle, where people stepped in to make statements about 'who I am'. Sometimes the statements were accompanied by actions – an addition to the game by certain individuals e.g. "I am an actor", from Walter, was accompanied by an open arm gesture. Another example was the use of the body to create 'frozen' physical images, to represent key events in people's artistic lives or to physically explore themes such as 'team' and 'future'.

We would start a research session with a brief physical warm-up, something that we were all used to doing to get mind and body active and focused. Each team member would lead something. In this way we began the session in our usual mode of working together as a group and all contributing something i.e. in collaboration. However, as in my usual Razor Edge director's role, I would loosely plan and lead the sessions, but with the flexibility to abandon the plan and follow ideas and themes that arose.

As we proceeded with the research I repeated the format of the games, sometimes developing and extending them slightly, but using formulae with which the team were already familiar e.g. working in a circle, crossing the circle etc. This meant that each person could be confident in knowing what he was doing and we could concentrate on

the content, rather than on learning new rules. I also repeated the focus of the games and exercises e.g. identity games were played in various forms. This enabled me to check that people really meant what they had said in the last game, rather than being led by me. It also pointed up the recurring themes. With these approaches I hoped to avoid over-influencing or leading.

One example of a checking out exercise was 'A case of mistaken identity'. This involved me pinning up four large sheets of card, each one with an artist's name, his photo and with statements that individuals had previously made. However, the photos and some of the statements were deliberately allocated to the wrong people. The team were asked to check the cards for accuracy. The next ten minutes were quite riotous as they removed photos and placed them with the right names and began to exclaim, "I didn't say that – that's not me!" "I'm not a drummer!" etc. They were asked to adjust the i.d. cards until they were all happy with them. If two people decided they wanted to claim the same statement then I would reproduce it and if no one wanted to claim it that was fine too. I also allowed them to add new statements, which everybody did.

I made available the Razor Edge photo archive of our work and people could choose which photos they wanted to add to their i.d. cards. As they made selections we discussed why they had chosen particular photos. After everyone had finished (this was one of the longest sessions at about two hours) each person presented his i.d. card. I felt that this exercise enabled individuals to review and develop their 'pictures' of themselves without the 'on the spot' pressure of having questions fired at them, or as one participant in Goodley's research put it, being "grilled like a tomato" (Goodley 2000 p 53).

An Inductive Process

Much of the process was intuitive rather than carefully designed. I would reflect on a session and try to pick up on what was being communicated to me, what appeared to be important to each person and which activities seemed to engage. I used my skills from my background, in arts education and in Theatre in Education in particular, allowing people to get to grips with ideas and develop or alter the course of the process with their contributions.

Sometimes the focus of the research sessions would overlap with the focus of our work in Razor Edge. This proved to be both useful and confusing at times. For a number of months we were making a film about the development of our new learning model, the employment of the team and our attempts to establish a course in H.E. – resulting in the DVD *Edge of Inclusion*. This involved a good deal of reflection on our way of working together and focus on the individuals who made up the team. At these times the research would serve the company's work directly and our work would serve the research. Reflecting on who we were and what we did became part of everyday working life and during this period I needed to be constantly vigilant to pick up on what people were communicating about themselves, their work and the journeys they were on. This was a very important phase in the process, as it was during this period that I really saw the team develop their sense of having a story to tell about themselves and their work. I am sure this contributed to Robert's position when Razor Edge was threatened with closure:

“My story still stands” (Robert Belcher, Razor Edge Team – stated vociferously, at a potential redundancy meeting, with emphatic arm gesture accompanying it)

An example of the overlapping interests - of the company and the research - was in our focus on what it meant to be part of a team. I used a practical approach to exploring this during our work time, for the research and for the DVD. Two questions were posed:

- What do you like about the team?
- What is important about working in the team?

The main means of exploring ideas in this session were physical images/body sculptures, which were created and developed to represent our differing perspectives of working in a team. Musical improvisation was also used to develop and deepen the exploration. From this practical session, using the body and music to develop our ideas, we created a list of important themes in relation to 'team'.

Recording Discussions

In discussions, I found that recording contributions on large charts, for everyone to see, could also improve the level and quality of contributions. This was particularly evident at times if the individual recorded his own contribution, but there were limitations to this. Each member of the team was able to write to a degree, but sometimes preferred not to, particularly if there were long words to spell out. If someone was writing, any member of the group might support the scribe to spell words and by and large we stuck to recording key words or phrases, having agreed the wording first, rather than writing everything down verbatim. The aim was for the chart to be of use to the team and if the

act of writing took over, the focus on the issues being discussed disappeared into the background. If what was written was too complex to read they could be disadvantaged in terms of keeping a picture of the discussion in their minds. And, as Booth and Booth (1996) noted, even single words can have a 'great wash'.

Early in the process I tried taping discussions, but soon abandoned this, because listening back to the tape was not an engaging activity for the team (the one exception to this was Robert Belcher listening back to tapes of the two interviews he carried out). If I transcribed the tape, the team were then presented with a lengthy document, which we either had to go through together – again involving long periods of time sitting still – or they had to take away and struggle to read. Consequently, the method of charting key words and phrases proved to be the most accessible, immediate and familiar way of recording our discussions.

Monitoring My Role

During the first period of researching together I began to develop a strategy for monitoring my role in the process. My aims were to check that I was:

- acknowledging the power imbalance (Aspis 1999 p177) and challenging this wherever possible
- listening to “less powerful voices” (Griffiths 1998)
- creatively collaborating (John-Steiner 2000), but not dominating

In attempting to create a collaborative process, I found myself frequently questioning my own role. I knew that I would influence the direction of the research with my contributions and was keen to monitor this. I needed to see myself as an ally (Walmsley 2001) in carrying out the research, but be careful to leave space for 'less powerful voices' (Griffiths 1998). I also needed the team to be an ally to me if we were to have a chance of creating research material that could counteract medical model views of disability (Moore et al 1998 p63).

As already mentioned, there were several key factors affecting the team's control over the process and their contributions to it. The biggest difficulties were the split focus and the stop-start nature of the process outlined earlier, which made it difficult to be rigorous about consistently including the team and enabling them to have equal control over the research process. And, as I have already mentioned, I did not find ways to enable them to access theoretical writings.

In addition, I was a very influential figure both within the company and, for some people, outside the company. As outlined earlier in this chapter, I had been a teacher and a friend and had been regarded by parents/carers as in loco-parentis. Vince and I were good friends and he looked forward to visits for Sunday lunches and other events, which made him feel part of family life. Robert had stated that he wished me to take the role of parent, in the event that his own parents should die. Of course, this intimacy also had a positive side, in that it meant I could easily perceive when someone was not engaged or was being unduly influenced by me. However, I think there were times when I suspected this was happening, but chose to ignore it for pragmatic reasons.

I was aware of the danger of researchers who work with people with learning difficulties setting up expectations that cannot be met e.g. expectations of longer-term friendships (Stalker 1998) but I felt confident that this would not happen with the team as we already had long-standing relationships carved out. This was a misjudgement on my part. I believe I was mistaken in my assessment of the degree of vulnerability of these individuals and involvement in the research did at one point raise expectations in one individual - of increasing support and friendship. This could be attributed, I believe, to the final closing down of Razor Edge, the consequent shutting down of creative activity, fear of losing important relationships and the inadequacy of the level of support provided by the company to deal with these issues. I had to monitor the situation very carefully in order to protect myself and the individual concerned. As other creative opportunities arose for that individual, this pressure eased, but it remained a factor.

Following Boxall et al (2004) I decided, at one point in the process, to bring in another person who could monitor my role and advocate for the individuals in research sessions. Unlike Boxall, who was able to obtain an advocate for the duration of the process, lack of resources meant that I was only able to do this for a short period of time - when we engaged a stage manager (Paddy) for the Razor Edge dissemination project and the making of the DVD.

Paddy was well-liked by the team, very willing to take part and the team thought it was a good idea to try. One of the difficulties that arose for me, was delineating the parameters of his role. At certain times he contributed enthusiastically to the practice and the debates and I felt his monitoring role was developing into a facilitating role. The team were used to Paddy taking part, as he often did in the actual Razor Edge

work and it was quite difficult to differentiate between his two roles. However, he did make some useful observations about what he thought was the essence of people's contributions at times. For example he was the first to pick up that Walter's focus on independent travel seemed to be a symbol for his concern with independence and freedom in his life generally.

When Paddy was not involved in the process I used the following approaches to monitor my own role:

- Always checking that I had understood someone's contribution correctly
- Using the charts as a way of checking back immediately, rather than later, so that the individual's ability to recall detail was not affected by time lapse
- Using repetition to ensure a) that I had not misunderstood or b) that previous contributions were not just 'of the moment'
- Not interrupting, even when I could not see where someone was headed or when, in practical sessions, someone seemed to be going off in another direction*

(*It was hard to find a balance with this - if I let the focus widen too much, others would start to get bored and there would not be enough time to complete a session)

As Moore et al (1998 p14) point out it is often only in retrospect that we see clearly how our own actions have impacted on our research in a negative way. Critical reflection is essential to enable researchers to build a collective resistance to the pressures that can influence this. Unlike Moore et al, I did not have pressures from external institutions, such as funders, but was adversely affected by split focus and lack

of time for the research. The Razor Edge Board was very accommodating, even allowing me to use work time to carry out research. Although they did not view the research as being undertaken in the company name, certain individuals were supportive and could see the value of it to both the company and the artists involved.

With hindsight and experience I realise that better planning would have enabled me to at least keep the team informed of my thinking, when research sessions had to be put on hold, but survival of the company was always going to be highest on the agenda in crisis times. In relation to accessing relevant literature, I realise I never really made it a priority, and although it would have been unrealistic to attempt to discuss the enormous number of publications read by a PhD student, I could have identified one or two key papers to explore in our group sessions. This may have enabled the team to connect with and contribute to the theoretical framing of the research, whereas, in reality, this remained in my domain.

Analysis

As I will outline in Chapter Seven, my approach to analysis was initially influenced by grounded theory (Glaser 1992, Glaser and Strauss 1999), particularly in beginning to create codings from data and in a desire to be as open as possible to what the data might be telling me. However, as I also explain in that chapter, I soon abandoned grounded theory to find a way of including the research participant, Robert Belcher, in interpreting his own story. This decision was the single most important factor in dictating how the analysis would proceed. It meant switching from being a researcher systematically scouring the data to a researcher interacting with another human being,

listening to where he was pointing me in relation to the data and trying to find the 'heart' of the material together.

My consequent approach was based on my Theatre in Education (TIE) practical experience, of starting with an open question and seeing where it leads, using facilitation skills that enable the participants to find what they already know and then building on it. Although I was influenced by accounts in the literature, for example Goodley's (2000a) ethnography about self-advocacy, his (2004) use of discourse analysis to interpret Gerry's story, Moore's (2004) loosely grounded theory approach and Denzin's (2003) performance ethnography, the method of analysis I developed came more from my own practical experience as a facilitator and director in performing arts education. Here I was used to drawing out and interpreting participants' thoughts and checking back with them before proceeding to build on this. Whilst mine was an intuitive approach, it is important to note that this kind of process could only be embarked on because of my considerable experience as an arts education practitioner, building on the theories of Freire (1976, 1993), Boal (1979,1995) and Heathcote (Heathcote and Bolton 1996).

Conclusion

Taking a 'pick and mix' approach to research, using a "wide range of interpretive practices" (Denzin and Lincoln 2008 p4), has given rise to three different, but overlapping levels of methodology. On one level, it has meant exploring the literature on inclusive research with people with learning difficulties, learning from other researchers' attempts to carry out research that is of a more collaborative nature. This

type of research requires constant vigilance by the researcher, monitoring her own contributions and the shifting of roles and sharing of power, remembering that research that is only partly inclusive is partly rejecting (Townson et al 2004 p73). It has meant drawing on Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) writings about research with indigenous peoples and the need to make research useful to participants who have a history of being used and misrepresented by researchers. It has also involved examining life story research as a means of enabling people with learning difficulties to communicate personal experiences and contribute to our social understanding of this label.

On another level, the research methodology is grounded in my years of practice as a facilitator, director and performer in arts education and TIE. It has involved the employment of methods derived from this experience, with the use of performance media as a means of communication. It has enabled the artists to reflect on their experiences and to access emotional as well as intellectual responses to events in their lives. This practice has supported a creative collaborative approach to research in the spirit of John-Steiner (2000).

Finally, the research process has involved the researcher as ethnographer, immersed in the culture of a small performing arts organisation, attempting to observe and examine her own professional practice and that of her colleagues. Here performance and ethnography have met, as in performance ethnography described by Denzin (2003), where the actual words of participants appear in performance presentations, creating sites of resistance and glimmers of possible futures.

In the next chapter I focus on a description and evaluation of the research process. In so doing, I am able to highlight some of the findings related to methodology and inclusive research.

Chapter Five

Describing and Evaluating the Research Process: findings in relation to methodology

An Uneven Process

The research was carried out over an extensive period – more than six years from the initial agenda-setting in 2003, to completion and analysis of each story. In terms of my study for my PhD, I did not spend a discrete period of time exploring possible methodology, identifying the group I wished to work with and creating a research design to propose to the university. Rather, the research ‘design’ evolved with the participants’ involvement, from very early on in embarking on my PhD.

In the first year the participants were involved only during periods when they were engaged for one-off projects with Razor Edge. In between projects we had no base or rehearsal space and I lacked the resources to pay for travel to enable the team to meet with me or to hire a space to carry out practical research sessions.

Once the team were employed by Razor Edge (from June 2004 to May 2006) we had a rehearsal space and could meet more often, but the pressure was always ‘on’ for Razor Edge. The organisation was unstable, mainly due to an inadequate management infrastructure and periodic funding difficulties, which made it difficult to keep to plans. We would often need to cancel research sessions and on two occasions all

practical arts activities stopped for a number of weeks and the team were not called into work. After Razor Edge closed down I continued to work with the team on research, but for some time this involved focusing on Robert's story, which left other individuals out of the picture for long periods.

The overall process was therefore of a rather stop-start nature for the team, which affected the level of their control over it, with me as the only person who had the overview. I think this would have been the case even with a continuous process, because of the nature of my role as research student working on my PhD, but it was accentuated by the episodic nature of the process - it is not possible to share control with people who are not there. In the early stages, there would sometimes be gaps of months between research sessions and it would feel almost as if we were starting again. I continued to make field notes even when the team were not active in the research and when I began to focus with each individual on his story, the control of the process became more equitable for that period of time, with that person. This was particularly the case with Robert Belcher.

Getting Started

I first met with the team to discuss my research, during a project we were rehearsing in the Spring of 2003. Bearing in mind Mike Oliver's words, I wanted to focus the research, from the beginning, on the team's concerns:

“Agenda setting, whether it be in politics, policy-making or service provision, is part of a process of struggle and this is equally true of agenda setting in disability research.” (Oliver 1992 p102)

These initial sessions were in the form of short meetings – about twenty minutes each. In the first meeting I handed out printed sheets, with illustrations, outlining what I was attempting to do and asking who would be interested to take part. All four team members wanted to do so (and they requested that any future text be in large font). In the second session, using the approach of always presenting anything I had to say visually, I took in a large sheet with a question for the team:

“What do you want people to know about you and the work you do?”

We charted the responses:

- “We are a team and we are all teachers.”
- “We are all trained”
- “Our work is professional.”
- “People with learning disabilities have rights -to get work, to be independent, to live on their own.”

The initial discussions were revisited using a drawing of the team surrounded by the responses we had noted down. These first discussions demonstrated to me clearly that each individual had his own opinions and was keen to assert them.

My notes for the third meeting record the following:

“Robert said that he did not agree with what Walter said about rights. He pointed out that people with learning difficulties don’t just have these rights. They need support to get work and be independent. ‘To get support there needs

to be trust between parents and support staff. If there is a problem *with getting things done** then you should tell your parents.’ ” (*my insert)

This particular contribution as well as setting off a discussion about support, immediately placed Robert very firmly in the role of expert. For me it reinforced my belief in one of the stances taken by Goodley and Moore (2002) in their research with performers with learning difficulties: “accept that people with learning difficulties are knowledgeable” (Goodley and Moore 2002 p24).

It also drew my attention to my own lack of understanding of what it means to be an individual with learning difficulties, who is struggling to do what most of us take for granted and assume is our right. I reflected on this. In just three meetings the team had moved my thinking on in two major ways.

Firstly they had given a clear focus for the research, placing their own agendas clearly and succinctly on the table. What they wanted people to know about them was that they were ‘professionals’. I interpreted this as meaning that they wanted to be taken seriously. Like Moore et al’s (1998) research with young deaf people, I wanted the research with these individuals to facilitate them being listened to and taken seriously. I knew that they had gained some skills and were certainly not prepared to accept a life without work and they had jumped a hurdle that most of their peers did not get the opportunity to do. This did not mean that they in turn were recognised and accepted as employable by society. (There was an advertising campaign on the London Underground in 2007 that sums it up for me. A poster of a young man with Down’s Syndrome bore the statement “You have looked at David longer than any employer will.”) It was their struggle for recognition as serious professional artists that struck me as warranting further exploration. Secondly they had drawn attention to the complex

support networks that need to be in place to enable learning-disabled individuals to achieve their aspirations (later in the process, my thinking on this was developed by my discovery of John-Steiner's (2000) book *Creative Collaboration*, which I discuss in Chapter Seven). I began to appreciate the effort that had gone into getting to work that day, and to understand more fully the notion of a disabling society.

In these early stages of the research I 'tried out' the role of observer-participant, hoping that the team could also take on such a role, observing and reflecting on their own and each other's practice. How naïve of me! It soon became clear to all of us that this was a ridiculous approach. My field notes at the time were full of frustration about the impracticality of trying to carry out our work and 'stand outside' it at the same time. I should have known better. I did, however, take some very useful post-session field notes while we were on tour, using the team's initial agenda as the focus for my observations. How much easier it would have been to build on these notes and develop an ethnographic account! But I was aware that I was excluding the team from the process and wanted to get back to working with them, rather than falling into the traditional positivist role of the 'expert' who observes the research subjects (Oliver 1992).

It was clear that we needed discrete time to focus on research together. However, we did not meet again for several months, when the team were employed in June 2004. We then held three sessions. The first session involved looking at photos of our work going back over several years, to initiate a discussion about what work meant to each person. I used the 'identity game' and other drama exercises in these sessions e.g. making physical images of "what you want to be doing in five years time".

We found time on and off to pick up on the research together over the next year, refining its focus and developing ideas for executing it. The second half of this year (the first six months of 2005) was a period of great uncertainty in all our working lives and it affected our ability to focus on research. By the Spring of 2005 we had begun to set aside regular time for our research together, but this was again interrupted, because of a crisis in Razor Edge, which meant that we had to focus one hundred percent on the company's survival. Nevertheless, we emerged, in the Summer of 2005, with a clear intention to present the stories of the team's lives in performing arts. The themes of history, identity and aspirations had clearly emerged in our sessions together and each person was extremely keen to focus on his identity as an artist, on his right to be an artist, as their contributions at this stage of the process show:

“I take my acting side very seriously” (Vincent Wolfe, Razor Edge Team)

“No one can take that away from me – my career. It's my life” (Walter Davis, Razor Edge Team)

Following this, each person made a timeline on a long roll of lining paper over the length of the hall that we were working in. The starting points were - to focus on their lives in performing arts; one end was to be the beginning of the story and the other end to be now; they could make their own decisions as to when it all began; they could use words, drawings, bring in photos or anything else they wanted to add. This proved to be a very engaging and key activity and we spent four one-hour sessions on it.

Each person approached their timeline in a different way e.g. Robert very efficiently completed his in two sessions, using words, drawings and leaflets that he brought in from home and he seemed to quickly develop an overview of the whole journey.

David, however, used very few words, creating large intricate drawings of electronic

music equipment, with endless tangles of wires filling the paper. Vince decided to work methodically through from going to his first school, completing detailed drawings and labelling everything meticulously. Later in the process he took several more sessions and two rolls of lining paper to complete his timeline, and it became clear that it had become less of a catalyst to get him thinking and more of a product that he wished to develop. Walter decided to start with the first experiences that were important to him as a performer and brought in photos to accompany each set of words.

From these sessions I realised that it was going to be necessary to work with each person individually, as they all had different approaches and concerns. Consequently we held both individual sessions to focus on the stories and group sessions to focus on issues that were important to the research generally e.g. what the word ‘professional’ meant, what they felt about working in a team, what they felt about Razor Edge closing down. I also ran further sessions around ‘identity’ using the drama games and exercises, large diagrams and charting.

Developing the Individual Stories

In this chapter I describe the individual processes of developing each of the four stories presented in Chapter Six. Robert Belcher’s story and the methods used to develop it constitute the central part of the research carried out and therefore merit a fairly in-depth account, drawing on the literature regarding interviewing as a dialogic process (Oakley 1981, Denzin 2003) and dance as a manifestation of thinking through the body (Gardner 1993, Shusterman 2006).

Robert Belcher

Following a comment made by another arts education professional about how much Robert had changed, I hit on the idea that he might interview people who had known him in a performing arts capacity, either consistently or periodically over many years, and perhaps use the material as a springboard to create a dance. I had already introduced the idea of being on a journey in our working lives and he was extremely keen to take the opportunity to get others' perspectives on how he had changed over the years. I sensed in this the need for affirmation and the joy of confirmation of his identity as a developing artist.

We set about writing letters, devising interview questions and carrying out the interviews. I was pleased to have the chance to challenge the notion of the non-disabled researcher as 'expert' (Oliver 1992), to reverse the roles of expert and subject, with Robert taking the role of researcher and interviewer, enquiring into aspects of his own life. It also meant that we had a way to enable Robert to use performing arts to develop and to present his story. On reflection, I think Robert grabbed this opportunity and did not look back from this point onwards.

To facilitate the interviews I took on the role of supporter, helping Robert to write letters (and typing them for him) to his choice of potential interviewees, supporting him to plan and rehearse the interview questions (see Appendix One) and set up the times and venues for the interviews. I arranged our travel and accompanied Robert, to operate the tape recorder and offer moral support. It was agreed that I would 'go through' Robert if I wished to say anything, which I did a couple of times, to either clarify or follow up points made. In developing the interview questions, Robert was

clear about what he wanted to ask and only needed minimal support from me to formulate his ideas into questions.

Unfortunately, two potential interviewees were unable to take part due to serious illness in close family members, which rendered them unavailable for some months. The remaining two – Mike Ormerod (Razor Edge Joint Director) and Simon Hutchens (freelance actor, director and workshop facilitator) did take part and it was from these two interviews respectively that we went on to develop Robert's dance and his poem.

Following both interviews we listened back to the tape together, playing it straight through in one session and getting initial responses charted. We then took further sessions to go through a chunk at a time and note anything Robert wished to get down. I would ask questions to facilitate his contributions and to challenge him at times. It was quite tiring for him and we took a few sessions to complete this for each interview.

After we had discussed the first (Mike Ormerod's) interview tape, Robert began to work with a dancer, Jennifer Irons. Jennifer was brought in by Razor Edge, to support Robert to develop his physical/dance skills and this meant that work on the dance was able to be incorporated into these sessions once a week. Jennifer immediately spotted the physical imagery that Robert was using in his responses to the tape e.g. "break down the wall" "I will go forward" and these themes were to recur throughout the process of creating the dance. The dance was developed over several weeks and Robert also used the finished product as an audition piece.

The second interview, which took place at a later date, was with Simon Hutchens, who had taught Robert many years before and supported him on a teaching placement. He had recently been brought in by Razor Edge to offer pastoral support and run some sessions about being part of a team.

By chance, Robert and I worked on the tape of this interview in a slightly different way. Razor Edge had by then closed down and we were meeting at my house. I had run out of large sheets of paper to chart his responses and used pieces of A4 paper instead, placing one comment on each sheet. As we completed them and laid them on the floor, I commented that they looked like a pathway and Robert began using this word to describe his journey “I’m on the path going forward”. The nature of the interview questions also meant that the responses started in the past and gradually moved towards the present. When I came to type up this ‘pathway’ for Robert I realised that it was beginning to look like a poem. Richardson (2000) suggests that poetry is closer to the way people talk than “sociological prose”, that “Poetry may actually better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting snippets in prose.” (Richardson 2000 p521). Robert’s ‘pathway’ certainly seemed to offer this possibility. Johnson (2009), who co-ordinated an inclusive research project in Ireland, also found poetry to be a good way of communicating findings, as part of developing an oral history of a coffee shop in a small Irish country town.

Robert responded positively to the idea of his reflections being presented in this performable form. In discussion, we both agreed that it would be preferable to use the poem to further develop the dance, which was Robert’s preferred medium, but in the absence of resources to do this, he was happy to keep the words in a loose, poetic

form. In some respects, it could be said that the poem was a stage in a process that was not completed.

We did not dwell on the technical properties of poetry, except to briefly explore the rhythm of the words, through speaking and clapping and make small adjustments.

Later, we looked at other poems, including the poems by people with learning difficulties in *Know me as I am* (Atkinson and Williams 1990). It seemed more important to me to concentrate on what Robert wanted to say through the poem, rather than worrying about developing the poetic form. Consequently, we spent a number of practical sessions exploring the ideas in the poem through drama and movement. This served the purpose of clarifying and deepening the meaning of what was being said and enabled us to make small amendments/developments to achieve the final draft.

Robert's timeline was developed initially as part of the group research sessions, when I used it as a device to enable individuals to begin to reflect on the journey they had travelled and to begin to decide what was important to them. Robert revisited and revised his timeline to present a factual chronology, which contrasts to the more emotional reflections in his dance piece.

The 'identity card' was also developed during the group sessions, but Robert went on to add to and refine this. Part of this process involved him working methodically through photo files on my computer, to make his final selection of images from Razor Edge archive material.

Rob saw the work as collaboration – "It's our project", but we both saw it as his story "my story, from my heart". It was a relationship built on mutual respect – I needed

Robert to complete my research and he needed my support to tell his story. He had to produce the material e.g. the interview questions, the photo selection, arranging/designing the i.d. card, creating and rehearsing the dance, clarifying and finalising the content of the poem. He worked particularly hard during the studio filming session, adjusting to this very different performance medium, where he was required to repeat the dance many times without a live audience to provide him with feedback. This was probably the only time that he became visibly irritated with me, as I pressed him to focus on details and find the right energy for each section of the dance.

There was also a friendship and social side to our collaboration. We would sometimes meet to discuss plans in a wine bar or he would come to my house to work and we would round off the morning with lunch. In addition, I was aware that I was offering Robert an opportunity to get his work seen beyond Razor Edge and I felt a responsibility to achieve this for him, albeit in a modest way. Perhaps he also felt a responsibility to help me achieve my PhD “I help you with your PhD”. In addition to this, I sometimes supported Robert in looking for other work/training opportunities.

On completion of the story we began to look for opportunities to present it to an audience. This was initiated by Robert, who was very keen to perform his dance in a nightclub for people with learning difficulties in South East London, where The Razor Edge Band had already performed. He realised that there was an immediate opportunity there and wanted to grab it. In following this up, we attracted the interest of a number of clubs run by and for people with learning difficulties.

At this time I began to be interested in how we might develop our material into a more comprehensive performance experience. I was interested in us working with a theatre/dance designer, to develop an environment/installation, in which an extended version of the dance would be performed. Robert became very engaged with the idea and I realised that we needed funding to achieve such a project.

After a meeting with the Arts Council, we began to develop an application for funding to plan, manage and carry out such a project together. This led to a reviewing and deepening of our understandings of what this story was about and why it was important. However, a response to the first draft of the application left me feeling that we would be judged as a dance company that could demonstrate little track record (although we both had plenty of experience in arts education). I assessed that it would need a great deal more time to refine the application and we perhaps would still not succeed in getting the funds. I realised that I had led Robert 'up the garden path' somewhat, getting carried away with wonderful ideas, but with the danger of actually achieving nothing. We decided to present our work in a more low-key way and perhaps to develop the application at a later date.

I had come full circle, back to where Robert had been in the beginning. I felt guilty at having misled him. It was a wonderful idea and we had made some important breakthroughs (e.g. the office dealing with his state benefits agreed to allow him to receive funding to set up an artistic project, without it affecting his benefits) but we had wasted time when we could have been getting the story out, as Robert wanted to. We booked a date to perform in a club in Milton Keynes (we did not pursue the other clubs, as either the dates did not work for us, or they did not have a suitable performance space).

In addition, Robert suggested some names of arts education practitioners who might know of opportunities for us to present his story. I contacted them and they both offered us slots in their workshops. We set about preparing a visual display, re-rehearsing the dance and involving an ex-Razor Edge actor, team member and research participant, Vincent Wolfe, to perform the poem on Rob's behalf (Robert did not want the pressure of trying to speak the whole poem, but preferred to use an actor to do this). Vincent involved me in speaking a small part of the poem, as he was concerned about learning the whole thing, which was not an easy piece to commit to memory. Robert paid Jennifer to help him re-rehearse the dance; I supported him to set this up.

Following our first three performances, we went on to perform twice more, to invited audiences of performing arts and education professionals, students, friends and family. These performances took place in two theatre studios - at the Oval House Theatre and Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts. After the latter two performances I issued a simple questionnaire to audience members (see Appendix Two). The response from the Oval House audience was overwhelming, whilst I received only a handful of returned questionnaires from Mountview students. Although this was disappointing, I was assured by the principal that this was by no means unusual and that I was probably lucky to get even a few.

The DVD of Robert's story should be viewed during the reading of Chapter Six as directed.

Interviewing as a Process of Empowerment

Reflecting on the process of developing Robert's story, I was led to consider the way in which we had used interviewing - how it differed from examples in the literature and how it had enabled Robert to have a significant level of control in developing his story.

Placing Robert in the role of interviewer set the interview in an interesting light. In evaluating this approach, and the role of interview in the creation of his story, I found two perspectives in the literature particularly useful. One was Anne Oakley's challenge to the traditional notion of the 'perfect interview' (Oakley 1981) which has since been cited and built on by qualitative researchers (Goodson and Sikes 2001, Lawthom in Goodley et al 2004) and the other was Denzin's fascinating exploration of the 'performative interview' (Denzin 2003).

According to Oakley, the 'perfect' interview, i.e. detached and uncontaminated by the personal involvement of the interviewer, is a myth – unattainable – and the focus on this so-called objective approach is associated with the attempt to earn sociological enquiry a place in the scientific community. For Oakley, these values are also related to feminine and masculine views of psychology in a patriarchal society, where subjugation of certain groups is seen as normal and objectivity and rationality are placed above subjectivity and intuition. In complete opposition to this kind of detached, hierarchical relationship, Oakley puts forward a style of interviewing that unashamedly involves the interviewer in building a more personable approach:

“... the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship.” (Oakley 1981 P41)

For Robert, interviewing others about himself meant that we had in some ways turned on its head the whole idea of who was finding out about whom. There is also no doubt that his personal identity was invested in the relationship as he was asking questions about himself! Like Oakley, we were not concerned about objectivity and rationality, but with using interviewing as part of a process of examining personal experience.

Our approach raised the issue (for me) of how to be sure that the interviewees would answer truthfully and not temper their answers about anything sensitive, so as not to cause offence to Robert. I don't believe this happened to any significant extent in Robert's case, perhaps because each interviewee had had a professional relationship with him and was used to being able to tackle sensitive issues openly. There was a collaborative feel to the interviews. Constructive criticism was made by both interviewees - and challenged by Robert, as can be seen from these excerpts:

Simon: As soon as we say “no” or “I'm tired” or sit back, then we kind of, you know, things start to slip.

Robert: I didn't sit back

Simon: No

Robert: No I didn't

Simon: No, not now you don't

Robert: No, now I'm changed

Simon: Yes

And:

Robert: Now, my team want me to support the team you saying. But I'm not tired but if I tired, I feel one person not work together – me and David not going to work together, but David got problems, not mine. But you say, Simon, about my mind...now I'm changed to work together in team.

Dialogue was part of both interviews, although Robert tended to wait until the end to have his say – “Right, now it’s my turn” as with the above exchanges. It is unimaginable to me that Robert would not have entered into dialogue and I saw it as part of the process of him developing his understanding and evaluation of his life.

More than two decades later Denzin (2003) re-establishes the approach of the dialogic interview and extends this view to create the concept of the ‘performative interview’. Examining Denzin’s approach helps to place Robert’s role (in the process of inquiry) in the context of developing research practices. It helps us to understand the potential role for our methods in future research with people with learning difficulties.

Writing about indigenous research, resistance to racist cultural practices and performance ethnography, Denzin (2003) goes beyond the notion of using interview data to write ethnographic accounts of particular cultures. In his view, the interview is itself a performance of everyday culture. The interviewer is there as a participant, to sensitively collaborate with the interviewees, to unearth the oppressive structures experienced by members of that culture. The words of the interview can be taken and performed by actors, thereby contributing to a culture of resistance. The personal becomes political in this approach and the voices of those who have been marginalised are heard:

“... gives a voice to those on the margin, moving them for the moment to the political center.” (Denzin 2003 p18, following Madison 1998)

According to Denzin, these performances challenge existing ways of knowing and representing the world and create what he calls ‘utopian spaces’. They are a way of critically examining existing, historically-sited situations, and exploring possibilities to

create a politics of hope; they embody resistance: “Meaning and resistance are embodied in the act of performance itself” (Denzin 2003 p245). This is similar to Roman’s (2009) view of Disability Arts performances as having the potential to challenge existing social practices and create a vision of social justice.

The interview, in Denzin’s approach, is an act of collaboration. The researcher participates in the culture she is researching and the resulting performance is seen as a mode of inquiry and a path to understanding (Denzin 2003 p19). The performance works by invoking shared emotional experience and understanding between audience and performers. Denzin, building on Freire, sees performance ethnography as a way of developing critical consciousness. He recognises that to achieve freedom people take part in struggle - freedom is not something that is given to them by others. He sees performance ethnography as part of that struggle:

“As praxis, performance ethnography is a way of acting on the world in order to change it.” (Denzin 2003 p228)

Denzin’s approach, contextualised as being in the ‘seventh moment’ of qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, Denzin 2003) is driven by the desire to create a politics of resistance built on personal experiences of oppression, exposing discourses of power in a post-modernist view of the world and a critical approach to research (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, Kemmis and McTaggart 2000) Quoting McLaren, he states that reflexive, performative ethnography:

“... privileges multiple subject positions, questions its own authority and doubts those narratives that privilege one set of historical processes and sequences over another.” (Denzin 2003 p234, quoting McLaren 1997 p168)

Denzin is concerned with research that exposes the ways that power and ideology shape consciousness and with developing resistance to discourses of power. He describes a critical pedagogy that disrupts and deconstructs oppressive cultural practices to create a just and more equal society (Denzin 2003 p 264, following Kincheloe and McLaren 2000). He is concerned with how critical consciousness-raising can create agency in individuals and reveal glimpses of how the world could be different. For him, it is not about researchers empowering or emancipating others, but researchers are repositioned in a collaborative process that enables people to have a sense of agency and an authoritative voice. It is just such an approach that I have attempted to take in researching with Robert.

Returning then to the process of developing Robert's story, it is possible to see how our approach to interview builds on Denzin's concepts of resistance and the performative interview. In some ways, however, I believe our approach went further, in that it placed Robert in the driving seat, as interviewer enquiring into his own life, in collaboration with the interviewees and myself. Robert set his own agenda, developed his own questions, reflected upon the responses, creating his poem and his dance that are at once expressions and evaluations of his experiences. He performed his dance himself – he did not need researcher/performers to do it for him - and chose those that he wished to perform his poem as part of his presentation.

Robert's poem could be said to closely resemble Denzin's notion of the performative interview, in that Robert's words became the performable poem. Robert's words were not, however, the words of the interviewee, but of Robert as interviewer, researcher and reflective artist, in the process of evaluating his own journey – a personal story set in the context of a disabling society and demonstrating clearly a voice of resistance.

This all sounds very wonderful and powerful and liberating, but it is time to hold up my hand as researcher and admit that there was also a degree of intervention by me in re-arranging Robert's words, editing parts of it grammatically, to make it clearer and working with him to extend passages, as well as initially recognising the potential for communicating his thoughts in a poem. This is what Tierney (2000 p542) calls "the researcher's hand" - hence the claim to collaboration, rather than simply facilitation. I will examine this more closely later.

In the dance, Robert's responses to the interview were embodied through a process of discussion and physical exploration. Recurring themes were expanded and deepened. These themes arose initially in the interview with Mike Ormerod. During his interview, Mike drew Robert's attention to how difficult it was likely to be for him to continue with his career if Razor Edge closed down. Robert responded at the end of the interview and again after listening to the interview tape. These reflections on the overcoming of adversity eventually appeared in the dance - as the shout and the breaking through the walls, with the fist, to go forward. Some of his actual comments appeared on the identity card.

Throughout the process Robert was dealing with how to overcome obstacles to his career. These obstacles were sometimes connected to his own confidence and perceptions of himself, related to how he was seen and treated by others. For example, while on his way to work on the London Underground, Robert was followed and knocked down by a man. This experience affected his confidence. Whilst developing the dance with Jennifer Irons, he began to explore difficulties relating to this, such as his inability to make eye contact with others and how it affected his work. Through the

exploration he was able to overcome his fears and transform himself into someone who had the confidence to continue and considered himself changed as a result. In her report for Razor Edge, Irons (2006) observed his determination to tackle these issues in the process of developing his dance:

“Despite the difficult process of bringing up and re-visiting a painful experience, he wanted to use that to enhance his own work as an artist and that is a rare quality found in great performers.” (Irons 2006 p6)

Through the process of reflecting upon issues and events that were holding him back, Robert was able to develop the agency that Denzin refers to in his writing about performance ethnography. Irons refers to the transformation in Rob:

“We have also only just filmed and watched the solo and Rob’s reaction was that of elation. He said he feels wonderfully proud of himself and like a different person. When I asked him specifically what he noticed when watching the film, he expressed surprise at the focus, the eye contact, and how his body has changed.” (Irons 2006 p 7)

and to his determination to continue his career:

“I believe the empowerment he’s experienced from creating and performing the solo will go a long way toward this.” (Irons 2006 p6)

I believe Robert’s participation in the interview process and the creation of the poem and dance are examples of performance as a mode of inquiry and a path to understanding (Denzin 2003 p19).

Thinking through the Body

In her report for Razor Edge, Jennifer Irons describes the process of developing the dance with Robert. The report tells a story of discovery, of thinking and developing ideas using the body, resulting in intellectual, emotional and physical transformation. The multi-sensory nature of the process comes across as a key to learning and to the development of Robert's ideas. Visualisation, embodiment of emotions and the use of the physical to trigger memory, are all strong elements described in the process of creating the dance.

The act of visualisation, where imagery is used to evoke the sense of how something feels, is not new in dance. Miranda Tufnell (dancer and choreographer) and Chris Crickmay (Head of Art and Design at Dartington College) use imagery (in words, photographs and paintings) in their book *Body, Space, Image* (Tufnell and Crickmay 2006). In so doing, they attempt to conjure up for the reader a sensual map for the physical exploration of her own body and the space that surrounds her:

**“SEE THROUGH THE FLOOR
AS IF IT WERE WATER**

**IMAGINE THE FLOOR OPENING UP
TO YOUR FEET AS YOU STEP
(Tufnell and Crickmay 2006 p38)**

The experiencing of the body brings in the senses:

“SIGHT TASTE TOUCH SOUND

REFLECTING THROUGH THE BODY

LETTING THE BODY OPEN IN THE BRANCHING OF THE SENSES”
(Tufnell and Crickmay 2006 p40)

According to Irons, Robert embraced the use of visualisation, building up a bank of images, such as ‘spiders walking’ and ‘stroking the cat’, to support him in his learning and teaching, enabling him to carry out dance exercises and then teach them, both visually and verbally and also becoming “a very strong tool” (Irons 2006 p2) in the creation of his dance. This approach seemed to be an important part of Robert’s thinking processes, giving him, perhaps, a ‘whole sense’ of an exercise, an immediate connection into what was being aimed at. Dancer and choreographer, Alice Nunes (2002), talks of trying to experience the immediacy of a connection through visualisation:

“The use of visualisation was very strong and relied on each dancer to embody, interpret and manifest the mental into the physical. However, it was not acting or representing the visualisation, it was becoming it, in the moment...” (Nunes 2002, describing participation in a dance workshop)

Jennifer noted that it could take up to ten minutes to think about and recall the complexities of doing a warm-up exercise correctly and thoroughly. However, if visualisation was used, the recall was speedier and the detail “much more specific” (Irons 2006 p2). Although quite a small instance, for me it is significant, as it suggests a certain liberation from being bound by traditional methods of thinking things through.

From my experience of working with Robert, he is clearly someone who also likes to discuss things and Irons states that there was much discussion in the initial stages of creating the dance. As time went on, however, and the scenario was completed and

then revisited to develop the meaning and dynamics of the dance, physicalisation became the primary tool for deepening the ideas. One way of doing this was through the emotions:

“The other way we developed this part of the material was by using how he FELT as well. ...There were movements that were representative of the anger and frustration he had felt, and when he really thought about the anger, those movements became very strong.” (Irons 2006 p4)

Emotions became embodied and were in fact a primary way into recalling experience:

“I think the discovery that the feelings he experienced were the key to his own empowerment and embodiment of the movement was a real turning point in the work.” (Irons 2006 p5)

As well as using embodiment of emotion, the body was used to recall steps and provide a map of the dance:

“There was a portion of this time where he struggled with the memory of what steps were to come next and would instantly go into his own thoughts to try and pull that memory out. We tried numerous ways of memorising the steps, but it only really began to make sense in his body when he went through it physically. So rather than stand and think about what was to come next, he would just start moving, and this physical way of trying to recall worked much better. It not only took the stress off him trying to remember, it gave him a pathway back into the piece...” (Irons 2006 p4)

Repetition of the physical movements enabled Robert to develop long-term memory of the piece. Irons refers to this as the ‘body’ rather than the ‘brain’ at work:

“The physiological benefit of this repetition is that the natural muscle memory kicks in when the brain doesn’t. This can only be achieved physically; the more the body does it, the more the body takes over, and the brain is relied on less.” (Irons 2006 p5)

The phenomenon of muscle memory has been described by neuroscientists as the creation of a short-hand between thinking and doing, through a thorough mapping of the movements in the brain (Solway 2007). Neuroscientist Daniel Glaser makes clear the level of brain work involved in dance:

“Of course you need a body to dance...But as dancers transition from conscious awareness of a newly acquired routine to the automatic performance of it, the brain is not doing any less work.” (Glaser, quoted by Solway 2007)

According to Glaser, who has studied dancers and the relationship between the body and the brain, the brains of dancers are particularly tuned to physicalisation of the visual. For example, they respond (in motor areas of the brain) to seeing familiar steps, as if they were themselves actually dancing them (Glaser cited in Solway 2007).

What Irons seemed to be describing in Robert was the need to use the body to actually trigger the awareness of the steps, a way of finding the patterns that he was looking for, that the brain had stored.

Howard Gardner has attempted to reconnect the body to notions of intelligence with the concept of bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence and his theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993). Gardner’s theory is based on evidence related to damage to areas of the brain associated with particular functions. He puts forward a case for a discrete intelligence that controls the body and movement, with dance representing a highly developed manifestation of such intelligence. The experience of using dance to develop ideas and communicate them is expressed in his quote from the famous dancer Isadora Duncan:

“If I could tell you what it is, I would not have danced it.” (Isadora Duncan, quoted in Gardner 1993 p225)

Apparently Robert, reflecting on the process, reaffirmed the benefit of a physical approach:

“Robert said that going through the movement physically and then repeating it again and again was the most beneficial approach for him personally, and standing and thinking about it, did not work for him at all.” (Irons 2006 p7)

Whether Gardner is right or not about a clearly defined set of natural intelligences in human beings, it is clear to me that Robert was using a combination of senses, of physical, visual and verbal skills to develop his understanding and expression of his ideas. This multi-sensory approach is just what Razor Edge was putting forward as part of its ‘new learning model’:

“The emphasis is on learning through practice... The approach to learning is essentially multi-sensory, with an emphasis on breaking the process down into very small steps. Non-verbal teaching techniques are part of the multi-sensory approach.” (Razor Edge 2004)

Tony Buzan (1993) reminds us in his book on mind-mapping (which focuses on a system of mapping words and images, to develop creativity in thinking and improve memory) that the more ways we have of remembering something, the better chance we have of succeeding.

Ironically for Robert, and perhaps others like him, it is this reliance on the body, as a way into thinking and a means of expression, that continues to exclude him from dance training programmes, as Irons points out:

“Even more frustrating, is the simple fact that dancers communicate through their bodies rather than written or spoken words. This, as we’ve discovered, is something that Rob excels at. It seems that the greatest barrier to Rob’s continued development lies less with him or his abilities and more with the programs on offer. Even the CandoCo Foundation Course, which offers the technique he so badly wants has a high degree of written work, and there is no way that he could be offered the required support to complete the theoretical portion of the course as it is run at this time.” (Irons 2006 p7)

Note that Irons does not say that he could not tackle theoretical issues per se, only that he could not “complete the theoretical portion of the course as it is run at this time”.

Vygotsky made the point that people with learning difficulties should be given every opportunity to study abstract thinking, specifically because it was something they were seen to struggle with (Vygotsky 1978 p89). Focusing solely on concrete approaches to thought development only served to fulfil low expectations.

Goodley and Moore (2002) in their research with people with learning difficulties in performing arts noted the following:

“We find that, in performing arts, people who have difficulty speaking need not have difficulty thinking and expressing themselves. “ (Goodley and Moore 2002 p96)

Shusterman (2006) goes further, with his development of somaesthetics, and presents a challenge to what he regards as a false separation of the body and mind, particularly in the study of the humanities, with its focus on ‘nobler’ pursuits and ‘higher’ knowledge. As far as he is concerned, the body is our means of experiencing and acting upon the world and should not be demoted to second place.

The point for me is that the multi-sensory approach described in the research process has offered Robert the opportunity to develop his skills and understanding. As a result,

he has been able to contribute his reflections and understandings of his experiences as a developing artist, to this research project. Enabling Robert to contribute to a research project about artists with learning difficulties can be viewed, in the spirit of Goodley and Moore, as a way of extending democracy:

“... celebration of the body as a vehicle of communication is tantamount to extending democracy because it emphasises capacity for self-expression rather than a lack of narrowly defined speech and language skills.” (Goodley and Moore 2002 p96 citing Thompson 1997)

For Robert, performance and the multi-sensory techniques surrounding it, in relation to this research project, has been a mode of inquiry, a path to understanding and a means of expression and transformation. He has used his body as a means of physical and emotional exploration, what Alexander (2008) refers to as coming to know through the body - coming to know through doing, rather than observing and writing, or intellectualising. This approach has enabled him to tell “my story, from my heart” (Robert’s story) and to contribute to knowledge and understanding about artists with learning difficulties in our society.

Earlier I referred to the researcher’s hand in the development of the product. I would like to turn my attention to issues related to this.

Collaboration in the Research Process

I have described the research process with Robert as ‘collaborative’; Robert has said that it is our project, but his story. The Collins dictionary definition of the word ‘collaborate’ is “to work with another or others on a joint project.” I will attempt to

analyse what I mean by this in practice and how Robert's perception of the relationship fits with mine.

As Walmsley (2004) points out, it is often difficult to find the right language to describe the research relationships in inclusive research. Walmsley draws particular attention to the difficulty researchers have in describing their own roles. She attributes this to the desire to demonstrate the active participation of the disabled individuals, often resulting in the underplaying of the researcher's role, using language such as 'supporter' or 'co-researcher':

“I argue that these roles deserve more than just the passing and self-effacing mention they often receive in the literature. Supporting inclusive research is a skilled activity. It needs to be recognized as such because if it is not then researchers are silenced and are left almost ashamed of their skills. It also makes it very difficult to train people in this way of working if we describe it as 'just support' as some have claimed.” (Walmsley 2004 p66)

Walmsley argues for the need to make the process transparent, avoiding obscurantist language in describing the research relationship, rather showing clearly who has taken which part and so enabling others to learn from the process. Consequently, I have attempted to spell out the nature of our relationship, as perceived by myself and by Robert. The table below can be used to indicate what my perception is, of our individual roles.

Robert	Irene
Creator of own story	Facilitator Co-creator of the poem Editor Contextualisor
Artist	Ethnographer Co-ordinator
Reflector/analyst	Analyst
Performer	Performer
Presenter of his story	Presenter of thesis
Communicator through artistic/mixed media	Communicator through text

Facilitating Robert to tell his story in his own way has not been about taking a back seat all the time. It has meant drawing attention to what I could see emerging during the process and keeping an analyst's eye on the process, to spot themes that were becoming apparent and could be developed - for example, spotting the possibility of Robert interviewing arts education professionals or noting the emergence of the poem.

In developing the poem, Robert's words were not recorded verbatim in a neat process of interview, tape, transcription, performable poem. We discussed Simon's answers and charted the key phrases and points of Robert's responses. The collaboration involved the use of facilitation skills, such as identifying key phrases and following them up in discussion with Robert. This aspect of the relationship should not be

underplayed. Good facilitation skills are essential to be confident that you are picking up on what is being articulated by an individual who may sometimes struggle with sentence structure or shift focus very quickly. Good listening skills and what Goodson and Sikes (2001) call ‘listening beyond’ are essential to pick up on potential lines of enquiry. There was also an editing role in relation to the poem. The original words arising from the stepping-stones needed some alterations to make it flow rhythmically or make the content clearer. For example, note the quite high degree of intervention in the following section.

Original words:

“Been harder than for people who don’t have Down’s Syndrome, learning disabilities – being a teacher” - and other disabilities (the latter was a response to a direct question by me about whether he included other disabled people here)

My edit, agreed with Robert:

“It’s been harder for me
(than for people who don’t have Down’s Syndrome, Learning disabilities, other disabilities)
being a teacher.”

Contrast this with sections of the poem that were verbatim, as they appeared on the stepping-stones. For example the following section was untouched:

“To be a teacher is to write it down”
“take notes”
“write plans”
“look after other people’s bodies”
“rhythm”
“shapes”
“health and safety”
“Getting people working in groups, thinking about their ideas”

This brings into question the extent to which the work is Robert's and the extent to which it is also mine. To what extent did I force my own agenda on him, snatching up words that fit into my view of a disabling world and a romantic view of him as artist, as resistor? A simple cross-check with the dance, the timeline and identity cards showed me that the themes recurred. Robert's view of the process also sheds light on this. I will deal with this later.

I also took on the job of situating the story in the wider educational, artistic and theoretical/political contexts. It may be that Robert could have taken on aspects of this work, but I judged at the time that he would have struggled with this. What seemed to be engaging him in the research was his desire to tell his story. Added to this, it was my first research experience and I did not feel equipped to fully include him at this stage.

Robert was the creator of his own story. One look at the huge amount of work he carried out to this effect (as previously described) leaves no doubt about this in my mind. He also comes across as the artist, the one who creates artistic material and performs it. My contribution as performer was to speak a few lines of the poem. Nevertheless, it felt good to be there in an active, artistic role presenting an aspect of the work, speaking his words that were the result of a great deal of careful thought and work together. Robert was narrator of his own story, which Vince and I helped to present.

While Robert was busy being the artist, developing his own work, I was co-ordinating the project, looking ahead to where we might go next, facilitating the interviews, setting up the performance venues and also keeping an analyst's eye on emerging

themes. However, if I describe myself as the analyst, I cannot leave Robert out of this part of the work. The whole story is a result of Rob's reflections. It is not a simple re-telling of events, it is his interpretation of those events, based on his physical, emotional and intellectual explorations and reflections. In addition, as I discuss later, Robert had significant input into the interpretation of his story.

Robert is also presenter of his own story. He has been able to do this, because of the use of the artistic medium. I am the presenter of his story in text form. To present his story, he communicates through the artistic and other mixed media, such as photos, drawings, poem, while I present it through the written word, in the form of the thesis. Each has its audience and each has its own particular impact.

When I look at the table on page 190, I see a joint project with significant contributions on both sides – a complementary relationship, a 'creative collaboration' John-Steiner (2000). Now I would like to present Robert's evaluation of the research process.

Robert's Evaluation of the Process

In examining the nature of my role in the process, I decided it was essential to get Robert's view and so set about devising an approach to do this. I chose, once again, a combination of practical and discussion activities. After a physical warm-up (developed together on our feet, to get ourselves awake, focused and working together) I introduced an exercise to rate different aspects of the research process. Two lines running the length of the rehearsal hall floor represented a scale in relation to each question put. After a short time of reflection, we each placed ourselves somewhere on

the line. As an attempt to avoid us each waiting to observe the other's position first, I employed a device of counting aloud "one lion, two lion, three lion" and then going straight to the spot.

I recorded the results to the questions in diagrams on charts and some discussion arose. I charted our comments next to the ratings. We added and answered two questions from Robert, in the same way. Finally, I simply asked Robert to say how he found the different methods we used in the research process.

The similarities and differences, in our perceptions of being involved in the research process and his responses to the methods used, are useful in assessing the value of my approach to the research. I was claiming, in the thesis, that the project had been a collaboration, whilst acknowledging that I had more of an overview of the process than him. I wondered if he saw it this way.

In summing up what the charts were telling me, I have used a system of qualifying words, according to the position on the line that was taken. Thus -

Completely	= at the far end of the line
Very	= three quarters or more down the line
Quite	= More than half way, less than three-quarters
Medium	= middle point on the line

There were no positions taken less than halfway down the line.

The first three answers indicated that Robert found the process medium hard, quite confusing and completely (i.e. extremely) long. Our perceptions were similar here, although my position indicated that I found the process harder than him and only slightly less confusing. So much for the expertise of the researcher! I think it is symptomatic of how we were both grappling with new issues and feeling our way. There was no 'masterplan' that we simply followed, because I did not have a clear idea how the research would proceed; the process was inductive -we were forging our own way. I needed Robert's ideas to take my own forward and vice-versa.

Robert was extremely clear about his views on the collaborative nature of the project. I asked how much I listened to him during the process. He was clear it was quite a lot and his perception of what this was all about surprised me. He initiated a discussion about control - "It's about control". He was clear about our relationship here. "You have got no control over me. You had control over me long ago." We both agreed that we had equal control in creating the story, that I listened to Robert quite a lot, but not all the time. He was certain that he made the decisions completely, but acknowledged "We discussed it together". He pointed out that I was not being paid anymore and from this I took the point that I was no longer the director, his boss, and I could not make decisions without his agreement. The sense of power that he felt in relation to the development of his story was clearly expressed here. When I asked him what control he thought I did have, he replied "You helped me a lot". In discussion we clarified what he meant by this – I brought skills and expertise that he did not have.

There is clear indication that Robert felt the story presented his ideas. He was clear that the dance consisted completely of his ideas, that he made the decisions completely, but control was medium, as again, he needed Jennifer's skills and expertise to facilitate the

development of the piece. He saw the development of the timeline as very much in his control and the poem as very much his words. There was a certain pride when he spoke of the material he had created “wonderful – the poem and the dance together make up the story. My journey – that’s what my story is about – a true story”. He acknowledged that the poem had been my idea and that I had typed up the words and altered them slightly, but when we continued to work on it, control was “half and half”, in his opinion.

Robert’s response to being asked if it had been a good experience, was immediate and adamant – a resounding “Yes!” I had expected a more cautious reply, given the emotionally sensitive themes explored for the dance, the sheer hard work put in and the admission that it had been quite confusing and very long. But no, it was clearly a positive experience for him.

Next, we turned to the different methods we had used to develop the story and I asked him to comment on each of them. As I had anticipated, the practical approaches got the thumbs up, whereas the discussions were “a little bit harder”. He made his views clear – “Sitting down, talking to others, makes us tired” “Not sit down all the time”.

Apparently I had got the balance “a bit right”, but this is how Robert saw a good balance – “Write it down, then off your bottoms – to loosen your words”. For Robert, the best part of the whole process was – “You! I was helping you out with your research” and the dance – “tell my story – to make up my own movement”.

I had approached the evaluation of the process in a practical way, building discussion on what we had expressed on our feet. I hoped this would enable Robert to access his thoughts on the matter – to “loosen” his words. It was designed to capture a

spontaneous response, but also leave room for further reflection. It would be easy to be suspicious of Robert's responses, to wonder if he was not perhaps swayed by me or keen to please me with the 'right' answer. I believe that would be to deny the sophisticated reflective skills that Robert has developed and that are demonstrated in his story. Robert's brother, in his feedback to the performance of the story, writes about this tendency to assume that things "go over his head":

"Sometimes, because he's the youngest in the family, his disability and because he doesn't often talk much about any negative emotions he may be feeling, there's a tendency to treat Robert almost as an adolescent and not to be appreciative enough as to how hard life can be for him, to think that he's not affected too much by any problems, that they somehow go over his head. This was definitely a powerful reminder for me that this is not the case and that he is an independent forty year old man with his own life and all his ambitions, desires, struggles and frustrations are just as real and just as painful as anyone else." (Mark Belcher, Oval House performance audience feedback 2007)

For me, this serves as a warning against assumptions that, because they are not always articulated in discussions or day-to-day conversations, complex issues are not understood or felt by someone like Robert. Conversely, working closely with Robert in a collaborative manner using performing arts techniques, has enabled him to 'speak out' about the issues that concern him.

If we accept Robert's perceptions of the research process as presented by me as valid and authentic, then the evidence suggests that the process was collaborative. I believe this is because we were able to build on certain understandings about respect and responsibility and consequently develop a working relationship that allowed for give and take, trust and leadership.

In Chapter Seven I continue the discussion about collaboration, drawing on the writings of John-Steiner (2000). I suggest that the team-style approach to working in Razor Edge resulted in forms of creative collaboration (John-Steiner 2000) that offered the artists with learning difficulties a context of mutual support and complementarity in which to develop skills and expertise and take responsibility and leadership.

Using data gathered during the research process I claim that it is this experience that laid the foundations for the collaborative relationship built by Robert and myself. As such, this subject is presented in analysis of findings rather than evaluation of the process, although I am aware of the overlap and its role in the discussions that I have begun to develop in this chapter.

Contrasting Processes: Developing the Stories of Walter Davis, David Warren and Vincent Wolfe

In Chapter Seven I claim that Robert Belcher's story was one of transforming his identity, telling his own story in his own way, claiming his own history, mapping out his own aspirations for his future, and presenting himself, through his art, as advocate for himself and other artists with learning difficulties. His story was developed in collaboration with myself.

As part of the Razor Edge Team, Walter, David and Vince were involved in the group research sessions and, later, worked with me individually on their stories, but I cannot claim that the processes were truly collaborative. As I have already explained there were a number of reasons for this. The closure of Razor Edge, the lack of resources in terms of time and money, as well as Walter's move away to Ramsgate in Kent (a

distance of approximately 70 miles from my home in South West London), all made it difficult to sustain the level of collaboration that Robert and I achieved. I grossly underestimated just how much time and effort needed to be invested in order to achieve a true collaboration with each of the four individuals. Basically I 'bit off more than I could chew'.

Robert was extremely motivated to tell his story and active in chasing me up if I did not meet with him regularly. I feel that he would not have allowed me to become distant from him. He clearly recognised the opportunity the research offered him, and I believe he had as much investment in the process as I did. I think this was not the case for the other three individuals. David was very keen to complete his story, but perhaps lacked the skills to find a way to insist that I give due attention to it. However, it was notable that during the periods I was actually working closely with David or Vince their engagement and their desire to tell their stories increased considerably.

This observation leads me back to Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and the active participation of Maori peoples in research. According to Tuhiwai Smith, before participating in research in any way, Maori people are likely to want to ascertain what use it will be to them, to know what they will get from it. In following a largely collaborative approach with Robert, he developed his own sense of what he wanted to gain from the research. In not investing the same amount of time and energy in the other three projects, the corresponding investment did not develop at the equivalent level. The law of diminishing returns, or in Robert's case the law of positive returns seemed to apply.

Reflecting on the above, it seems to me that it is extremely important to get the right level of investment to achieve a collaborative process that will bear fruit for both

parties. I succeeded in this with Robert, but largely failed with Walter, David and Vince. Consequently, the resulting stories are of a different quality, and although the data was collected using performing arts and multi-sensory methods, the data was not further developed and presented through the medium of performing arts. For Robert, the process of developing his dance was not simply a way of presenting his research material, but an act of deepening and extending his reflections. This does not mean that the potential to do this was not there for the other three artists. It is simply a result of the limitations of the particular process I followed with them.

Developing Walter Davis's Story

Although Walter took part in the group research sessions, alongside Robert and the others, we had only limited time to pursue his story on a one-to-one basis before Razor Edge closed, and by the time Robert's story was completed Walter had already moved out of London.

From the beginning there were some problems with getting Walter's story off the ground. Despite the four sessions spent on it, he was not able to finish his timeline. After a couple of sessions he was unhappy with his first attempt and decided to begin a new version. Unlike Robert, he took his timeline home to work on, but forgot to bring it back for the next session. The set-up for working on it was also difficult for him. Whilst the others could lay out their rolls of lining paper on the floor, Walter needed to lay it across a table, as getting down on the floor was not an option for him. With hindsight, I can see that I should have explored other ways of tackling this, because it probably began to disadvantage Walter. Consequently, his timeline was incomplete at the time Razor Edge closed down. This was frustrating for both him and me. From my

perspective we had not covered an important element of groundwork, but for Walter I believe it was more significant. Like Vince, he seemed to see his timeline more as a product, rather than part of a process of developing his story.

Walter took part in the group sessions focused on the concepts of 'team' and 'professional' and the various sessions on 'identity'. He completed the first stage of creating his identity card. We then went on to pursue discussions together about things he wanted to be in his story. During these sessions I wrote down his narrations on a flip chart and read them back to him. Walter was quite keen to tell his story in words. During one of our Razor Edge work sessions we used drama to explore his concerns about travel and independence, videoing it for further discussion. Following this sequence of events, Razor Edge closed and I became mostly immersed in developing Robert's story for the next year.

When Walter moved out of London, our ability to continue with his story was further affected. I took the decision (reluctantly) to write up his story, using his words, descriptions, reflections and opinions, along with the photographs he had chosen to accompany his identity card. The final product, presented in Chapter Six, consists of a combination of text and photographs.

Having completed a first draft, I took it to show Walter in April 2008. This was more than eighteen months after his employment had ended with the company. I travelled down to Ramsgate in Kent to meet him and discuss what I had produced. We read through the draft together. He recognised his own words, was quite clear that he viewed the story as accurate and was happy with the way he was presented in it. It is

possible that this is a sign that I had been sensitive and perceptive, or alternatively that his distance from the research made him less critical than Robert might have been.

We discussed his life following the move away and I took notes about updates that he would like added. These follow the story presented in Chapter Six. I also asked him what he felt was important about his story. I met Walter again, to show him the final draft, which he approved, and to present my interpretation of his story.

For Robert, I believe it was in the process of creating his own product, of interpreting his own story and communicating it himself, of embodying his feelings and exploring his reflections physically, that the deeper levels of reflection and evaluation took place. Walter was deprived of this process. I was once again very unhappy about the ‘messy’ nature of the research process and felt that my inexperience had led me into a corner. Despite my dissatisfactions and frustrations, the resulting product does tell a story that both Walter and I recognise as belonging to him. His choice of photographs and my placing of them along with the text, create a sense of who this person is, what motivates him and what his aspirations are. The story, born from the particular research process, also serves to contrast with Robert’s story, born of a more collaborative, artistic process.

Developing David Warren’s Story

Like Walter, David was part of the group research sessions and also worked with me on a one to one basis.

David's timeline was completed very quickly, consisted mainly of drawings about musical equipment and was short and effective in communicating what was important to him. I immediately asked him if he would like to use the Razor Edge camera to photograph his equipment. This he did enthusiastically, creating a series of images that I was keen for him to include in his story. However, David decided against this when we came to collate his material for the final product. Following the photography session, I visited David at his house, as he wanted to show me various DVDs of his past involvement in performing arts. We discussed these and I took field notes.

In time it became clear that the relationship with The Razor Edge Band was central for him, particularly with a bass player, Nick Doyne-Ditmas, who worked closely with David on his music compositions. Consequently I introduced two sessions about their partnership, including a game, which David named 'Deal/No Deal'.

'Deal/No Deal' involved selecting from a series of flash cards, which I had created, showing descriptive words about partnerships, such as 'respect'. The words I produced were both positive and negative. David accepted those that he felt applied to the partnership and rejected those that did not, as well as adding his own descriptive cards, which we then discussed. He then ordered them in terms of those that were most descriptive of their relationship. This was a similar task to the one that John-Steiner (2000) set her research participants. In another session Nick also carried out these exercises. I discuss the similarities in Chapter Seven.

After the closure of Razor Edge, there was a gap of some months before I managed to meet with David again – at his house. His parents kindly vacated the house each time I went to David's, in order to give us some space and privacy to carry out our work.

This was not my idea but, with hindsight, I feel it was perhaps an important factor in providing some separation for David, between a social visit and work. Although they were keen on David taking part in the research, they did not attempt to intervene.

David and I discussed how we might develop his material into a presentation. This was a key point in his research for me, because he was very clear about how he wanted to proceed and I was eventually unable to fulfil his requirements.

We reviewed the data we had gathered so far, discussed different modes of presentation and made a chart of ideas. David then clearly indicated what he was interested in doing - live performance of the compositions developed with Nick and The Razor Edge Band, performed by the band, in a space where he could exhibit his images and words about his perspectives on his work, through film or some kind of projection. His second choice was to make a film about himself. This would include shots of him playing his compositions, interviews (particularly using some of the material from the Razor Edge 2006 DVD, *Edge of Inclusion*), plus images and words from the research material we had collected.

I was excited by the ideas and set about thinking how we could do this. It soon became clear (after some discussions with other individuals) that a full-scale performance by the now disbanded Razor Edge Band was not feasible. However, I felt the film might just be achievable.

David and I did not meet again for some months, but while working with the filmmaker, Rachel Ferriman, on Robert's DVD, I discovered that she was extremely interested to meet David and discuss how we might begin to develop the material into

a film. She indicated she would be prepared to get involved in doing this, but might need to find someone to hand over to for the final making of the film. I set up a meeting with David accordingly.

Unfortunately, Rachel, due to personal and work commitments, had to withdraw before we had our meeting. She tried very hard to get someone who would be willing to get involved in her place, but ultimately did not succeed. We were asking people to work for expenses only and for what they would get out of the project personally and artistically. Finally, I abandoned the idea and became resigned to presenting the existing material, with David, to the best of our ability.

It was an extremely disappointing and disillusioning time in the research process for me, not least because I felt guilty for raising David's expectations. It was frustrating too, because I could see the huge potential to create something unique and interesting that could be shown to a wide audience. Despite this, I did not want to divert time and energy to fundraising, given there were four stories to complete, and given my lack of success in doing this for Robert's story. I think also, that I felt rather worn out with fundraising, because so much of it had fallen to Mike and myself in Razor Edge.

It was nearly a year later, in the autumn of 2008, after the completion of Robert's story and Walter's first draft, that David and I began working to finalise the presentation of his story. He understood the limitations of what we could achieve, but set to work enthusiastically with me. We took the decision together to develop his identity card, with words and photos, into a final piece and to develop his words into a written piece. He did not want to incorporate the latter into his identity cards but, in the final event, he did develop the textual element of these. In addition, he decided that he would like

some of his musical compositions submitted with this material, in my thesis. In the final event, we were able to work with the film-maker Rachel Ferriman to capture most of his material on DVD.

Developing the written piece initially involved me collating my field notes from discussions, games and exercises and the early draft of his identity card. I presented a first draft to David and we discussed it. He then began to make some changes and to develop it into a complete narrative. I took notes, reading them back to him, to check he was happy with the wording. Sometimes this involved me suggesting alternative grammatical constructions, but only if I felt what he had said obscured the meaning he seemed to be aiming for. This took some careful listening on my part, to be sure I wasn't leading him or ignoring aspects of what he wanted to say.

We worked several sessions at my house, which involved me meeting him halfway and accompanying him to my house. We also met in the Royal Festival Hall in London, where we could sit comfortably, have a sandwich and a coffee and lay out our material for discussion, before chatting generally about life. These sessions were pleasant and friendly, but as we moved closer to putting the finishing touches, I sensed David edging us toward completion. It was as if he was saying to me "I was happy to help you out and I've produced something I'm quite pleased with, but it has limitations in terms of its engagement for me now". He was not particularly interested in taking the full size identity cards home to keep. He made it clear that he already had plenty of photographs of himself and didn't really want any more. I was only too painfully aware that he had already expressed that he did not want to present his story through photos, but through live or filmed performance.

In addition, at this point, there was no one to show the finished piece to – except through my thesis. Like Robert, David had wanted to present his story himself, through some kind of performance, using his skills as an artist. I felt strongly that this would have been a far more empowering process for him. Once again, I had an overwhelming feeling of failure and having let him down. But, I had of course strengthened my own thesis that for an artist with learning difficulties, presenting your own story, through performing arts media, is far more engaging and empowering than someone else presenting it on the page through words and photos.

In the final event, David did have something to take away, independently of my thesis. Although his story appears partly as a written account, the majority of it has been captured on disc. In attempting to record the data for the thesis, I was once again able to engage the help of the film maker, Rachel Ferriman, who in addition to capturing David's identity cards and music, was able to incorporate some of the written text, making the DVD into a piece in its own right, rather than simply a record of additional material. David and I discussed a first draft of the 'film' and we made an initial selection of text to be included (given that it was not feasible to include the whole of the written piece).

David became very animated in communicating his ideas about presentation of the material on screen, but it was difficult for him to explain in words the images he envisaged and equally hard for me to grasp. Consequently we arranged for David to meet with Rachel and myself (despite Rachel's work commitments and the pressure I was feeling to finish the thesis before it became 'old hat'). In the meeting, David seemed agitated, concerned about the time and about getting home for tea.

Consequently, I do not feel he engaged as much as he might have if he had not had

these distractions. It served to remind me of the difficulties of getting the practicalities sorted and how these can play a big part in enabling someone to concentrate on the work in hand. Perhaps too, it was also a reminder that talking about his work was not as engaging as actually playing music.

Having satisfied himself that the dramatic effect was what he wanted, David made it clear that the final choice of text could be left to Rachel and myself, as all the words were his and therefore any of them would be relevant and representative. However, there was a delay of some weeks before Rachel was able to complete the second draft, echoing the stop-start nature of the whole research process. Due to time constraints and David's seeming withdrawal from the process, I viewed and approved the second draft, myself. David's DVD should be viewed as directed during the reading of Chapter Six.

Developing Vincent Wolfe's Story

As with the other three artists, Vincent took part in the group research sessions at Razor Edge. He began a meticulously detailed timeline and, despite my request to focus on the performing arts aspects of his life, insisted on including his every school, college or other organisation he had ever attended! He was determined to start at the beginning and record each place methodically, with drawings and text. Unlike David's timeline, which was a more symbolic representation of what was specifically important to him about performing arts, Vince's record was more literal – a factual documenting of where he went and whom he met. As I will discuss in Chapter Seven, the timeline highlighted the importance of the social relationship aspect of his performing arts life.

After the closure of Razor Edge I did not work with Vince again until the other three stories were completed. In 2008 we returned to his story. He wished to complete his timeline and so we laid it out as best we could on my living room floor and he set to work on it in a number of sessions spread out over some months. On completion, it filled nearly two rolls of lining paper. For Vince, it had clearly become a major product in his story. I believe there were three reasons this happened - 1. It seemed to be almost a stream of consciousness for Vince and I found it difficult to interrupt this. The inductive nature of the process I was following meant that I was bound to allow Vincent to develop the work however he chose. 2. Without the context of Razor Edge we were removed from the focus on performing arts as a medium for developing ideas. 3. I did not make it clear that we should aim to develop the story through performance, as I was not sure we were going to be able to follow this through. Vince did what made most sense under the circumstances – continued the work he had started. I mistakenly thought it would be a quick job and we could soon move on.

Time passed and I tried to find ways to develop the themes of the timeline through discussion with Vince, while he was working on it. Conversations about the places and people did not produce any memory of particular incidents, feelings etc. My attempts were also half-hearted, as I kept thinking he will soon have finished this and we can move on. I was at a loss as to how to proceed and desperately wanted to get on to ‘the next stage’, but was also aware that for Vince the act of committing his life to paper was a positive and engaging activity. In the end, I was reconciled to the work on the timeline being an end in itself, rather than a process to stimulate other developments. However, on completion of the timeline, we did further develop his identity cards, continuing some of the themes arising.

The timeline had shown that relationships and travel were top of his agenda, but Vince had not engaged with my attempts to question him about this and I believed exploration through performing arts was the most effective means of achieving this. It was as if questions made him clam up, which had often been my experience in working with Vince over the years. I felt that the use of dramatic improvisation would free him up, remove the sense of being put on the spot. I believed that using a performing arts medium would allow for the exploration of feelings and the deepening of his reflections, as had been the case for Robert. It would give him the opportunity to reflect upon and express the significance for him, of the places and people he had encountered in his performing arts life.

At this point I was caught in a dilemma. On the one hand there was a responsibility to give Vince the opportunity to develop his story more fully. On the other, there was my need to finish the thesis, a large part of which was now written up. Added to this I had no significant resources that would allow us to pursue his story dramatically. I no longer had access to rehearsal space and I had no funding to support hire of space. Neither did I have any funding for the general expenses of creating even a small performance presentation.

Feeling extremely frustrated once again, I resigned myself to collating Vince's visual research material for inclusion in my thesis. I also pondered how the visual material he had created might be of use to him personally.

Some months before this, his key worker had mentioned that Vince might have use of a spare room in the house he shared (supported housing, run by the Aurora Options charity), to set up his electronic drum kit. I had thought that he might be able to display

the research material in this space and invite people over for coffee to see it. In this way it would serve to affirm his identity as an artist, at a time when opportunities for his involvement in performing arts had decreased, and it would give a reason to build on the personal relationships in his arts life. It transpired that problems with neighbours meant that converting the garage was instead being explored as an alternative option. However, there was little progress on this for some months.

When I was invited to attend Vince's life review meeting, I decided to raise the question of the garage space again. It was decided that Vince and his support worker, Paul, would clear the garage and investigate its potential for housing his drum kit and visual research material. I also decided to ask if any help could be given to find a free rehearsal space to explore the development of Vince's story into a performance, even though this would not be included in my thesis. At least it would mean that something more useful to him might result from the work he had put in. Neither of these things have been achieved at the time of writing.

Vincent Wolfe's story is presented solely on disc and includes two recordings of The Razor Edge Band, with Vince playing drums. As with David's DVD, a first draft was discussed with Vince and amended accordingly. He had definite ideas about the presentation of the data, which were conveyed to Rachel. We then met with Rachel to discuss the second draft, but a technical hitch in the computer software meant that we had to reschedule. This meant that Vince and I discussed the second draft without Rachel and, as with David's DVD, the second draft was not received for some weeks. A final draft was then created by her and viewed and approved by us. The disc should be viewed as directed during the reading of Chapter Six.

The making of the DVDs highlighted the drawbacks of relying on individuals who are prepared to help out for little or no payment because they have a personal commitment to the project. For all three DVDs there were periods of simply waiting to receive drafts and final edits, because the demands of paid work needed to take priority for the film maker. This increased the already stop-start nature of the research process. A small budget would probably have alleviated this situation, putting any relationship with outsiders on a formal basis, with deadlines to be adhered to.

The processes of working on the stories, described above, give rise to certain ethical issues, which I would now like to discuss.

Discussion of Ethical Issues

Ethical issues in relation to this research are intertwined with methodological issues. I believe that the choice to carry out inclusive research (Walmsley 2004) is itself a moral one and signals that inclusion, representation, interpretation, accountability and ownership are all issues that must constantly be addressed. The researcher/participant relationship is of central concern here - in gathering data, in further developing data through performing arts and in interpreting data. Various issues arise in relation to this, some of which have already been alluded to in my description of the research process.

It should by now have become clear that I have had huge reservations about the three stories that were not developed into performance pieces. For me, there is a sense of having let down Walter, David and Vince, because I have not provided the opportunity for them to deepen their reflections by taking their material into performance.

Consequently, their stories remain half-developed, with only a promise of what might

have been if we had been able to develop the material into performances. I feel I have favoured one participant, Robert Belcher, and sold the others short. Ethically speaking, this is unacceptable. I have been constantly aware that I could have continued to develop the stories in some other way. For example, I could have begun some discussion/interview sessions with Vince to follow up themes arising from his identity cards, if I had not been concerned about the futility of engaging him in a process that would bore him to tears and be totally inappropriate, given the whole tenet of my thesis – i.e. to allow performing artists to think and speak through their chosen art form. Thus I acknowledge that the work remains imperfect, falls short of its own aims. Ultimately it is only partially inclusive, which means that it is also partly rejecting/exclusive (Townson et al 2004 p73). At the same time, I believe it offers positive suggestions, which could be built on to further include artists with learning difficulties in research. There are a number of issues arising in the literature on inclusive research in the social sciences and performing arts, which shed light on aspects of the researcher/participant relationship and the difficult path to achieving inclusion.

Problems of ‘Othering’

Leighton (2009), writing about her performing arts research with people with learning difficulties, looks at ethical issues of ‘othering’. Whilst acknowledging, like others before her (Chappell 2000, Walmsley 2001), that people with learning difficulties need non-disabled supporters to carry out research, she raises concerns about the nature of reflexive practice by these non-disabled researchers, when they attempt to give an account of their involvement and their influence on the research. She suggests that in

the resulting ethical discussions researchers posit an 'ontological difference' (Leighton 2009 p98, quoting Butler 2005). According to Leighton, this has a counter-productive effect, which "...unintentionally compounds the research subject in a passive role in terms of creating an ethical discourse while putting the non-disabled researcher into the role of morally and rationally superior." (Leighton 2009 p98).

Therefore, according to Leighton, attempts at being ethical can reinforce dichotomies of non-disabled/disabled, expert/non-expert, knower/experiencer, researcher/theatre practitioner (Leighton 2009 p99). Discussions about how to include participants with learning difficulties can result in researchers appearing differently - "more benevolent and capable" (Leighton 2009 p100). She observes that researchers continue to conceptualise non-disabled and learning disabled in opposition to each other, through use of language that divides for example 'researchers' and 'knowers', and referring to participants with learning difficulties as having a 'different rationality'.

I hope that in attempting to examine the research process and interpretation of his story with Robert Belcher I have gone some way to developing an approach that extends and develops the ability of artists with learning difficulties to work with researchers without learning difficulties in presenting their findings together. But, as I have indicated, this has not been put into practice fully with the other three participants.

I cannot honestly see any way round the problem posed by Leighton, other than to continue to develop collaborative working practices, whilst still acknowledging the academic skills that researchers bring to the process. Otherwise researchers are likely to fall into the trap Walmsley describes, of saying very little because we are afraid of saying it without the people with learning difficulties we are attempting to include in

our research (Walmsley, 2001, p202). It seems ridiculous to decide not to discuss issues related to including people for whom the academic process is not accessible. Otherwise there is a danger of not being able to share and develop inclusive practices and we are back to Aspis's concerns of leaving power imbalances obscured and intact (Aspis 1999 p177). It seems to me that it is also necessary to delineate between researcher and participants in any research, to explain the roles each took and the contributions each made, or again, we are obscuring the real nature of the process.

Performing Arts Practice and Dangers of 'Normalising'

Leighton (2009) goes on to examine the practice of 'normalising' the 'other'. She takes issue with existing theatre practice, which she suggests results in non-disabled directors who work with performers with learning difficulties using normalising approaches. She believes this is done through imposing a realistic structure and content and selecting the most 'able' performers to carry out the lead roles, for example those who can learn lines.

Leighton states that, in an attempt to avoid 'othering' and 'normalising', the performance of *BluYesBlu* by her research participants "became more postmodern as I tried to be less prescriptive about what was expected" (Leighton 2009 p102). She describes how she struggled in her attempt to enable all the participants to contribute, how she resisted the desire to develop and structure the 'random' material into "a recognisable performance, which would meet the expectations of the audience and examiners." (Leighton 2009 p103) and she generally gives the impression of being frightened to use her expertise as a theatre director.

The problem for me in Leighton's approach is that she seems to be putting forward a self-defeating argument. In attempting not to intervene and impose any kind of order, which she seems to see as normalising, surely she is treating the participants as 'different'. Would she have worked in this way with participants without learning difficulties? Was she really making room for each participant to contribute to devising a theatre piece or was she actually demonstrating low expectations? She seemed to be defeating her own argument by treating the participants with learning difficulties with 'kid gloves', as 'special' and 'different' – that is, not able to learn the basics of dramatic art and therefore needing special allowances for how they might participate.

In her desire not to normalise, did Leighton miss the point that a theatre director is there with any group, disabled or non-disabled, to provide leadership, to help structure a performance and to enable performers to develop their own performance skills, as well as enable each person to contribute to the devising and rehearsal process? In my experience, it is possible to do this, without negating the contributions of the performers – i.e. a collaboration, where each brings his/her unique skills to the relationship. However, I acknowledge that it is not easy and I do not always get it right. The directorial role is a powerful one and this power can be abused. In taking issue with Leighton, I am of course interpreting from her reflections on the process, not speaking from first hand experience of watching the performance being created.

Leighton was struggling with pertinent issues but, whilst I can directly relate to these difficulties, I feel she has gone too far the other way in seeming to be afraid to bring her own skills to the collaboration. There is a danger of researchers still ending up treating participants with learning difficulties as 'different' by not making demands of them, by having low expectations of their abilities or being afraid to contribute

professional or academic expertise. Furthermore, I am not sure that researchers can enter into the research relationship purely as facilitators, anymore than they can be purely objective about collecting data – unless perhaps the research is commissioned by the participating group and even then it must be difficult to achieve one hundred percent, although individuals do take on the specific role of being supporters to researchers with learning difficulties, as can be seen in Chapman and McNulty (2004).

Both Chapman and McNulty acknowledge that their roles changed as the research progressed, in that McNulty, who was new to research, started off as a supporter and was drawn into participating, while Chapman, an experienced researcher, started off by offering advice to the group and increasingly became an observer as the researchers with learning difficulties developed more expertise. Williams et al (2006) observe that roles of those participating do often shift, which also implies a shift of power.

Researchers may start off by being the initiator or leader, but need to be open to changes in roles that can occur and realise that this can be a positive aspect of inclusive research projects.

Continuing the Debate about Control and Maximising Participants'

Contributions

As Stalker (1998) points out, inclusive research is based on a belief that traditional research carried out by 'experts' is inequitable, that people have the right to be consulted and involved in research that is concerned with issues affecting their lives and that the quality and relevance of research is improved when disabled people are closely involved in the process. Achieving a more equitable process and including participants in a meaningful way is a constant struggle for inclusive researchers as the

literature shows (Booth and Booth 1996, Mitchell et al 1997, Stalker 1998, Rodgers 1999, Goodley 2000, Booth and Booth 2003, Boxall et al 2004, Brooks and Davies 2008).

Hodge (2008), in an attempt to foreground the concerns of research participants with learning difficulties, takes a methodological approach known as Lifeworld. In this approach, the researcher 'brackets' his own views early on in the research process in order to focus on those of the participants. The personal is seen as political – all part of lived experience - but the researcher does not seek to extract essential universal truths or common theories from the data. However, the researcher does use his own perspective to analyse why individuals experience particular phenomena in the ways they do. He uses feedback, checks the participants' responses and amends his representations of their experiences accordingly.

Hodge claims that Lifeworld enables the richness of the whole experience of the diversity of the disability community to be explored. This is an interesting methodology, which I only read about as I was nearing completion of my research. It seems closer to my own approach than Leighton's and more honest in its acknowledgement of the researcher's skills in interpreting and presenting the material arising. However, I acknowledge that Hodge did not have the added complication of being in the role of theatre director as well as researcher.

I come back yet again to Griffiths's "Strategies are needed to listen to quiet, less powerful voices" (Griffiths 1998 p96). For me, this doesn't mean researchers have to completely silence their own voices in the research. Neither does regarding the participants as "less powerful " necessarily mean they are seen as passive, or requiring

special treatment, although they may be different in some ways. To me, it means giving space for contributions, developing accessible research methods, listening properly and generally being sensitive to the individuals who are participating – in other words, paying due attention to using good facilitation and collaboration skills. This is something we should always do, because in any group, disabled or not, there may be individuals who are shy, unconfident, who have a low boredom threshold, have difficulty reading or who are simply in disagreement with us.

Placing the Concerns of Participants with Learning Difficulties Centrally: an ethical issue

If I seem too confident of my own position, I can only assure the reader that my journey through this research project has been filled with self-doubt. I have constantly struggled with some of my claims in the thesis. One claim I make is that the stories contribute to knowledge generation in their own right and should be viewed as part of the main body of the thesis. Whilst I am convinced that it was unethical for them to remain in the appendices, I constantly struggle to fully understand the relationship of the stories to the thesis and the academic arguments presented herein.

Goodley (2000a) placed Joyce's version of her story in the main body of the work and his own in the appendices. For me, this represents a move to ensure that people with learning difficulties are allowed to speak for themselves, directly to an academic audience, rather than foregrounding the voices of academic researchers. It is not about removing the voice of the researcher, but concerned with strengthening the voice of the participant. Therefore, it seems to me that it is ethically correct to place the artists' stories, in whatever form they are told, in the main body of the thesis. If we can learn

from what and how they tell us (and this is the most essential tenet of my thesis), then let them speak to us directly, alongside the researcher. Without the stories there would be no thesis, or at least, it would be a very different one.

Accountability and Ownership

As Leighton (2003) reminds us, the production of the written account is where ownership shifts:

“The current controversy amongst advocates of Practice as Research in Performance centres on the respective cultural values adhering to performance and academic writing. Where the ‘artefact’ of such research is a community performance project, it is the writing and dissemination of analysis which is responsible for a sudden shift of ownership, of focus and of rationality.”
(Leighton 2003 p6)

This research is ultimately geared to fulfilling the academic requirements of a PhD, despite attempts to make it useful to the artists. Issues of ownership and accountability can only be partially solved, unlike research that is commissioned by people with learning difficulties, such as through People First (e.g. Central England People First at www.peoplefirst.org.uk). Consequently, I own the thesis, although the actual stories are as much the property of the artists as they are mine.

Although I have read huge chunks of my thesis to Robert (mainly the sections that refer specifically to his story) and discussed their meaning, I cannot be sure how much this was a token gesture on my part. The process, taking place over several sessions, was slow and yawn-inducing, but I felt it was necessary to attempt to be accountable - at least for what I was saying about him. With Vince, David and Walter this process

was shorter, because there was less written – another indication of the lack of investment, by comparison, in their stories.

Robert Belcher was unequivocal in his claiming of ownership of his story – “Our project, my story” (extract from field notes). His story exists as a performance, which can be presented by him - live or on DVD – and which can be used by him in the promotion of his career. On the contrary, the thesis where the contextualising and interpretation of the story happens is mine. Once again, my contribution to these debates is to suggest that the onus is on us as researchers to find methods to include artists with learning difficulties in the analysis process, and to describe how I have tried to do this with Robert. Through strengthening his voice in the thesis I hope to make the presentation and ownership of the ideas more equitable. But, I feel I have a long way to go before I can fully collaborate with Robert to create a thesis about performing artists with learning difficulties.

Vincent and David also possess copies of their stories captured on DVD, for their use in furthering their careers or presenting to whomever they please. Walter is the only one whose story is in print form and, although he can read and may show it to whomever he wishes, it is not as accessible, as capturing of his identity as an artist or as useful. Tuhiwai Smith (1999), in writing about research with indigenous peoples, states that research must be of some use to participants who have traditionally been ‘used’ and misrepresented by researchers. This seems an ethical position to take in relation to people with learning difficulties and I am aware that I have had mixed success in achieving this.

Accountability

Wiles et al (2004 p9) ask how concerned researchers should be to get agreement as to how the data produced is used. The four artists featured in my thesis are free to do what they will with their stories. I obtained their permission to use the material for the thesis and promised to check anything written about them before the thesis was submitted, but in terms of academic arguments, this is once again a question of methodology and techniques to make the whole research process accessible - and I am certainly not at that stage. Therefore full accountability has not been achieved.

Gaining Consent

Informed consent to take part in research is another focus of the literature (Stalker 1998, Wiles et al 2004) Wiles et al (2004 p9) present a list of questions to consider in relation to this:

- How can you know that someone has understood the information that you have given them and that they appreciate fully what participation will involve?
- How can you judge when someone wants to withdraw from a study? How long do they have the right to withdraw (e.g., during data collection, during the write up, later?)
- How concerned should researchers be that participants will agree with how data about them are used? Should participants have the right to veto this? Who owns the data: the participant, the researcher, the grant holder, the research funder, or the gatekeeper?

The artists in this research were able to give their consent to participating, in the context of our work as colleagues within Razor Edge, without the need to consult parents, carers, support-workers or figures of authority. The information I was able to convey about the process we were embarking upon was minimal and initially David Warren declined the invitation to become involved. However, he changed his mind quite early in the process (I believe parental pressure to take part was a factor but, once engaged, David remained enthusiastically committed).

In an inductive process it is difficult to know how the research might proceed. Consequently there was an element of trust required of each artist, in embarking on a journey with me. I believe this was helped by my role as director, teacher and colleague and the onus was on me to respect the trust put in me. As Wiles et al (2004) point out, consent is ongoing and willingness to engage in research activities can be an indication of continuing consent to participate. A crucial point can even be after data has been collected, given that there is then something concrete to relate to (Wiles et al 2004 p8).

Leighton (2003) confirms - specifically in relation to developing a performance as a research project - that consent should be seen as an ongoing issue and that it is clear when individuals are not consenting to participate in this context:

“In a performance project, like *BluyesBlu*, however, participants find ways of communicating non-consent. In social science research consent is seen as a once only transaction, done at the beginning of a study and then not renegotiated. Where a performance process composes the research, like *BluYesBlu*, communication and negotiation are a continuing and constant part of that process.” (Leighton 2003 p4)

Perhaps the clearest indication that the artists I worked with were consenting to participate and understood the opportunity to tell their stories was in their contributions to the first research session, where they set the agenda for the research in relation to their own concerns. It is also implied by the level and quality of their engagement and contributions throughout the process. I do not honestly know what I would have done if one of them had decided to withdraw later in the process. I can only project that probably I would have talked it through with him, making sure that the implications of this were understood, definitely presented my own perspective, asked him to take time to reflect, but made it clear that the final decision was his to make. The aim would have been to ensure that it was an informed decision. Probably I would have suggested a 'disinterested' third party be present at the meeting.

Leighton (2003) also draws attention to social science's reliance on a verbal response to give consent and the literature's focus on the problem of 'acquiescence' in people with learning difficulties, who are constructed as passive. She is concerned that this is often used as a reason to exclude them from research. Although some researchers subsidise the use of language with pictures, she feels this is only a "limited attempt on the part of the researcher to accept the research subject's rationality", whereas a performance project "allows participants to access a range of physical and vocal stimuli and responses".

Leighton's view supports my own here – that consent is ongoing, is implied by the level of engagement in the process and can be communicated both physically, and verbally. The level of energetic and focused engagement in physical activities was a clear indicator of consent, or what I would prefer to call commitment to participate (this term suggests to me a more active engagement with the process). On the other

hand, the body language (yawning, checking of watches, heavy eyelids, slumped body positions) displayed in discussion sessions that went on too long, clearly communicated the opposite. I firmly believe that each individual would have gradually withdrawn from the process if the project had gone down this road. Yet again, this brings me back to my view that ethical issues are intricately connected to methodology in inclusive research.

Remuneration

Kiernan (1999), Chappell (2000) and Burke et al (2003) all draw attention to the issue of payment for those participating in research. This is something I considered very early on in the research process, but after one application for funding, I felt I did not have further time to address. Initially the artists were employed by Razor Edge, but were also giving up their own time for research sessions. In recognition of their professional status, they should have been paid and ideally, this issue would have been addressed before embarking on research. In any future research projects I would wish to do this.

Withdrawal from the Research Relationship

Stalker (1998) is concerned with the expectation of continuing friendship that can arise in a research project with people with learning difficulties. She counsels that researchers need to be sensitive to interpretations that individuals with learning difficulties may put on the researcher-participant relationship and suggests that people with learning difficulties may wish to set their own rules of engagement, taking into

account Booth and Booth's point about the need to withdraw at their own pace (Stalker 1998 p11 citing Booth and Booth 1994).

Robert Belcher, after completing his story, continued to telephone me once every couple of weeks at first, and then every few weeks, to see how I was getting on and to suggest meeting up. Before we worked on his story I had a work-based relationship with him, which meant that there was a minimal social side to our relationship, in the context of going out for dinner or to the theatre with other colleagues. However, during our close collaboration on his story, we became accustomed to meeting up for a drink and having lunch together at my house, as well as still occasionally eating out with our ex-colleagues. My sense of responsibility to ensure that he could benefit from the research and from our relationship, meant that I also gave some support to him in seeking training and employment. For example, using his story as a starting point, we put together a c.v. that we sent out to prospective employers with his DVD and a letter.

During the last two years of completing my thesis, my stepson became ill, and I feel that this perhaps gave me a legitimate reason for pulling back from my involvement with Robert. Otherwise I am aware that I would have had to think more carefully about how to do it. Now Robert rings me every few weeks and we sometimes meet for a drink, or he rings me to discuss any career related matters that crop up. This feels comfortable to me, but I am aware that Robert may prefer to meet more often if we could, perhaps because his life is not as busy as mine. I have no doubt that we will continue to stay 'in touch' as there is a desire to do so on both sides.

Vincent Wolfe was a friend and colleague before we began researching together. The level of our involvement increased when we were meeting to complete his story, but

on the whole, the social side of our relationship has not changed. He still comes to dinner with the family a couple of times a year and we still meet up for a drink every couple of months. The situation with David and Walter, is also much the same as it was - I occasionally meet up with them socially.

Although I have no doubt about the huge benefit it will be to me if I achieve a PhD through this research, I do not feel quite the sense of worry that Stalker (1998) mentions about what I am 'giving back' to the participants. Our relationships are ongoing in the context of the performing arts and social worlds. As I write, I have just been asked to chat with Vince, about a job he is applying for, and to provide a reference. I will continue to respond to such demands as and when I can.

In the next chapter, I present the stories of Robert Belcher, Walter Davis, David Warren and Vincent Wolfe. As previously outlined, Walter's story appears in the chapter 'on the page', as does part of David's story. Vince's story and most of David's are on discs. Robert's story appears on DVD, but some of it is repeated in text form in the chapter. Instructions about when to view the discs are given during the chapter.

Chapter Six

The Stories of the Four Artists

This chapter presents the stories of Robert Belcher, Walter Davis, David Warren and Vincent (Vince) Wolfe. During this chapter the reader will be asked to view/listen to material on DVDs that are placed in the front of the thesis. It will be made clear when this is required.

Robert Belcher

No More Hiding Behind the Curtain

Robert's story was developed into a performance, which was presented on five occasions in very different settings – a club for people with learning difficulties, a drama workshop for a small number of young people (16+) who had been given the label of moderate learning difficulties, a workshop as part of a week-long, dance summer-school for young people aged 11-14, a studio at the Oval House Theatre, to an invited audience of friends, family, colleagues and other arts educationalists and at Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts, to an audience of students and staff. Each time the presentation was slightly different, but the basic components of his story are as follows:

- A short dance – devised and performed by Robert

- A poem – devised by Robert, with support from Irene and performed by Irene and Vince (ex-Razor Edge Team)
- An ‘identity card’ (a display in the form of three A1 size cards) comprised of photos and text showing his view of his identity as an artist
- A timeline - in the form of a number of A4 sheets, set out as a pathway, backed with black card, comprised mainly of text, with some photos and drawings (by Robert)

Robert and I also worked with a film-maker, Rachel Ferriman, to capture aspects of the story as a record. We filmed the dance in a studio and recorded the poem. Rachel also filmed the dance live at the Oval House performance. In addition, she filmed the timeline and identity cards for inclusion in the DVD.

We met with Rachel to discuss the first edit, which she had prepared in advance.

Following this we viewed two further edits, requesting changes, which she carried out, to produce the DVD. Whilst the studio version of the dance provides a record, Robert and I both agreed that the Oval House performance was far superior in terms of conveying the focus and intensity of a live performance (the performance also developed each time it was performed live and the dance was extended). However, the filming conditions at the Oval were such that a considerable part of it could not be used. Consequently, we asked Rachel to include some excerpts of the Oval performance as an extra on the DVD.

The DVD contains all the components of the performance, but the poem has also been included in this chapter, in written form, with the addition of an introduction in

Robert's own words. The text from the identity cards has also been reproduced here, as some of the words cannot be read from the DVD.

It is impossible to fully convey the dance component via the printed page and therefore the DVD should be viewed as part of this chapter. Despite being placed as separate from the text, I view it as an essential ingredient of the thesis and central to Robert's contribution.

Please note that the stories are presented in the original font that we worked in together, for reasons of easy reading. Each of the stories is presented here on single-sided pages, to avoid leakage of photographic images and to maintain consistency throughout.

No More Hiding Behind the Curtain

Introduction

"My name is Robert and I first started in 1985 when I went to Jamaica with Mike and the Green Jam production.

No more hiding behind the curtain!

I first started at GYPT, going to an evening workshop for people with learning difficulties. I was a bit nervous, tense. Now I'm more relaxed. I used to hide in the box and jump up – scare you! What would I say to that young man now? I won't tell him off. I like him. Persuade him to come out – it's ok – the group are waiting – you can do it." (Robert Belcher, from a research session using drama and physical image to explore aspects of his poem)

PLEASE VIEW ROBERT'S DVD, *NO MORE HIDING BEHIND THE CURTAIN*. Please note that elements of the story (the poem plus the timeline and identity card text), as well as being presented on the DVD, are printed, for the reader's reference, below.

No more hiding behind the curtain!

No more hiding behind the curtain!
I don't do that now – I'm changed
Now I'm more relaxed

I have a feeling inside – a passion
It's been there from the beginning, but it has grown
A powerful feeling, a feeling of power
in my mind
in my arms
in my legs -
everywhere
A Passion
I'm on the path, going forward!

I was a student
It was sometimes hard, going too fast
Woah – hold on
Slow down!
Learning to teach others
at the same time

I was born – “Down's Syndrome!”
Named Robert, by my mum,
red hair – just like my brothers
People with learning disabilities can do it,
give people a chance
There are new ways of learning

I am a nice person to work with
It's been harder for me
(than for people who don't have Down's Syndrome,
Learning disabilities, other disabilities)
being a teacher

Teaching is-
looking after people, taking care of people,
help people, train them to be a teacher
Teaching is not easy

To be a teacher is to write it down
take notes
write plans
look after other peoples' bodies

Rhythm
shapes
health and safety
getting people working in groups
thinking about their ideas
Track suit bottoms and tops
Have a shower – clean bodies!
Sweaty, hard job
Lay on the floor, deep breath, to help –
Relax

Teaching to remember in my mind
to learn my mind
Think down into your mind, into your body

I want to be a choreographer
It's an exciting time
I'm happy
I've done well working with the team
I am proud of myself

When Razor Edge closed down
I put my head down, I was sad
I missed my friends
In my dreams they walked away

I will go forward,
I'm serious about my future
If I run my own company
there are different places I want to go -
to Sherrard Rd,
Dockyard,
Tim Webb's company,
Mind the Gap,
I'll take workshops
I need more funding -
My plans are coming!

Now I've got more energy
Now I can work longer and harder
No matter what anyone says, I'm staying on the path
No one's stopped me yet
I'll follow my dreams
My future is coming!

Text from Timeline

Hello I'm Robert
I'm four
I'm going to nursery school today.
I'm going with my mum.
I'm feeling happy.

GYPT (Greenwich Young people's Theatre) evening class –
met Mike
Ormerod

Hiding Behind the Curtain and in the box!

Hot!

To Jamaica – taking the play Arthur Awakes – with the
group, Wed July 31 1985 –
I'm happy

The Mummy

- performance with the evening drama workshop at Royal
Hill, Greenwich
1994

Yes!

Letter from Mike and Irene to say – got a place on Theatre Arts Course Greenwich at GYPT, Burrage Rd, Plumstead 1995-1998

Lewisham College
1997-98

placement with Simon Hutchens,
teaching a dance workshop

'Sweat'

Razor Edge

Performance at the Royal Festival Hall - boxing dance and dustbin dance – 1998

'The Yellow Wallpaper'

Performance with Strathcona Apprenticeship Company – 2000

Razor Edge

Southampton workshops with the group - storytelling, movement, warm-up -

Razor Edge Team 2003

Razor Edge Team 2004 - all 6 of us
We're here - back with Razor Edge,
planning for teaching a course at
Mountview

Voice technique with Hidemi - 2005

This is important for teaching students.

Developing dance and movement skills - to teach.

Pilates - movement at the 999 Club - with Fabio.

After Fabio left, who was really busy, we interviewed 2 ladies, Ann and Jennifer...

Jennifer worked with me all the time - a more experienced person and a nice person. Doing warm-up work, step by step by step and ...

...working on my dance piece!

I miss her..... Please come back!

Razor Edge

Higher Education tour, 2006 – showing them our work – other ways of learning

Research - with Irene

About my life as a dancer and in performing arts – telling my story about the work I've done

Anjali Dance company – 2006

Student on a course – with Marianne – learning ballet, free dancing, choreography –

StopGap dance company - 2007

Teaching young people in special schools – a dance project

And...

Philip and Rachel – working with me on my dance training

The Future?

Teach students

Get married

Be a dad

Have my own

Company

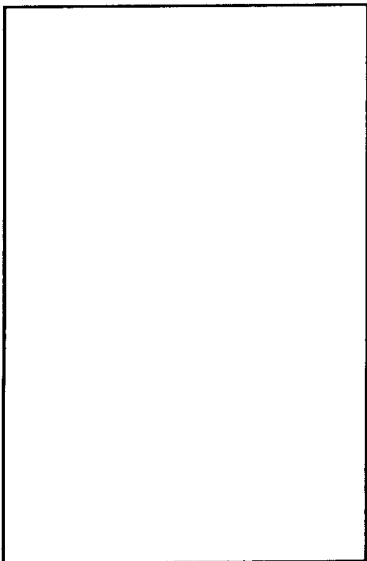
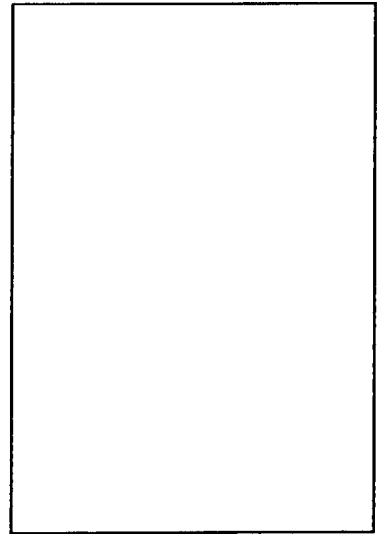
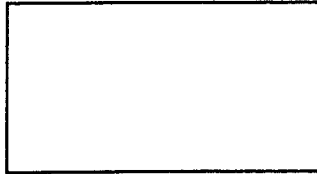
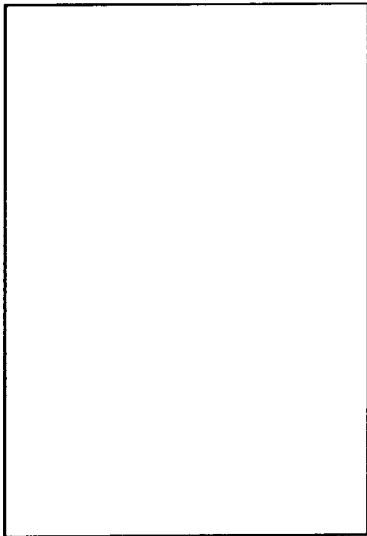
It's a dream?

I'm going to make it real.

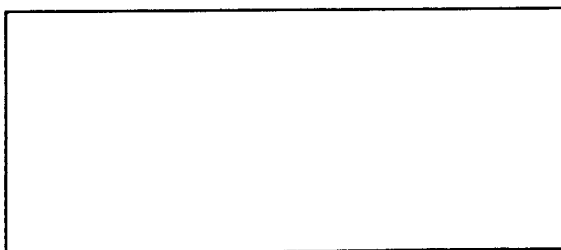
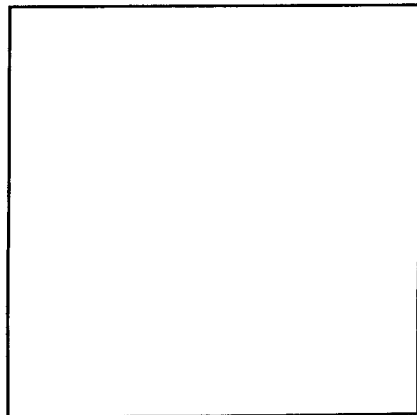
Text from identity cards

First i.d. card

(please note: the layout is not exact, and the photographs, which are on the actual i.d. cards and captured on DVD, are represented here by blank boxes. The aim is simply to show any text that cannot be read on the DVD)



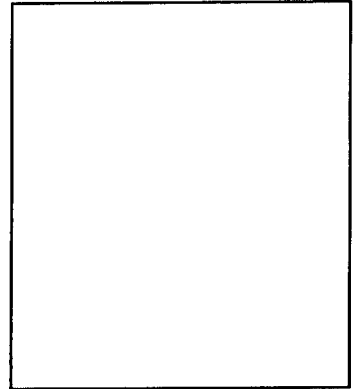
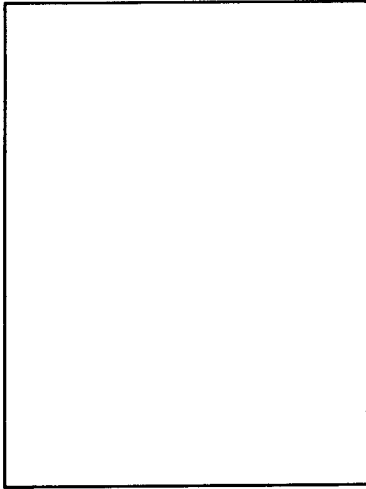
Dancing is important to me



I am a professional
I want to be paid properly
I take my work seriously

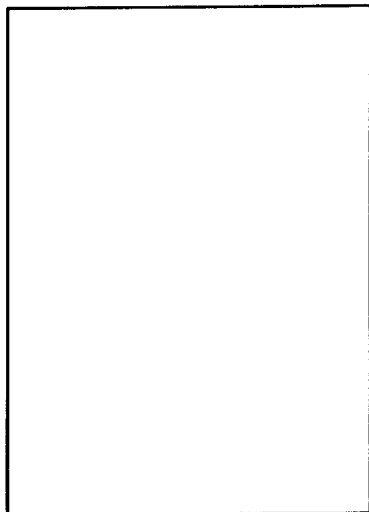
Second i.d. card

Do warm ups



Do performance

Robert The Artist and Teacher



Vocal throwing character
from
physical space

Free up
Body, voice, imagination

Hot	Other	Dance
Clapp-	creative exs.	from
Ing	e.g. T shirt	physical
		space

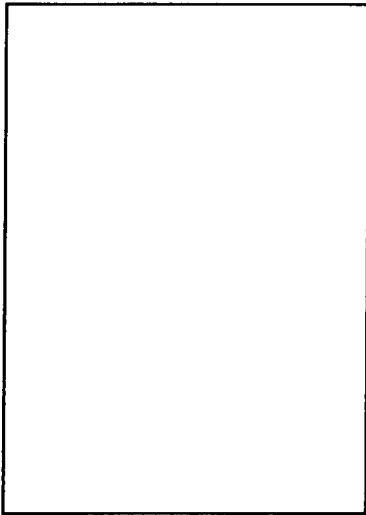
Alexander

Easing tension

Pilates

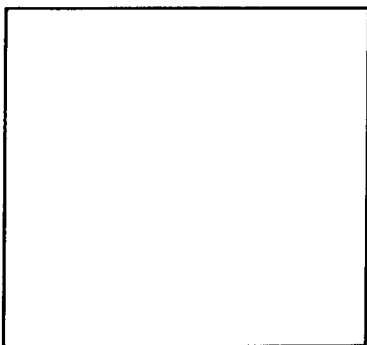
Massage

Third i.d. card



Representing Razor Edge e.g. at meetings	Health and safety e.g. is the space safe?
Responsibilities	
As a team member	Recording our work
As teachers e.g. supporting students	

It's my life



I'm here to help students

Teaching drums	Warm up
Individual Teaching Skills	
Monitoring students e.g. are they focused?	Keyboard

Mike says it's hard. I
know it's hard.
If Razor Edge closes, it's
Finished. I'll lose my
Team. My job will end and
My work pay.

I won't go back. I will go
Forward. I'll fight it.

Be famous

I want to run my own
company

Testing out ideas
Lambeth College
Oval House workshop

Walter Davis:

In the Future...



Once there was a young man
who was at a day centre.
Then he moved on.

Have you heard of the White Paper? People with learning
difficulties got rights. Everyone can do everything. It's our
right.

Learning disability people have got rights to be a
professional – got rights to get a real job – earn real
wages. No one can take our future away.

Learning disabilities got rights to get a proper job and the
human rights as well, all different people. I'm one of the
Razor Edge Team. It's hard, sweaty work and I like
working hard. We got a proper job and we earn money –
wages, proper wages. It's not like if, you know, your
parents give you pocket money. No. You have to earn and

to pay your own way. Loads of jobs I done to do with Mencap and Lewisham College I didn't get paid, but this one is different, now I got money in my pocket.

I take my acting seriously.
No one can take acting away from me.
I don't throw my career away.



I remember what Mike said to me – Ashley not my place. And where we are today – here – it is our place. You said to share your skills with your day centre. But they can't let me share it. We had two ladies who was running the music and drama and were from the Albany, and then they split up with their own way. And then I told the manager can I run a drama and share my skills, but they said no.

Once I was at a day centre. Now I moved on.

I always say to my mother "I'm normal". In the past I was called spastic – what I hate.

I went to a nightclub. It finished late. There were cops outside: they thought there was drugs in the nightclub. I was in the nightclub and my cousin was in the nightclub and she got caught. I didn't want to get in trouble, so I walked home. There were no buses. It was nice and quiet. Everyone was still in bed. I lived up Woolwich Common.



I want to be on TV



When I was living up Woolwich Common, I got mugged seven times. I knew who it was. It was a young boy lived round the back of my flat on the estate. It was him all seven times. He had a marrow in his coat and I thought it was a rifle. I was walking fast. I was going home from Ashley Centre at five o'clock. I got to the lift and he got me on the floor and my neighbour came out and said "Leave him alone!" – and this is the funny bit – he ran off like a rocket. After that my mother, my social worker and me had a little meeting about me, to move near my mother – a flat next door – Woolwich Dockyard Estate. That's how I started to go to the Clockhouse and do more drama.

When my mother passes away, who will I turn to? My next door neighbours treat me kind. They are like a second family. And as well, Mike and yourself, when I have a problem we sometimes talk one to one. Coming to work, we are like a family.



When Razor Edge closes, I still want contact with the Team



Friends

Relationships

Team

Support

**Don't want
to fall out**

Safe

Confident

In the past I used to go by bus, but then I got my arm caught between the bus doors: they closed so quickly. The driver didn't see me. The bus was full. The bus was moving and I lost my balance and fell. After that I used the mini-cab.

My father is up there now and I've only got my mother and my brother left. My mother is getting on and my brother, and they can't keep driving me around.

I tell my mum "You can't look after me for ever."

Travelling by taxi

A nightmare! Poor me! I have to wait for someone else. I like to be on time.

I need to go to the loo if I have to wait too long. I feel stupid standing and waiting. Sometimes I mistake the wrong car. I need to apologise when I get to work and I feel embarrassed a bit. When I get to work - feeling angry - with the driver. The team are worrying about where I am. And I feel worried I'm late.

I'm always rushing. If the taxi is late I need to ring work and my phone isn't charged up, so I have to rush back into the house to ring. When I get to work my body is tight. I need space to calm down, have a fag - or have a cappuccino at the café.

I want to drive my own car. There is pressure from my mother. She worries about me travelling by bus or train, but it would be ok with someone to support me.





It's my life and no one can take it away from me

Update to Walter's Story

In April 2008 I visited Walter in Ramsgate. I asked, "What is important about your story?" He replied, "Need to go forward – to move on".

Walter moved to Ramsgate in September 2007. He informed me that he had several commitments in his week, but he was not employed or earning as an actor. He was attending a part-time, two-year, performing arts course at a Further Education college. He was also studying computer skills. At the drop-in, in Margate, he was involved in the Unicorn (now called Funky Orange) drama group and was also a member of another drama group at Mencap. He had taken ideas from his previous experiences in performing arts, into one of the groups. He was going to one club a week and still practising his karaoke at home.

I understood, from Walter and his mother, that although they had moved together, there were plans for him to get his own flat again. For that, he informed me that he would need training in using the washing machine and Hoover etc. He still very much wanted to learn to drive and said that people were looking into it for him.

Walter told me "Now I'm at the day centre again. My friends are still at day centre. Feel like back to square one. The others do bowling and sports. They ask 'Do you want to join in?' and I say 'no' – (it's) like going back to what I used to do."

My personal impression was of a forty-four year old man, who was on a college course for young people. He had been warned not to go out with a young woman at college. He was active, but was once again a student and a member of leisure-time drama

groups. In Razor Edge he was a professional, a leader, teacher. I was left wondering how he could find a direction that made him feel he was moving forward and was valued for his experience and maturity. Despite this, I noticed that he looked healthier than I had seen look him for a long time. The local sea air must have been agreeing with him!

We Meet Again: October 2009

In October 2009 I met with Walter again, to check that he was happy with his story, the update and my interpretation presented in Chapter Seven. We met at the Albany Empire community arts centre in S.E. London, where he was attending a short course, run by Heart 'n Soul, culminating in an all day/evening performance at the Royal Festival Hall. His mother or brother drove him there a couple of days a week, for the few weeks duration. Of course, he was keen to tell me more about his life and I realised how difficult it is to draw a line under an ongoing life story. It was hard to say “no” and we agreed that I would include a brief update in my thesis. He gave me permission, after I went over my notes with him, to go ahead with a written up version, as long as it remained true to the original notes.

Now aged 46, Walter had already moved into his own flat, where he had friendly neighbours. He informed me that he couldn't afford to learn to drive, but he was now travelling by bus unaccompanied and he seemed very happy with this. He was hoping to graduate to travelling by train. He was still attending the same F.E. college, but on a different, short, acting course. The other students were still younger than him.

“At the moment I have moved on, but I’m still not sharing my drama skills. I did, but they got someone else more experienced” (at the drop-in centre). But after this acting course I can give advice to do with drama stuff – warm ups. The course will help with my c.v. – to be on TV . Still looking for a job”.
(Walter Davis, extract from my field notes 2009)

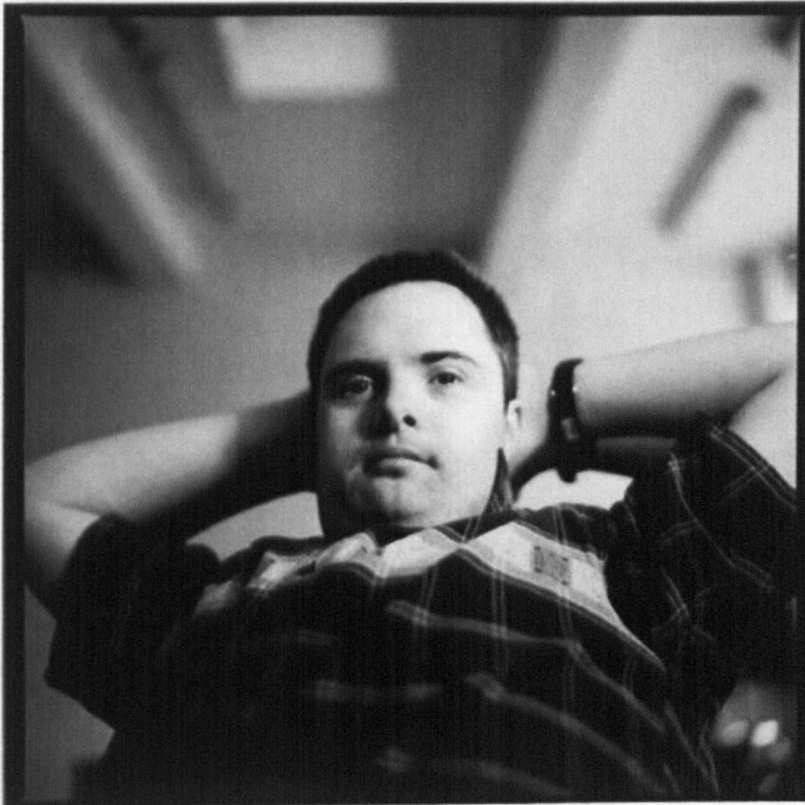
He restated his aspirations to me:

“finish the course, find a job and have a chance for the future, to be on TV.”
(Walter Davis, extract from my field notes 2009)

It was at this point that I asked Walter to give his story a title. He decided on *In the Future...*

Please view the DVD, marked 'David Warren' before reading on.

David Warren



Hello, my name is David. I am a musician. I compose music.

My first guitar lessons were with Dave Jones. He gave me a song to play. Then I was training on a course. I did some work down the recording studios up Shooters Hill. Then I was teaching at Lewisham College with Mike.

Working with Razor Edge

This job is important to me: -

Wages; proper money – not pocket money.

Creative together

Colleagues

Work together

Sharing

Sometimes worked separately

Kind and friendly

Support

In control

Focused

Believed in the course - Higher Education

Going out for an evening meal together

I'm part of a team. I am a professional and I like to be paid properly.

I am a composer

Nick came into Razor Edge to rehearse with our band and go to the Albany and put on a performance there.

I start playing music first and Nick follows me, and then I follow Nick – so me and Nick we take it in turns together. It's about eye contact and listening skills. I work it out with Nick and then go to the band – and that's called arranging music. What Nick says about me, is "Dave's got great talent". I am a great talent. All the music, I'm the one who wrote it. Mike says I'm bloody good!

Working with Nick

I am

A musician

Composer

Supporter

Professional
Creative
Teacher
Leader
In charge
Respected
Serious

I learn, listen, focus, stay with it all the time, improvise, have ideas.

I have listening skills. I do body skills for warm up. Team work.

Working with Nick, it's

Equal
Playing music together
Working together
A joint project
Friendship
Great

We're workmates.
I need him here. I can't do this without him.
Nick is the best.

Leading Warm-ups

Warm up every bone inside your fingers and get your hands working. If you're playing music, playing keyboard, your hands and fingers will get stiff if you don't warm them up. I'm moving like when you're playing keyboard. That is really helping all the bones and blood inside your fingers when you do that.

And I'm working on the computer – the iMac. It's called GarageBand and I'm working on different music to go with my rhythm work. Doing warm up with my hands, rhythm

work, improvising. Music helps me doing it. I can't do it without the music or my hands will get stiff.

Remember

Warm up hands
Do some clapping
Some rhythm
It is important to keep time
Keep focused
Use your imagination
Listening skills
Feedback
Make sure your phone is off
Pack away first, before getting changed

Performing

We did a show at the Royal Festival Hall. It was called 'Sweat'. My parents came along and my brother and my brother's ex-wife. I played lead guitar. We went into a recording studio with me, Mike, Vince and Mark – to record music with Mark rapping "Hit him with this hand". We did stick work on the Kodo Drummers and I was dancing as well. I am so proud of myself, when I got up on that night.

The seminar performances we did, I was working on the 12 bar blues for when all the workshop people were coming in. I took my top off, leave my vest on because it's so warm working on music - because I'm so serious - concentrate, keeping time.

Moving On

They treated me like a kid at Carlton Rd (day centre). I wanted to leave when they left (2 members of staff). I don't go there any more. I want to move on.

I don't want to be called mug, phone pervert or pussy boy.

I am a composer, a musician. I've grown up – me, myself. I worked that music myself, developed my skills.

I left Razor Edge. It closed – funding. Now? I'm still going to the Albany, working on Jazz Band with Nick. I'd like to make more new music – about the colour 'blue'. It came from my head.

Vincent Wolfe

Please view the DVD marked 'Vincent Wolfe'

Chapter Seven

Analysis of the Artists' Stories

I begin this chapter by examining some of the issues relating to interpretation, which have been paramount for me and which have caused me to question the need for analysis. In relation to this, I present some of the issues arising from attempting to present an analysis of performing arts 'on the page'. Coming out of this discussion, I show how I was led to put aside my initial use of a grounded theory approach (Glaser 1992, Glaser and Strauss 1999) to devise a strategy that could include one of the participants, Robert Belcher, in creating an interpretation of his own story. I describe how this involved using drama exercises to ascertain what Robert felt his story was communicating and I explain how this gave rise to a number of headings for framing the analysis.

Following the completion of Robert's story and the analysis of it, I began to examine the other three stories, utilising the framework/headings developed with Robert. In this way, I was able to use the headings to compare, reinforce and develop the findings from Robert's story. I started each process of interpretation by asking the same question that I had put to Robert. I took this approach in order to allow each artist to set the course for an interpretation of his story.

The analysis of each story is presented separately in this chapter and there are two reasons for this. Firstly, Robert and I worked on the interpretation of his story before the other stories were completed. My approach to analysis grew out of my close

collaboration with Robert, focusing specifically on his story. Each of the other stories was completed in succession after that. Secondly, I did not want to dilute the presence of each artist by amalgamating their stories as one set of data to be analysed. Although I had not succeeded in developing each story fully to a performance presentation, I did not want to reinforce the reader's sense of Robert and 'the others'. After all, my intention had been to enable each individual to speak out in his own way, with equal space to be heard.

Working with Robert: Whose analysis?

Goodson and Sikes, writing about life history research, make the following statement:

“Increasing awareness of researcher reflectivity means that more people take the view that interpretations/explanations/analyses are, inevitably, coloured and shaped by a range of influences, not least of which is the background interests, in short, the biography, of the researcher.” (Goodson and Sikes 2001 p35)

If I accept this, which I do, then I must acknowledge that any analysis I make will reflect my own concerns, which I have laid out in the thesis – namely a social model perspective, an understanding of learning disability as having aspects of social construction and a view of education and performing arts that is about participation and transformation.

Goodson and Sikes (2001) acknowledge that life history research is a creative act and not a representation of reality. Therefore it is necessary to spell out whatever influences may have coloured the teller's story – a sensible stance to take. But can the teller's perspective actually become completely obscured by the researcher who uses it for her own agenda?

Looking at the central story in this research project, Robert's story, as it stands, communicates Robert's concerns, places his voice in the foreground. It provides a strong presence - of Robert:

“There was a strong sense of presence, which was very affecting; this was Robert.” (Pan Pantziarka, audience member, Oval House performance 2007)

Simon Hutchens, from whose interview the poem was created, described the impact Robert had as he filled the space with this presence:

“We had been brought together in that small upstairs studio theatre, a space which he had just filled with energy, with his words still echoing off the walls, and it felt as though we had been invited inside his head. I left with a palpable sense of his passion and his vision. And I felt very proud to have been involved, in even a small way, in his journey so far.” (Simon Hutchens, audience member, Oval House performance 2007)

My concern was how to ensure that Robert's presence was not obscured, that he was not reduced to simply the object of my enquiries. With this in mind, I thought perhaps it would be better not to analyse at all, to trust in the power of the story and let it speak for itself. This was, after all, what we had done when we had performed it. It was a creative act, but it was Robert's.

Goodley alerts us to some of the dangers of undertaking analysis - of overlaying stories with researchers' own interpretations, of taking away ownership (Goodley 2000a p61-2), of masking the qualities of a narrative with “the abstract interpretations of the theorist” (Goodley et al 2004, p149) and, in the post-modern age, of reducing the subject to “a mere object of discursive practices” (Goodley et al 2004 p151). In reflecting on his discourse analysis of Gerry's story, Goodley states:

“Indeed Gerry and his peers are no longer characters with agency, choice and ambitions – which people all have no matter how hard life gets – they are simply objects of sophisticated knowledge systems best seen in institutional settings. The post-modern narrator/analyst does away with the characters within the narrative and renders them mere objects and subjects in a discursive tale belonging to the researcher. So much for the emancipatory potential of story telling.” (Goodley in Goodley et al 2004, p151)

Moore (Goodley et al 2004) also expresses concerns. She tells the story of David and the events that led up to the taking of his own life. Moore finds herself analysing the story after David’s death and is aware that it is her interpretation that takes priority:

“It hasn’t been possible to prioritise David’s preoccupations; these have had to be presumed and fused with my own. If he had his own agenda for the telling of his story, it is far from foregrounded now.” (Moore in Goodley et al 2004 p156)

Moore is clear that it was her intention to steer the reader in a specific direction, to “guide the reader’s interpretations” (Goodley et al 2004 p157) i.e. towards a social model reading of the events leading to his death. Whilst Moore takes a loosely grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1999) approach to analysis, she does not follow this through by simply allowing the themes to emerge from the data, certainly not in the manner that Glaser (1992) insists upon - allowing a theory to emerge, supposedly uncontaminated by the researcher. Moore intentionally uses a social model framing to “ground the analysis” (Moore in Goodley et al 2004 p 157). In making this decision, she enables us to understand that there could have been a different outcome for David. If he had been supported to live independently, as he had wanted to, he might not have chosen to take his own life. Consequently, the knowledge gained from Moore’s interpretation of his story may have an impact on the lives of other disabled people in similar circumstances.

I think what Moore is dealing with here is responsibility. It raises issues of what the researcher's responsibility is - whether a researcher's primary responsibility is to the research 'subject/s', to a wider concern or both. In my case, I was concerned that Robert's voice should come through, but I also wanted to make sure that I was not missing things that would serve the needs of artists with learning difficulties more generally. To do this, like Moore, I felt it was necessary for me to ensure that any analysis was framed with the social model, as well as my understanding of the social construction of learning difficulties and the transformative potential of education and theatre.

I decided to explore the possibility of including Robert in a process of analysis. This meant I would need to find some ways of making the above ideas accessible to him and take account of where his views differed from mine. There was no way I could share all the ideas from my reading with him and I did not want to fall into the trap Walmsley (2001) had described:

“My fear is that inclusive researchers are so fearful of saying things which people with learning difficulties cannot follow that they say very little, leaving the field of theorising to others, including disabled scholars, with little or no commitment to inclusion.” (Walmsley, 2001, p202)

I wanted to highlight aspects of the research that might usefully affect the lives of other people with learning difficulties, but I wanted to include Robert in doing this. I decided to find ways of exploring Robert's perspective and (being as transparent as I could about the process) describe how we achieved this. Including Robert in the analysis, albeit in a small way, would fit with my theoretical agenda framed by Freire and Boal and with a capacity model approach, but I needed to find out if it was possible to

include him in more than a token way. In relation to this, I was encouraged by the level of reflective skills he had used in creating his story and evaluating the process.

Despite this, the temptation to leave the story to stand without analysis was still quite strong. Apart from my worry about excluding Robert from the interpretation of his own story, there was another aspect to my deliberations. I was aware that the analysis on paper could never have the power of the live event, with Robert there, presenting his story. I believed the power to change minds was in his live performance. This was partly because of his presence - because it was presented by him, not by me. Like Leighton (2003) I was aware of the potential transference of ownership, as the performance/story was interpreted in my thesis. In analysing Robert's story, it was also necessary to take account of what it would become. Presenting what was a 'live' performance event, via the printed page, does not give the reader the full sense (quite literally) of the story being analysed. This is what I will discuss next.

Interpreting Performing Arts

I feel compelled to stress the limitations of communicating the experience of a live event through the printed page – of representing and interpreting it in this way. Why? Because there is a limit to being able to access fully the knowledge generated at the point of performance.

Goodley and Moore (2002) referred to this when they wrote:

“It is impossible to adequately convey an experience articulated through performance, and evaluated through observation, via the text-based constraints of a book.” (Goodley and Moore 2002 p4)

Robert's performance enabled the audience to experience his story in a sensual way and the emotional impact was strong, as is shown by these audience responses:

"I found it a deeply moving experience which brought up so many conflicting feelings, anger, frustration, awe, compassion, astonishment, delight, joy and grief and a sense of having participated in a piece of real theatre." (June Mitchell, audience member, Oval House 2007)

"I enjoyed the performance. He made me feel happy to see Robert enjoying himself while dancing". (Nick, audience member, Oval House 2007)

"It was a lovely night, and I will remember the performance for years to come as a profoundly moving and beautiful experience." (Nick Doyne-Ditmas, audience member, Oval House 2007)

Welton (2003) as part of the Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP) conference, points out that knowledge accessed at the point of performance is different to knowledge gained through viewing a text:

"...performance allows the accessing of certain kinds of knowledge not privy to conventional academic practices of reading and writing which privilege 'viewed' over 'felt' experience." (Welton 2003 p1)

Welton is referring specifically to the knowledge accessed by the performer, but I believe this can be applied equally to that accessed by the audience. For example, Arader (2001) draws attention to the ability of documentary performance to "delve into the emotions, issues or lessons behind the facts" (Arader 2001, p2).

Cologni (2003) draws attention to the difference between the event and the documentation of it:

“In this context the documentation for research stands for proof for the live event, but it also becomes something else from it and thus never fully documents it; the nature of live Art is in the liveness of both its delivery and fruition.” (Cologni 2003 p1)

Cologni, a visual artist, using ‘video-live-installation’, attempted to address this problem by incorporating the creation of documentation into the performance itself, thus tackling the issues of presentation and representation simultaneously. She states:

“...by performing the piece tracing I will both present and represent my performative self simultaneously, thus opening up questions within a debate regarding issues of presence/representation, the live spectacle and its simultaneous documentation as perceived by you audience.” (Cologni 2003 p2)

For Cologni this means that the need for separate, written documentation falls away and the performance itself stands as a research output. However, if documentation is still required by a university, this does not solve the problem.

The debate about performance practice as research has been going on for some years, with the Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP) project (referred to in Chapter Four) leading the way. From this, I acknowledge that “practitioner-based research is generally focused on processes for theorising practice” (Stewart 2001 p4) and this is not a thesis about discovering and understanding performance practice per se.

However, if a project has been about focusing, for research purposes, on performance practice in relation to the existing knowledge field, theories and processes, then the act of research is embedded in the performance (Stewart 2001 p4).

This research project is about using performance techniques, as a means for artists with learning difficulties to explore and express their ideas and tell their stories. In this sense it is about methodology and methods in relation to existing theory and practice.

Can Robert's performance be said therefore to embody the research process?

Ironically, given the stance taken by academic departments outside performing arts, it seems that any case for this must be made on paper.

In relation to these debates, I once again found myself asking whether analysis of Robert's story was necessary, whether the performance, which embodied the process of Robert's reflection on his life, should stand alone? If a life history can be seen as a reflective interpretive device (Goodson and Sikes 2001), I believe Robert's story can be viewed in a similar way. More than a description of events, it is a reflective interpretive piece arrived at through the use of performing arts techniques and it embodies the process that led to its creation.

Robert's DVD goes some way towards enabling the reader to experience the performance, but it has a different energy and intention. It is a record of the actual movements created, which are performed for the camera, without an audience (some excerpts from a live performance are also included on the DVD). But, there is no dialogue between the performer and audience, no sense of each responding to the other as the performance unfolds. Also missing is the collective experience of being in the audience, which Samson (2005) refers to as a communion between performer and audience. One audience member describes this in her feedback to the Oval House performance:

"I watched the audience and felt one of those rare moments when, as a collective, we were breathing with the dancer, as small children breathe together on the story mat as teacher reads our story, and it was our story, as well as specific to the dancer." (June Mitchell, audience member, Oval House performance 2007)

Even viewing one live performance does not fully capture the breadth and depth of a piece, because each performance is subject to the variations of the live event e.g. environment, mood of the audience and performer, number and make-up of the audience.

If I present an interpretation of Robert's performance, it will be based on knowledge accessed during the 'live' experience, for the performer (Robert), director (myself) and audience. Therefore, it has been important for me to establish that there is a difference between knowledge gained as an audience at the point of performance and knowledge gained through documentation and interpretation on paper. If, as I have posited, there is a limit to being able to make accessible, via text, knowledge gained at the point of Robert's performance, then questions about interpretation on paper remain. It is difficult to grasp exactly what an analysis on paper provides that the experience of the live performance does not. Perhaps, in the absence of viewing the live performance, guided interpretation becomes necessary, to try and 'fill the gap', to explain the performance. Nevertheless, it feels unsatisfactory and I believe that live performance presentations created with artists with learning difficulties as part of an inclusive research project should be able to be presented 'live' as part of the thesis submission, as well as captured on DVD for future reference. In itself, Robert's live performance constitutes a reflective, interpretive piece. However, I acknowledge that for those who did not get to see the live performance, written interpretation is useful, perhaps even essential, to further academic arguments. As the reader can see, I am by no means settled on this issue; I struggle with it constantly.

Where does this leave me, as a PhD student needing to work within the current constraints of academia? Firstly, it means I have placed a recording of the

performance/visual material in the front of the thesis, in the hope that the reader will view it. Secondly I have articulated how experiencing Robert's story through the thesis is different from experiencing it 'live'. Thirdly, I have acknowledged that interpreting a piece of performance through the written medium involves transference of ownership of the story (Leighton 2003). The thesis is my work, not Robert's.

In the final event, I did write up the analysis of Robert's story (as well as Walter's, David's and Vince's). I made a decision to devise a means of including Robert in the process of analysis, as well as using comments from the audience feedback from the Oval House and Mountview performances (feedback was not solicited from the workshop performances or the club performance). The feedback has been used to reinforce or contrast with Robert's and my interpretations and to attempt to give a fuller sense of what was experienced at the live events.

Attempting an inclusive analysis with Robert

Having made the decision to proceed with analysis, the approach taken was arrived at through the desire to include Robert and complete the process we had begun together.

In the early stages of the research, I had thought the material would lend itself to a grounded theory analysis (Glaser 1992, Glaser and Strauss 1999). The advantage of this, as I saw it, was that I would be able to follow an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge that would reflect the concerns of the artists. I had been noting and following up themes from the first moment of working with the team – a common practice in narrative research (Goodson and Sikes 2001). Once Robert's story was completed, I went through it, grouping data together under headings. I could have

continued with the process, using a loosely grounded theory framework to code the data, allowing a core theory to emerge (Glaser 1992) but I was all the time conscious of my own agenda in my reading of the data. Like Goodson and Sikes (2001) and Denzin and Lincoln (2008) I did not believe in the objective voice of the researcher, revealing fixed, hidden truths about people's lives. Robert's story is his perspective on his life – that is the point of it - presented for his family, friends and other artists and any interpretation I make is framed by my theoretical positioning. The research seemed to fit with Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) prediction of the development of messy, multi-voiced research by reflexive researchers, with Moore's "messy" analysis (Goodley et al 2004 p156), and I felt the analysis of Robert's story needed to reflect this.

I decided to put aside my codings and devise a set of questions that I hoped would enable us both to 'have our say'. I could then refer back to my codings in creating the final analysis (I never actually did this, as it seemed unnecessary once Robert's analysis of the story took off), as well as using the audience feedback to see if this differed from the perceptions of those who experienced the live event. In this way I hoped I could 'have my cake and eat it' – that I could present Robert's interpretations, share my agenda with him and include my own interpretations.

Laying the Foundations

It seemed important to discuss my positioning with Robert and so the first stage of including him centred on discussing the social model of disability. To stimulate discussion, I planned some practical work, including a warm up game about 'rights' and a simple role-play about access to a theatre with no lift. The resulting session was a rather flat affair. The role-play did not engage Robert as much as I had hoped and it

was followed by me asking simplistic questions, such as “Do you think disabled people have a right to go to the theatre?” and one-word replies from Robert – “yes” (was he likely to say no?). Robert had difficulty putting himself in the shoes of a person in a wheelchair and asked to have another go at the role-play, during which he chose to play someone with learning difficulties. This time he was visibly more engaged and began speaking up for himself - “Go and ask someone. I want to come in.” “No, I don’t live with my mother, she is dead” and “I am a director of my own company.” He was attempting to counteract the reductive, patronising attitude of the front-of-house person (me).

Following this, my laying out of the social model, on a chart, was basic. I got the feeling some of it was obvious to him – yes, disabled people should have the right to be included, which they clearly often aren’t - and some was either not understood or just plain boring. It was hard to judge whether Robert understood the clear division made between disability and impairment, by the social model. Shakespeare’s (2006) warning that this false separation results in misrepresentation of the everyday experiences of disabled people rang in my ears. Did Robert experience disadvantage as a mixture of the two and was it too difficult to separate each out? Too much talking resulted in a number of yawns.

The most interesting point in the session was early on. An exercise about ‘rights’ sparked off Robert to talk about power and Razor Edge and I charted the points he made - “no funding, no power” “want Vince and David back with us again – a team” “the government to help us again”. It was clear that he understood the relationship of financial resources to power and the government’s potential role in recognising the aspirations of performing artists with learning difficulties. He also recognised the

power of opportunity - to learn and express oneself through dance. This can be seen in the following response:

Irene: Working with Razor Edge, what power did it give you?

Robert: Power of movement – skills. In the dance, power of my voice and body – really angry.

It indicated to me that Robert clearly had things to say relating to the social model and exclusion, but he was not necessarily aware of the connection to an abstract model. Actually, I felt he had already communicated these things through the poem and dance. The lines “People with learning difficulties can do it, give people a chance” can be seen as a plea not to exclude people on the basis of impairment. The session felt tokenistic and I wanted to get down to discussing his story, what it meant to him and what he thought it meant to others. It seemed to me that this was the best way to include him in a meaningful way.

Eckard and Myers (2009), writing about the Improbable Theatre Company, made up of disabled performers in the US, remind us that disabled artists can be concerned with the immediate experiences of doing their job, using their energies to get through each day living and working with impairment and disability, and not necessarily forming an awareness of the wider political and academic discourses. This does not mean they do not have understandings of being disabled by society. Eckard and Myers (2009) suggest that the theatre company “provides access to a stage from which their authentic voices and stories can be heard – challenging themselves and society about what accessibility and disability really mean” (Eckard and Myers 2009 p59). I found this paper after having completed the analysis with Robert, but it confirmed for me that I took the right decision to move on and see what he felt his story was telling us.

Asking the Right Questions

I planned a number of questions that I felt would be accessible for Robert. My aim was to identify what he felt was important about his story, rather than to tackle ‘meaning’ in an abstract fashion. This time I decided not to approach it practically, as we would be discussing his practice i.e. his story and I hoped this would be enough to engage him to ‘have his say’ in words.

The questions I presented were:

- What is your story about?
- What were the most important/powerful moments in your story?
- And specifically, in the dance, poem, timeline, identity cards?
- What do you think we (audience) can learn about you, from your story?

Follow-up questions:

- What else can we learn about from your story?
- Do you think it is important for people to see your story? If so, which people?
Why? Who would you like to see it?

The questions were designed as ‘jumping off’ points, as I did not want to preclude the direction in which Rob might lead us. In my mind I was thinking about getting to the heart of what the story was about for Robert and how it could help us understand

aspiring artists with learning difficulties, issues of identity and their relationship to the production of art and knowledge.

We discussed the above questions in one, two-hour session and Robert was immediately engaged in the process of reflecting on his story. He was clear about the most important moments in the story for him and his responses moved my own thinking on. He initiated a discussion about the implications of having Down's Syndrome, which developed my own interpretation of his story and my understanding of what 'transformation' meant for him in relation to this label. He reinforced my perceptions of him as an advocate for other artists with learning difficulties and made me realise that his story issues a challenge to the education and arts communities to accommodate these artists.

As a consequence, I chose to use Robert's responses as the framework for presenting the final analysis. This gave me a number of headings:

- "About my life": Not a Case History
- Identity: Transcending a Label
- "Power of the Dance": Emotions, Embodiment and Expression
- History: "all the work I've done"
- Claiming a future: "I will go forward" - "people with learning difficulties can do it"

I have included a section entitled 'Further Reflections', in which I raise additional issues.

I have used audience feedback, elicited through a questionnaire, enabling me to begin to theorise what an audience takes away from this performance (Alexander 2008) and thereby further inform the analysis of what the story communicates. In addition I have referred to Irons's (2006) report on developing the dance, as well as my own field notes.

An analysis of Robert's story

“About my life”: Not a Case History

Robert's view is that his story is “About my life”. Reflecting on this simple statement, led me to consider this as a claim of ownership of both his life and his story and a challenge to reductive notions of what constitutes the identity of a person with learning difficulties. Through the story Robert claims the identity of artist (dancer) and educator, using performing arts to reflect, examine and explore his own life.

An examination of how a story is told, how it is put together, can communicate something of how the teller constructs his identity (Smith and Sparkes 2008). Robert tells his story, using performing arts, constructing his identity as an artist, presenting aspects of himself that he chooses to communicate to the audience and doing so in his own way.

Gillman et al (1997) have described how people with learning difficulties can become objectified as ‘cases’ and ‘problems’, their histories, their stories, owned and locked away in filing cabinets by professionals and agencies, for use as diagnostic ‘tools’.

This objectification can be seen as a “denial of humanity itself” (Gillman et al 1997, p690) a view which can be found in Dr. Down’s theory of lesser beings or ‘idiots’ with low IQs (Borthwick 1996). Education institutions can take a reductive approach to assessing the learning potential of students with learning difficulties, given that current methods of learning and expectations remain low (Curtis 2007). This was born out in Razor Edge’s experience, when one university proposed to consult an educational psychologist, for evidence that individuals with the ‘condition’ of learning difficulties had the mental capacity to learn to the required level.

These views have not gone unchallenged. Some researchers have deplored the dehumanisation of people with learning difficulties and questioned the assumptions of ‘lesser intelligence’, ‘challenging behaviour’ and ‘social incompetence’ that are assigned to this client group as fixed aspects of their ‘condition’ (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Borthwick 1996, Goodley 2000a, 2001).

I believe Robert’s story can be seen to go further in challenging these views. It not only asserts his humanity, presenting him as a rounded human being, with a past present and future, who is on a developmental journey, a person with many qualities and different aspects to his identity: It not only makes clear that he is a person with agency, who will make his own choices about his future, who is an articulate and expressive human being, but it also demonstrates that he can communicate to, and educate, others through his art.

Tuhiwai Smith (1999), in her writings about Maori research, draws attention to the need for people to write their own accounts, to “give testimony and restore a spirit”. She proposes a form of research where Maori participants can make their own choices

about what is important to address and how their identity is defined. For Maori people, taking control of research enables them to challenge the objectification and dehumanisation that western, scientific traditions of research have perpetuated (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). For Robert, telling his own story, in his own way, enables him to present his interpretation of his identity and challenge reductive notions that can accompany the label of learning difficulties.

The very act of presenting his story himself is significant, in that it means he is in control of it. It is not 'owned' by another professional, not kept filed away in a cabinet. Neither is it owned by a researcher, kept in a book that he cannot access. It is a living and ongoing story, owned by the teller and it cannot be divorced from the telling. The power of the story is in the passion of the performer telling his own story. He can present it to whomever he likes, through a medium that is accessible to him. Despite the involvement of other performers, I believe it can still be classed as a piece of art presented by the artist himself about his own life, advocating for himself and others – proof of the ability of an artist with learning difficulties to contribute to knowledge and understanding, through an artistic medium.

Boal (1995) describes an incident early in his career, which transformed his work. In Peru, in 1973, he was carrying out what he called 'simultaneous dramaturgy', where a (usually political) problem was presented through theatre, but the drama was halted at a crucial moment of decision, for the audience to suggest actions to enable the protagonist to resolve the problem. During one particular performance a woman became more and more furious as the actors attempted to portray her idea. Finally, Boal requested that she come on stage and demonstrate the idea herself. This she did and the result was to transform Boal's work, giving birth to the Theatre of the

Oppressed. He describes how real her version was, as compared to the actor's – "personal, unique and non-transferrable" (Boal 1995 p7). He states:

"On stage the actor is an interpreter who, in the act of translating, plays false. It is impossible not to play false" (Boal 1995 p7)

It seems to me that it is also impossible for the researcher not to play false, in presenting someone else's story. When the story is presented by the research participant, there is a 'reality' which can be said to be "personal, unique and non-transferrable". This is the power of Robert's story. Yes – a story is still an interpretive piece, as it comes out of reflections about the past, but it is the reflections of the person who experienced that past.

When Branfield (1999) called for the disability movement to be controlled by people with a lived experience of disability, I think she would have felt that Robert's story was making, a small, but valuable contribution to this, through controlling the telling of his own story in his own way.

For me, this is the most important aspect of Robert's story – ownership and control - and it has implications for future research. It does not do away with the need for collaboration with a non-disabled researcher, but it means it is possible to honestly use the term 'collaborator', each person bringing his/her own essential skills and expertise to the research project. True collaboration results in new learning on both sides (Freire 1976), as has this research project.

However, Leighton (2009), Hargrave (2009) and Calvert (2009) draw attention to the problems posed by collaboration in performing arts – questions of ownership, of

potential dominance by the non-disabled collaborator, of the tendency to want to normalise the performance of the performer with learning difficulties. Calvert (2009) is concerned that portrayals of characters with learning difficulties, although now often played by learning disabled actors, still present fixed characters - unchanged by the world around them. He asks:

“How can we move towards forms and aesthetics that allow for fluid, changing or even contradictory identities?” (Calvert 2009 p77)

I believe Robert’s story does just this. A performer with learning difficulties presents his own story, in his own way and emphasises his ability to change in response to events in the social world and to challenge the world to change to include him. In doing so, he shows us that his identity is not fixed and immutable, but fluid.

Identity: transcending a label

Robert’s story denies the static, incapacity identity that can be attached to the label of learning difficulties (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Goodley 2000, Hatton 2009) by successfully foregrounding other aspects of his identity. Like Corrigan (2009), a visual artist with learning difficulties, Robert presents himself as an artist. In doing so he alerts us to the rich ingredients that make up his artistic identity. Hatton (2009) reminds us that:

“In a dramatic context, a participant can challenge the authority of medical diagnosis because they are engaging with, and critiquing a much wider range of social roles, statuses and identities.” (Hatton 2009 p92)

Robert, although not taking on dramatic fictional roles, is engaging with a range of social roles, statuses and identities in presenting his story. Through his story he presents himself as an artist and educator (dancer and teacher), which is validated by audience responses to the performance. He succeeds in “disrupting incapable assumptions” (Hatton 2009 p93) that might be harboured by audience members. He shows us that he can be a learner, brother, son, friend, that he possesses many different qualities - determination, motivation, passion, vulnerability: we see that, just like us, he can be afraid, angry, happy, proud, skilful, powerful etc. The dance, poem, identity cards and timeline combine to take us on a journey of discovery – of the Robert behind the label. As a whole, it is a powerful experience, which moves the audience and leaves them with no doubt of who he is, as this comment indicates:

“There was a strong sense of presence, which was very affecting; this was Robert. As a statement it was clear and concise and provoked a very emotional response.” (Panik Pantziarka, audience member, Oval House performance 2007)

It is an intimate experience:

“...and it felt as though we had been invited inside his head.” (Simon Hutchens, Oval House performance 2007)

Robert demonstrates his skill in using his art to develop an effective and affecting choreography, a potent communication tool. He shows us that he is a man who can use his art to move others:

“It was a lovely night, and I will remember the performance for years to come as a profoundly moving and beautiful experience.” (Nick Doyne-Ditmas, Oval House performance 2007)

“I thoroughly enjoyed it and it moved me in a way I had not expected.” (Priya Bhamrah, Mountview performance 2008)

“I found it a deeply moving experience which brought up so many conflicting feelings, anger, frustration, awe, compassion, astonishment, delight, joy and grief and a sense of having participated in a piece of real theatre.” (June Mitchell, Oval House performance 2007)

His qualities as an artist, evident in the presentation, command respect:

“Robert has such fluidity which, combined with his intense concentration, was captivating to watch.... His performance showed us where he is now, an accomplished dancer with all the skills and confidence necessary to stand alone on stage.” (Simon Hutchens, Oval House performance 2007)

The energy and emotional commitment with which he performs the dance reinforces his statement in the poem, about his passion and his sense of power as a dancer:

“I have a feeling inside – a passion
It’s been there from the beginning , but it has grown
A powerful feeling, a feeling of power
In my mind
In my arms
In my legs
Everywhere
A passion
I’m on the path, going forward” (extract from Robert’s poem)

The passionate performance of the dance shows Robert overcoming the identity of ‘victim’ and presenting us with a man who has the strength to continue on his journey. The power of the anger and frustration, expressed by the thrusting fist and the shout, which seems to come from deep down inside the very heart of him, is both shocking and upsetting to witness. For Robert, interpreting his own story, this is the most important moment of the whole piece:

“my arm – power – shouting with the fear – anger”

“getting it out of my system”

In interpreting his dance, he connected his anger to the fear he has felt. Although the inspiration for the choreography of this part of the dance came from the attack that Robert experienced while travelling to work, he was clear that his anger was about many things and provided me with a list:

- Attack
- House (support worker)
- Friend died
- Losing Razor Edge
- Losing Walter, Vince, David, Mike and Irene – work friends, in a team - lost my team – and Jennifer
- Board member, staff rep (losing his position as staff rep on the Razor Edge board)
- Money (loss of wages)
- My brother
- Work is better for me
- Working with David – didn’t understand me

The suggestion seems to be that the moment of letting the anger out connects to many aspects of Robert’s life and is a moment of release, of transformation (I will look at this later in my discussion about embodiment). Perhaps this could be viewed as a moment of social action, presented in performance, that represents the broader power relations (Alexander 2008) in Robert’s life and his position as a person with the label

of learning difficulties in society. Jennifer Irons comments on his ability to use his life experiences in his choreography:

“Despite the difficult process of bringing up and re-visiting a painful experience, he wanted to use that to enhance his own work as an artist and that is a rare quality found in great performers.” (Irons 2006 p 6)

Robert’s identity as a ‘dancer’ is also confirmed by the photos and statements on the identity cards – pictures of a small pile of warm-up clothes, dance mats, Robert warming up, notes about releasing physical tension, the statement “dancing is important to me”. He convinces us, through his story, that dancing is not simply a leisure activity for him, but a serious career move “I take my work seriously” “I am a professional”. His timeline is testimony to the fact that he has been employed to carry out dance-related activities.

Along with his commitment to being a performer, Robert shows us that he is a person who is motivated to teach and support others. He has knowledge and experience as a teacher:

“Teaching is –
looking after people, taking care of people,
help people, train them to be a teacher
Teaching is not easy” (extract from Robert’s poem)

and

“Rhythm
shapes
health and safety
getting people working in groups
thinking about their ideas” (extract from Robert’s poem)

Robert has experience of being a learner too. Through the timeline we see that he takes up opportunities to develop his knowledge and skills and puts them into practice through work. He does not remain passive in this respect, but uses his learning to further his career. He also tells us about his qualities. We discover his sheer will to keep going and achieve the things he wants:

“I will go forward,
I’m serious about my future.” (extract from Robert’s poem)

This is not just a fantasy – he is prepared to put in the work, rise to the challenge:

“Now I’ve got more energy
Now I can work longer and harder
No matter what anyone says, I’m staying on the path” (extract from Robert’s poem)

He is aware of the struggle to continue down his path, as we see from his identity card:

“Mike says it’s hard.
I know it’s hard.
If Razor Edge closes, it’s
Finished. I’ll lose my team. My job will end and
my work pay.
I won’t go back. I will go
Forward. I’ll fight it.” (extract from Robert’s identity cards)

We learn about Robert in relation to other people – he likens himself to his brothers, he expresses the warmth he feels for Jennifer Irons, he acknowledges the sadness he feels when the Razor Edge team no longer exists:

“When Razor Edge closed down
I put my head down, I was sad
I missed my friends
In my dreams they walked away” (extract from Robert’s poem)

The various aspects of Robert that are expressed in the story show many sides of a fluid identity. He can change from student to teacher to performer to researcher; he is living proof of the claim made by Branfield in relation to the identity behind the label 'disabled':

“Our identities are an amalgamation of many interweaving, overlapping and sometimes conflicting subject positions. They are not static, nor are they fixed. As such, our identities as disabled people are fluid and, irrespective of our impairments, can be transient.”(Branfield 1999, p401)

Robert's story convinces us in many ways that he is a man who has transcended the label of learning difficulties and who is asserting himself as a talented artist and teacher, a multi-faceted human being on a journey, of which he is the driving force. He has transformed himself through his performing arts work. As Boal said “You don't have to be a poet to write a poem, but when you write a poem you become a poet” (lecture delivered at Cochrane Theatre, London 2004). Robert has become an artist through getting on and doing it and in the process he has changed. It was Robert, in the analysis session, who alerted me to just how central this transformation is to his story.

Robert is aware of the impairment aspects considered to be related to Down's Syndrome: He often talks of the difficulties of getting his mind to work, of the mobility in his joints. He also considers himself to be a person with learning difficulties. He is aware of the implications of living with all this and his poem shows that he has a certain affinity with other disabled people:

“It's been harder for me
(than for people who don't have Down's
Syndrome, Learning disabilities, other disabilities)

being a teacher” (extract from Robert’s poem)

In interpreting his story, he pointed to the importance of this statement and what it felt like for him “different to other people - harder”, but he also drew attention to how he has overcome this through his work:

“I was Down’s Syndrome long ago: now I’m changed. Body – normal – growing up. Working in the team – helped me a lot.”

He referred to his previous feelings of fear and the need to hide, to not look at people. “Hands over face” - he demonstrated hiding behind his hands, explaining “Fear, hiding, no eye contact. Eye contact now – speak more”.

This brings us once again to the initial focus of Robert’s story – the potential to change, to develop, in relation to skills and confidence and to mature as a person:

“No more hiding behind the curtain!
I don’t do that now – I’m changed” (extract from Robert’s poem)

And:

“Now I’ve got more energy
Now I can work longer and harder” (extract from Robert’s poem)

The then Principal of Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts confirms in his feedback, how Robert’s story communicates this ability to change and mature:

“Robert said it all really, through his dance and his poem. Working with you, Mike and the others has released his creativity, allowed him to discover previously-unexplored resources within himself and develop his self-confidence as a man and as an artist.” (Paul Clements, audience member, Oval House performance 2007)

The expression of change is present in the dance. Jennifer Irons refers to this in her report:

“...after the change within himself occurred, he made very direct and strong eye contact with the audience, where originally in the movement he had turned his back to them.” (Irons 2006 p4)

“...and at the very end, turns the palm upwards to the audience to show that he now has something in turn to offer us.” (Irons 2006 p4)

Here is a person who seems to be saying ‘judge me by who I am, not by who I was; judge me by what I can do, not by what I couldn’t do before; I am a man with passion, power and energy’ – key words for Robert in interpreting his own story. In presenting himself through his story, Robert is enabling us to look beyond the reductive label of learning difficulties and understand the complexity of his identity and aspirations as an artist and human being. Through presenting himself in this way, he reminds us that people with learning difficulties should be perceived as people with the potential to change and develop, as all people have the capacity to learn and transform themselves (Freire 1976).

“Power of the Dance”: Emotions, Embodiment and Expression

Combined together, the poem and dance provide an intimacy, a sense of really getting to know Robert, which one audience member described as feeling like we were getting inside his head. Another described how the dance allowed her to get underneath the external reality of his world and his aspirations, to another level of understanding:

“...we are allowed to see below the surface of the external reality and what a rich, textured world this was, full of moments of lyricism, but also of struggle and vulnerability...” (June Mitchell, Oval House performance 2007)

Aldridge (2007) found that the taking of photographs by respondents, in the research she was involved in, provided a similar useful method for gaining insight into the inner world of vulnerable groups and what is meaningful to them. I suggest that it is this opportunity to 'get inside' Robert and find what 'makes him tick' that makes the performed story so potent and valid as a piece of research and that it is particularly the dance that offers a key entry point to this inner world, providing Robert with a means of expression that enables us to access his innermost feelings.

For Robert, the dance is the most important part of his story and the strongest moment is "my arm – power - shouting with the fear – anger". For the audience it is an intimate experience and very affecting to witness the anger being expressed with his whole being. Performance privileges felt experience (Welton 2003). What is produced is based on what the performer feels inside and senses through his body. As Robert is able to embody his feelings, to express them with his whole body, using his dance technique, he is able to foreground his emotional responses and consequently tap into the audience's own emotional responses:

"As a statement it was clear and concise and provoked a very emotional response." (Pan Pantziarka, Oval House performance 2007)

If stories enable us to develop social understanding through experiencing empathy and emotional engagement (Goodley 1996) then Robert's story goes even further, because it allows us to experience him reliving his feelings 'in the flesh'. Samson (2005) confirms the power, for an audience, of experiencing someone presenting their own experiences in a performance context (Samson 2005, p76), while Blumenfeld-Jones (2009) claims that dance transcends standard ways of communicating (Blumenfeld-

Jones 2005, p63). Time and again the audience feedback confirms the potency of the dance and its affective power. It is compared to the poem:

“It expressed the same feeling of commitment and aspiration as the dance, though in a calmer and more measured way ... but it didn’t provoke the same immediate reaction as the dance”. (Pan Pantziarka, Oval House performance 2007)

Shusterman (2006) proposes that the body is the means by which we experience the world and act upon the world. As such it is a prime source of agency. The separation of the mind from the body is a false separation (Shusterman 2006 p2). Robert demonstrates this to us in his dance, responding to events and acting upon them through his movement. There is no false mind/body separation in his dance.

Robert is able to create a rich experience for the audience, engaging both their emotions and their intellects and conjuring up images, to further develop the meaning of what they see:

“Images of brick walls, the glass ceiling came to me and a sense of determination literally being wrung out of the dancing figure, in pure Laban terms.” (June Mitchell, Oval House performance 2007)

He uses repetition of movements to embody his determination, as one audience member observed:

“... the repetition communicated a sort of ‘never giving up’ attitude to his art.” (Elena Hargreaves, Mountview performance 2008)

What does he show us in the dance? Initially we see a person who is a victim – who can be attacked, pushed around, is afraid, frustrated, closed in and unable to look the

world in the eye. His movements are closed, his eye contact is non-existent, he has his back to us, he is thrown to the ground. When he explores the anger through his body, when it is embodied, he has to let it out. The result, as I have said, is both shocking and upsetting to witness, as he thrusts his fist forward and the sound that comes out seems to emanate from somewhere deep within himself. After he has let out the anger, he can move on. He goes on to celebrate his own existence, using his body to spell out his name, with movements that are open and bold and full of joy. He shows that he now has something to give, to contribute, with the hand and the eye contact at the end of the dance.

Robert is, I believe, doing more than (re)presenting a moment of his life that symbolises his other experiences of powerlessness. It is as if he is reliving the experience every time he performs it, through responding emotionally each time – what Zarrilli (2007) refers to as an enactive approach to performing. Each time he performs, he revisits the pain and anger he felt during the original attack. It becomes a rehearsal for life (Boal 1979, 1995) as he overcomes his anger and fear on stage in front of the audience and moves himself into a position of power and strength.

Robert indicated to me his understanding of the relationship of the dancer and his feelings, to the production of dance in the body:

“Think in the mind, down into your body – a powerful feeling – and feel the body move.” (Robert Belcher’s personal statement, prepared with my support, to accompany his c.v.)

This approach fits with Blumenfeld-Jones’s (2009) perspective on how movement is created in dance. In his view, writing about dance as a manifestation of bodily-

kinaesthetic intelligence (Gardner 1993), the creation of movement for dance comes from inner attention paid to motion. It should not be seen as deriving from external imitation of experts (here he takes issue with Gardner's view of a natural intelligence that can be evidenced through looking at geniuses in the field), but something that, arising from everyday carrying out of movements, can be developed by all individuals. His analysis provides an accessible view of dance, with a continuum for learning and developing skills, based in our everyday experience of carrying out movements and our awareness of what this feels like from the inside. This view of dance is inclusive of artists like Robert, who are developing their ability to communicate through the art form.

Lussier-Ley and Durand-Bush (2010) highlight the importance in dance of an awareness of the experience from the inside – of the desired feel, coming from physiologically experienced emotions. Lussier-Ley and Durand-Bush studied the role of 'feel' in creativity in a dance context, with dance students in Canada. They suggest that a feel-based pedagogy of creativity in dance could bridge the gap between the science of movement, the study of style and technique and the art of dance. Students involved in their research expressed the desire to live the moment truly embodied when they danced. They made comments about wishing to "feel myself at the moment", to be 'present'. One dancer made the observation that she only knew how her dancing felt from the inside, not how it looked from the outside (Lussier-Ley and Durand-Bush 2010 p208).

The development of a feel-based pedagogy of creativity suggests the need to have an awareness of how one wants to feel when dancing, of the obstacles to achieving this and how to overcome them. Robert is aware of the power that dancing makes him feel:

I have a feeling inside – a passion
It's been there from the beginning, but it has grown
A powerful feeling, a feeling of power
in my mind
in my arms
in my legs -
everywhere
A Passion

What makes Robert's dance so effective is his ability to tap into his innermost feelings, in the strength of feeling he is able to embody and communicate to his audience. This ability, to feel his power from the inside and embody it in his dance, is at the root of his presentation of himself as an individual who has inner strength, agency and the ability as an artist to use his skill of feeling. Lussier-Ley and Durand-Bush explain the notion of feeling as a skill:

“From a pedagogical perspective, ‘to feel’ is a skill emerging from awareness and consciousness that can be learned, developed and enhanced.” (Lussier-Ley and Durand-Bush 2010 p203, following Callary and Durand Bush 2008)

Robert's brother comments on the effectiveness of this communication tool for Robert:

“It felt like Robert was really trying to speak out through his dance and let us know what he was feeling inside, in a way that he struggles to do so, or chooses not to, by talking.” (Mark Belcher, Robert's brother, Oval House performance 2007)

In addition, having a forum for working through his anger “getting it out of my system” has enabled him to move on – to feel more confident, more relaxed, more giving. He explains “Eye contact now, speak more.” In this way, the very act of exploring his experiences through dance for the research has provided a therapeutic opportunity – a chance to deal with the ‘demons’ and to express his anger and

frustrations to us. In doing so, he shows that he will not remain a passive victim. We are left in no doubt of the inner strength he now feels as he takes up his stance, towards the end of the dance, drawing back his bow to aim at his target. The body has become for Robert, what Alexander (2008) calls a site of performative resistance (Alexander 2008 p94). Karafistan (2004) observes a similar phenomenon in members of the Shyster's theatre company:

“As we have seen, the Shysters are not afraid to draw on their past, and in fact embrace the opportunity to do so. The process of creating and performing has a huge cathartic effect on them; in turn this is fed back into their own lives, making them (amongst other things) more confident and outgoing individuals.” (Karafistan 2004 p277)

Through his dance, Robert demonstrates for us that performance can be a mode of inquiry and a path to understanding (Denzin 2003, p19) and transformation (Boal 1979). Osterlind (2008) refers to Boal's forum theatre and its ability to enable participants to break with habitus (the social structures embedded in our minds, inscribed in our bodies) and this is perhaps what Robert's dance has enabled in him. I would go so far as to say that using dance to explore and express his ideas has contributed to Robert's development of critical consciousness (Freire 1976). In examining his own experiences and reflecting on his own position in relation to others, he has come through, not simply with a cathartic response, but also with a renewed sense of determination to continue on his journey and overcome whatever obstacles might be in his path. He has done this partly through physical and emotional exploration of and responses to his life. He has rehearsed a resistance to oppression, which has begun to permeate his real life, his sense of who he is and what he can do.

Boal (1995) acknowledges the dichotomising effect of the aesthetic space on the actor. He calls it the doubling of the 'I', and in the context of Boal's development of a theatric-therapy (which uses the approach of the Theatre of the Oppressed), the performer is both 'I' now and 'I' before, as he recalls and acts on past events. He is aware of himself speaking, acting, and aware of himself in the past event he is re-enacting. And the experience on stage is aesthetic - that is it involves the use of the senses:

“This doubling, certainly possible in other spaces, is here, on stage, inevitable, intense, aesthetic.” (Boal 1995 p28)

In this way the individual acting out his past is able to relive, reflect and rehearse change to his approach to his life.

The power of dance for communication and transformation has been acknowledged in other settings (Edell 2007). In 2007, two companies of teenagers from impoverished backgrounds in Colombia and Brazil presented dances as part of a Dance for Tolerance project. Edell interviews them, as well as other dance professionals involved in the project. One dancer describes how “Dance is like life – permanent movement and transformation.” (Tatiana, quoted in Edell 2007 p1). The director of the project refers to the “urgency fire and passion being expressed through movement” and, for young audiences, the “images burned into their minds that will last longer than words ever could.” (Bowers quoted in Edell 2007 p3). This is what I believe Robert senses when he refers to “power of the dance”, when he speaks of thinking down into the body, “a powerful feeling”.

Robert has demonstrated that he can make an effective contribution to research, exploring and encapsulating his experiences through the power of dance, in relation to being an artist with Down's Syndrome. His achievement suggests that the potential is there for other performers with learning difficulties to tell their stories through performance media, to relive their responses to oppression and create spaces of resistance (Denzin 2003).

History: “all the work I’ve done”

Irene: What’s your timeline about?

Robert: All the work I’ve done.

Irene: your history?

Robert: That’s right.

This short exchange drew my attention to the length of Robert’s journey in performing arts, the variety of his experience, the lack of opportunity and, consequently, the enormous amount of determination that must be required for him to stay “on the path, going forward”. It also caused me to reflect on the level of agency he exerts. Robert is making his own history – he is not a pawn in the game – and with the telling of his story he has claimed ownership of this history. He has also ‘made his mark’. He offers us a reflective account that can take its rightful place amongst the emerging history of people with learning difficulties that is owned and presented by them:

“A history of people with learning difficulties is now emerging as articulated and understood by the people themselves.” (Atkinson 2004 p700)

In offering his interpretation of his personal experiences, Robert is providing us with valuable knowledge and understanding about his life as an artist with learning difficulties. Without such knowledge we cannot adequately construct theories about

the interaction of individuals with the social world (Goodley 1996) and specifically, in this case, of people with learning difficulties' interaction with the worlds of art and education.

Robert's journey started more than twenty years ago. One audience member observed:

“Looking at the Time-line display, it made me think what a long journey Rob, Vince and the others have been on. It was a massive investment.” (Bryan Newton, Oval House performance 2007)

What does this long journey tell us? It is clear that there has been progression. He has graduated from student, to employee, to teacher; we see that his relationships with people in his life have changed, that he has become a colleague instead of a student, a teacher instead of a pupil, a performer commanding respect from his audience, instead of spectator. However, despite this history, Robert is still searching for opportunities to train. His documentation of events shows that training has become an ongoing part of his professional career – learning and practice are interspersed or go hand in hand.

Robert was not able to start his career by training on a valued course at a recognised drama school, which would have earned him the right to call himself a professional. We see that, more than twenty years on, he is still seeking training opportunities to justify his claim. His pathway is different, not by choice, but by force of circumstances i.e. the lack of education and training opportunities for performers with learning difficulties, as outlined in Chapter Three. His story alerts us to the level of determination, commitment and motivation required by someone with learning difficulties who wants to become an artist - to the inner resources needed to get through and succeed.

In one session, during which Robert and I were examining the poem, we began to focus on the phrase “I’m on the path, going forward!” I asked Robert to locate himself on an imaginary path stretching from one end of the hall to the other, with the beginning of his journey at one end and his goals at the other. He placed himself less than half way down his path - he was forty at the time. How will he continue to move down the path to his goals? What will be the next chapter in his history? The story raises the question of what next on this unfinished journey, of what the future will be for artists like Robert and whom he should be presenting his story to:

“The performance begged the question of what next? Where does this person go from here? And where does this performance go next?” (Pan Pantziarka, audience member, Oval House performance 2007)

The journey continues, but where to and how?

Claiming a future: “I will go forward” - “people with learning disabilities can do it”

Some of the key words for Robert, in interpreting his story, were “serious” “dreams” “future”. In reflecting on this, I am clear that his story is telling us he is ready to step into the future and that he will continue to work to achieve his aspirations, with renewed energy and commitment. The story draws attention to how he has changed, has transcended the label of learning difficulties and transformed himself emotionally, intellectually and artistically. It shows that he is now prepared for the challenges to come. At the end of the poem, he tells us:

“Now I’ve got more energy
Now I can work longer and harder

No matter what anyone says, I'm staying on the path
No one's stopped me yet
I'll follow my dreams
My future is coming!" (extract from Robert's poem)

His dance also leaves us in no doubt of his transformation. It shows us bold, open body images of Robert greeting the world, looking straight at us, his outstretched arm and open palm signifying that he has something to offer. With the image of the drawing back of the bow, he indicates he is poised, ready to release his presence on the world; it is an image that conjures up notions of strength, focus, intention and skill, of someone who has a determined eye on his target.

In emphasising his capabilities and his ability to change, to progress and claim a future for himself, his story can be understood as an example of self-advocacy (Goodley 2000, Chappell, Goodley and Lawthom 2001, Goodley and Armstrong 2001) presented through performance. It demands that we look at who Robert thinks he is, what he believes he can do and it convinces us that he has the qualities and skills to go forward and claim a future as an artist. In this way, it contributes to a body of knowledge for reviewing our perceptions of learning disability:

“... *(their) experience and expertise... constitute a body of knowledge that can be fruitfully drawn upon in reviewing notions of ‘learning difficulties’.”
(Goodley 2001 p 210)
*my insert

In this way, Robert appears as an advocate for other people with learning difficulties and speaks to their potential to change, to transform themselves through learning. He causes us to re-evaluate what they might do, if given the chance:

“People with learning disabilities can do it,

give people a chance
There are new ways of learning” (extract from Robert’s poem).

This is not about adaptation or normalisation (Oliver 1994, Chappel 1997) He is issuing a challenge, suggesting that society needs to change to accommodate the aspirations of an artist with learning difficulties such as himself and he relates this specifically to education.

In interpreting his story, Robert reinforced the statement in the poem, drawing attention to the need to adapt learning models to the requirements of these learners.

“Other ways of learning. Learning disabilities can learn to be a teacher.”

I asked if his story told us anything about how we should treat people with learning difficulties and received the immediate reply “That’s it – properly.” And for him this meant:

“Trust them and support them. We are here to help them – other ways of learning. I can teach them properly.”

He seems to be putting himself forward as a spokesperson, as someone who can take a leadership role in enabling change to come about, challenging reductive notions of the label ‘learning difficulties’. He has aspirations and in this way he deflects our attention from considering him as just another disabled person with ‘needs’ and requiring care (Finkelstein 1998 p29)

What is the future he envisages? His aspirations go to the very heart of key aspects of life – work, relationships and children. In the timeline, Robert outlines these:

“ The Future?

Teach students
Get married
Be a dad
Have my own company” (extract from Robert’s timeline)

In the poem he states:

“I want to be a choreographer”

And:

“If I run my own company
there are different places I want to go –“

In one research session, he showed me physical images of his future, which he brought alive:

“I find myself tingling with a lady’s touch - a nice feeling, my body is alive.”

The lady, who would also be involved in dance, would become Mrs. Belcher. He spoke of the “warm feeling” of being a dad as he showed me a physical image of how he would throw his young son up in the air, in his imagined future.

In these outlines of his aspirations, we see Robert’s desire to journey towards a time when he will have the same opportunities as others – to have a career, relationship, children. June Mitchell, audience member, spots Robert’s claims to these:

“The hat and the briefcase had such rich connotations as images. These are symbols of journey, travelling, working, ‘normal’ clothing therefore ‘normal’ lives, business, work and therefore value in society...” (June Mitchell, Oval House performance 2007)

One might question if these images are about normalisation. For my part, I consider he has a right to claim a life that includes the opportunities to take up ‘valued roles’. Call this what you will. But, his story also goes further, challenging society to include artists with learning difficulties on their own terms. Robert’s performance can be seen to deconstruct images of normal/abnormal and received notions of what art is and who can produce it.

Robert sees himself as “on the path, going forward”. I find myself asking whether he will continue to transform himself through his artistic journey and continue to advocate for himself to be judged first and foremost not by the label of ‘learning difficulties’, but on his merit as an individual person and artist. Will he continue to write his own future, belying reductive notions of learning disability, presenting a vision of people who can change and learn, challenge and educate? Maybe this is the true sum of his aspirations for himself and other people with learning difficulties.

It leads me to wonder whether the rest of the world will rise to the challenge and whether the academics and policy makers will be persuaded to “rinse their imaginations” (Razor Edge DVD 2006) and develop and fund learning models that can truly include students with learning difficulties and accommodate the aspirations of artists such as Robert. With this in mind, I asked Robert who should see his story and he gave me this list:

- Professionals in H.E, colleges, special needs, and (those working) with young people
- Famous dancers and actors

- Tour to different places like Southampton
- Funders – to give more money
- Tim Webb’s company (Irene: employers? Robert: that’s the one)
- Families – our families – to be proud of our lives
- Carers

Perhaps he had already begun to outline the next step.

Further Reflections

The Role of Support

Robert goes from strength to strength. He has made a huge contribution to this research project, both artistically and intellectually and has had a significant influence on the direction the research has taken. Later in this chapter I have asserted that, as well as using performing arts, he has done this through a process of creative collaboration with myself and that this way of working provides a context of mutual support and complementarity, as outlined by John-Steiner (2000) and as developed in the Razor Edge team. I believe that support has played an important role in enabling Robert to succeed and I wanted to know his perspective on this.

Robert is clear that the Razor Edge team offered support in his working life “My team support me”. Beyond these collaborative contexts, his story implies that receiving support has been an ongoing part of his development as an artist. We can see the people who have been key to his artistic progression – Jennifer Irons, Fabio Culora, Mike Ormerod etc. Their pictures appear in the timeline or they are referred to in the

text. In addition, like many people with learning difficulties that I have known, Robert is allocated a support worker to help him manage various aspects of his life e.g. travel, finances, scheduling. He also cites his parents as key supporters in his life, despite not having lived with them for over 10 years. In my experience, they have always been behind Robert in his quest to gain independence and achieve his artistic goals.

Robert acknowledges that support has been a key aspect to his achievements as an artist and that the nature of these relationships has been all-important. I asked him what 'support' meant to him. He drew attention to the need for three key ingredients – trust, honesty and respect:

“Lesley is my support worker – trust each other – not tell lies”

As can be seen from this comment and the following, for Robert, in a good relationship, these qualities exist on both sides:

“Simon trusts me a lot now. He is a nice man. I trust him – to listen to him a lot - respect”

In addition, Robert alerted me to the need to feel safe with the person who is supporting. He compared two contrasting relationships – with Jennifer Irons and another person he had worked with:

“Jennifer is fantastic – trust her, listen to her. She helped me a lot – trust, support – yeah! Nice lady!”

Irene: What was it about what she did that made you feel supported?

Robert: Safe.

Irene: You felt safe with her?

Robert: That's it.

Contrast this with:

“Steve* didn’t give me a chance. Scared of him. Steve not the right person to support me. I want him to respect me. Steve didn’t trust me.”

*I have changed the name for reasons of confidentiality.

Clearly Robert did not feel respected in the relationship with Steve. Whether this was due to personality or artistic differences I do not know. However, it is clear that in many other working relationships respect has been mutual. Jennifer Irons comments on working with Robert:

“For myself, I have gained a great deal from this experience in my own practice and as an artist. In the sharing of our ideas, I have found on more than one occasion that Rob’s perception has informed my own and for this I thank him. As well as for his honesty and in our work together his commitment to the integrity of the work and for the sheer pleasure of working with him.” (Irons 2006, p8)

Robert also drew attention to the negative effects that a breakdown in a supposedly supportive relationship can have. He described how trust broke down between himself and another member of the Razor Edge team. Consequently, he did not feel supported by this individual. He stated that it was “very upsetting for me” “I was in tears.” and “I felt pressure” (it is my perception that the experience had a similar effect on the other person).

Robert’s comments confirm the need for mutual respect if the support role is to be a positive experience for the person being supported. Goodley (2000) in relation to support in self-advocacy, writes of the danger of non-disabled supporters dominating, talking over or not listening to the people they are supporting. Supporting someone is

clearly about a human relationship and Robert's assessment points to his awareness of the essential ingredients for making it work in performing arts and beyond.

Williams et al (2009), analysing the communication skills of personal assistants working with people with learning difficulties, seem to support much of Robert's perspective. They found that essential ingredients to good support were showing respect and not talking to individuals as if they were children, listening to what the individual wants, sometimes giving advice and helping them to be in control of their choices, whilst not rushing them. A friendly relationship and teamwork were considered to be important. However, Williams et al found that good support cannot be exactly prescribed by a 'cookbook' of guidelines to fit everyone; it has to be sensitive to the individual.

Robert is likely to always need support to pursue his goals in life, but this does not mean he takes a passive role. In my experience he will often ask for what he needs in order to achieve what he wants. This ability to take an active role has perhaps been one of the keys to him successfully moving forwards. I would say that one consequence of him understanding the meaning of support is that he recognises his own potential role as a supporter:

Irene: How should we treat other people with learning difficulties?

Robert: that's it – properly. Make sure working in a team, trust them and support them. We are here to help them...I can teach them properly.

And from the poem:

“Teaching is looking after people, taking care of people
help people, train them to be a teacher” (extract from Robert's poem)

We can see that Robert has another aspect to his identity – someone who is supported, but is also a supporter of others. This information combined with the outstretched hand at the end of the dance, speaks to me of a generosity in Robert, a sense that he is not going to keep all the goodies for himself. It shows a certain confidence too. His statements are pretty convincing that he knows what he is talking about and really can do it. It also gives him status in that he is not just a passive receiver, but an active giver, who has the skills to guide others on their journey – and we all feel good when we can do that.

Finally, Robert has supported me, through his unswerving commitment to this project. His enthusiasm, reliability, trust and constant giving have enabled me to get through some difficult times in the research process. His presence as a partner and fellow artist have provided a ‘leaning post’, a chance to share the weight and make this project work – and for this I thank him. Later in this chapter, I look at the role of creative collaboration (John-Steiner 2000) in offering artists with learning difficulties support to achieve their artistic aims.

Next, I present an interpretation of Walter’s story (followed by David and Vince’s), linking it to some of the themes in Robert’s story.

Interpreting Walter’s Story

Irene: What is important about your story?

Walter: Need to go forward – to move on.

I have used this response from Walter as the starting point for interpreting his story - i.e. what does Walter tell us, in his story, about moving on? I have referred to the

headings from Robert's analysis, to examine to what extent Robert's concerns are borne out in Walter's story. In other words, as artists with learning difficulties, are they presenting the same concerns?

It is clear to me that the notion of moving on recurs throughout Robert's story – his sense of being changed through overcoming adversity, of a renewed energy to continue moving forward down his chosen path to achieve his aspirations. These themes are echoed in Walter's story and can be directly related to four of the headings used to interpret Robert's story:

- History: "all the work I've done"
- "About my life": Not a Case History
- Identity: Transcending a label
- Claiming a future: "I will go forward" - "people with learning difficulties can do it"

History: "all the work I've done"

I begin with the above heading about history because, like Robert, the desire to 'move on' is partly characterised by what Walter wishes to move on from. Like Robert, Walter paints a picture of his past struggles – not being paid for his work, being refused the opportunity to use his skills at his day centre, being called names ("In the past I was called spastic - what I hate"), being attacked, striving to achieve his aspirations and what he sees as his right "to get a real job – earn real wages". There are similar themes here reinforcing the picture painted, by Robert's story, of an artist with

learning difficulties striving to overcome adversity and achieve recognition. He expresses the same kind of determination to stay on the path, going forward.

Walter's history as an artist is also one of striving for personal independence.

Describing the incident of waiting for the taxi to arrive, Walter expresses his frustration with having to depend on others in order to get to work. He speaks to us of his feelings – “feeling angry – with the driver...and I feel worried I'm late.” “I feel embarrassed...” He tells his mother “You can't look after me for ever”. He is clearly aware of his dependence on her and that her ageing and eventual mortality will make this situation unsustainable.

In expressing the desire to move on - from being called names, from not being allowed to practise his skills at his day centre, from a continual dependency on others who may not always be around to do things for him, Walter, like Robert, expresses a kind of resistance that Goodley (Goodley 2000a, Goodley et al 2004) observes in the life stories of people with learning difficulties. It is an unwillingness to be pigeonholed as someone who cannot achieve, to be diminished by other people's attitudes, to be objectified (Ryan and Thomas 1987, Goodley 2000). On the contrary, he wishes to be seen as someone with agency, who has a vision of his own identity and future. In this respect his story echoes Robert's. Walter agrees with this interpretation and has added the comment, “I'm not invisible”. It took me some time to realise that he was actually emphasising the desire to be seen, not ignored.

Like Robert, Walter uses his story to show how he wishes to be seen. He explains how he has moved forward in his life - “Once I was at a day centre. Now I moved on.” -

and outlines the things he wishes to achieve in the future. Like Robert, he is attempting to transform himself, to place himself on the artistic ‘map’.

“About my life”: Not a Case History

As with Robert’s, Walter’s story challenges the objectification and dehumanisation of people with learning difficulties and their presentation as ‘case histories’ (Borthwick 1996, Gillman et al 1997). Like Robert’s story, Walter’s can also be seen as being “about my life”, not a case history. It presents the person behind the label, who has similar everyday concerns to the rest of us, who has his own opinions and aspirations. As Walter says “I’m not invisible”. He wishes to be seen as he really is. Walter does not focus our attention on his incapacities, but rather on his perception of the external obstacles (past and present) to achieving his aims in life. Along with Robert’s story, Walter’s can be seen as part of a history of people with learning difficulties being told by the people themselves (Atkinson 2004), the stories of “survivors of an oppressive system” rather than of victims of it (Atkinson and Walmsley 1999 p212).

The statement “It’s my life and no one can take it away from me” is a powerful assertion that no one owns him or his life.

However, whilst Walter is the subject of his own story, told with his own words and photos, which add to the sense of his presence, the story is presented by me in my thesis. It is not as accessible or utilisable as Robert’s story is for him, presented by him as a live performance/on DVD. Although Walter can give a copy of his story to whomever he wishes, he cannot use it to advocate for himself as a performer, through the actual medium of performing arts. Whilst Robert’s story can live partly through his body in performance, Walter’s must live through the printed page only. Although

Walter's story presents him as an artist, Robert's performance embodies the identity of artist. The statement his performance makes to an audience is direct and unavoidable. We cannot choose to ignore the artistic aspect of Robert's identity; he has the power, while he is on stage, to hold us in thrall. Walter does not have this direct access to his audience in telling his story.

Identity: Transcending a Label

Although Walter's story is not embodied and presented by Walter directly, his story, like Robert's, does present the man behind the label 'learning difficulties' and conveys his own perception, of who he is i.e. a 'normal' human being:

“I always say to my mother “I'm normal”.” (Walter's story)

When I showed his story to my fourteen-year old son and simply asked, “What are your impressions? What do you get from it?” he commented “He's just like the rest of us – you know, worried about a job, money, friends, like everyone else.”

Walter's story clearly does focus on 'normal', everyday concerns i.e. having a job, earning money, getting about, having a social life, relationships with family, with friends. This emphasis on 'normality' was also noted by June Mitchell, audience member, in relation to Robert's story – as represented by the hat and briefcase in his dance. The desire not to be seen as different, as 'spastic' and the need to achieve 'normal' things is a strong theme in Walter's story. It demonstrates a resistance to objectification and dehumanisation and to 'othering'.

Although Walter self-identifies as a ‘learning disabilities’ person, he communicates a sense of wanting to leave behind any reductive perceptions or clinical assessments (Goodley 2000a, Beart 2005) accompanying this label. The need to assert his right to have a job and earn money implies that he perceives others do not immediately recognise this as being part of his identity. I get a sense, from both Walter and Robert’s stories, that they have to work twice as hard to achieve what most of us take for granted because of external obstacles and attitudes.

The picture he paints of himself is of a man with strong opinions, who is motivated and active, a man who sees himself as having responsibility “...earn and pay your own way”, who takes acting seriously and is a hard worker, who wants a career in performing arts, who has moved on from attending a day centre and is employed - an ‘earner’. He is a man, like Robert, who is striving for independence, and control of his life. He has strong beliefs regarding ‘rights’ – his own and those of other people with learning difficulties. Alongside the text, the photographs show a man with presence, a man who comes across as warm and cheerful, positive, focused, and also reflective.

Walter’s story reinforces the theme in Robert’s story, of people with learning difficulties having both the desire and potential to change and develop, as all people have the capacity to learn and transform themselves (Freire 1976). The sense of frustration and determination that accompanies the struggle to do this is evident.

Claiming a future: “I will go forward” - “people with learning difficulties can do it”

“Have you heard of the White Paper? People with learning difficulties got rights... to be a professional – got rights to get a real job – earn real wages. No one can take our future away.” (Walter’s story)

Like Robert, Walter aligns himself with other people with learning difficulties. He believes in his right to his own future as he envisages it and he sees this in the context of the rights of people with learning difficulties generally. Like Robert, he becomes an advocate for himself and others (Goodley 2000a, Chappell, Goodley and Lawthom 2001). He does this not only through speaking about rights, but in communicating his own achievements, which can be interpreted as representative of the potential achievements of other people with learning difficulties.

Walter outlines his own aspirations as a performer – “I want to be on TV” and in his life generally - to be independent, to drive his own car, pay his own way. He seems to be on the way to achieving some of these things, but the story shows that the future of his employment is in question – “When Razor Edge closes...”

The update to the story shows that Walter is now unemployed, back in an F.E. college alongside much younger students and attending day centre service. When I spoke to him in 2008, he clearly felt that this, at least in part, was representative of a backwards move - “Feel like back to square one.” “...like going back to what I used to do”, whereas what was important for him was to be able to move on. It almost seems like a game of monopoly, where there is always the chance of being sent back to ‘Go’ without collecting the £200.

In 2009, Walter comments, “I have moved on, but...” For me, Walter reinforces the impression given by Robert’s story, that a huge amount of determination is required by an artist with learning difficulties to stay “...on the path, going forward” (Robert Belcher’s poem).

In looking at Walter’s desire to move on, I find myself asking what it is that stops him. Several issues related to this are evident in the story. Firstly, there is the question of the opportunity to practise his skills. In the past, this was not facilitated at his day centre. It is not clear whether this was due to timetabling, lack of recognition of his skills, lack of respect or other. Lack of trust in the skills of people with learning difficulties to carry out even simple everyday tasks, such as making a cup of tea, was noted by Goodley (2000a), even though the individuals concerned were already doing these things in other contexts. Whatever it was in Walter’s case, there is the suggestion from the story and the update that day centres do not facilitate Walter to move on. In his story, Walter agrees with Mike that his day centre, Ashley, is “not my place”. Razor Edge, however, is regarded as his ‘place’.

Razor Edge provided employment that used Walter’s skills and demanded “hard, sweaty work” but, as has been outlined in previous chapters and as is anticipated in the story, it closed from the lack of funding needed to achieve its aims. Other companies, as explained in Chapter Three, have not been able to offer paid employment to artists with learning difficulties in the same way. As was also explained, employment in performing arts is often short-term, requiring the artist to relinquish state benefits temporarily and creating a fear about losing benefits longer-term. Obstacles to gaining

employment are evident. In addition to these issues, Walter needs to rely on his mother and brother for transport to get to work.

In 2008, Walter's mother was still not happy for him to travel on public transport, due to his additional physical impairment, although his view was that he could do it with support. At this point, he had not yet succeeded in getting support to learn to drive. By 2009 there was some progress and he was travelling alone by bus, but had decided he could not afford to learn to drive. From Walter's perspective, the point is that the obstacles to moving on are clearly external to him, rather than connected to some innate lack of ability.

Like Robert, it is clear that Walter needs support to be able to move forward as a performing artist. John-Steiner (2000) claims that achievement is not precluded by the lack of an independent, individualistic approach in life – that working as part of a group, or in partnership, where support is offered, enables individuals to achieve what they may not be able to do alone. I return to this theme later.

Walter needs support with practical issues, such as travel and doing his housework, but also to find employment and more appropriate training or professional development opportunities. However, even with support, Walter cannot 'move on' if the opportunities do not exist - i.e. if, as I suggest in Chapter Three, lack of funding, low expectations and aesthetic perceptions do not allow for this. If this situation prevails, it is evident that individuals like Walter and Robert will always struggle to stay on the path, going forward.

In 2009, Walter's aspirations were to "finish the course, find a job and have a chance for the future, to be on TV". For the purposes of this thesis his story ends here but, like Robert's, it is clearly ongoing. Meanwhile, I shall continue to 'watch this space'.

Other Reflections

"Power of the Dance": Emotions, Embodiment and Expression

Although physicalisation through drama played a part in the process of creating Walter's story, it is the verbal reflections coming out of that work that are presented in this thesis. Consequently, his story does not offer the all-encompassing experience that Robert's live performance provided, as he re-lived his physical, intellectual and emotional responses on stage (Zarrilli 2007). This was seen to have a powerful impact on his audience, as well as effecting a change in Robert.

In Walter's story, we are one-removed, similar to the way in which one audience member felt about Robert's poem:

"It expressed the same feeling of commitment and aspiration as the dance, though in a calmer and more measured way ... but it didn't provoke the same immediate reaction as the dance". (Pan Pantziarka, audience member, Oval House performance 2007)

Whilst Walter's story expresses many of the same concerns as Roberts, his story does not have the same immediacy as Robert's 'live' performance because his feelings are not embodied and relived for us by Walter each time we read his story. They are confined to being represented and described by words on the page. For me, this means it does not have the same power to communicate and convince as Robert's story. It

provides a contrast however that highlights the effectiveness of an artist with learning difficulties performing his own story.

I was nervous about reading the above to Walter. What would he feel about this, given he had not had the chance to develop his story into a performance? Would he feel I was criticising him? Would he understand what I was getting at? Walter was actually not offended by my comments and agreed that it would have been better for him to act out his story himself, rather than have it presented by me, in my thesis.

Conclusions in Interpreting Walter's Story

In reviewing and interpreting Walter's story, it is clear that he is presenting many of the same concerns as Robert. In both individuals, we see that there is a strong motivation to move forward, to achieve their aims as artists and to advocate for themselves in relation to this. In order to achieve their aspirations, they need to overcome adversity, to keep "on the path, going forward". They both describe incidents of abuse at the hands of other people, which they must move on from. They impress on us their ability to learn, to achieve with support and to transform themselves. The need for support to do these things is evident, but the need for opportunity is paramount. Together, Walter's and Robert's stories advocate for artists with learning difficulties to be given a chance, "to get a real job – earn real wages" (Walter's story), to be recognised for their abilities and their potential to change and develop.

Next, I move on to an interpretation of David's story, continuing to develop the themes arising in Walter and Robert's stories.

Interpreting David's Story

Irene: What's your story about?
Dave: The story of my dreams
The story about my world
About something new

David kicks off my interpretation of his story, with his own perspective. He interprets it as a story that tells us about his life – his world, but also about his dreams, of something new. The above statement by David seems to echo Robert's words:

"I'll follow my dreams
My future is coming!" (Robert Belcher's poem)

Could David be reinforcing the message communicated by Robert and Walter? Can his story also be interpreted as being about a desire to move on, about change and transformation through the performing arts? Once again I use the headings evolved from Robert's interpretation - to compare David's story with Robert's and Walter's.

In addition, David's story implies another key aspect to his work. He describes a working relationship with the bass player, Nick Doyne-Ditmas, which can be equated with John-Steiner's (2000) view of creative collaboration. I have alluded to creative collaboration at times during my thesis. As this theme arises so clearly in David's story, I feel it warrants a more in-depth discussion of what it is that collaboration can offer individuals like Robert and David in their quest to achieve their aspirations as artists. In exploring this issue further, I also suggest that this approach was part of the ethos of Razor Edge and formed a basis for the research relationships in this research project. Therefore, I have added a heading in interpreting David's story – 'Creative

Collaboration'. But, first of all, I discuss the theme of identity and the label of 'learning difficulties', because this is where David's story begins.

Identity: Transcending a Label

David claims the identity of artist in his opening statements on his identity card:

"I am a composer"

And in the written piece presented in the main body of the thesis:

"I am a musician. I compose music."

Together, the music recordings, the photographs and text portray a focused, confident, serious musician, who also appears to be taken seriously by colleagues. Like Robert, he uses the comments of fellow artists to reflect on and reinforce his view of his identity:

"What Nick says about me, is Dave's got great talent*. I am a great talent. All the music, I'm the one who wrote it. Mike says I'm bloody good!"

(*Nick made this comment at a Razor Edge seminar/performance, which was filmed for the DVD *Edge of Inclusion*)

Like Robert, David's performance work (the music recordings on his DVD) and the photographs are evidence that David doesn't just talk about being an artist, he lives it. He uses his story to advocate for himself as a man with ideas, with creative skills and an understanding of creative processes:

"I start playing music first and Nick follows me, and then I follow Nick – so me and Nick we take it in turns together. It's about eye contact and listening

skills. I work it out with Nick and then go to the band – and that’s called arranging music.”

He wants to be recognised - to be seen as a professional artist and to be paid properly:

“I’m part of a team. I am a professional and I like to be paid properly.”

He comes across as proud and confident. The photograph at the beginning of the written piece also shows a side of David that makes me warm to him as a colleague and fellow human being – a man who is open, relaxed and focused.

In *Razor Edge*, David sees himself as part of a team and as a partner in his collaboration with Nick. In the context of performing arts, he is an equal, valued for his creative skills and contributions. He is someone who can achieve, develop and learn:

“I learn, listen, focus...”

“I worked that music myself, developed my skills.”

Like Walter, he also makes it clear how he does not want to be perceived and in so doing, resists negative interpretations of his identity:

“I don’t want to be called ‘mug’, ‘phone pervert’ or ‘pussy boy’” (names that he tells me he has been called by others)

If, as Somers claims, “...our self identity is a story we tell ourselves about who we are” (Somers 2006 p346), then reductionist notions of the label ‘learning difficulties’ have no place in David’s story of himself. Instead, he is attempting to live out a story where he is a valued, respected, skilled and serious musician. It is “the story of my

dreams”, which, like Robert and Walter, he is striving to make real and we get the same sense of motivation and determination that comes across in their stories.

David’s story does not allow us to pigeonhole him into being someone who ‘can’t do’ or reduce him to a ‘case’ history (Gillman et al 1997). His identity is that of a musician; music is his story.

“About my Life”: Not a Case History

“The story of my dreams
The story about my world”

David’s story opens up his world to us. In it he leaves behind the label of ‘learning difficulties’. He is not concerned with it. Instead he communicates his beliefs, his commitments, his perspective on relationships with his colleagues. It is not the view of parents, clinical professionals or any other person connected with his life. Like Robert and Walter he foregrounds his concerns and presents his story of himself.

The music recording and the photographs enable David to go beyond words in communicating his story. However, like Walter, David’s audience consists mainly of readers of my thesis. Unlike Robert, he has not had the opportunity to present his story in person, directly to his audience.

History: “All the Work I’ve Done”

There is no doubt that David, like Robert and Walter, has a history as an artist. He refers to guitar lessons, training on a course, developing his skills, taking part in

recording sessions, teaching and past performances. There have been moments of pride in his achievements:

“I am so proud of myself, when I got up on that night.”

Placed alongside Robert’s and Walter’s story it reinforces the picture of artists with learning difficulties, advocating for themselves, forging their own paths in a system that does not provide the opportunities they seek and making a clear contribution to a developing history of people with learning difficulties as told by themselves (Atkinson 2004).

Claiming a future: “I will go forward” - “people with learning disabilities can do it”

Like Walter, David gives us some idea of what he wants to move on from, to leave behind:

“They treated me like a kid at Carlton Rd (day centre). I wanted to leave when they left (2 members of staff). I don’t go there any more. I want to move on.”

He seems to be reinforcing Walter’s view of the arts as ‘my place’, as opposed to day centre. Within the context of his artistic life he is afforded respect and recognition, as we see from his lists about working with the Razor Edge Team and Nick. He draws attention to “working together”, being “paid properly”, being “Equal” and “being respected”. The story gives the impression that this is the kind of world that David wishes to continue to be involved in, in the future. He seeks the opportunity to continue to compose music:

“I’d like to make more new music – about the colour ‘blue’.”

He demands to be recognised as someone who has grown up, who can change, develop and move forward as an artist:

“I am a composer, a musician. I’ve grown up – me, myself. I worked that music myself, developed my skills.”

It is clear from his story that David, like Walter and Robert, sees Razor Edge and the world of performing arts as offering an environment in which he feels equal, respected and able to grow as both a human being and an artist. His aspirations, like theirs, are to continue to be involved in such a world.

I believe Razor Edge offered a working environment that encouraged the respect and recognition these artists seek and it provided the support to enable them to ‘move on’. In his story David describes the working relationship with Nick, which was developed in this context. Therefore, I would now like to look more closely at the type of working practices that Razor Edge encouraged. I believe the partnership with Nick that David describes, developed within the team environment in Razor Edge, was akin to the creative collaborative partnerships that John-Steiner (2000) writes about. David’s story is alerting us to an approach that offers the support that artists with learning difficulties require, while demanding a level of commitment and responsibility that encourages the development of professional skills. This collaborative ethos has enabled the four artists involved in this research project to construct their artistic identities in a supportive context. In addition it has provided the base on which to build collaborative relationships in an inclusive research project.

Creative Collaboration

It is my assertion that the team-style approach to working in Razor Edge resulted in forms of creative collaboration that offered the artists with learning difficulties a context of mutual support and complementarity in which to develop skills and expertise and take responsibility and leadership. It is this experience that laid the foundations for the collaborative relationship built not only by David and Nick Doyne-Ditmas in their music work, but also by Robert and myself in the context of this research.

For disabled performers, being part of an ensemble can provide a safe environment, which supports individuals to take risks:

“Alicia takes the risks working with ITC promises, because she knows when she makes a mistake she has a safe environment in which she can recover.”
(Eckard and Myers 2009 p66)

The centrality of collaboration as a way of working can be seen from day one of the research. One of the first statements made by the artists in relation to what they wanted people to know about them and their work was “We are a team”. I cannot remember whether the ‘Razor Edge Team’ was originally so-named because Mike and I had the desire to work in a collaborative way, or whether it came from the artists’ references to our approach to working together. Either way, it was clearly a central concept that ran through our practice and our relationships to the work and each other:

“He then drew attention to the Razor Edge T shirt he was wearing and pointed out that it had been his idea to get them done ‘People know where we are from. And that we are part of a team’.” (Walter Davis, from field notes)

During the period of the research I tried to form a picture of what the term ‘team’ meant to the artists that were part of it. In this section I examine the nature of ‘team’ in their view and in relation to the theory of creative collaboration (John-Steiner 2000). I look at how this approach is compatible with a capacity model view and can support people with learning difficulties to develop skills and understanding and take responsibility and leadership.

What is a creative-collaborative partnership built on?

1. The Razor Edge Team

From my field notes and from certain exercises focused on exploring notions of ‘team’ it was possible to identify how the concept was defined by those involved. The data collected includes some contributions from myself and my co-director Mike Ormerod and I have indicated where this is the case.

Firstly, my field notes suggest that it was largely regarded as a positive experience to be part of the Razor Edge Team. For example:

“Irene: ‘How do you feel being part of Razor Edge?’

Walter: ‘Great! We like working hard and making friends and relationships.’
(extract from field notes)

I used a combination of physical and verbal activities to specifically explore and discuss the experience of ‘team’ with the four artists. In Chapter Four I cited a particular discussion, which was inspired by the use of body ‘sculptures’ to respond to

the question “What is important to you, about working in the team?” We created a list, which I will repeat here:

- Respect
- Support
- Dynamics
- Skills
- Contributing to the team (Mike)
- Focus
- Listening – (Irene)
- Eye contact
- Sometimes two people don’t get on

In a later session, David Warren commented on the difficulties of working through conflict, when two people “don’t get on” - “I’m not a switch. You can’t turn me on and off like a switch”.

The list can perhaps be viewed as a combination of desirable attributes e.g. skills required to be a team member, as well as difficulties that can arise. The list was expanded over a number of weeks, during which we were developing ideas for the Razor Edge DVD, *Edge of Inclusion*. Issues arising in practical sessions were discussed and the following words were added to our wall chart:

- Trust
- Dynamics

- Falling out
- Empathy (Irene)
- Give and take
- Preparing for work – mind and body
- Thank-you!
- Feelings

“Respect”, “support”, “skills”, “focus”, “listening” – these were all listed in David’s story in relation to his work with the Razor Edge Team and Nick. They were also acknowledged by myself and Robert as being descriptive of our research relationship. In relation to this, I carried out a creative exercise with Robert to review the Razor Edge ‘team’ list, applying it to our research relationship. We each selected, from slips of paper with the ‘team’ words on, those that we thought relevant to us. At the end of the exercise we both had the same words, leaving out only two – ‘falling out’ and ‘sometimes two people don’t get on’. Robert also made some additions to the list, which drew attention to the familiarity, the social dimension to our relationship and our connected history:

“You are a friend – and work-friends.”

“You know my parents. You’ve known my parents a long time.”

It is not my intention to examine in detail how the different concepts of ‘team’ were manifested or experienced by its members, but to show that Robert, Walter, David, Vince and I were immersed in a culture of collaboration, which we took into the research process and which David and Nick took into their music relationship. I simply wish to illustrate that these kinds of collaborations can offer artists with learning

difficulties the support they require to transcend the label of 'learning difficulties' and achieve their artistic aspirations.

John-Steiner (2000) writes about collaboration and the creation of 'thought communities', where individuals work together, offering mutual support in the development of new creative ideas and resulting in the development of a particular culture. She looks at collaboration across the arts and sciences, age and gender, amongst pairs and groups and attempts to define some of the recurring themes and patterns. Her theory supports my assertions that a collaborative approach has much to offer artists with learning difficulties in constructing an artistic identity and I believe it also provides a positive base for building inclusive research relationships.

2. John-Steiner's Theory of Creative Collaboration

John-Steiner theorises collaboration by building on two important aspects of the theories of Vygotsky, namely that thought develops first through interdependence and is later internalised (Vygotsky 1978) and that there exists a 'zone of proximal development' for individuals in learning contexts (Vygotsky 1978, 2000). Vygotsky defines the zone of proximal development as follows:

“ It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” (Vygotsky 1978 p86)

In the research process, my facilitation skills and academic knowledge could be seen to place me in the role Vygotsky defines as the “more knowledgeable other” (Dahms et al 2007), a person who, in collaboration with the learner, and through their more

advanced knowledge, provides the scaffolding to support the learner (Dahms et al 2007). In evaluating his research process, Robert acknowledged the skills and experience Jennifer and I brought, which supported him to develop his own ideas - "You helped me a lot".

John-Steiner observes that social interaction plays a central role in the maturation of humans:

"Social, cultural, historical, and biological conditions together contribute to the realization of human possibility. Central to such an approach is the principle that humans come into being and mature in relation to others." (John-Steiner 2000 p 187).

She notes the importance of 'relation to others' in the development of creative work:

"Creative work requires a trust in oneself that is virtually impossible to sustain alone. Support is critical, as the very acts of imaginative daring contribute to self-doubt." (John-Steiner 2000 p8)

The collaborators she interviews back up her assertion:

"What a collaboration does for you is, by spreading the risk for you a little bit, it encourages you to take more chances." (Howard Gruber, psychologist, quoted in John-Steiner p19)

"I could not have done it myself... That is the point of collaborating." (Gay Block, photographer, quoted in John-Steiner p20)

David lists the qualities of the collaborative relationship with Nick that evolved in the context of Razor Edge:

Equal
Playing music together
Working together

A joint project
Friendship
Great

We're workmates.
I need him here. I can't do this without him.
Nick is the best."

He also felt that he was taking leadership and supporting Nick:

"Supporter"
"Teacher"
"Leader"

(When I carried out the 'Deal/No Deal' exercise (described in Chapter Five) with Nick, he reinforced David's view of the partnership as "Equal", "Working together", "Great" and saw himself as both teacher and learner within the relationship.)

Raman (2009), writing about dance education, has something to offer here. She noted that a collaborative process in learning, which is built on a constructivist view and a student centred approach to education, has been shown to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and to provide a deeper learning experience, helping the learner to develop critical reflection skills. Applying this approach to a dance technique class, Raman found students working in pairs were better able to learn the material, develop critical skills in relation to their own understanding of how they and others carried out the movements, and gain more confidence than in traditionally run, imitation-based technique classes. Students spoke about their reflection on their own movements, encouraged by working with different partners, and the motivation they felt to extend their own movement as a result:

"...then someone else comes and pairs with you and they tell you to stretch further or reach further ... They push you more, whereas when you are on your own you don't tend to push yourself as much as you could." (Daisy, quoted in Raman 2007 p84)

It could be that the very nature of collaboration in the performing arts makes it such a fertile ground for artists with learning difficulties to develop skills, gain confidence, take creative risks and be motivated to achieve their aspirations. The work of companies of disabled artists, described by Eckard and Myers (2009), Hargrave (2009), Karafistan (2004) certainly seems to suggest this.

John-Steiner posits that the effect of being supported to take risks contributes to the growth of the individual and development of his/her identity:

“I would add further that taking risks, buoyed by collaborative support, contributes to a developing, changing self. Through collaboration we can transcend the constraints of biology, of time, of habit, and achieve a fuller self, beyond the limitations and the talents of the isolated individual.this analysis emphasizes the potential of stretching one’s identity through partnership, through sustained and varied action, through the interweaving of social and individual processes.” (John-Steiner 2000 P188)

In interpreting his story, Robert expresses the same sense of transcending biological constraints:

“I was Down’s Syndrome long ago: now I’m changed. Body – normal – growing up. Working in the team – helped me a lot.”

The notion of a changing, developing self comes across in the artists’ stories:

“I am a composer, a musician. I’ve grown up – me, myself. I worked that music myself, developed my skills.” (David Warren’s story)

Is a collaborative approach nurtured in our society?

John-Steiner relates collaboration to feminist theories of connectedness and interdependence. She contrasts this to an individual and adversarial mode of thinking,

a confrontational view of reasoning fostered by historical and social practices aimed at developing a critical mind. This is manifested in the carrying out of experiments that look for errors and concentrate on regular repeatable phenomena to discover the governing laws of our world. This approach, pervasive in academia, is seen by her as deeply formative in relation to the construction of knowledge in our society.

For me, the experience of Razor Edge meant that in performing arts practice, in order to allow room for my colleagues with learning difficulties to develop their ideas, I had to sometimes hold off my critical judgement, arising from my prior knowledge and experience. I found that looking for positives to build on, rather than for all the reasons something might not work, resulted in a richness of ideas, where my colleagues were given space to contribute and I was enabled to extend my own creativity - by building on ideas very different to my own. Finding ways of holding back were equally important in the research relationship. We are back to Freire (1976) and his view of teachers learning alongside their pupils and to Griffiths: "Strategies are needed to listen to quiet, less powerful, voices." (Griffiths, 1998, p96) and to the need for trust, as listed by the Razor Edge Team.

For example, I would stop myself from thinking through a forthcoming session with Robert, because I did not want to get ahead of him, to have fixed ideas before we began to work together. To do this, I needed to trust in our collaboration, that we would discover things together. Of course, I often planned activities, but I tried not to go beyond this into answering the questions the activities were focusing on.

John-Steiner does not attack the scientific method as 'wrong' or say that scientists do not collaborate (in fact she devotes a whole chapter to looking at collaborations in

science) but she is interested in the history of how such a method has come about and how it can be compared to feminist theories of connectedness and interdependence as alternative ways of knowing. In particular, the theory of self-in-relation proposes that a different pathway is followed by females, where independence and autonomy are not seen as the primary goals of maturation. It argues that women follow a different, often hidden and unacknowledged pathway, where relationship is the basis of self-expression and even the basic goal of development. It assumes that other aspects of self e.g. creativity or autonomy, develop within this primary context. This is in contrast to the goal of independence, self-reliance and competition, which is seen largely as the experience of men. I, in turn, am suggesting that the nurturing of the collaborative 'team' relationship in Razor Edge provided the context for team members to develop their individual creativity and autonomy, that this was followed through in David and Nick's creative relationship and in my research relationship with Robert, where he was supported by myself and Jennifer to develop his own ideas and reflections.

John-Steiner puts forward a historical analysis, which shows that the emphasis on individuation is the particular product of Western, post-Renaissance, technological and economic advancement, with its focus on economic expansion and personal daring. Psychological theories and their emerging understandings of human nature have reflected these historical realities, represented in the theories of Freud and Piaget. John-Steiner argues that mutuality and interdependence are not biologically linked to gender, but are socially and historically linked. If women appear to be more at ease with interdependent modes, it is because they have been traditionally excluded from other modes of operating and confined to care-giving roles. She posits that those who can presently best integrate separate and connected modes of knowing are perhaps

those whose responsibilities in life span public and private domains i.e. both work-related and care-related concerns, particularly the care of children.

She recognises that there is growing and necessary large-scale and cross-disciplinary collaboration in science, education, social sciences, business etc. in order to solve the complex problems presented by today's world. John-Steiner does not appear to suggest that scientific method is being or should be abandoned to achieve this, but looks at the extent to which the practice of critical thinking prepares us for acts of collaboration:

“In these emergent shared endeavours, the participants must reconcile conflicting styles of work, temperament, values, and role expectations. Butsocialization practices prevalent in contemporary Western society emphasize competition and the adversarial mode of self-presentation. These practices do not prepare us well for the interdependence and mutual adjustments needed in collaborative endeavors.” (John-Steiner 2000 p100)

Looking back at the list drawn up by the artists with learning difficulties in Razor Edge, they did seem to be alluding to the sheer effort required at times, to negotiate creative collaboration, when they identified the need for 'trust' and 'give and take' and pointed out that 'sometimes two people don't get on'.

Interestingly, the Razor Edge Team were all males, apart from myself. John-Steiner's analysis could perhaps be applied to them and used to account for the difficulties that we experienced at times in negotiating collaboration. However, this becomes a little more complex when we see that the artists with learning difficulties had not followed a traditionally male pathway of independence, of developing critical thinking through education or of establishing self-reliance and autonomy through the world of work. In fact the role of team member in Razor Edge was the first experience, for each individual, of being employed and properly paid. Three of the team members, who had parents in their lives, were still dependent on those individuals to varying degrees.

Robert, although living in an independent flat, was aware of the continuing role of his parents in his life:

“To get support there needs to be trust between parents and support staff. If there is a problem (with getting things done*) then you should tell your parents.” (Robert Belcher, extract from my field notes) (*my insert)

Of course this did not mean that individuals were not striving to achieve independence and to be recognised as autonomous:

“People with learning disabilities got rights - to get work - to live on their own. I say to my mum ‘You can’t look after me for ever’.” (Walter Davis’s story)

Certainly we were trying to create a sense of connectedness in Razor Edge and a willingness to build on each other’s ideas and we clearly struggled with this at times. More important for me is the process of negotiation it meant we had to go through each day, to develop our working relationships, the understanding of the need for give and take, support, responsibility, trust:

“In working as a team there has to be trust that each person will be contributing to getting the job done and will not let the team down.” (Mike Ormerod, director, extract from my field notes)

“My team support me.” (Robert Belcher, extract from my field notes)

A collaborative approach to research enabled Robert to contribute his ideas, but with support - “You helped me a lot.” I also expected a lot from him in his role as reflective artist. “I could not have done it myself... That is the point of collaborating.” (John-Steiner p20) could be applied equally to myself as to Robert. For me, therefore, the key to Robert having a significant level of control over the process of developing and presenting his research story (confirmed by him in the evaluation) was not only the use

of multi-sensory, performing arts techniques, but also the creative, collaborative approach that we took. And, it is clear from David's story that a sense of team and partnership, of support and mutual respect, has been key to his development as an artist.

Conclusions in Interpreting David's Story

In his story, David clearly presents an awareness of the qualities of a good, collaborative relationship, as defined by John-Steiner's (2000) research. In so doing, he draws attention to the significance of this way of working for the four artists involved in this research project. His story indicates the potential for creative collaboration in an ensemble performing arts context, to enable the development of skills and confidence and encourage the taking of responsibility, in a context of mutuality and support. This approach has much to offer artists with learning difficulties. Why? It suggests an alternative path to achievement in our society, following on from a feminist perspective, as outlined by John-Steiner (2000), where the role of team member has superiority over goals of independence and autonomy, whilst not actually excluding the latter.

Next, I move on to interpreting Vince's story. His story further develops themes of connectivity, of engagement with others. It raises questions about the existence of a collective identity as artists, a sense of belonging and mutual respect, which builds on the notions of 'team' expressed in *Razor Edge*. But before examining this further, I begin with the same question I put to Robert, Walter and David about the importance of his story.

Interpreting Vince's Story

Irene: What is important about your story? What does it tell us about you?

Vince: Still with these people – showing the people I've worked with. It goes a long way back – mask work, actor, drummer, focused, serious. I'm focusing on the audience – communicating. Going to a lot of places, on trains, buses. I'm going a long way back, working with all these personalities.

In this short contribution, Vince establishes for me the themes featured in his story i.e. relationships, artistic identity, travel and a sense of history. Asking Vince about his story caused him to delve into his history once again and I begin the interpretation of his story with this theme (I use the headings from Robert's analysis).

History: All the Work I've Done

To say Vince's timeline is lengthy would be an understatement. The meticulous detailing, of the many organisations and groups of people with which he is connected and each place he has visited/revisited, shows he has a sense of his own history. His identity cards display photographs of many of the people he has known and worked with and record the places he has travelled over the years. He claims ownership of that long history; he acknowledges it as part of who he is:

“I feel that these people, that inside of me, that these people go a long way back.” (Vince's identity cards)

In discussing this history, as part of interpreting his story, Vince expressed to me some of the feelings his past engendered in him. He outlined the disappointment and regret he felt when Razor Edge closed and establishing the H.E. course became unachievable:

“All these meetings we had in Woolwich – for all these disappointments in the meetings. We couldn’t get the money etc. etc. Then we couldn’t carry on – since we had the sad news of our course going down the drain. I would have loved to carry on. I don’t think we are ever going to carry on for the rest of our lives. Unfortunately I don’t think there’s any way we can continue back. I would have been happier – happier if I’d continued to work with you and Mike.”

In expressing regret, Vince does not communicate the same desire as Walter and David to leave the past behind. Rather his reflections on past events focus on the loss of relationships, work and a life in performing arts that made him happy. He is aware that the past is not perfect, that it has implications for the present, that things could have been different. He is connecting his history to the present and the future. The notion of continuing forward is actually expressed as “continuing back”. Robert expresses a similar sadness at leaving relationships behind, when Razor Edge closed down:

“When Razor Edge closed down
I put my head down, I was sad
I missed my friends
In my dreams they walked away” (Robert Belcher’s poem)

In interpreting his story, Vince is aware of how things could have been different and how this might have changed the present and future for him:

“I would have been happier – happier if I’d continued to work with you and Mike.”

Vince’s investment in Razor Edge echoes my own and the sadness I feel when I look back at what we almost achieved. His past and mine are intertwined; his regret is also mine:

“Stories appeal to our own positions in life resonating as another’s story collides with our own.” (Goodley 1996, p336)

Vince's ability to interpret his own history, Razor Edge's history, my history, is evident. In so doing he reminds me that life stories, histories, are closely linked to relationships with other people:

“He is not an isolated individual, he is a son, a brother, a husband, a father, a friend. The road to myself is a road that inevitably runs by the other.”
(Meininger 2006 p184)

Vince also seems to confirm Meininger's (2006) claim that through reflection on the past and in the narrating of one's story, an individual comes to understand himself in relation to others and this affirms his self-identity. Vince's story and his contributions to interpreting it give a clear sense of his awareness that past relationships have made him who he is now. I will look more closely at this issue in the next section, in relation to identity.

Vince's story raises the issue of lack of opportunity yet again for me. Vince outlines a past that at first glance shows he has had plenty of opportunity to practise his skills and be socially active. However, his reaction to the closing of Razor Edge alerts us to the closing down of opportunity – for establishing the H.E. course, for continuing his working relationships, for happiness. Examination of the timeline tells us that Vince's artistic life existed in the context of two companies – Strathcona and Razor Edge. These companies no longer exist. What opportunities does Vince have now – as an actor, drummer, teacher? Like Robert, Walter, David and other performers with learning difficulties, he is subject to the lack of opportunity, low expectations and aesthetic perceptions outlined in Chapter Three, and these will affect his potential for continuing down his path as an artist.

Vince, like Robert, is 'spot on' when he identifies funding as the reason for closure of Razor Edge. He shows an understanding of the need for funding and a realistic appreciation of the difficulties in obtaining it. This re-alerts me to the lack of funding to back up inclusion policies as being a major reason for the gap in opportunities for performers with learning difficulties (again see Chapter Three). And, it emphasises the huge amount of determination these artists need, to keep going despite the difficulties. It indicates the determination needed to continue developing an artistic identity and points to the supportive contexts that nurture the motivation to keep going.

Identity: transcending a label

Vince's story presents him as an experienced artist. Photographs show him drumming, acting, rehearsing. They portray a serious, focused performer, with a strong physical presence. The music recorded on his DVD evidences his identity as a drummer and his part in *The Razor Edge Band*. Like Robert and David he is clearly carrying out the role of performer, living it, not just talking about it.

Vince convinces the viewer of his story that he is capable of developing skills, applying himself to work and career. As with David, there are no perceptions of 'learning difficulties' here limiting what Vince can do. What we see and hear is Vince, the artist, Vince the skilled musician and physical performer, who loves to travel and meet people, who is warm, sociable and connected to other human beings.

We can see from the identity cards on the DVD that Vince's relationships with other people figure prominently in his identity as a performing artist. And, both timeline and

identity cards show that his connection with people and places is linked to buildings he has worked in and journeys he has made to get there. The people are performing arts people, the buildings are theatres, studios, rehearsal spaces and the journeys are made in theatre company mini-buses, or by public transport, meeting up with other performers to set off on tour together. Overnight stays in hotels are connected to performances away from home. His connection with these people, these places, reinforces our sense of his identity as an artist. We get the impression that he lives and breathes performing arts. If Meininger (2006) is right, then these relationships with performing arts places and people also reinforces his own perception of his identity as an artist and as part of an artistic 'community'.

His relationships with others, his ability to engage and interact, can be seen in the photographs and perhaps give us a taste of the kind of performer he is. In the past I have heard other professionals comment that he is generous in his work; the photographs appear to confirm this. In each one, everyone he is working with seems to get his full attention; he shows a strong engagement with others. For me, this is reminiscent of the generous gesture made by Robert at the end of his dance, when he reaches out to the audience, palm up, as if offering something to them. With this generosity we get a sense of their confidence in the context of their performing arts worlds.

Like Robert Walter and David's stories, Vince's story foregrounds his artistic identity. It presents him as a skilled artist, and it shows him as being part of an artistic community. In so constructing his identity, Vince draws attention to the existence of a collective identity for artists with learning difficulties that is not focused on disability, but on identity as performing artists.

However, in Chapter Three, I examined the exclusion of artists with learning difficulties from mainstream performing arts, through low expectations, aesthetic perceptions and lack of funding to support inclusion policies. What sort of performing arts community is it then that appears to accept the artists in this research project and recognise their skills and ability to make a contribution? What kind of community offers the opportunity to creatively collaborate and provides the respect and trust referred to by Robert and David?

In Chapter Two I discussed Disability Arts, which is informed by personal experience of disability (Sutherland 2006), seen as an expression of disability culture (Vasey 1990), providing an alternative to the negative images of disabled people prevalent in popular culture (Barnes 2003a, Kuppers 2003). Various writers, however, have drawn attention to the essential role of non-disabled artists in creating performances with artists with learning difficulties (Leighton 2009, Hargrave 2009, Calvert 2009). Earlier in this chapter I examined some of their concerns about questions of ownership, of potential dominance by non-disabled collaborators and a tendency to normalise the performances of performers with learning difficulties.

Perring (2003), carrying out research into the roles of non-disabled artists in this context, suggests that there is a difference between Disability Arts, where disabled people speak directly about their experiences and Arts and Disability, where non-disabled collaborators are involved:

“Arts and Disability’ on the other hand, refers to artistic activity that occurs between non-disabled and disabled people. It most frequently describes the use of non-disabled artists in disability settings. The two terms suggest differing

relationships to dependency and institutional culture. In political terms, David Hevey argues that disabled people need to 'reclaim'; that a cultural shift is necessary, which moves the disabled experience of the Arts 'from Arts and Disability to Disability Arts' [Hevey 1991 p28]" (Perring 2003, Introduction).

Whilst he acknowledges that collaboration with non-disabled allies can result in normalisation, it can also be a way of highlighting what artists with learning difficulties are doing and of reconstructing identity:

"If this work is suggesting a reconstruction of learning disability, then it is worth considering what the activity of non-disabled artists is saying. Perhaps, firstly in the normalisation model, the message is "Look! If we put this together in a way that mainstream audiences relate to, they can see that learning disabled artists are really doing it!", or secondly, in the countercultural model, "Look! Look over here! This is good! We need to have this in our society too!" (Perring 2003 Discussion and Conclusion - creative interest and the [re]construction of learning disability)

However, he questions whether the art produced is saying more about the non-disabled artists or about alternative views of learning disability:

The issue that is not answered by this study but rather highlighted more clearly, is that a great deal of what is being said, is being said by non-disabled people. The question perhaps is to assess whether their work is talking about them or whether it is helping to say something about the way society needs to look at learning disability." (Perring 2003, Discussion and Conclusion - creative interest and the [re]construction of learning disability)

Perring also points out that there are projects that have a more collaborative nature and that these result in greater choice and control for artists with learning difficulties to express their own aesthetic and cultural 'messages':

"While most learning disabled people will have come into contact with Arts access projects through the efforts of non-disabled people, in more collaborative projects such as Heart'n'Soul, they may eventually be in position to choose how they work. They can put themselves at the centre of creating the

aesthetic and cultural message that they put across in their performances.”
(Perring 2003, Discussion and Conclusion – empowerment)

It seems to me that Robert’s performance, whether strictly classed as ‘Disability Arts’ or ‘arts and disability’, would fit more closely with the latter description – a piece of work that he has been at the centre of steering/controlling. In the evaluation of the research process, he made clear his feelings about how our relationship had changed from when we worked together before the research project:

“It’s about control. You have got no control over me. You had control over me long ago.”

Perhaps Robert is drawing attention to Razor Edge falling within Perring’s (2003) description of Art and Disability, whilst the research project has moved him further in control of his aesthetic ‘message’, into a collaboration that echoes Roman’s (2009) view of ‘speaking with’ rather than for. Razor Edge however saw itself as part of the arts education world, as expressed by the Theatre Royal Stratford East’s Youth Arts and Education:

“We have a commitment to fostering new talent, addressing inequality and giving a creative voice to those who are rarely heard.” (Theatre Royal 2008)

It seems to me that to afford respect and recognition to artists with learning difficulties there has to be such a commitment, with a striving towards collaborations that enable aesthetic control to be equal between non-disabled and learning disabled partners. Along with this, goes a recognition that challenges to aesthetic ‘norms’ can foster “revolutions in taste” (Hargrave 2009 p41) and the development of exciting new art (Kuppers 2000, Anjali 2007). Perring (2005) draws attention to arts practitioners’ approaches to creating performance that enable the contributions of people with

learning difficulties to be valued artistically and provide a context for developing a fuller personhood:

“Within artistic traditions that have valorised alternatives to the hegemony of technique in virtuosic and conservatory traditions, arts practitioners have found the basis for an affirmation of personhood of learning-disabled people, a personhood fuller than the one constructed for them outside the arts project.”
(Perring 2005 p185)

It seems to me that collaborations that enable sharing of aesthetic control, that involve artistic approaches that are not necessarily traditional, that are committed to addressing inequality must be the nature of any community of artists that is attempting to make room for artists with learning difficulties - to make a contribution to performing arts and to reconstruct their identities as that of respected, included artists.

When I look at Vince’s photographs, I realise that the artists represented are all from Arts Education backgrounds, for example working with Theatre Royal Youth Arts and Education, Razor Edge, Greenwich Young People’s Theatre, Oval House Education Department. To investigate whether these organisations enable reconstructions of the identity of artists with learning difficulties that go beyond normalisation is not the remit of this thesis. And I do not intend to attempt to make clear distinctions between companies as falling exclusively within Arts Education, Arts and Disability or Disability Arts. Nor do I intend to examine to what extent a ‘pure’ disability culture can exist, uncontaminated by non-disabled society. The discussion simply serves to show that there are communities of artists who are giving space to contributions from artists with learning difficulties and that Vince clearly feels included in this kind of artistic community, which in turn reinforces his sense of himself as an artist.

It may be ultimately that the persona Vince is projecting as an artist with learning difficulties has been normalised by association with dominant non-disabled artists, or it may be that he has 'held his own' in developing his artistic identity and influencing that of others. Or it may be that the idea of a separate disability culture actually reinforces notions of 'other' and 'special'. For me, the important point is about continual working towards sharing control, towards developing trust and respect and affording recognition.

I suggest that through presenting himself primarily as an experienced artist, as part of an artistic community, Vince transcends the label of 'learning difficulties'. He portrays a skilled, sociable, engaged human being who is full of life. Like Robert Walter and David's stories, his story is "About my Life": not a case history.

"About my Life": Not a Case History

In discussing and interpreting Vince's story, I asked him whether he preferred visual material or performance as a means of telling his story. He stated that he would do both if he could. When I asked which would be the most important he indicated performance, giving the following reason:

"It's like it's lively. The audience are listening to what you're saying, what you're communicating back to them. It's like a live performing show for the audience, looking at the person on the stage."

Vince's comments seem to confirm yet again the power of live performance. His statement shows that he is aware of the power of the performer in relationship to an audience. I believe he is referring to the live element, to the ability to communicate

directly with people, to hold their focus (Tomlinson 1982). This echoes the power felt by both Robert and his audience in relation to his presence on the stage. Vince, however, has been denied this opportunity in the telling of his story through this research project. Consequently, I feel huge regret - for not enabling him to communicate directly to his audience.

Despite this shortfall, Vince's story is about his life - not a 'case' history. But neither is he in control of it, presenting it directly to a live audience. Once again, as with David and Walter's stories, ownership has been transferred to me, as the story becomes part of my thesis. Unless I am able to find the resources to work with Vince, to develop his story into a performance of some kind, it will remain in my control, communicated via my thesis. However, the capturing of his research material on DVD means that he at least has something to take away and show people, if he so wishes.

Claiming a future: "I will go forward" - "people with learning disabilities can do it"

Vince does not express his vision of the future in his story. Although I asked him, in the process of developing the story, what he would like to do in the future, the conversation did not really take off. However, during the discussions about interpreting his story, I brought the subject up again. This time I asked him to do some physical images of his vision of himself in five years time.

Vince showed me two images, one of him as an actor, communicating directly and confidently to the audience and the other, playing drums, looking out to the audience, lively and happy. I asked him how likely he thought it was that he would find acting or

drumming work again. He replied that he thought it was possible, maybe in the near future. He also stated that he would like to do more travelling:

“I tell you what, I would love to do more travelling again. I wouldn’t mind going to Exeter again.”

Vince does not communicate a strong drive to continue with his career in the way that Robert does. Although he makes it clear that he would like to continue with his performing arts life, his story leaves us with a strong sense of loss – of past friends, colleagues and a full artistic programme. The Vince I know now fills his week with pottery classes, visits to the gym, club nights and meeting up with his girlfriend. He occasionally takes part in an electronic drum project *Jazztronics*, at Heart ‘n Soul, with Nick Doyne-Ditmas.

Like Robert, Walter and David, Vince would need support to continue his career as an artist. At present, I am aware that his support workers do not feel knowledgeable enough about performing arts to be able to actively seek out opportunities for him. But, even with support, opportunities cannot be invented and this latter remains an issue, as I have reiterated throughout this chapter and Chapter Three. And I will refer to it again in the next chapter.

Drawing Together the Arguments

In Chapter Eight, the final chapter of this thesis, I build on the analyses I have presented here of the four stories, as well as reiterating the arguments articulated throughout the thesis, to draw conclusions from this research project.

Chapter Eight

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

In this chapter I draw together the arguments presented in this thesis, referring back to the research questions outlined in Chapter One, the issues raised in Chapter Three and the stories themselves. I also examine whether involvement in this research project can be said to have been useful or emancipatory for the four artists involved. I discuss the limitations of the research, what I have learnt from the project and what I would change in embarking on similar inclusive research in the future. The chapter ends with the words of the four artists.

This research project has focused on the stories of four artists with learning difficulties, attempting to enable them to use their art to reflect on, express and communicate their thoughts and feelings about their lives in performing arts. The main focus has unintentionally fallen on one of the artists in particular, Robert Belcher.

In Chapter One, I outlined the questions that I believed this research was addressing:

1. What are the stories of a group of performing artists and educators with learning difficulties who seek to become professionals in a disabling society?
2. What do the stories contribute to our understanding of 'learning difficulties' and issues of identity and resistance?

3. How does the use of performing arts methods in the research process enable performing artists with learning difficulties to contribute to the generation of knowledge and understanding?

What can I now say in answer to these questions?

The stories demonstrate that the four artists are constructing identities as performing artists. Involvement in an artistic community contributes to the affirmation of this identity and gives a collective base from which to build confidence, as Goodley and Moore (2002) before me have indicated. The focus on artistic identity means the affording of respect and recognition for their skills, within artistic communities that are committed to supporting these artists. Consequently, emphasis on deficit notions of learning difficulties gives way to positive constructions of an identity as an artist. Like other performers with learning difficulties they are transcending the label of learning difficulties:

“ The fact that they have learning disabilities has (for the actors at least) ceased to be an issue. They have left behind this label - outstripped its negative connotations and surpassed all associated expectations. They are busy creating a new language to describe their individuality and celebrate their achievements as actors.” (Karafistan 2004 p 266 speaking about the Shysters theatre company)

It is evident that the themes of transformation, ‘moving on’, leaving things behind, are present in all four stories and that overcoming adversity and striving for recognition are part of the artists’ histories. However, moving on requires the existence of opportunities to do so and the stories show that such opportunity is thin on the ground.

For Robert Belcher, the opportunity to create his dance allowed him to embody his deepest feelings about aspects of his life as an artist with learning difficulties and to communicate these to his audience, to advocate for himself as an artist. He was able to move his audience, conjuring up complex images about normality, 'glass ceilings' abuse and frustration, as feedback showed. After telling his story in performance he was able to reflect on what he had produced, reiterating themes that arose in the dance and the poem, in the interpretation of his story. The power he felt in communicating to his audience was evident, suggesting the creation of a site of resistance, a contribution to a culture of resistance, part of the creation of a politics of resistance, in the spirit of Denzin's (2003) view of performance ethnography research. It is my view that Robert, Walter, David and Vince's stories can be seen as part of a resistance movement of people with learning difficulties creating their own accounts, their own histories (Atkinson 2004), part of a "transformative body politic" (Roman 2009 p8-9).

Robert Belcher's story demonstrates how presenting a story in person, through performance, has a powerful effect on an audience. The embodiment and reliving of emotional responses on stage, enables the audience to feel they are 'getting inside' the performer to understand his perspective on his life – both emotionally and intellectually. The artist is able to speak directly to his audience, without the mediation of a researcher presenting his thoughts for him; he remains in control of his own story. Contrastingly, representation in a thesis transfers ownership to the researcher (Leighton 2003).

The accessibility of the research process for Robert was made clear in his evaluation of it, where he commented on the importance of physical, dramatic explorations of themes to support discussions - "Write it down, then off your bottoms – to loosen your

words". Whenever it was employed, the practical, performing arts approach to developing the research material allowed the artists to contribute effectively, in their own ways.

The research relationship with Robert was a collaborative one, while this was achieved to a lesser degree with Walter, David and Vince. Creative collaboration, as theorised by John-Steiner (2000) - in the form of ensembles, teams, partnerships - offers an environment conducive to developing skills, confidence and responsibility. It can provide the support required to 'move on' and take up new artistic and personal challenges. Ultimately, it offers an alternative path to achievement from a traditional emphasis on independence and autonomy, whilst not precluding the development of the latter. This kind of approach has the potential to form the basis of developing alternative learning models for performing arts students with learning difficulties - models similar to that put forward by Razor Edge in its attempts to open up opportunities for these students in H.E.

In following a collaborative, inductive, artistic approach to generating and interpreting data, particularly with Robert, I hope I have shown the potential for artists with learning difficulties to use their art to make valuable contributions to research and the generation of knowledge and understanding about learning difficulties. I think this research project demonstrates that creative collaboration (John-Steiner 2000) offers a way forward for inclusive researchers – a way of sharing responsibility and developing the research agenda together. However, in order for this approach to be used effectively and more widely, performers with learning difficulties need to be offered opportunities to develop their performing arts skills in meaningful contexts i.e. through a substantial training in the heart of performing arts education and training.

I am aware, in focusing on claims to artistic identities and valued social roles, that this research could be seen to be promoting ideas built on normalisation rather than a social model perspective. My response to this is that the artists have a right to claim lives that include opportunities to take up 'valued roles' - opportunities that their non-disabled peers have should be open to them, whether this be to go to work, earn wages or get married. Call this what you will. Why should the artists involved in this research be denied what the rest of us have? However the artists stories go further than a bid for 'normality', challenging society to remove the barriers and include artists with learning difficulties on their own terms. Robert's performance in particular can be seen to deconstruct images of normal/abnormal and received notions of what art is and who can produce it. And, if artists with learning difficulties could gain access to performing arts education, to Higher Education, then they would be able to contribute to the development of new aesthetics and debates about normality/abnormality.

Performers with Learning Difficulties and Access to Higher Education

This research project builds on the work of Goodley and Moore (2002), who put the case for the development of performing arts opportunities for people with learning difficulties. In my research, I have focused particularly on the opportunities to develop skills that lead to recognition as a 'professional'. Performers with learning difficulties are excluded from the main pathway to achieving this – through Higher Education (H.E.). Government inclusion policies in recent years have not been specific or effective enough in changing this situation. In 2002 Goodley and Moore made a call for policy to be better articulated to serve the needs of performers with learning difficulties:

“We have also found that practice is inadequately informed by policy. There needs to be an explicit statement of commitment to the performing arts for people with learning difficulties, backed up by adequate funding arrangements. Some of the practical barriers to expanding this work are the same as those facing all community-based arts work – it is generally insecure, under-resourced, low profile and under-valued. What policies exist to circumvent these difficulties given that, in view of our findings the performing arts looks set to be a major force in enabling disabled people? Greater articulation of policy could enable the entitlements of people with learning difficulties to participate in performing arts to be addressed more adequately.” (Goodley and Moore 2002 p189)

Sadly, in my view, their request has not yet been met, but I hope this research will add weight to their argument and that policy will come to specifically address the need for appropriate training opportunities to be developed and funded, not just in the voluntary sector, but in H.E.

This research project makes a bid for the inclusion of artists with learning difficulties in H.E. because the need to include performers with learning difficulties in H.E. is paramount. Through inclusion in the academy comes the opportunity to develop skills and participate in the development of new aesthetic ideas. As Whately (2007) suggests, aesthetic priorities might actually change if more disabled artists were participating in H.E. Of course, if aesthetic priorities changed, then perhaps more disabled performers would be invited in. This is a chicken and egg situation and something has to give. For people with learning difficulties, who may look different, sound different, move differently, as well as prefer different learning styles, the situation is even more difficult, as Verrent (2007) indicated:

“On the whole, those with less visible impairments appear to be able to be easily incorporated into the teaching practices within the schools. Those with more visible impairments, *more significant learning needs** and greater physical access requirements are still excluded.” (Verrent 2007 clause 7) (*my emphasis)

Teaching staff working in the colleges and universities need to be able to see the potential in individuals who may not present a traditional performance persona – a ‘dancerly’ body (Kuppers 2000), or an actor’s voice. They need to be able to include students who may not achieve standard academic outcomes.

In 2006, Bulmer, working for Graeae in the Arts Council’s project *Into the Scene*, investigating barriers to inclusion in three drama schools, confirmed that teaching in the schools could be made inclusive, but the real problem lay in the assessment procedures. For this, it would be necessary to go to the external validation boards. Talented disabled actors would need to be offered a pathway that met their needs as developing artists and could be judged in assessment (Dacre 2009). As Paul Clements former Principal of Mountview states, those who assure quality in H.E. have to be challenged to “rinse their imaginations” (Paul Clements, *Razor Edge DVD, Edge of Inclusion 2006*).

Inclusion in H.E. i.e. access to learning/training opportunities would open the door for artists with learning difficulties to be able to develop their artistic skills and their aesthetic values, enabling artists to challenge aesthetic preconceptions that contribute to their exclusion. For this to happen, inclusion policies need to recognise the under representation of disabled students and students with learning difficulties in particular, which the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA)* did not (Skill 2003a, 2003c). The *Disability Equality Duty (DED)*, despite its aim “to help widen participation and retention in further and higher education.” (DRC 2005 p5) did not provide any focus on students with learning difficulties in H.E. Policies need to be explicit in their support of this student group and be backed up by funding.

Inclusion in H.E. is the first step to not only opening up the potential for challenging aesthetic preconceptions, but also to participating in the development of academic arguments. The notable lack of people with learning difficulties involved in research carried out in the academy (Chappell 2000, Boxall et al 2004) needs to be addressed. Inclusion in learning opportunities within H.E. may be a place to start. Whilst other disabled people have been involved in H.E. and in the production of knowledge about disability, this is not the case for people with learning difficulties (Boxall et al 2004). As long as they remain excluded from the academy, they remain excluded from the process of generating knowledge that relates to learning difficulty (Boxall et al 2004).

In Chapter Seven I outlined my view of the nature of any performing arts community that aimed to include artists with learning difficulties, to afford respect and recognition to artists with learning difficulties. This requires a striving towards collaborations that enable aesthetic control to be equal between non-disabled and learning disabled partners. Along with this, goes a recognition that challenges to aesthetic 'norms' can foster "revolutions in taste" (Hargrave 2009 p41) and the development of exciting new art (Kuppers 2000, Anjali 2007). This must be the nature of any community of artists that is attempting to make room for artists with learning difficulties to make a contribution to performing arts and to reconstruct their identities as that of respected, included artists. I reiterate the statement by Skill:

"A truly equal society should recognise people's different needs, circumstances and aspirations, and should ensure that there are no barriers to allow individuals to reach their potential." (Skill 2007 p3)

How will this research further the inclusion of performers with learning difficulties?

I hope that this research will add to the voices supporting the rights of artists with learning difficulties, that this research is furthering the work of Goodley and Moore, when they stated:

“There is also scope for both policy and practice to be informed by further research. People with learning difficulties are best placed to conduct this themselves or with their chosen allies.” (Goodley and Moore 2002 p 189)

The work of the four artists presented in this thesis is making an impression on those they come into contact with. The stories issue a challenge to the world of performing arts and education to include them. Like other artists with learning difficulties, they are growing in confidence:

“Participation is already equipping group members with the skills and confidence to start challenging those who may be reluctant to acknowledge the inestimable advantages of increasing access for people with learning difficulties to performing arts.” (Goodley and Moore 2002 p193)

Their stories bear out the following prediction by Goodley and Moore and confirm that speaking out through their art is where their strengths lie:

“We remain convinced that people with learning difficulties will be making their case for their rightful inclusion in society much more effectively than we can here through their performing arts.” (Goodley and Moore 2002 p195)

To this end, there needs to be a central place, for performance material created by artists with learning difficulties in inclusive research projects, in academic theses.

Emancipation: a realistic or naïve claim? Has this research proved useful for the four artists?

In Chapter Four, I referred to the historical literature defining 'emancipatory research'.

For example, the following statement made by Barnes:

“In essence, emancipatory disability research is about the empowerment of disabled people through the transformation of the material and social relations of research production.” (Barnes 2003b p6)

I expressed reservations about the extent to which this research project could be said to fulfil these criteria and therefore be considered as a piece of emancipatory disability research. Despite this, it clearly has empowering aspects, which I wish to draw attention to.

Goodson and Sikes are dubious about the potential for empowerment through life history research:

“It is our view, however, that claims for empowerment and emancipation through research in general, and life history in particular, are at best, naïve and, at worst, grandiose and ethically dubious.” (Goodson and Sikes 2001 p99)

Goodson and Sikes (2001) suggest that in referring to the empowerment of research participants, there is an inherent implication that they are socially disempowered, and that if this is so, they do not have equal social status with the researcher. I have shown in chapters two and three that artists with learning difficulties are socially disadvantaged. I have stated that collaborating in research has meant listening carefully “to less powerful voices” (Griffiths 1998 p96) and acknowledging the nature and extent of my control over the research process and products. However, I do not believe

that this diminishes the value of the collaborative approach I have used, particularly in the development of Robert Belcher's story.

Any assessment of the research's potential to empower depends on what is actually seen as constituting the research products. I clearly have control over the thesis, and hope to gain from producing it. As Tuhiwai Smith (1999) observes, research benefits the researcher. However, Robert Belcher has more control over his story/his performance and, I believe participation in this research has benefited him in particular, enabling him to transform himself and in some senses to 'move on'.

It is my view that working on his story can be seen to have transformed Robert in relation to his sense of himself. He has spoken of the overcoming of his fears and anger through the process of creating and performing his dance and he speaks of his renewed ability to tackle the future to achieve his goals. Participation in the research has perhaps reaffirmed his goals and his confidence to go forward, as Mike Ormerod, ex-Razor Edge director, observed:

"However, I suggest the true significance of the work Rob has done with Irene has been to affirm for Rob the journey he is on, thus recharging his battery for the next stage of the fight." (Mike Ormerod, Oval House performance 2007)

The performance has also given Robert a platform to present himself as an artist – to advocate for himself through his art. It has enabled him to use accessible means to explore, express and communicate his thoughts, feelings and opinions about himself and the worlds of performing arts and education he relates to. It has provided a lens for viewing his disability and his feelings about this. Through developing the performance

he has been able to reflect on his own position in relation to the social world, as one audience member notes:

“I felt it was a powerful expression of one man’s frustration with society and his place in it.” (Priya Bhamrah, Mountview performance 2008)

Robert has been able to speak directly to his audience through his art. In so doing, he has been able to advocate for himself as an artist, embodying and foregrounding his artistic identity and using it to communicate his concerns. In addition, he has been able to use the DVD to promote his skills to employers.

I believe participation in this research project can be said to have been useful to Robert, in the spirit that Tuhiwai Smith (1999) describes. And, if emancipatory disability research is expected to have “some meaningful practical outcome for disabled people” (Barnes 2003b p12), I believe these expectations have been fulfilled for Robert.

However, I acknowledge that participation in research has not changed Robert’s social position. Material conditions would need to change for this to happen e.g. access to recognised training and employment opportunities that would enable him to pursue his career as a dancer. Since the closing of Razor Edge, lack of opportunities to practise their skills is a continuing issue for all four artists involved in this research project. For me, the heart of this research is in the performance we have developed. It is the centre of Robert’s contribution and it has a powerful impact on a live audience. I believe it is the power of the live performance, presented by Robert that has the potential to change minds. Whether this effect could be lasting enough to provoke action, if seen by policy-makers, is unclear. Financial and political agendas would be

likely to dictate. However, if seen by other groups that Robert proposed – parents, carers, education and performing arts professionals – it could have a significant effect on attitudes to working with, teaching and supporting artists with learning difficulties.

Denzin, referring to performance ethnography states that performance provides a context for resistance:

“The performative is political, the site of resistance” (Denzin 2003 p245)

and

“Meaning and resistance are embodied in the act of performance itself.”
(Denzin 2003 p245)

In relation to this, I can remember an incident that took place when the Razor Edge team toured a performing arts workshop to a group of head teachers and teachers at special schools, on the M.A. course at Cambridge University, Faculty of Education. After the workshop, one head teacher commented “I now have to go away and completely re-evaluate what my pupils can achieve”. This is the kind of revelation that would be ideal to achieve with Robert’s story. However, the reality at present is that I have not found the time or financial resources to develop a new tour of Robert’s performance, and as time passes it becomes less likely that this will happen.

Atkinson states that life-story research can be seen to be “part of a ‘resistance movement’ where people with learning difficulties have co-constructed their personal and shared histories.” (Atkinson 2004 p700). Robert’s is not a lone voice. For me, it is in the context of other disabled voices speaking out that Robert’s story can be seen to have the power to change social policy and material conditions i.e. as part of the disability movement, Disability Arts and the self-advocacy movement. Does this mean

that his live performance is simply in the activist camp? I believe this would be to deny Robert's contribution to the research that has provided the context for the development of the performance and its interpretation. The performance should be seen as part of the research, with, I suspect, more potential to educate and empower than the written thesis alone. If this view is accepted, then Oliver's definition of emancipatory research could be applied:

“Disability research should not be seen as a set of technical, objective procedures carried out by experts but part of the struggle by disabled people to challenge the oppression they currently experience in their daily lives.” (Oliver 1992 p102)

My hope is also that this research, including the DVDs, will provide a useful teaching resource with students of disability studies or performing arts. Perhaps Robert, Walter, David or Vince might also be called on to present their work in person. This is something I would like to work towards on completion of this thesis.

I believe, despite the warnings issued by Goodson and Sikes (2001) and despite the limitations I have outlined, that participating in this research has been empowering for Robert (i.e. he has empowered himself through it) and that his story, placed alongside the stories of Walter, David and Vince, has potential, in some small way, for contributing to the emancipation of other artists with learning difficulties.

Acknowledging the Limitations of this Research

In considering the usefulness of the research to the wider community of artists with learning difficulties, the performing arts education professions and other researchers, I am aware that there are several factors that point to the limited nature of my research.

It is necessary to acknowledge these, in order to avoid being seen to make claims that are beyond the scope of the thesis.

First of all the size of the 'sample' is extremely small. The main focus is on one story (Robert Belcher's) that was developed to artistic presentation. The other stories, developed to a lesser degree, number only three. Secondly, the four individuals involved are all men. Thirdly, the research focuses on the artistic, educational and disability worlds in the UK, specifically England. I make no claims as to the similarities or differences in experience in other countries. Fourthly, the research is about subjective, personal experience. It makes no claim to be an objective measure of the experiences of performers with learning difficulties. I am aware that this might mean that in some quarters the research is dismissed as of little or no value:

“ We're not interested in worthless correlations based on small samples from which it is impossible to draw generalizable conclusions. We welcome large scale, quantitative information on effect sizes which will allow us to generalize, with in-depth case studies into how processes work” (David Blunkett 2000, quoted in Goodson and Sikes 2001 p xii)

Despite this, I believe that the research does make a valuable contribution to enabling us to understand who artists with learning difficulties are and what concerns and affects them, and how constructing an artistic identity enables personal transformation and resistance to reductive notions of learning difficulties.

Boal refers to the interpenetration or osmosis, which occurs when individuals live in any specific society and which emerges 'In all the cells of our social life' (Boal 1995, p41). As long as the individual case invokes in its audience what Boal refers to as 'sympathy', then it will touch other individuals and resonate with their own

experiences of a particular society. Audience responses to Robert's performance demonstrate this phenomenon in action - "and it became our story" (June Mitchell, Oval House performance 2007). When the story resonates with our own and we recognise the themes contained in it as being relevant to the society we live in, then we can address the emotions, the ideas and issues it raises. This we can do from connecting with the stories of individuals, because, in the words of Boal (1995):

"The great general themes are inscribed in the small personal themes and incidents. When we talk about a strictly individual case, we are also talking about the generality of similar cases and we are talking about the society in which this particular case can occur." (Boal 1995 p40)

More importantly, I believe this research offers a methodological approach that can enable performing artists with learning difficulties to contribute to disability research. The research is as much about the methods used as it is about the information we glean from the stories. Through using an artistic and collaborative approach I have enabled the four artists with learning difficulties (to varying degrees) to articulate how they see themselves and the issues that concern them.

The research process with Robert Belcher has resulted in a performance piece that placed his identity and his life in focus for his audience, that enabled them to feel as though they had been invited inside his head, to get to the very heart of what makes him 'tick'. I believe inclusive researchers could build on this, to provide a way of accessing the deepest thoughts and feelings of artists with learning difficulties.

The research involves a methodological approach that contributes to the development of inclusive research with people with learning difficulties. It provides an approach that can be built on to include artists in research, using the means of expression that is their strongest communication tool.

What can an inclusive researcher learn from carrying out such a research project?

As a novice inclusive researcher, I learnt a huge amount from carrying out this project. However, there is one particular area where I feel I have gained enormously – from working collaboratively with Robert Belcher. Working with Robert 1) enabled me to extend my ability to work collaboratively in a creative context and 2) changed my aesthetic perceptions.

Attempting to build a collaborative relationship with Robert meant making extra effort to listen, to be prepared to take on someone else's ideas, not second-guessing how the creative process might unfold. It meant learning to further develop the skills that we had begun to draw on in *Razor Edge*, as described by John-Steiner (2000), putting aside critical thinking at times, or sometimes 'bracketing' (Hodge 2008) my own creative ideas in order to make room for Robert to express his. This has given me confidence to trust someone else's ideas and apply myself to developing creative ideas different to my own.

Through the need to take into account Robert's ideas, I was able to become more flexible in my understanding of what makes a piece of performance effective. Initially, I felt that the short pieces – the dance, the poem, the display material, were not substantial enough to engage an audience. This was a misjudgement on my part; it was the quality of Robert's performance that actually engaged the audience. Secondly, I was unsure that we could make a coherent performance from the separate pieces. Here I misunderstood how effective Robert's story was when all the parts were put together,

how the gaps in what is told in a story are filled by the ‘listener’ (Berger and Mohr 1995), how even single words can have a great ‘wash’ (Booth and Booth 1996).

Thirdly I had questions about the technical side of things. The display material was not professionally produced. We had no money to produce a set design. Would we be judged on how ‘glossy’ the whole presentation was? Would it be considered unprofessional? Here I missed the very essence of what made Robert’s performance so powerful – his presence.

The power of Robert’s story was in his total commitment to telling his story and his ability to perform with honesty and integrity. As Paul Clements, former Principal of Mountview indicated, what performers with learning difficulties have to offer to the arts is “being themselves” (Paul Clements, Razor Edge DVD 2006, *Edge of Inclusion*). Robert offered himself to his audience, enabling them to access his deepest thoughts and feelings, using his skills as an artist. His fluidity and intense concentration “was captivating to watch” (Simon Hutchens, Oval House performance 2007). It was a simple, honest piece, which had the ability to move the audience, and produce complex responses, as the feedback shows. The power of Robert’s performance was in his ability to share his story through his art and connect with his audience. Even as someone who has been immersed in the type of theatre that relies on the performer, not necessarily on elaborate sets, lighting and sound, I missed the main point initially – that it was the presence of the true, vulnerable, inner Robert on stage that engaged and fascinated his audience. This was the power of his performance.

For Walter, David and Vince this experience was not made possible. I have no doubt that what they have to communicate is as powerful as what Robert has to say. Their stories suggest this. Consequently, in any similar, future project I would wish not to

increase the research ‘sample’, but reduce the number of artists I worked with, in order to realise the potential of each individual to communicate through his art. I would not wish to repeat the mistake of confusing quantity with quality.

What would I change in embarking on a similar research project in future?

Whilst I have learnt much from this research project, I acknowledge that each new piece of research is unique and brings with it new challenges and hopefully new ideas. However, certain issues have arisen in this project that I would wish to act on. The points below sum up what I would change in embarking on inclusive research with artists with learning difficulties in the future.

In any future research, I would aim to include the artists more throughout the research process. Specifically,

- I would wish to plan particularly for including all the artists in setting the research in context, including the theoretical framework. Taking in, to a research session, one or two key articles or papers that relate to my own perspectives and that could be discussed, might be useful, but I would first of all wish to glean the artists own perspectives on theoretical issues. I would attempt to do this by devising practical, performance-based sessions. However, I am aware that in the research project described in this thesis, the artists’ engagement was with the telling of their own stories. Exploring our own personal/political perspectives in an engaging manner would require some imaginative and collaborative thinking on my part.

- I would plan to include only as many artists as I had resources for developing the work fully through performance media, into performance presentations. This might mean looking at a joint performance, or just working with one or two artists from the beginning. Of course, I am aware that even the best-laid plans cannot be guaranteed and contingencies would need to be considered.
- I would wish to devise an approach to interpretation that could include all the artists involved. Reducing the number of participants and working in greater depth would make this more realisable.

What further questions arise from this research project?

Researchers might begin to look at the following questions, in order to build on the work of Goodley and Moore (2002), Verrent (2003), Verrent (2007) as well as the work carried out in this research project - in respect of furthering the interests of performing artists with learning difficulties and their inclusion in H.E:

- What kind of education funding framework might be needed to support students with learning difficulties in H.E?
- How could new learning models, such as that developed by Razor Edge, be enabled to be piloted?
- How far could standard academic outcomes be stretched?
- How could performing arts schools be enabled to begin opening their doors to students with learning difficulties?

Personal Impact of the Research on the Researcher

To say that I have learnt an enormous amount from carrying out this research project is something of an understatement. It has required a huge commitment on my part - intellectually, emotionally, creatively and also in terms of time - especially in attempting to sustain collaborative work with the artists involved. The responsibility I felt not to let the artists down, not to exclude them, or simply use them for my own ends, laid heavy on my shoulders at times and I felt a great sense of frustration and disappointment when I could not facilitate developing Vince and David's stories into performance. Conversely, the sense of achievement at watching the audiences take in Robert's performance was huge. Seeing Robert project himself so confidently as an artist and seeing him present his innermost thoughts and feelings about his life, in such an effective way, moved me greatly.

My respect for all four artists increased as a result of carrying out this research. I would say that respect and trust are key ingredients to embarking on such a project, just as Robert outlines in the analysis of his story, when he talks about supportive relationships. Without respect and trust on both sides I believe there can be no real collaboration, only paying lip service to inclusion. So, I would say to other inclusive researchers to focus on developing these two essential ingredients. And I guess I would say I'm still learning to develop them.

The research process has served to strengthen my resolve to work collaboratively when working with artists with learning difficulties. I believe there is no excuse for me doing otherwise; it is what *feels* right, it is what 'fires' me, it is an extension of my

professional practice and it will continue to influence my practice. The strangest thing about this research process has been in writing about the artists, when I would normally develop and present work with them, using performing arts. At the same time, I cannot deny that there is also a sense of achievement at having articulated my own argument in the thesis, but I am certain that it would not feel nearly so good without the presence of the artists.

It has also been important to me to write about the work of Razor Edge and its commitment to furthering the interests of performing artists with learning difficulties. The sense of frustration and anger I felt at the closure of Razor Edge was channelled somewhat into the writing of this thesis and the promotion of the four artists from the Razor Edge Team.

A collaborative research project is not for the faint-hearted; it cannot be done half-heartedly. But, collaboration takes some of the weight off as well - "I could not have done it myself... That is the point of collaborating" (Gay Block, photographer, quoted in John-Steiner p20).

Conclusion

**"People with learning disabilities can do it,
give people a chance
There are new ways of learning" (extract from Robert's poem).**

Robert Belcher's story and the stories of Walter Davis, David Warren and Vincent Wolfe make a bid for the inclusion of artists with learning difficulties in the worlds of performing arts and academia. Their stories show that artists with learning difficulties

can develop performing arts skills and use their art to construct identities that transcend reductive notions of the label 'learning difficulties', creating sites of resistance (Denzin 2003) and contributing to a transformative body politic (Roman 2009), continuing the work described by Goodley and Moore (2002):

“...proud and successful people with learning difficulties are currently transforming the performing arts into a vehicle that will prove unstoppable in contributing to the emancipation of disabled people.” (Goodley and Moore 2002 p29)

This research represents a challenge to the performing arts and academic establishments to “rinse their imaginations”, to be open to new aesthetic approaches, to new models of learning, to alternative means of communicating.

The artists in this research are seeking recognition and respect for their abilities. The research demonstrates the potential for performers with learning difficulties to use performing art forms to reflect, express and communicate thoughts and feelings and to develop a critical consciousness about their relationships to the world they live in.

In this thesis I have discussed the continued exclusion of students with learning difficulties from H.E. in the performing arts. Policies of inclusion have been shown to have failed in opening the doors of opportunity for this group of learners; the main pathway to expression through the arts is barred. Participation in mainstream training means the opportunity to develop artistic skills and to contribute to aesthetic development and debates. Inclusion in this learning context may also be a step towards enabling artists with learning difficulties to use their art to contribute to academic discussions about disability and learning difficulties. Access to an artistic medium can mean the chance to challenge concepts of 'disability' and 'normality':

“I am interested in art that challenges the ideas of normality, and in art that shows up the thinking about things taken for granted...” (Kuppers 2003 p4)

New ideas are not easily taken up, challenges to our aesthetic tastes are not always welcomed. but as Hargrave (2009) reminds us, new things that we come to find attractive are often alien and unattractive to us at first. Consequently, there is a need for artists with learning difficulties and their allies to keep ‘banging on the door’.

There is recognition in some quarters of academia, of the need to challenge the existing models of learning, systems of assessment, modes of generating knowledge (Razor Edge DVD 2006, *Edge of Inclusion*). Razor Edge gained considerable support for its alternative learning model, from academics all over the UK, including the universities of Cambridge, Sheffield, London, Glasgow and Exeter, as well as drama colleges and professionals in the BBC and Royal National Theatre (Razor Edge 2002). As Lesley Dee at the University of Cambridge, pointed out:

“...sometimes alternative, creative ideas can also be a way through and the alternative can become the norm... can become the way forward. And sometimes the establishment has got it wrong ...we have to keep banging on the door.” (Lesley Dee, Senior Lecturer, Education Faculty, University of Cambridge on Razor Edge DVD 2006, *Edge of Inclusion*)

This research project has focused on four artists with learning difficulties who continue to “bang on the door”. It has produced knowledge and understanding that has been generated through the production of their stories, using performing arts methods.

Ironically, initially I was advised by the examining university that the case for recognition of a different way of communicating had to be made through the written word in this thesis, with the performance and mixed media elements confined to the

appendices – “a body of separate additional material at the end of a book” (Collins English Dictionary 2000).

My response to this has been - must the expressions of artists with learning difficulties remain separate and additional? How hard must people with learning difficulties hammer on the door of H.E? Or was Mike Oliver (1996 p11) right when he suggested the ‘door’ needs kicking open and will only remain open through collective action?

The consequent advice from my examiners, to transfer the DVDs to the front of the thesis, provides a glimmer of hope for the future. I hope that doctoral students will be encouraged to enable research participants to contribute to inclusive research using performing arts methods as and when appropriate and that any artistic work produced may be shown as part of the thesis - including the presentation of live performance events.

Why should ‘higher’ education and access to developing skills, to generating knowledge, be available exclusively to those individuals who can satisfy narrow definitions of intelligence, as represented in I.Q. tests (Borthwick 1996, Goodley 2000a)? Why should it be open only to those who can measure up to fixed, standard, academic achievements? Why should people with learning difficulties be excluded on the basis of educational psychologists’ definitions of learning ability, based on unreliable clinical diagnoses? (Boxall 2007).

Education is a basic human right. When Robert Belcher conjured up images of brick walls, of glass ceilings, for his audience, he was drawing our attention to the barriers experienced by artists with learning difficulties. However, in the repetition of his

movements, in the statements in his poem, on his identity cards, he made it clear that he is not giving up. Robert, Walter, David, Vince and other performing artists with learning difficulties continue to make their artistic presence felt. I hope this thesis in some small way strengthens their case for inclusion as artists and educators, as contributors to the production of knowledge and understanding.

I would like to end this thesis by reiterating the words of the four artists:

“I am a composer, a musician. I’ve grown up – me, myself. I worked that music myself, developed my skills.” (David Warren’s story)

“No one can take our future away.” (Walter Davis’s story)

“All these meetings we had in Woolwich – for all these disappointments in the meetings. We couldn’t get the money etc. etc. Then we couldn’t carry on – since we had the sad news of our course going down the drain. I would have loved to carry on. I don’t think we are ever going to carry on for the rest of our lives. Unfortunately I don’t think there’s any way we can continue back. I would have been happier – happier if I’d continued to work with you and Mike.” (Vincent Wolfe, interpreting his story)

**“Now I’ve got more energy
Now I can work longer and harder
No matter what anyone says, I’m staying on the path
No one’s stopped me yet
I’ll follow my dreams
My future is coming!” (Robert Belcher’s poem)**

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Appendix One: Robert Belcher's Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Why am I interviewing you?

- For research
- Telling my story
- I am going to make a dance about myself
- I want to make a book about myself

Questions:

1. What is your name?
2. Which job do you do?
3. How long have you known me?
4. Have you ever worked with me?
5. Can you remember when you first met me?
6. How have I changed?
7. Is there any more you want to say?

I will run the interview and Irene Kappes will support me in interviewing you. She will operate the tape recorder and take some notes. She may also join in sometimes.

Thank-you for letting me interview you.

Robert Belcher, June 2006

Appendix Two
No More Hiding Behind the Curtain: feedback
questionnaire

What did the evening/different parts of the evening
communicate to you?

Any other comments you would like to make

Please note that feedback may be quoted in Irene's
PhD thesis. If you prefer not to be quoted please tell
us.