

*Lifewide Learning Research & Development Group*

**Towards a Better Understanding  
of Our Own Learning Lives**

**WEEK 3 #69 to #101**

**Vignettes of Experiences  
Involving Emergent Learning**

## Vignette#69

### Vignette 1: "Getting into the Zone"

**Domain:** Work & Formal Education

**Narrative:** Third level education was wonderful. I still wonder about it today. You see, others are fortunate enough to have known better schooling experiences. While I sometimes wonder how aspects of my education might have been different, I maintain what would approach a kind of cognitive dissonance in identifying how this education could have been more fruitful and yet I recognise that each of my experiences have made me the person I have become.

Again, *third level* was wonderful in that it opened so many doors, and all in the context of a framework that had yet to be defined and asserted. By bursting into the social arena with some inelegance and excitement, my studies took a right hiding! This inevitably led to panicked exam cramming on repeated occasions which in and of itself correctly suggests that I was no great learner and lacked vision. Mingling with better students and meeting with inspiring lecturers inevitably lifted my expectations of myself. Despite a relentless struggle, I somehow (mostly due a lot of help from others) managed in going the whole way.

Working through one particular cramming session for a subject (analogue electronics) and in performing exercises from previous exam papers, I got to a stage of 'sudden explosive understanding'. Like as though all the little parts just clicked into place and that I could take on any problem. I had to wait until the age of nineteen before experiencing this neuron firing chain reaction that I have seldom met since. I remember all my house mates had gone to bed and that there would be no interruptions, that time seemed inexistant, and yet in what must have been every single minute, I had revelations that got me stuck into the process of continuing with utmost excitement. Having aced the exam in a nonetheless least advised fashion, I knew I had inadvertently discovered something new and important.

**Reflections:** Only years later did I hear of Mihaly Csikszentmihaly and the notion of flow and, by way of popular culture, it was in a documentary about high functioning professional sports people. Flow would seem to be a succession of sparks : Each spark being what teachers (and parents) speak of when a child successfully learns and suddenly integrates a new concept. I try to convert any reminiscing about my education into tools and tips towards my children's education. My hope would be to maximise opportunities for them to live that 'glint in the eye' for which teachers strive. It is in having children that I appreciate all the better how teaching professions lift individuals, society and civilization, why not, towards new heights. It is this lift that has led me from electronic engineering towards 'pedagogical engineering'.

A memorable time, in recent years, that I managed to enter into "the zone" again was when something inspired me to sit down before a stretch of old wall paper, a French dictionary and some coloured pens. Again, I remember that I was not about to be interrupted and that I could let my mind go where it needed. I mention the French dictionary because I find that even simply the nouns of this language carry enormous insight to their very rhetoric and assists even in the process of thinking. In this session of experiencing the zone, I managed to describe aspects of consciousness and creativity to myself.

This process had no real objective other than to satisfy my curiosity, and to explore. Unsure of how I eventually ended the process, I know that I had opened many paths that would allow me to start up many more exploratory paths given a permitting context. This process brought me to discover aspects of divergent (creative) thinking and helped me realise that many, let's say, business brainstorming sessions fall well short of their holy grail of innovation because as I would believe, they often introduce convergent thinking far too early, thereby interrupting the process of priming divergent thinking and just as it gets started.

Upon reading a document on a subject published by Norman and his team, I was drawn in by what I perceive to be an exceptionally thorough understanding of creativity. A closer involvement with this group only seemed natural to me and I am encouraged all the more to read and to learn of such refreshingly interesting thoughts and perspectives.

## **Vignette#70**

**Vignette 2:** Was that tree a wish tree?

**Domain:** work

### **Narrative:**

Since my classes continue virtually, I decided to use my time to gain tutoring experience and also put money aside. So I started teaching to a first-grader (Maeda) who is also studying virtually at home. Before going to her today, I had made a video to teach an alphabet sign that I had to present in my classroom today. In this video, I taught a lesson with a story. What occupied my mind about this story was what homework or questions should I ask my students to get them to look deeper into the story. (The story was about three animals who each achieved what they wanted with the help of a tree, and in the end, we realize that whose wish was fulfilled in the story depends on how we interpret the events in the story).

In the middle of the class, Maeda asked me: How do you teach your students? I said: Like your teacher, with video and stories. she asked again, "Do you have a story now?" I said yes. I made one today. she asked me to play it for her. I remembered that in the morning I wished that a child was by my side and I would play the video for her and she would critique it. After watching the video, without asking her a question, she said: "I think it was a wish tree because everyone's wish was fulfilled. So all three achieved their wishes". When I got home, I edited the video and put this question in it: Was that tree a wish tree?

**Reflection:** This experience reminded me how much ideas come to my mind as I experience and increase communication. I realized that communication is an important part of my life, and since I live alone, I have to try to raise the level of my conversations and connections. I also realized that when a subject keeps my mind busy, it is enough to look for the signs and symptoms of those around me. With the help of this tree, I achieved my three wishes today. I reached out to a small consultant, wrote the appropriate story question, and the idea of writing this vignette crossed my mind. Was that tree a wish tree?..

## Vignette#71

### Imposter Expert

#### (Work and personal domain...as always...)

Having exclaimed in my vignette that the 'unexpected' is reliable and predictable, I have once again this week been engaged in an activity that was not in my diary...

#### Story Summary:

**Bid 1.** Over Christmas, I was engaged in a tender for a significant (size, effort and 'importance') piece of work. The tender was led by a huge consultancy with whom I met regularly to compose the bid. Although I remain confident that the part of the overall assignment that we could be involved in is well within the capabilities and competencies of my team, the process to apply/bid was incredibly complex and entailed some very late nights of 'panic produced policies', other complex operational documents and endless 'proof of the pudding' descriptions. The process left me excited and exhausted in equal measure due to a persist feeling of being the novice whist trying to present the expert.

**Bed 2.** The same consultancy contacted me last week to highlight a similar opportunity. They explained that they did not have capacity to bid but wanted to share it with me in case I wanted to pursue it. Despite my 'still in recovery' state from the previous tender, I decided to explore. I contacted one organisation in the field who I thought might be interested in partnering with me only to discover that they had already begun the process with another organisation. We talked a bit and decided that our three organisations would form a consortium to bid together. I was excited as I had all the operational documents and Perfect Policies to hand now so the process would be smoother. What I did not anticipate was having to lead the process upon very quickly discovering that neither of the two other organisations had ever bid for a project of this nature. We had 5 days to put the bid together once again against a backdrop of 'we might not get it' and the need to gather CVs in a particular format, budget proposals and a posh Gantt chart for page 27 etc. I had to decide very quickly whether or not to continue. I was so enthused by the other two organisations (their passion and innovation in particular) that I decided to 'just do it'. We submitted on time (87 pages), but the week featured a feeling of being an 'imposter expert' needing to encourage and support the team to believe in the value of our combined efforts whilst knowing that my best hat is 'curriculum designer' not 'Senior Bid Manager' as described in the email signatures of colleagues in Bid 1.

**Reflections** I have learnt such a lot during these two bids. Some of the technical aspects of bidding and tendering are added to my pile of related business development tickets – a steep learning curve that I know will never end. But the most interesting aspect of learning was how to position myself within these teams of people that I did not know (very well). In Bid 1 I had to quickly give up any pretence of being a 'Senior Bid Manager' as there was not time to pretend and then investigate. I had to confess. Upon doing so of course I was reassured that I was not expected to know very much about leading a bid, they just wanted the nuts and bolts of curriculum design. In Bid 2, I had to lead the process using what I had learnt in Bid 1 (along with smaller tickets from previous experiences). Importantly, this meant I had to earn the trust and respect of the team. To gain that trust, amongst other things, I had to demonstrate a clear understanding of the process and expectations which I found really challenging! But my motivation was solid because the greatest joy this week has been the rapid 'get to know you' path with these two organisations whom I have come to greatly admire – I even managed a call in my PJs on Thursday morning such was the depth of our relationship towards the end of the week!

I have always maintained the view that a dose of Imposter Syndrome if administered carefully is a healthy ingredient of my personal and professional growth. It's important to respect knowledge boundaries whilst remaining optimistic about being able to cross them. All I can do now is wait to hear about the outcomes of these projects. I don't think I will ever enjoy having to tender/bid for work but increasingly the field is competitive and procurement practices become tighter, so it is just something that I need to get on with – hopefully with less 'panic' and more PJ moments.

## **Vignette#72**

### **Vignette 2 WALKING**

**Domains:** Homelife, Creativelife, Connectedlife

**Narrative:** As we have a small dog, taking him out for a walk is a daily obligation that I am happy to undertake. But these walks are purely functional, with my focus very much on the dog. So, once a day, I go for a long, brisk walk by myself. I've been doing this virtually every day since the Covid crisis began almost a year ago (as I write this). We live in an urban area which I know, or think I know, very well. As well as the typical streets and houses of late Victorian and 20th century town planning, there is - a mile or so away - a large area of parkland and woodland that runs for miles either side of the river that runs through this part of the city. So, having done this every day for nearly a year, when I set off I always wonder what new, unfamiliar sights and places I might find among these now familiar places.

It is on these long walks that my mind literally wanders. One minute I might be looking closely at someone's interesting front garden. The next minute I am thinking about some work or research I am currently engaged in. Snatches of thoughts, ideas, a song that matches the rhythm of my walk flit in and out. Sometimes I find that I've been humming the same tune for ages.

I enjoy not only the sights but also the sounds that surround me. I really don't understand those people who walk with earbuds or headphones on, listening to whatever they have playing on their phone. Actually, I do understand it, but why cut yourself off from your aural environment? Today I actually stopped at the sound of the tiny wren hopping about the branches just above my head in a tree in a front garden. A few days ago it was the sound of one of Bach's Cello Suites being played expertly in someone's front room. When I got home, I have now read all about wrens (and some other birds) and listened to all the Suites for Cello.

My latest walk 'quest' is to seek out some of the numerous paths and alleyways that connect various streets. It happened by chance walking along a short stretch of a busy road (that I usually avoid when walking) I've driven down hundreds of times over the years. A small gap between two houses revealed an old, long, rather overgrown path that connected several early Victorian streets. I've started to discover various similar paths, many still paved with the original cobbles. One appeared at the very end of a very unpromising looking cul-de-sac, with some cobbled steps leading to it.

### **REFLECTION**

This is probably an obvious one: that even in the most familiar, possibly mundane situations there is often something new, unexpected, which then sparks a new path of exploration and knowledge. Perhaps, more importantly, my walks are a meditative activity, relaxing and freeing my mind as well as keeping my body reasonably active and healthy. It is on these walks that that often elusive 'creative spark' ignites, something stirs, an idea forms, a solution to a particular problem appears. There's something about the repetitive rhythm of my steps and the rhythm of my breathing that creates the space in which all this occurs.

## **Vignette#73**

**Vignette** - The glasses again!

**Domain** – Personal Maintenance

Last year I got a new set of glasses, big lens, very comfy and functional. Yesterday I was out for a walk and in preparation, into my shoebag went the usual items, phone, camera, face mask, purse, small cloth bag, sun glasses (it's summer here in NZ) and regular glasses - in their case. During the day, as I was taking things in and out, not so carefully, I damaged 1 arm of the glasses badly out of shape. I only found out when I went to look for said glasses in the afternoon. One arm was badly askew. I put on another old pair to have a look and thought whoops maybe I should get the optician's technician to have a look so that I don't damage them even more. So I put them on the table with a note to self to ring the optician on Monday morning. On Sunday afternoon we heard we were going into a mini lockdown (until Wed midnight at the earliest) as we have 3 community cases of COVID-19.

Monday morning when I got up I looked at the glasses again and very gingerly decided to see if I could tease the arm into its correct position. Sure enough it started to move, I carefully eased it back into shape see below.

What did I learn? That learning seems to take time with me. I knew the risks of having the glasses in the case since this is not the first time this has happened. And I often put a pen in the glasses case as well which adds to the risk of something happening. And yet I did it again. So lesson hopefully learnt - I will get a larger case, I will not put a pen in the case with the glasses. Notice the use of the emphatic word 'will' instead of the wishy washy should or could or hope to.

**Reflection** In the context of this lifewider workshop, I guess this occurrence falls into personal maintenance domain, which isn't one of the categories or activities so far listed. And yet when you think about it it is the source of much potential ongoing learning, certainly in my case.

## Vignette#74

Vignette #3 Ways of seeing.

It often happens to me that I see things differently. I concentrate hard, I screen unwanted sounds and noises, I focus and keep my mind alert and receptive, but I don't often see what others see. Unfortunately, I see beyond or maybe it is better described as sideways or I see things upside down. It has also happened that I don't see at all. This can be inauspicious.

An activity was proposed at the school where I work and the idea at it's foundation was to my eyes and mind completely off target. When I asked how the idea came about, the answer was, "It has been designed by a group of psychologists." Here there was a massive full stop. Was this enough to close the doors of perception and cognition? Why was I the only one asking questions? My questions blossomed pretty quickly creating a colourful flowerbed. The other gardens seemed to be still in winter. Or maybe my flowerbed was a tangle of tropical trees, exotic birds, and unusual creatures while the other gardens were perfectly trimmed with neat rows of seasonal flowers leprechauns on the sides and a table with chairs and possibly steaming hot tea and digestives waiting to be consumed.

I tried climbing my trees, swinging from one to the other and stood upside down and I even closed my eyes but....while I was still looking for perspectives the others had packed their gardens and made their way into ....tick the box, get it done.

It goes without saying that I declined the offer to join in the activity. I was gravely concerned about the principles at the base of the activity and the values implicated. I packed my garden too and mind wandered finding solace in solitude.

"The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled." (Berger, 1972)

**Reflection.** Maybe being creative, as this is what is said of me, can be a blessing and a curse. Being imaginative can be worse. Perspectives are in the eyes of the beholders. No matter how similar we are physically: two arms, two legs and a body we have one unique brain. It works in very different ways. It makes unique connections and pathways that to some degree will deviate and be itself.

This is the beauty of being human, choice. Sometimes it's conscious and at other times it's unconscious. How far does one want to move and travel? How much luggage does one want to take and for how long? We can stand in one place and travel to outer galaxies or move from place to place carrying our shell with us.

My eyes see, my mind travels, by body is very often in motion and I feel that once you have seen, it is very difficult to close your eyes because imagination travels with you.

## Vignette#75

**Title:** Learning to become an activist

**2 Domain:** Deliberate learning, study, CPD

**3 Narrative:** During the first Lockdown I noticed a post on LinkedIn calling for participants (much like the one for this project) to engage in a 30 day challenge/programme, learning to become a 'Sustainable Stylist'. The call was from someone I had worked with some years ago (much like this project). I responded to the call, expressing my interest in joining in, what I anticipated might be some gentle distraction from lockdown.

I joined a small virtual group exploring issues of sustainability, ethical practice and transparency in fashion, and clothing more generally; the skills and habits of informed choosing, buying, caring for, maintaining and customising clothing; and related issues. We were led by an experienced academic, maker and stylist. Participants were the "advance guard" for the programme, collaborating in and informing its development, adjusting and extending its focus as we went along. Participants were from a variety of backgrounds and of different ages: all women.

The programme was, in part, hosted on a Facebook private group. Facebook is not a platform I enjoy using, and my heart sank when I realised this, however I decided that this might be a good way to experiment with participating in such a group, since I had not tackled this before. There were some early false starts and technical hitches with the programme, but these seemed to underline its developmental nature and reinforce the pioneering aspect of participating. Occasionally, I blamed myself for a hitch, only to find out that it wasn't me after all. I resolved that I needed to be unabashed, patient and determined in my participation. I was quite surprised with what I gained in return.

**4 Reflections:** Just before last Christmas, the participants in the programme gathered for a Zoom meeting, facilitated by the course leader, to share reflections on their learning and experience. On reviewing my learning, I was gratified to realise the impact on me of the programme. I noted that I had learned new things (about e.g. sustainable textiles, and the enormous lifespan of waste fabrics that go to landfill; the prevalence of unethical clothing production practice in the UK and beyond; the scale of problems inherent in the current 'fast fashion' industry; ways to repair, recycle and reuse clothing; the need for transparency by retailers about their whole supply chains; the concept of greenwashing). In addition, I had become familiar with being a Facebook group member.

As well as gaining knowledge and some skills, I have become enthused to take action, rooted in this learning. At my suggestion, I collaborated with the course leader to respond, on behalf of the group, to a House of Lords call for written evidence on "Fixing Fashion", focused on the environmental and social impact of the fashion industry. Building on this, making use of the App 'Good On You' to inform my approach (see watermark for logo, to help you find it), I have targeted a favourite retail chain. I have sent in my feedback on their current sustainability campaign and urged them to do more to improve their practice and to convince customers of their green and ethical credentials. I wonder what further activism I might venture into.

Through being involved in the programme, I have reaffirmed earlier understandings and habits, some of which I had forgotten or had decided were outdated and no longer relevant, and refreshed my knowledge for the post-Covid world. I have also realised that I can take actions to effect change. I can even play an informal leadership role in my wider family, mentioning the course, what I am learning, and actions I am taking in everyday conversations, especially when I detect a glimmer of interest in the issues the course has raised for me.

## Vignette#76

### Learning vignette 2: What will make learning 'work' for me?

**Domain** These observations cut across several domains. I have tried to stitch them together into something remotely coherent

**Narrative** This has been another week of lockdown for us. That plus the 20-30 centimetres of snow has meant plenty of time to reflect on the experience of this project so far and the way it has forced me to think about my approach to my own learning. And, more importantly, to realise that my approach needs to change and that this is probably the best opportunity I have to make some significant change. I'll reflect more on this below. A few actual events over the last few weeks (all related to learning but of very different scale and significance) have contributed to this rather messy ensemble of thoughts, including:

- The communal/neighbour-initiated snow-shovelling in our cul-de-sac.  
This cleared the lane outside our house and meant that we could all get out for Covid jobs, emphasizing how lucky we are to live in a community where such collaboration can be anticipated and we can live safely. And the experience of the job gave us some feelings of hope and reassurance for the future.
- Some very positive comments on some of my recent coaching efforts.  
This emphasised the power of feedback and caused me to reflect on what the recipients valued in my efforts.
- Negative feedback on Powerpoint slides.  
I did a session to help colleagues who are short-staffed because of the virus. The session went well but some of my slides were rejected as 'inaccessible' by their VLE. I need to sort this (and quickly) for all future events. This has triggered more general thoughts about my presentation style – what could/should it be, given that any face-to-face presentation is at least in the distant future and may be never again?
- Venturing further into an online card magic course  
The course leader also works as an organisational coach which explains the first segment of the course on approach and attitudes – got me thinking about practice routines. He supports the course with open discussion sessions through Zoom and online comments through Slack. I can learn from his style and approach
- Observing the cat.  
Our rescue cat has further refined her skills in human manipulation. She has increased her repertoire of attention-getting manoeuvres, and become more explicit in her nonverbal demands ('I want to play with the laser pointer now to get reward treats.'). She seems to have shifted up a gear in her relationship with us. Learning is not a tidy sequence of uniform steps.

**Reflections** The most fundamental thing that came out of all this was surfacing the realization that my approach to learning has always been: too last-minute; more reactive than proactive; too tentative and 'safe'; too ruled by the fear of failure rather than a need for growth; and I could go on. I seem to have been much better at supporting others than I have been at sorting myself out. I do not intend to change the former and have volunteered for a couple of initiatives this last week to keep that going. But I need to take a few more steps on my own account. That sounds like my agenda for Vignette 3. Perhaps the cat can help.

## Vignette#77

**Vignette 4:** Bodily performances of knowing/learning.

**Domain:** Home (kitchen)

**Narrative:** Prompted by a commitment to produce a vignette, I laid in bed last night thinking what did I learn this week. My week, as usual, consisted of working on the balcony and work-related learning. I was keen to avoid yet another pity party of how hard I am working (insert yawn here). But then I remembered my hands!



The other day I was in the kitchen making dinner when a neighbour knocked. She needed to speak to me about an urgent Strata issue. I was elbow deep in mess as I prepared the evening meal and was at a stage where I needed to continue. I'll spare you the details, but it was truly messy. But I add that I've made this meal many, many times.

The partner let the neighbour into the apartment, and she came to the kitchen bench. She began talking about the urgent strata issue while I continued with my messy preparation. For about 10 minutes we spoke in depth about a complex issue which needed my complete attention. Meanwhile my hands continued doing their job.

**Reflection:** What is interesting is that my attention was on the strata issue and I barely paid attention to my hands. These hands knew what they were doing, and they did it (without me thinking about it). It certainly wasn't the case the first few times I made this meal, but now my hands had learned how – they knew what to do.

**Learning:** This bodily performance of knowing is replicated in other interactions I have with the world; my hands can burp a baby, fold a fitted sheet (quite an accomplishment for those 'in the know'), and can collaborate with my feet to change gears when I drive - among other things. So, this week I'm fascinated by bodies learning. *When was the last time you actually thought about walking?*

## **Vignette#78**

A homemade eureka moment Vignette: #2

**Domain:** Home life / Hobbies / Cross-domains

Date: 13 Feb 2021

### **Narrative:**

- I have been living in the same flat for 7 years now and never before have I had the chance to properly enjoy one of its rooms (amongst other things!). I am talking about a cosy, tiny room that welcomes you with a big hanging map of the world showcasing my travels (colour-coded by year, naturally ☺) and a vinyl player that has been long-forgotten in a corner.
- Last weekend, I decided it was time to dust off some of the good old records and make myself comfortable on the fold-out sofa whilst sipping a cup of my favourite Roibos tea (if you haven't tried this decaffeinated goodness yet, now's the time!)...And then I was transported – transported to a world where everything was easy, where travel was a thing and going to concerts and theatre plays was an actual monthly occurrence. What changed you ask? The music started.
- I was listening to Scorpions, my favourite band of all times and one that I have been bringing into my home and sharing with my other half. It was wonderful to talk it through and see how he sees and understands it, compared to me, for whom it is a personal band with a strong emotional connection taking me back straight to my childhood, my parents and the good times.

### **Reflections:**

- My first thoughts were quite how pleasant it is to let go and just let the music transport you to a time and place that bring you joy. After all, they don't say it's the little things in life for no reason! It made me appreciate the times when going to a gig in a foreign country with not many speaking a language I would understand whilst shouting from the top of their lungs and jumping with exaltation and think – how universal is music and how potent its ability to break barriers and bring us together!?
- My second thought was even closer to home; I have been able to share some of the music I like with my partner and he could do the same; enter Counting Crows. And then we started talking about the history of the bands, the meanings and then it got late and we realised almost three hours had passed and we regretted nothing.
- It was wonderfully simple experience and my takeaway is that there are certain things in life that no matter where you're from, where you went to school, what you think or how you look, they are so universal that they can be translated through feelings and emotions. What will you be listening to tonight?

## Vignette#79

**TITLE** Savoring the bud at the expense of the blossom

**DOMAIN:** Travel/culture

I mentioned in my first vignette that due to the pandemic, my wife and I have been 'stranded' at a resort in Zanzibar for the past four months. I actually spend part of each day on my research into lifewide learning, and as I sit at my small table I can see Christine on a sun lounge knitting jumpers for our grandchildren. From the photo below, you can see there is a very thick green leaved tree to the right but to the left is a tree that looks like it is waiting for spring growth. It will never happen. Why? Keep reading.

In the second photo, you can see a cute monkey in the tree that no longer has leaves but did have some when we arrived. What has happened during the past four months is that the monkeys pulled off all the remaining leaves and as soon as new buds start to show, they eat them as they obviously enjoy the taste of this particular tree. The monkeys have apparently now set up camp at the resort and we have been told by the caretakers that the tree will probably die as the monkeys are not giving it any chance to regenerate. I am not a botanist or a zoologist but I can see each day as the monkeys pass through in front of our bungalow, they stop to pick any new buds. What has this got to do with my lifewide learning? When I was young, I was impatient to try everything. A pear that is not quite ripe may look delicious and actually taste very crisp; however, your stomach will soon pay for it. Getting back to my leafless and dying tree, it is not much use to anyone now. It does not provide shade to us and apparently, if the monkeys don't leave it alone to regrow, it will die. They are enjoying the tiny buds but what are they missing out on? When I was a youngster in the 1950's and 1960's, I was like most young boys and shared an inquisitiveness and imagination about lots of things that were not discussed. In fact, I am still waiting for 'the' talk about the birds and the bees. Anyway, my 7 year old grandson wont have to imagine anything. It is all there on a smart device if only he has a friend with access. I am so glad I am not a young parent now.

**Reflections:** What is the impact of savoring buds, or fruit, or temptations too early? I don't know but I want to give you two real life examples. When I was teaching hospitality students in Australia around 2002, as we were leaving class, I asked one of the very polite young male students (about 18-19), what he was going to do for the rest of the day. I have absolutely no reason to doubt his immediate and perhaps too explicit response that he was going to watch porn with some mates at a friend's flat. Around 2004, when I was teaching accounting in Kuwait, a young male student (again about 18-19) was looking at his phone instead of paying attention to my class. So, I confiscated his phone and told him to collect it after class from Student Administration. After class, he came up to me and was most distressed. He called me aside and explained that he had been looking at porn photos and would be in great trouble with his father if it became known. Terrible sex offences are happening in Kuwait and elsewhere, and these are only the ones we hear about. What happens to young girls or boys who find themselves in situations where their curiosity and perhaps naivety expose them to predicaments they are not ready for? In the internet age, how do parents and communities protect their young children from growing up too quick? If we savor the bud, what are we missing out on if only we wait until the time is right? Governments have a real responsibility here. Let me close with one simple example. Again, here at the resort, many of the young women wear bikinis and one piece swimsuits that fully expose their cheeks. What impact is this having on the young boys, both local and tourists? We as a community have to decide what are the boundaries. If there are no boundaries, then anything can, and does, happen. We can talk about individual rights, but if it is negatively impacting others, then what about their rights? Whose rights prevail: the individual or the community?

## Vignette#80

### Vignette 3 A brush, with silence and solitude

**Narrative:** I really enjoy painting. Not the sort of thing one might frame and hang on a wall, but the actual walls one might hang them on. The larger the better. And I'm trying to work out why I like it so much.

We decided ages ago i.e. BC (Before Covid) that various areas of our house needed re-decorating, and we went out and bought several large cans of white paint. This time the normally angstridden process of choosing a colour was reduced to a simple choice: brilliant white. None of that, "oh, but should it be a 'cool white' or a 'warm white' or an 'antique white' or one with a 'hint' of blue/green/yellow/pink?".

Needless to say, as soon as the Covid crisis commenced, plans were put on the backburner, even though we were now staying at home during lockdown. Seems odd, looking back, why I didn't do it then. Too much going on. Too much to worry about. Too much to get angry about.

Preparation consisted of looking at the walls and deciding that the paint could go straight on, requiring at least two coats. So, with paint, brushes and roller, at the ready, I changed in to my painting clothes (old T-shirt and jeans) and started on the downstairs hallway.

\* \* \* \* \*

The house is very quiet. My partner is working during the day in her office at the top of the house, so it's just me, Bertie the Lakeland Terrier, who sleeps most of the day on the small bench next to radiator by the front door except when he is barking and trying to get at Archie the Cat, who comes and goes as he pleases. I'm tempted to put on some music, but can't decide what I want to listen to, so I don't bother. I turn on the radio instead. Again it doesn't feel right, so I turn it off.

I am left with silence, except, of course, there's no such thing. The distant sound of traffic, the occasional louder sound of a delivery van going down our narrow street, the odd creaks of an old house, the excited chatter of the kids next door as they arrive home. But gradually, as I start to paint, my face no more than a couple of feet from the wall, I sense everything focusing down to exclude everything except me, the paint tin, the brush and the wall.

One of things I remember particularly from my theatre education and teaching was Stanislavski's 'Circle of Concentration'. As an actor (or teacher) you can choose where to draw the circle. You can draw it so closely around yourself that you are aware of nothing except your own mind and body (not that useful for an actor or teacher). You can choose to widen it to include the actors on the stage but not the audience. You can choose to include just the (expensive) front rows of the audience or the front row of students, or you can choose to include the whole audience.

In the case of my painting, the circle is drawn tightly around me, and I immerse myself in the rhythms of the job at hand. Being so close to the wall I notice the small differences in the surface: a hairline crack here, a slight pitting there, a small bubble in the lining paper. The paint is quite thick, and I watch as the rather obvious brushmarks disappear as gravity (I'm supposing) allows the paint to settle in the micro-troughs and render the surface smooth. I have a steady hand and can hold a line, so I don't use masking tape but I use a narrow brush that I've had for many years.

I know precisely how this brush works, how much paint to use, how much pressure, in order to achieve a solid, accurate straight line. I've tried using another, similar brush, but it's not the same. I have a relationship with this brush.

And so the hours pass, and the white colour field extends before my eyes.

Eventually I stop. I have no idea whether it's been one hour or five until I look at my watch, which has been on my wrist the whole time, but I haven't looked at it since I started painting. I'm aware that my body feels tired, and a few muscles are complaining that they haven't been used in a while. But my mind feels particularly clear and not filled with the usual fog of too many things to do.

There is one of those zen things about the benefits of 'sitting quietly, doing nothing'. I'd certainly recommend 'standing quietly, doing painting'.

**REFLECTION** As I write more of these vignettes, notions of 'space' and 'slowing down' seem to be emerging as central themes for me. There is also a question that has emerged on reading the fantastic vignettes that have produced. That question is 'Is there such a thing as a non-learning situation? The answer seems to be the obvious 'No, there isn't'. Everything we do and everything we encounter has a potential for some sort of learning, even at a very simple level. So, the question really is what are the conditions required to enable us to engage with the affordances of the situation; do we have the capacity, resources, motivation etc. to learn from that situation?

Which brings me to idea of space and slowing down.

I attended a webinar earlier today on how teaching has changed due to Covid. The presenter was adamant that the pressures on teachers in the current, long-lasting situation are such that any idea of creativity or being creative has gone out the window as colleagues struggle to just get through the day. There is no time or space to be creative.

While the act of painting the walls in my house are not a creative act (though I suspect some might argue that it is), what it does - by creating space and forcing me to slow down and to focus in – is create the conditions where I can be creative.

"It is really a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one's arms again." — Mark Rothko

## Vignette#81

**Title:** Life routines

**Domains:** All of them but perhaps Relationships is the strongest fit

**Background:** Last week I taught online to students in China and found my usual, well hoped for, weekday routine impossible to maintain.

**Narrative:** I've been trying to get an encompassing routine for my life together. I've had one in the past, and to a certain extent I still do – every morning I have the same breakfast – home made muesli made in bulk every 2 weeks; 95% of the time my weekday lunch is a salad with some protein - I prepare two-three days of lunches at a time; dinners are easy affairs determined the day beforehand – often something from the freezer reheated because I cook in bulk on the weekends to save meal preparation time during the week – fish is on Wednesday because the rubbish gets taken on Thursday mornings; and the list of my routines continues to include washing, cleaning, etc. My preference for routines, that are patterns transposed from one day to the next, has been evidenced. Routines enable me to 'do' without thinking.

Problematically, the life encompassing routine that I wish to once again live has been elusive for the best part of 12 months. Yes, COVID has played some part in this but other factors have also had influence. Completing my PhD enabled me to take on more casual work and I'm looking for permanent positions as well.

Casual work, I've found, is challenging to juggle and requires time for my thoughts to switch from one job to the next. My motivation ebbs and flows as I respond to demands from several different supervisors. Please don't mistake me, I like my various roles and respective supervisors but it is challenging.

With the PhD completed I'm more social. Perhaps COVID has influenced this increased socialising but I recognise also that I'm no longer conscious of a need to be home for study. Subsequently lunches, gatherings, etc. are longer. I have more interest in gardening as well. Presently, the most pressing and absent part from my desired life encompassing routine is exercise.

For the best part of 25 years I've exercised. Certainly the discipline and physical benefits accompanying exercise form my persona. On Saturday, with every intention of going to the gym in the afternoon I worked in the garden instead. A decision internally debated at the time.

Immediately, I find my need to work and want to create space for other things has pulled me from a significant element of my personal identity. I'm not quite ready to say previous personal identity though because I still want exercise to feature. Consequently, in the past few days I have moved my gym membership so that it is more convenient to access.

**Reflection:** Routines are an important part of my life and enable me to 'do' with little thought. I'm surprised by how much thought I have given, am giving, to my lack of regular exercise. Although prioritising my work is necessary at present I don't want to consistently work long hours that impact my ability to get to the gym and exercise. I recognise there are different forms of exercise, such as gardening, but I want to maintain my gym exercise.

I am pleasantly surprised by my comfort with transitioning lifestyles and personas but that hasn't stopped me wanting to settle into a 'new' encompassing life routine soon.

## Vignette#82

### Vignette #10: Belonging to a Place

#### **Domain:** Home environs

A lot of learning must take place close to our home but what is the nature and purpose of this learning? After reading Paul Kleiman's vignette I felt inspired to go for walk across the fields to Betchworth, my local village about a mile from my home. Unlike Paul, I don't have Bertie to keep me company and my wife is at work so I can get lost in my own thoughts. The sun was shining and it was the first mild day for a week so I was feeling the pull of, 'the exercise will do me good'. But I also had a reason – someone on the WhatsApp village forum was inviting people to take photos for the village online photo gallery and I had been intending to take some photos for a few days so I thought I would use the opportunity to take my barely worn hiking boots for a walk to take some photos.

Following Russ Law's lead, I adopted an 'explorative' approach, forcing myself to find a footpath I hadn't trodden before. The fact that it turned out to be a foot deep in mud didn't matter in my now muddy boots, and neither did the muscle I pulled in my thigh as I climbed over a fence to escape the mud, because, looking back I saw views of the hills behind my house that I had not seen before. Much to the annoyance of my unimaginative older children I call this hill Chalk Mountain because of the chalk quarry in its south facing face. When my first grandson was around 5 years old we used to walk on the hill and we used to make stories up as we walked. Because of this the hill became a magical place for me and I eventually turned it into a story [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZ-SN5fWg\\_s&t=101s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZ-SN5fWg_s&t=101s) The steep white face is the most striking feature for miles around. I have lived here for nearly 16 years and I always look for this feature as I get close to home because it triggers in me a sense of 'I belong here and not somewhere else'. As I walked along the muddy track across the fields, I began to reminisce (Nathalie Sheridan) I have always found any sort of movement a great stimulus for imagining and as I thought about belonging, into my mind came images of some of the places I had grown up and lived in – some more vivid than others but all had been part of who I am. This sort of knowing stays deeply embedded in who we are.

As I walked, I listened to the sounds around me – the heavy earth moving equipment in the sand quarry I couldn't see, dogs barking, rooks squawking, two women chatting and more. I took photos of things that meant something to me. I took in the panoramic view of Wyke Hill to the west where the sun goes down, noting the spire of the church poking up through the tress in the next village called Brokham. I passed 'Acorns' the village school where my youngest daughter went when we first moved here. I remembered waiting for her in the school yard with the mums and occasional dad. I was always in a rush so I drove rather than walked, I regret it now.

I looked back along the track to the hills one of my favourite views and one I have tried to paint. This path takes me to the graveyard where my wife's first husband was buried 21 years ago. There is a path behind the graveyard called 'coffin road' along which the dead were carried from Brokham to the church and graveyard in Betchworth before that village had a church. I walked through the grounds of St Michael's church with its ancient yew trees. This small but ancient village has been here for over a thousand years. It was mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086) and a church has stood on this spot since Saxon times. St Michael's church was built in the 13th century and I am conscious from the eroded tombstones that I am sharing this space with people who lived centuries ago. I stood for a moment working out how many generations had used this space since the church was built. I estimated at least 37.

I cross the road and pass by our local pub where, before the pandemic, we would sit and chat next to the open fire in the winter and in the garden in the summer. This has also been a public meeting place for centuries.

I walked down to the river Mole whose banks were covered in snowdrops. I noticed a World War II pillbox overgrown with ivy and being reclaimed by the landscape. I wondered, as I always do, why would anyone build one here? Was it a psychological fortification? I decided to use my phone to ask google and discovered they are part of a massive chain of defence structures south of London built in 1940 when we feared invasion. This one was defending the river crossing.

I heard running water and was curious to know what lay behind a high wooden fence. I found a hole conveniently at eye level and saw that a large lake had been constructed with a weir. I had never seen it before in all the time I had lived here. I am sure if I had been a boy here I would have known every inch of this place. I sat for a while by the river but it began to cloud over and then started to rain so I retraced my steps along the muddy path. How different it had been an hour ago.

When I got home I assembled the photos and video I had taken into a short movie and found some music to accompany me on my virtual walk. Watching my movie made me feel happy. I sent the clip to some school friends and asked them if they fancied a walk.

**Reflections:** In a Field Guide to Getting Lost (2005), Rebecca Solnit wrote of the places in which one's life is lived: *'They become the tangible landscape of memory, the places that made you, and in some way you too become them. They are what you can possess and in the end what possesses you.'*

I am a Mancunian by birth but the twists and turns of my life brought me, through my history of events and travels to this place in the Surrey Hills.

I know, at least for now, I belong here, sandwiched between Chalk Mountain and the River Mole. But we have talked about 'down-sizing' and eventually the time will come when the reasons for moving will outweigh those for staying. I know from past experience that giving up a place where you feel you belong is not an easy thing to do. It is associated with a sense of loss and sometimes identity if a role has been lost too.

Learning about a place and developing a sense of belonging is a complex thing. It takes time and it involves lots of experiences, and the development of a history of being in a place which is entangled with the history of the people we know and care about in that place. It is a mix of knowings and feelings that is not something that can be learned easily or quickly. It is something that has to be lived and experienced through the ups and downs of life and through particular people and events that make up our life in the landscape of a particular place.

*A strategy for belonging?* Call me sentimental but I reinforce my attachment to this place and my sense of belonging to my home by making short movies about my garden and its environs. I know that one day I will not live here but I will still be able to enjoy the feeling I once had of being here. You are very welcome to join me on my walk to Betchworth village.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6iktBkqWuA>

## Vignette#83

**DIARY OF AN AGED LIFEWIDE LEARNER:** What was I learning in the first seven weeks of 2021? I'm not very good nowadays at keeping a daily or weekly diary in which the tale of my bits of learning is told in readable and reflective form. Instead I have assembled a handful of wee stories which, for me at least, tell the tale more effectively.

### 1. Unexpected learning

**Domain:** Personal interests

For Christmas, my son gave me a book entitled *Map of a Nation*, written from work begun by the author as part of her PhD. This proved interesting for me, for as a young civil engineer, I had early been inducted into the mysteries of land surveying. I had enjoyed many days in the field with ranging poles, chain and theodolite, engaged in triangulation and levelling.. The book's account of the development of the Ordnance Survey also had strong historical content. I had not known that military surveys in the Highlands were hastily arranged because they were deemed necessary after the Jacobite Rebellion. For the English soldiers charged to trace and execute those rebels who had fled from the Battle of Culloden had been unable to find their way around the Highlands because they had no maps. The researcher expanded on the sequence of historical events following the Rebellion, in detail that was new to me, and of interest. She also recounted how Lowland Scots contributed to the compiling of the first surveys originated by that military purpose.

I became immersed in the intriguing story that then unfolded, including the setting out and meticulous and precise measuring of the baseline on Hounslow Heath, the development and use of the Great Theodolite, and the Paris/Greenwich triangulation to link England and France – all before the Napoleonic Wars. I now know much more detail about the history of an important period for my country; and about the way early land surveys coped with massive triangulation, before the days of trig points and today's satellites.

### 2. Infectious enthusiasm

**Domain:** Extraneous and almost irrelevant learning

Without much interest or knowledge of the subject matter, I've noticed that my son has mentioned to me from time to time how much he was looking forward to a forthcoming America's Cup. Neither he nor I would call ourselves sailors, although we have both sailed; in his case, by manning a week-long cruise on the West coast; in mine, crewing a catamaran owned by my best friend who was a keen competitor. Certainly I knew of the history of this event, the oldest sporting challenge in the modern world. It began with a challenge in which the Cup was lost by Britain to America and has never been won back in return, despite repeated challenges in the ensuing 170 years. Recently other challengers, even from landlocked Switzerland, have been successful – notably and in the last event, New Zealand.

Short on conversation topics in the weekly lockdown phone call (usually mainly with his mother) when he breaks into his parents' isolation, my son talked to me one week about the ongoing preliminaries in Auckland. I expressed polite interest. He sent me a URL on YouTube, and I felt I should at least give it some mild attention.

Immediately, I became completely hooked on this America's Cup business. I was soon enthralled by these so-called boats which spend most of their time up in the air, balanced on apparently slender hydrofoils, by their crews of frantically winding men some of whom rush from one side to the other every time the boat tacks. I struggled to master the speedy commentary, addressed to enthusiasts familiar, as I am not, with rather specialised vocabulary and concepts. I thrilled as the

boats jostled for position at the start, avoiding as best possible a punishable early crossing of the line. I was baffled by the penalties frequently awarded thereafter, and didn't unravel how they featured in the scoring system, as the winner of each heat seemed to be the first one to cross the finishing line, regardless of their history of being penalised. I had questions for my son during his next phone calls, we messaged. I found and read up articles on the internet.

Then, at the end of a round-robin process which I believe I actually did understand in principle but will not try to summarise here, the American challenger capsized, punctured and spectacularly began to sink. The salvaged hull was taken away, and was a non-starter in its next scheduled races, while it was gutted and refitted. The sparse press accounts provided some detail of the damage and of the repairs, to which I gave the keen attention of a recent enthusiast.

As I write this, the drama continues. I missed out on my usual Sunday morning crossword to catch up with the post-mortem, and analysis of what Ineos Team UK needs to do to be successful in the next few days, as I write. I shall then be logging on for the report of every race; but, in the present context, I hope that my point is adequately made. This was a short period of fairly intense and admittedly somewhat superficial learning about something I would previously have dismissed as irrelevant to me.

I'm learning about the race rules, how hydrofoils work on sailing boats and dinghies and spectacularly on surfboards, and what designers and crews and tacticians do to enhance performance and win races. As I make that summary, I can reflect on the fact that my enjoyment in watching the next stages in this event has been and will be directly enhanced by my understanding of how the equipment, designs, tactics and skippers function. This knowledge makes me more aware and appreciative of the intriguing subtleties of what's going on. I find this valuable – however short-term my enjoyment of watching this unique series of events may be.

### **3. Lockdown frustration**

**Domain:** Thinking about my thinking

Living virtually in lockdown for 12 months has left my wife and I to our own devices. We soon found the attraction of multi-tasking, between my wife's gardening (in the summer) and my tutoring (online), household tasks, TV, reading until our stock on the bookshelves and kindle began to run out – and of course the ubiquitous jigsaws.

For the last of these, we engulf the dining room table (unlikely to be used imminently for guests). We spread out the pieces, first finding the edges, of course – and the corners (though for our one circular jigsaw the absence of corners was more troublesome than we had anticipated). We have found a split in interests and abilities similar to the eating habits of Jack Sprat and his wife. Once we have the framework established, my wife hunts through the assembled residue for pieces that share a common and interesting feature – contributing to the bonnet of a racing car or a large garden bush. Meantime I assemble the pieces likely to belong in an expanse of sea or sky. I don't have an eye suited to picking out intriguing features; my wife finds no delight in assembling masses of sea or sky. Happily we thus avoid treading on each other's territory. She strives to match distinctive patterns; I battle to match shapes of undistinguished colour.

Until recently, my strategy centred very simply on matching shapes. I would identify the shape to search for, in order to match up with just one already established portion of sky. I also rely on subtle differences in tone and colour, to whittle down my selection of pieces to try out. Interestingly, my brain knows the pattern I am seeking amongst pieces of a certain shade, and I 'describe' this shape to myself rather than picture it. But that description of a sought shape is not something I can put into words, even to myself.

I am taken back to memories of a visit to a conference in Vienna for which only the main sessions offered simultaneous translation from German. I did a lot of walking there, and had the intense and curious experience of doing some profitable creative thinking about the potential of reflection-for-action – without putting it into words until very much later. I didn't talk to myself; my "language" was thoughts and thinking. It was a strange experience for one who often talks quietly to himself while walking, or even showering.

So what have I been learning from this rambling? Have I been learning anything? I've re-awakened my awareness of thinking without words or images. I must try to find a way into internet items on this subject, if I can work out what it will be called. So I've opened up and activated my curiosity about what this reflection says of the way my brain works, and why or when it eschews words.

#### **4. Serendipitous enrichment of learning**

**Domain:** Scientific understanding

Twenty five years ago, when I was the Scottish Director of the Open University, I encountered a remarkable character, who was then one of our part-time tutors. Born in central Scotland, Frank Rennie had studied geology at Glasgow University and developed an interest in Hebridean geology, and Hebridean culture - and an incidental commitment to learning to speak Gaelic. He settled as a Gaelic speaking crofter in the village of Gabhsann (pronounced "Gow-sun"), became an influential chair of the Crofting Commission, and bobbed up occasionally in my encounters with the nascent University of the Highlands and Islands, in whose Lews Castle College he appeared as a lecturer, then professor. I recall that, on a QAA visit to Lews Castle, I chatted with him about the Gaelic language. He told me that one of his daughters had been quizzed by a researcher asking her about the language of her home. Almost shyly for such a strong character, this immigrant islander recounted proudly that her response had been "My mother is an island woman; and my father has a little English."

A few weeks ago, I encountered an interesting educational paper, and noted that Frank Rennie was one of the co-authors. Doubly interested, I looked it up, and serendipitously encountered mention of a book he had written and recently published: *The Changing Outer Hebrides*. My lockdown reading being restricted, I ordered a copy from Amazon, expecting an interesting autobiographical tale. My prediction was offtarget; it was a fascinating text, but hardly autobiographical.

I find it a very difficult text to describe. It concentrates on the tiny township of Gabhsann in the Western Isles. Frank studies it rather as if examining a very small part of this world under a microscope. He studies change in this location, change beginning when the world began, change as tectonic plates moved and split, change as the terrain eventually attained relative stability and was inhabited. He explains the evidence of change and development which he finds and observes in his role as a resident of this small crofting township. He moves forward in time, to the advent of animals, birds and human beings, in ever-changing populations. He notes and overviews for his readers the evidence of changing occupation by all of these, over a period of more than five millennia. Unconsciously I had been recalling and building upon my undergraduate study of geology all those years ago. I went on to share the book with my wife, who is a keen observer of birds, the chapter on the changes in bird life that Frank has observed; and so we shared in new learning for each of us, at different levels. In all of this, I noted how the author was making constant reference to the great depth of meaning contained for him in Gaelic names and words. He tellingly conveyed to this reader his enthusiasm for the richness of his second language.

What did I learn? Perhaps first of all, the joy of meeting a wonderful person, in the pages of his moving book. It would be simpler to claim that I extended my undergraduate geology, and learned a little about the development of bird and animal life in more than Gabhsann, in more than the Western Isles, even in more than Scotland. It would be naïve to state that I renewed and somewhat deepened my acquaintance with Frank Rennie. But has it been meaningful for me? It has opened my eyes and my mind to think again and more of geological, biological and social history in terms of a process of explicable change that not only explains the world I live in, but which is continuing as change today, tomorrow and in my future.

What have I learned by thinking about this learning? I suppose I have questioned my researching preference for general findings and transferable principles which takes me away from considering particular and distinct examples, in which I can find much learning that I value. I have found food for thought in the deep, scholarly understanding of this changing world which Frank Rennie has accumulated and is still accumulating from his highly detailed scrutiny of the small rural township, to which he is utterly committed, and belongs.

## **5. On the horns of a (reviewing) dilemma**

**Domain:** Interpersonal skills and integrity therein

There are perhaps five or six educational journals that fairly regularly approach me with requests to review. My style in so doing, which some editors have volunteered that they appreciate, is to frame my comments as far as possible around what needs to be done and can be done, to make the submission which I am reviewing acceptable for publication. I leave it to the editor to decide on a judgement.

Recently, I was asked to review for a somewhat unusual journal. It is published bilingually in Kazan. When I was invited to review, I was told that the Board had it as a firm priority to enhance the quality of educational research papers published in Russia, and in their journal. The English editor explained to me that he was also anxious that reviews should be supportive and facilitative.

Drafts are sent to me in English, with no indication of whether they have been translated from Russian by the services of the journal, or have been submitted in English by authors who may be writing in a second language. When the submitted research is of reasonable merit, I have no problem in following my usual style and assembling a list of suggestions, preceded by any major issues I identify as requiring attention. These could be the absence of detailed information likely to be of interest or use to readers, disregard of the Hawthorne effect in an account of innovation, or the all too common confusion of causation with correlation. My style in these circumstances is much the same as usual. I supportively identify an issue, explain briefly why it needs to be addressed, suggest how I believe the writer might do this in a revision, and avoid using judgemental and critical adjectives and adverbs; I leave the blunt description of weaknesses to speak for itself.

With drafts of highly questionable quality that I find myself in a Catch-22 situation. I am charged to address two different purposes; to both maintain standards and to facilitatively encourage. I notice thankfully that I concentrate more on the former without quite neglecting the latter. The result is that instead of simply outlining objectively the aspects of the submission that are deficient, I simply state the striking weaknesses and word my advice for repair as if I believe the writer capable of making them good – although I hold no such belief. Is that hypocrisy?

What have I learned from these reflections? To deliberately distinguish, reconcile and honour my two uncomfortable remits with as much integrity as possible.

## 6. Frustrated navigation

**Domain:** Basic IT skills

Apple regularly update my Mac; I have no option. Nowadays, each time they remove my printer driver. This was restored last time during a digital trip to Computer Solutions for a different purpose. Next time, I tried for myself. I meticulously followed the driver manufacturer's instructions, step-by-step and precisely as listed. Each time this led me to a screen calling for entries that I could not provide. After over half-an-hour of frustration, I phoned Computer Solutions who solved my problem in two minutes. I learned that you cannot load a Kyocera printer driver to a Mac unless the printer is plugged in to the Mac. I wish the instructions had told me that.

Why was this frustrating experience meaningful? It reminded me of my conviction formed when interviewing students about their sense of belonging, when I concluded for the umpteenth time that designers of software give insufficient attention to students' navigation problems. This neglect had even led on interviewed subject to contemplate "withdrawing" from the course hon which she was seeking to enrol.

In a subsequent and first online conversation with a new colleague, we considered floating this as a possible area for funded action-researching by colleagues, perhaps using talk-aloud student protocols. Although he had responded positively to much of what I said in our exchanges wherein we were finding much common ground, he let this one slide gently past. I always encounter disinterest in the possibility of constructively promoting action researching of students; navigation problems. I am, learning that I need to find another and an effective way to get the problem onto the agenda for action.

## 7. Serendipity

**Domain:** Metacognition and possibly impending dementia

The past few weeks have been very busy with many tasks that are not connected to each other. I need to prioritise. And then I need to get going! I find it enormously helpful in this multi-tasking, especially on a busy day, to make a daily note of what I have in hand on a rectangular postit, set higher than broader to take a long list. This system has for a long time seemed to take me from a rambling wander around agenda items in my head, to following a firm written agenda, item by item. I try to note what's to be done in preferred order. Then when the list is complete, I number them in order, usually almost as listed. I block them out when I have attended to them. I find the listing keeps me focussed, even if I deliberately switch between items when Pomodoroing. But I've noticed recently that, although my list is clearly printed, and the blocking out is solid, a blocked out list suddenly stops being useful and motivating; I need to rewrite the outstanding items in a new list, which then becomes functional for me. I didn't have this bother five years ago. Why does a partly blocked out list stop being motivating and then become distracting, and encouraging my mind to ramble over what's to be done rather than doing it? I don't know yet, and should try to find out. I'm not sure I want to explore it; perhaps what I learn will be unwelcome news.

Like many old people, I have difficulty remembering names. Sometimes it's only the first or the family name that eludes me; sometimes both. Often delayed action memory, unprompted, can suddenly present me, even days later, with the missing name. It then seems to stay for days or weeks in accessible, refreshed (?) memory.

Recently I chanced on a quirk in this process. We discovered that my journalistic grand-daughter uses her first name and then "Riley" as surname on Facebook, of which my wife is a member. She wondered why. I asked my grand-daughter, who explained it was for security. By chance, social media security arose in conversation with a colleague as we prepared for a Fellowship Dialogue in

whose notes this issue featured. My colleague told me that she has two Facebook accounts, one in her married name which few contacts would know, and one in her poetry writing name.

In a few conversation like this, I kept forgetting "Riley". I asked my wife to remind me. She was not amused to be asked yet again. I explained why, then realised I had already forgotten the surname in the course of this brief conversation. Reminding me yet again, she said firmly "Write it down" – presumably meaning that I should refer to this note next time instead of bothering her. I did so. Now comes the point of this rambling story. Since then, I have had no difficulty whatsoever in remembering "Riley". But I have never once referred to my written note.

I need to explore the link between writing notes and my memory's use of that thinking without referring to the written notes.

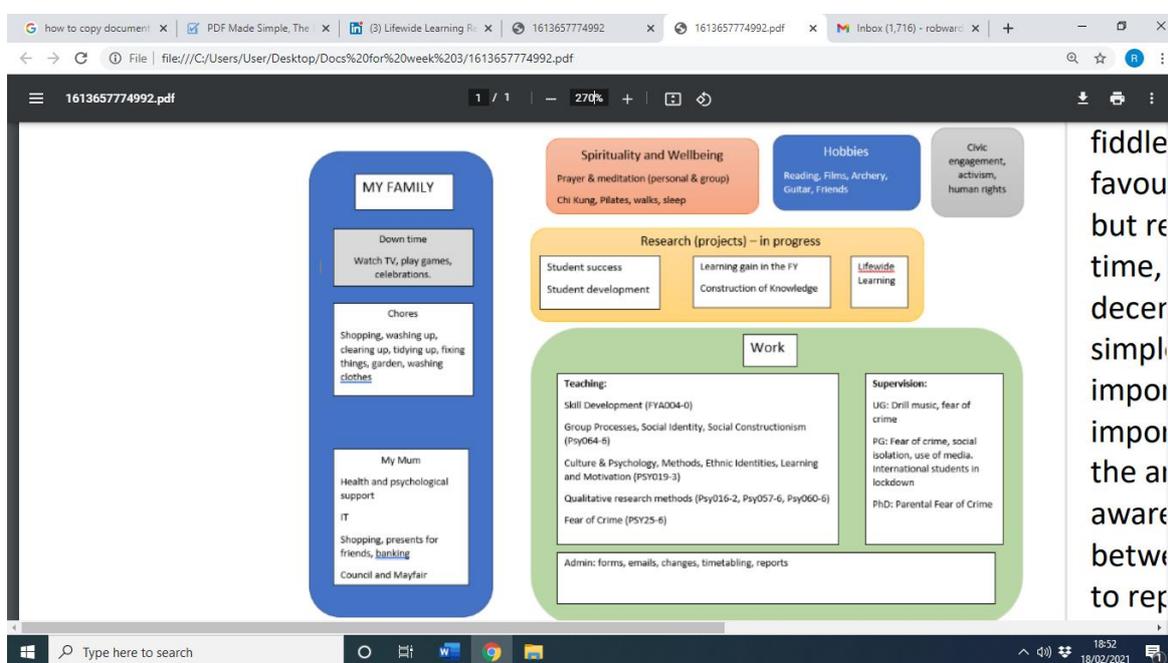
## Vignette#84 *nb this feels like a mix of vignette and domain map, so I've pasted in the graphic*

**Title:** Sketching the domains in my life

**Domain:** All

### Narrative

I wanted to write the first vignette about the experience of drawing the map because I learnt and continue to learn a great deal from drawing it. I had been meaning to do something like this for some time to help me (re)gain a sense of perspective of what my life is about at the moment, using some of the domains suggested. I first fiddled with different templates in my favourite mindmapping programme, but realised I was wasting precious time, as I could use WORD to achieve a decent product. The task seemed simple enough, but I realised it was important to represent the relative importance of each domain as well as the amount of time because I am aware of a painful incongruence between the two things. So, I used size to represent amount of time invested in a domain and location to indicate how important. I joined the project late and two very busy weeks meant this very useful task got postponed several times.



### Reflection

Drawing the map was very satisfying for several reasons. First, I was able to complete a task that I had been wanting to do for a long time. In fact, since I returned from sick leave in March 2019 when I decided to go part-time after 23 years of service and experiencing burnout. It has taken me almost two years to find the time to try to bring some order and a sense of perspective into my life. I think the reason I kept postponing it was out of a sense of guilt associated with taking time from work. However, since it is requirement of the project, I feel it is OK to do it. It is as if work was more important than me! This can be seen clearly in my map: Work takes up a huge chunk of my life, pushing other areas that I would like to develop to one side. The second reason is that it is now out there for me to see and I can keep coming back to it. I have revised it a few times because it is dynamic. From the learning point of view, I had been thinking for some time about recording and reflecting more on the learning which happens in different areas of my life. Finally, the map could lead to action, although this is not clear at this stage.

## Vignette#85

### Connection, catalyst... or... (External landscapes as a context for exploring internal ones)

**Narrative:** So, having read and marvelled at the richness of experience reflected in 'Norman's muddy walk' we set out on one of our own. The timing was apparently accidental, to avoid the impending rain, and the walk much less impressive in terms of vista (largely flat landscape, agricultural and residential, a well-trodden route for exercise). But today that did not matter at all, as the time and energy was taken up almost entirely with an internal dialogue. About connections, and movement, but behind the wheel.

As we walked, I thought about my current car.

(Full disclosure alert) When it was built – 17 or so years ago, in a factory very soon to close forever – it was probably less in the collective consciousness but now I'm deeply aware that it's actually terrible. It absolutely guzzles petrol; it is in a tax bracket that suggests it's highly polluting and it's hard to get bits for it. But I love it - I love the colour, the noise it makes, the challenge of keeping it together. (Please don't judge me too harshly, I only take it out on special occasions these days).

Moving on with the walk, I realised that my life has many points along the road of coming to love this machine; of sitting (age 5) with my Grandad as he recovered from a stroke in the front room of his terraced house and naming the cars as they went by; of attending a 'technical' school where the machinery was stuff the local car factory had finished with; of being aware when an industrial dispute at said factory was anticipated (workers getting on the bus that went past our school and the factory carrying their fishing rods); for being advised in my 'careers interview' to 'go for a job down the Rover' (everyone that day got the same advice, apparently); of many cars, all made by the same company, before this one, of still being somehow emotionally connected to that part of the world – or my recollection of it; of the world of my Grandad - and many generations before him – toiling in the iron and steel industry that degraded and yet sustained their lives....

**Reflection:** Bit of a ramble, this. What I think I take from it is the walk – on this occasion – as a reflective space – seeded with thinking from my previous reading that I took with me. A space which allowed me to making some connections I've not made quite so clearly to myself before, and which sprung from insights from my immediate reading of Norman's vignette. So - thinking catalyses other thinking, and disclosure begets more disclosure – but then you all knew that. Just still not sure why I love that car so much though - perhaps it's just the latest link in that series of personal connections to my history...

## **Vignette#86**

**Title:** A glimpse into other people's lives

**Domains:** technology, identity

### **Narrative:**

Lockdown and communication via Zoom and Teams have brought new self-awareness: I am most definitely not a voyeur and have been forced to appreciate how I tend to pigeon-hole people (contrary to my own assumed open-mindedness), according to their job. As a child, we would drive for many long hours from wherever we were living at the time to my maternal grandparents on the Scottish border. My father, at the wheel, was so tense that you could literally cut the atmosphere of fear. This was accentuated by my own as we drove over Shap, then a precipitous route with narrow, winding tracks and sharp drops that terrified me. Perhaps it was because of this anxiety that my relief on seeing houses focused on their cosy, illuminated windows (it was always night by the time we neared our destination). I would look in through their undrawn curtains and be comforted by the normality of the occupants' lives. I like these brief glimpses into them and the welcome they promised.

Ever since those distant days, I have assumed I was slightly voyeuristic. However, the last year has disabused me of the notion for, every time I see an interviewee or reporter speaking to camera from the intimacy of their home – worse still, their bedroom – I feel distinctly uncomfortable. Why is this, I asked myself as I became aware of my reaction? I realised I was judging people by the nature of their décor, their pictures, the red despatch box carefully positioned for the camera, so that we could be in no doubt as to the speaker's status... The more I reflected, the more contradictory I found my unwanted responses. I had always thought that I saw people in the round, was free of prejudice, yet here I was having to acknowledge that I had expectations of them based on knowing just one dimension of their life.

### **Reflection:**

It has been a sobering experience. I have been forced to confront a prejudice I did not know I harboured. Lockdown has helped me learn a bit more about myself. I am still trying hard not to pass judgement and be distracted by the speaker's surroundings.

## Vignette#87

Vignette #3 - How do you recruit a VC?

**Domain:** Work, Activism

The starting point for this vignette is that the Vice Chancellor of my institution has recently announced his retirement, and the search for a new VC has launched. As part of this, a short questionnaire has been circulated inviting all staff and students to share their views on the following three questions: What background and experience should the next VC have?; What skills?; What personal qualities?

This led me to a number of (internal) questions - and I realised that this is a very common learning pattern for me, particularly recently. I wonder whether the pandemic (but more specifically the government mishandling of it) made me more critical in my consumption of information – or whether this is something that we develop in tertiary education and simply continue to develop over time?

My questions were firstly - how “genuine” is this? How do I really think my responses will be used? It reveals to me an insight into my own cynicism, but I feel I encounter this problem regularly in the workplace – some information is given, and some good intention present – but we often need more to connect the dots and see the bigger picture – to have truly informed consultation and input.

Then I pondered: how do you go about the process of recruiting a VC? I work in Careers (albeit the graduate end of the spectrum), but the actual process of this kind of senior level recruiting remains a mystery to me. I’m fairly sure “headhunting” will feature... so I wonder where would recruiters be looking for suitable candidates (other HEIs and sector bodies, or the corporate world)? A bit of Googling provided a few interesting insights - but here I realised the importance of experiential learning- that unless you have been involved in this kind of process, you won’t really know how it happens in practice.

And finally - what would my response be to the questions asked? What would I value in a new VC? The first thing that came to mind, given so much focus on systemic racism in the sector, is how powerful the appointment of Kamala Harris in the US was, as a woman of colour in leadership. But how realistic was this? Another flurry of google activity began - how many women of colour are there in Senior leadership positions in the UK universities? Or in our sector bodies? Is there an adequate “talent pipeline” - would there be any potential candidates if this was part of the criteria?

### Reflection:

**Critical Pedagogy and links to teaching practice (Work domain):** Alongside all of this pondering, I am also currently teaching a careers module on commercial awareness, and I was very aware of how – in being asked these questions, I was taking the opportunity to develop my own commercial awareness. I was also simultaneously thinking about how I could use what I was learning (the information itself but also the process – a form of critical pedagogy) in the next iteration of the module.

**Social learning (relationship domain):** Although part of this learning process was independent, there was also a social element. During the pandemic, a dear friend of mine (initially a work colleague, and co-founder of the women’s network) has been off ill – her mental health badly affected by the events of the past year. We have fallen into a truly joyful habit of sending each

other articles we have read, with a small bit of commentary - many of those articles about UK universities (for which there is no shortage of current news stories), and linked to our shared social justice values. We exchanged several messages about this consultation process and what we might want the future worth sector (and our institution) to hold – and I realised how much my thinking was developed and shaped by the act of discussion (albeit over text).

**Emotional learning (self domain):** Through this process I realised how frustrated I was by the current culture and leadership in my workplace - and disheartened by problems in the sector as a whole. This has an emotional toll, as the disappointment weighs heavy. I try to balance it by taking small positive actions where I can (running events and art projects through the women's network to develop connection and community; and engaging with consultations, focus groups, and meetings with senior leadership to try and advocate for change).

Another reflection in the self domain is one on time-management – how we manage and invest our time as a personal resource. This task felt important - but I was consciously aware of how much time it was taking - and how little time I currently have to focus on something like this, that might be perceived as “extra” - The marking is piling up and the deadlines are approaching. And if I had more time, what would I do with this learning? Write an article? Conduct in-depth research into BAME stats in Senior Leadership across the sector as a whole? Alas, although it feels “timely” now, by the time I get round to it, the conversation will already have moved on!

## Vignette#88

Vignette: #3

**Domain:** Virtual Life / Travel / Family & Friends – Cross domain

Date: 19 Feb 2021

To travel is to live and to document it is...therapeutic!

### **Narrative:**

- A while back I had what some might call a 30% life crisis and asked myself “what will I leave behind?” And even more back to basics, what have I produced that can benefit my family and friends, if not society (separate story!)? So on the principle of if you want to change the world you should start with your room, I started contemplating what I could do. As I explained in my Domains Map, travel has been the centre of my life for the past decade – my fountain of youth, my purest, most inexplicable source of happiness (perhaps because my father was a naval engineer always sharing stories of far away lands??), so I knew it had to do with globetrotting.
- As I have been travelling extensively each year (c. 14 trips for leisure per year), my friends and family started asking me for tips on places and some suggested I start writing about it. Start writing about? What a crazy idea. But then I thought, why not? Why not relive my travels by writing about them and sharing with those dear to me; enter The Awayfarer.
- The problem is since lockdown, firstly, I haven’t been traveling very much, nor have I had the impetus to actually document my last few trips before the world got taken by storm. Having joined the Lifewide Project however and seeing some of the inspiring stories out there (Chrissi’s sea bonanza and Nathalie’s micro-adventures to name a few), last weekend, I did it! I wrote a new post on my trip to Provence and this time it felt different! I wonder why...

### **Reflections:**

- I have never taken more enjoyment from writing a piece as I have from writing about Arles and the Camargue ((for those of you who wish to read it – [www.theawayfarer.com](http://www.theawayfarer.com)). I think that for the first time, I truly thought about it – how the place looked, how it felt, the food I ate, the galleries I’ve seen, the people I met, how it got engrained in my memory and how liberating it was letting it all out in writing (plus, I suspect the forbidden fruit element also contributed!). It’s almost like having the best meal you’ve ever had and being able to close your eyes and taste it again! Harnessing the power of your mind to its fullest.
- I think that writing about experiences can be somewhat therapeutic whilst reinforcing experiences. It has challenged me to think deeper about what the experience meant for me, what I had learned from it and how it changed me. I look forward to writing a few more and mind-travelling to sunnier places with hospitable hosts and culinary delights.

### **Post scriptum:**

- I also realised that part of my blog I had included a “Did you know section” where one of my facts is linked to my work and relates to the longevity of Japanese family businesses. Another cross-domain spillage that made me realise how interconnected the areas of our lives are.

## Vignette#89

**Title:** Learning to hold back and let go in supervision

**Domain:** Work

**Narrative:** Supervision is one of the most complex, demanding and, at the same time, satisfying aspects of my work. Due to the large number of tasks that I have to try to fit into my three-days-a-week work pattern, I would like the students whose dissertations I supervise to work hard and engage in the process. I would like them to contact me early, come up with ideas that relate to my interests, complete the tasks we agree and to reply to my emails promptly. In return, I try to understand their topics and guide them in their exploration of the literature and help them produce the best design that will allow them to answer their research questions. I also guide them with the analysis of data. Although my personal preferences lie with a qualitative approach, I can also supervise quantitative projects.

This year I have had some very good undergraduates, masters and one PhD student; a few aren't as motivated or don't engage as much as I would like. I have always thought that supervision is a partnership where I should try to match the students' involvement with my involvement. If they work very hard, I ought to input a lot, because they deserve it. That way, the final product will be of a very high quality. On the other hand, if students drag their feet and do not work much, I tend to input less. I call this my 'reciprocity model'. I must be clear: I do not abandon the students that struggle. I would try to support them as much as I can. I care a lot and want each one to succeed.

Because I regard their projects as learning experiences, I tend to 'teach' them quite a bit. I give them a lot of feedback on their writing style, so I annotate early drafts extensively. In order for this to work smoothly, I ask each of my students to save all their documents in a Dropbox folder they share with me. They save all their sources, notes of meetings, data and analyses in that folder. I also show them how to perform specific types of analysis, for instance using Grounded Theory or a complex statistical analysis. We may use software such as NVIVO or SPSS. Sharing screens in Skype or Teams is ideal in the current pandemic situation because I can demonstrate how to do something and they can also show me what they are doing.

**Reflection:** As I said at the beginning, supervision can be very satisfying when things run smoothly, but it can also be challenging. I have recently began to recognise a new element of frustration and I sometimes feel I am wasting my time when students fail to complete tasks or don't reply to my emails promptly, don't show up for meetings, or simply disappear for a while. These feelings seem to have several sources. First, a sense of inequity or unfairness related to the 'reciprocity model'. Maybe it is time to review this model and replace it with one of generosity, where I let go of the expectation of equity, perhaps something like sowing seeds and hoping for the best. I know on a conscious level that there are multiple factors that can prevent a student from engaging: poor knowledge and skills, weak IT skills and resources, or even mental health issues. I should not take their lack of engagement personally, but it is easier said than done. The other possible source is a more recent sense of urgency to achieve my goals because time is running out with retirement looming on the horizon.

At this point in time, I have become acutely aware of the importance of practicing the art of holding back and resisting the temptation to tell the students what to do because it is their research project, not mine. It is their process of discovery and of learning-by-doing. So, I have to work harder at not giving the answers to all their questions and instead encourage them to search for them themselves.

In the end, supervision is a fine balancing act where one has to tip-toe between, and skilfully combine, collaboration and autonomy, knowing when to give and when to hold back (your knowledge and ideas) to let the student do their own thing and let go of expectations or ideas of what things should be like.

An earlier piece on supervision: <http://murmurations.cloud/ojs/index.php/murmurations/article/view/9>

## Vignette#90

Vignette – Fact Check Dory Reeves Feb 20 2021

We have a programme here in NZ called Seven Sharp on TVNZ1 that follow the 6pm news. It's a light sofa/magazine type show. Hilary Barry is one of the hosts and at the end of one of the shows this week said she had something to share that she had just learnt that day about the Covid Tracer App we are encouraged to use where ever we go. She said that Nigel Latta a trusted and respected TV colleague and qualified psychologist had showed her that when you have 'scanned in', and gone around the store to get what you need and then leave that if you click finish it will then provide a record of how long you have been in said store.

I did wonder at the time how we had been using the app for months and this had not come up before but hey – life is too short. The following evening we happened to have the show on after the news and low and behold Hilary Barry had a confession to make. She said she had misled her audience that the finish button did no such thing and simply closed the screen. She had not done her usual check before going on air.

**Reflection** I am not too sure how to describe the learning here other than to say we have become so familiar with the phrase fake news and the exaggerated and hyperbolic aspects to fake news that this is a reminder of the need to fact check info and tips provided by trusted friends and colleagues no matter what the context.

## Vignette#91

V3 Green pets by Chrissi Nerantzi

### Domain: Life

When I was a teenager we had a cat, called Susie. I developed an allergy that never left me. A dog chased me when I was even younger and I fell, this was a traumatic experience for me; my schoolmates brought their hamsters to school. I found them very smelly and they reminded me of mice. Not something I would like to have in my room. Some of classmates had guinea pigs and they smelled even worse and when I visited their houses they were running freely around. I was scared of them. I know they are just little but so hairy...

The plan was of course to write about plants... but maybe the title I picked surfaced pet memories from many years ago. I know that pets are really good for our well-being, health and are valuable companions. I just didn't have any luck with them yet. But then, when I think about it a bit more, my own recent drawings surface in my mind and I hear them saying "what about me?" Very true. I have been writing many stories for my picture book stories with animals and one of the most recent ones is also with animals. The open picture book project I mentioned in a previous vignette. So yes, I have found a way, it seems, to bring animals into my life to some extent. There is even a green one

Back to plants. My dad used to have a garden where he grew vegetables and fruit and I enjoyed helping him. As a precision engineer his tomatoes had to be lined up and the pepper and aubergine plants too. My mum looked after the flowers. She loves roses especially. Gardening today always reminds me of my parents. I have even written a picture book story which reminds me of my dad especially. Hopefully it will be published one day. A few years now I grow chilly plants to remember them and we have a small greenhouse for our tomato plants. On one of our walks when we arrived in Glossop we adopted some forget-me-nots. Since then our borders become a blue carpet every May and June. They don't seem to be demanding as plants and grow back from seed every year. Last year I started drying some and using them to make brooches and pendants.

In the house we only ever had a few plants, as we love travelling and didn't want them to suffer. Since the pandemic I have been potting and repotting, considered a plant swap in our street (the sign is ready but didn't dare to do this last year) and we have now plants on almost every window ceil. A small spider plant has now children and grandchildren. I had one in my Wunderkammer, our little garden house but noticed that it didn't like it there in the freezing cold so I took it in the house and it has now fully discovered. That was a relief.

I soon ran out of nice containers from my new plans... and had to be resourceful. Oat milk cartons became pots and the wrappers are now knitted or sewn. I like them. They add a bit of different texture and make my plants feel more cosy too? See the link to crafting? Previous vignette? I am still not much further with my knitting. Still just able to knit lines. I guess I have been inventive in using my pieces in multiple ways at least. I even made an advent calendar and preparing now two more for my boys to remember mummy when they move out. Have I started creating more memories now since the lockdown? It seems that way.

We just started growing flowers, tomatoes and cucumbers from seed for this year. I enjoy looking after them with Adam. The tomatoes are still sleepy but the flowers are keen as you see in the picture. It is just wonderful to be able to see and experience the cycle of life. Renewal is on its way now.

When Nassi started university in October last year and he was away, I looked after his plants and added a few more pots. I went in his room every day and I think my excuse were the plants. I missed Nassi so much. I know he is 19 but he will always be my little boy and Ody too. I think Greek mum's must find it harder to let go... Nassi is of course now with us due to the pandemic after we picked him up before Christmas. At least he is able to study remotely and the university seems to be really well organised also in supporting practical, hands-on learning opportunities at a distance. I am truly impressed also by all lecturers and the whole support network that is in place to look after the students under very challenging circumstances for all.

**Mico reflection:** Looking after a plant is caring for somebody. This is how I see it. Seeing the plant grow gives me great satisfaction. I am useful for nurturing life. This is perhaps not very much different from caring for people. Plants are of course not people, but they have life and they give life. Living in harmony together with plants, like we actually want to do with human beings and animals.

Nature or nurture? Perhaps both are equally important? Or nurture more important than nature? I suspect Norman would perhaps talk about an ecosystem? Maybe I will put my plant swap sign outside this spring together with the pots with forget-me-not I had prepared. Maybe, I will be braver this year...

## **Vignette#92**

Title: Vignette 2 'New Direction - Back in Op's'

**Domain:** 'Education standards within Global Corporate Life'

It is almost six months since I started my new job, in Facilities Management. A huge change after 16 years of working in Higher Education. Due to lockdown, very few clients are travelling to work in the building, leaving our daily duties very different so we have focused in other areas of importance. This month my team and I are focusing on QHSE compliance - starting the year as we aim to continue. Two on my team have recently contracted the COVID-19 virus. Both are well again, but it was alarming to witness their struggles during their illness first-hand.

We ensure 2021 is a year where we are as QHSE compliant as possible we are completing formal training through our training portal, Talent Coach, safety audits, we have created a more userfriendly hazard tracker, and are working on individual case-studies. What surprises me when completing the formal training modules is that they are similar those I developed in my previous role as curriculum developer for a Hospitality and Retail training company in South Africa.

### **Reflection:**

Obviously QHSE is a universal language, I should have realized that! (Prohibited signs for example are the same colour world-wide ) It feels satisfying to know that the material I developed in my previous role in SA is not too different to the material given by my company (a global giant in the property management industry). This gives me a sense of confidence and pride. It has also been great to focus on QHSE this month, the importance of health and safety at work and home, something I have become acutely conscious of recently for personal reasons, heightened by our COVID-19 world.

## Vignette#93

Vignette 3 Learning Anecdotes. Paul Thomas. February 21 st 2021

Title: Learning as co-creativity to build healthy communities

**Domain:** Children.

Narrative: I was struck by Holly's vignette about seeing things that others don't see and I thought "I can often see things that others can't too; maybe everyone can, but not the same things?" Then I was struck by Donna's vignette about her hands cooking without consciously thinking about it, and I thought "I can do some things without thinking about them too; maybe everyone can, but not the same things?" Then I was struck by Norman's comment that such actions may result from deliberate practice rather than emergent learning and I thought "that must be true, but are learning from repeated practice and emergent learning less distinct than they might seem? Might we need to re-learn and re-learn the same things in an emergent way for them to become and remain instinctive?" Might Donna have to re-learn how to cook the supper if she hadn't done it for a year, or hadn't slept for a week, or if her confidence had been knocked by stressful experiences? And might a desire to learn idiosyncratic things start in childhood, but our expectation of what specific things children should learn cause us to not notice that it is going on?

This week I tried to order photographs to make an album of our family story. I was unable to place a photo that showed my son as a young child. I had a confronting thought – "I used to work with children and could tell the age of a child instinctively, without consciously thinking about it; why can't I place my own son's age in this photo?" I asked him, now aged 19, to help me. He took one cursory glance and pointed at a fountain in the background that I had completely missed that allowed us to place the date and location exactly. He saw it; I didn't. Maybe this is the kind of experience that helps us to realise what we want to re-learn to fit into a community?

**Reflections:** It may be that everyone can see and do things that are peculiar to them and that peculiarity combines some innate skill, some emergent learning and some purposeful practice. And when it becomes instinctive, we think of this peculiarity as in some way usefully defining us, so we don't use the language of learning. If we lose that peculiarity, we think of it as illness and again don't use the language of learning.

The dominant understanding of learning in our society is as a compartmentalised commodity – Google says: "the accumulation of new understanding, knowledge, behaviours, skills, values, attitudes and preferences through study, experience, or being taught". Some of our vignettes describe sets of interlinked learning outcomes or re-learning things that we know very well, so they don't fit easily into the learning as commodity idea - and even we are struggling to describe them in the language of learning! Our discussions suggest that learning should be used in a broader way to shape meaning, identify individual peculiarities and build relationships. If the world is to move into a new stage of history that values diversity, complexity and emergence, the commodity definition of learning won't be enough. We may need to emphasise learning as a co-creative activity that builds communities and achieves desirable things – making a meal or sort photos for example. Parents may need to use this kind of action learning to help our children to find useful places in society.

## **Vignette#94**

### Vignette 3: Garden Domain

I planted a living wall, three years ago. It underwent a couple of iterations and I am still to find the best plants for it. In the meantime more and more wildlife has begun using it. Initially, I noticed the vast amount of insects and spiders who would scuttle when I watered the wall, and the wrens took to feeding from the open buffet as if they had been waiting for it to be built. But as time passes on we notice more and more garden inhabitants making use of the opportunities the living wall offers. This week a couple of robins has been busy collecting pieces of moss and dead leaves off the wall, probably to build their nest. They diligently collect plant parts, some of which do not pass muster according to the female robin and are discarded for better choices. Each of us empathises for their own reason when watching them during breakfast.

### **Reflection**

When planting the living wall through observation and trial and error I learned about plants becoming pot-bound, the micro-climate that establishes itself—for instances in the lower shadier corner of the wall I have now planted small ferns, while strawberries grow well in the upper sunnier spots, but the plants become pot-bound easily and stop to thrive. Felt pockets dry out too quickly even in Scotland, and the selfwatering system which is really expensive becomes waterlogged and I had to drill in holes. The cheapest and easiest way to create the living wall was to place a piece of old thick towel in the bottom of the brown pots, drill hole in the pot and washers on the inside and outside of the screw and fix the pots directly onto the wood frames. This effort created more biodiversity than I ever thought possible and it brightens up a dark, shadowy and damp corner in the courtyard.

## Vignette#95

Title: Never too old to play and learn

**Domain:** Technology, relationships, play

**Narrative:** Many of our recent conversations have been deep, probing fundamental questions. To lighten the tone this Sunday morning, I am sharing the conversation we had before I got up this morning.

I jokingly call my husband 'Gadget Boy' because he loves anything mechanical, technological, novel. He can spend hours hovering over a single counter in one shop; he is in his element when we are in one of those multi-storey markets you find in the Far East.

Me: What time did you come to bed?

GB: Not long after you, but I was watching Shankar on U-tube for a while.

Cue demonstration. He reaches out and displays his latest gadget, some posh Sony ear buds. I am subjected to a demonstration of how the right and left pods are charged in their neat pouch, learn that they are labelled right or left, then he puts them in his ears. I can't hear a thing: thankfully, these are much more efficient than previous versions he has had which emit whooshing noises, disrupting my sleep.

GB: Try them.

He removes the right pod and inserts it in my right ear. Yes, it works! We have learnt that the technology can be shared by two people.

GB: I wonder if it works in either ear?

He places the left pod in his right ear. We discover that we can both still hear the music. My imagination is getting naughty:

Me: Will it work in other parts of the body?

I giggle and place my ear pod in his nostril. 'Can you hear it?'

Yes, he can! Where else might I place it? Resisting the obvious, I modestly try an arm pit – it still works! So, we have learnt that the technology has nothing specifically to do with ears, but is, rather, sensitive to the human body.

**Reflection:** even as these events were unfolding, I was already thinking how well this exchange illustrates the process of learning. We were playing – never too old for that! And out of our play came discoveries. Not earth-shattering, not likely to have any major application, but learning that demonstrate our human drive to be curious. We turned the process of inquiry into a game which in turn bound us closer in our relationship, as we shared these new discoveries.

## Vignette#96

### Vignette 2

Title: Solving a Problem by Insight or Analytically

**Domain:** Work, Family and Problem Solving

Finally, I managed to purchase a bookshelf online for my new workspace. This shelving was long overdue and badly needed as my growing collection of books lay divided in two spaces. I came across a wooden bookshelf on a website that appeared to tick all the boxes in terms of measurements, design, price and ease of assembly. And adding a touch of rustic charm to this space with this 5 tier bookshelf was the way to go for me.

The shelving arrived promptly and I was eager to begin to assemble it. Upon removing the side panels, individual shelves and other materials necessary for its assembly I realised this job was for another day. I did not have time available to do this task and so the materials lay on the floor of my office until the next available slot in my diary. It was on a Sunday that I found time to begin work on the shelf. Thinking it would be intact before lunch, I was soon to realise that this would not be the case. Having had assembled one side of the bookcase and slotted in the shelving, the other side would not fit into the frame to complete the assembly. I tried numerous times to tease the panel into position with a mallet but it was not working for me.

I had a rant about the shortcomings of pictorial instructions alone for this kind of task and lamented the need to design better instructions for self-assembly builds. The charm of my new bookshelf, rustic or otherwise and its exquisite craftsmanship was soon lost on me.

Following lunch, I went for a socially distant walk across fields and through a woods with my sisters and their children (we live beside each other). There is something so energising about being outdoors amongst young children and watching how they naturally flow with life. Children are great adventurers and know how to take things and themselves lightly, and most importantly have fun. The outdoors is one giant playground to them, and that afternoon helped to remind us adults of that too. Time spent outdoors in nature helped me and my sisters to relax, let go and explore the surrounding landscape.

So, it was not surprising that when I came back to the job of assembling my bookshelf that it came together easily for me. I took the mallet into my hand and with a few light strokes evenly dispersed over the length of wood I soon realised that was what was needed to press the side panel to the rest of the shelf.

For me, this experience has highlighted the use of insight to resolve the problem. This involved me taking time away from the problem, slowing down and allowing my mind to wander. When I think about how I find solutions to problems broadly speaking, interestingly I tend to solve problems by insight, not analytically. I am intrigued if there is any research that supports the idea of bias in how humans solve problems (by insight or analytically). This also gets me thinking about the process of solving a problem analytically. I am interested in knowing more about this way of solving problems as it is not the usual way I tend to find solutions to problems.

## Vignette#97

Vignette 2 : “Vegetable Gardening”

**Domains** : Family & Home – Significant Relationships

**Narrative** : Having received a present of some gardening tools and seed, three years ago I decided I would have a go at growing some fail-safe plants so we could experiment and, if lucky, could put something homegrown on the dinner plate. Reading packet instructions, I decided the fifty centimeter spacing needed testing so in some areas I respected it and in some, I spaced the cherry tomato seeds apart by only thirty centimeters. There must have been only about ten plants and despite our exceptionally long holiday absence that year, they bared some fruit despite the searing heat that summer.

Following this first experiment I made an earlier start, just as Covid-19 provoked us to be imaginative at home. I worked the earth, added plant nutrition and discussed gardening by videoconferencing software with my father who had earned some experience since entering retirement. This was another way for us to connect despite our geographical spacing to which we were already accustomed and before Covid-19 ever arrived.

This time I cleared some grass so as to improve produce yield and soon discovered that I would have to delay for another year my plans of planting carrots and potatoes (I am Irish after all :-)) since root vegetable-eating click-worms would appear to dwell even after clearing grass. So it would be tomatoes again! Lots of them! (You may wonder if onions came to mind ... I tried it and realised later the seeds were not close enough to the ground surface – I might try sets this year).

One of numerous tips my father made about growing tomatoes was that it is important to detach the ‘suckers’ from the plant as a stilt is provided to support vertical growth. The idea being to provide a maximum of nutrition to the fruit of the plant as opposed to ‘extra’ and ‘useless’ side growths. So I was happy to remove the suckers I noticed and for any suckers that managed to evade my attention for too long, I let them grow.

Oriented North to South and spaced by about thirty to forty centimeters between each plant, and despite a very slow start (the earlier months were too cold even after seedlings had grown nicely), the plants eventually took off. So much so that they grew far beyond the width of their originally designated lengthwise limits but since their onion neighbours didn’t work, I just let the tomatoes take over. Most stems had to be tied to a vertical support in such a way as to harness all available volume and sunlight. Because the plants were far too close by normal standards, I had to repeatedly untangle tomato plants from choking one and other which would have been their means to leverage further reaching growth. Since this was still a kind of experimentation, I chose not to attach the lowest offshoots and simply to let them grow freely.

With hundreds of tomatoes being eaten at this stage and still more ripening (4 varieties), I noticed how the ‘forgotten’ lowest offshoots were crawling. It was then that I was reminded that I had still not asked my father what function the suckers would serve to the plant had we not removed them. And indeed how would tomato plants fare in absence of their human caretakers? It’s not as if they are like bananas, doomed to fail without human assistance. What I noticed (at least for the tomato variety in question), was how the sucker leaves were wide and shaped like duck feet. They pushed down on the neighbouring grass they had eventually reached, elevated the horizontal stem further from the ground and served to raise the ‘fruit-branch’ above the rest of the plant.

**Reflections** : By observing what happens at the edge of orderly tomato growing and yet in helping each plant to seek a better place, I managed to imagine better how the plants would fare without my pruning... Quite well in fact! Indeed if yield is the objective and at no other cost (time, orderly and aesthetic gardening, etc.) this could be the way to go.

How many many of us don’t test the limits? How many of us have learning opportunities at our fingers tips but have failed to recognise them? How many of us are painfully close to life-changing experiences that we don’t know how to recognise? How many learning experiences are all about without us seeing them? How can we more easily access these experiences when our close ones can see them before we do?

## **Vignette#98**

Title: Pancake Day: the wheel of life turns

**Domain:** Family

### **Narrative:**

For many years, as in most families, Pancake Day used to be marked by Dad (me) making a large number of pancakes. The children would get very excited and boast about how many they were able to eat. They would sit down at the table when they were almost ready and plan what each would have with each pancake. 'I'll have banana and Nutella with my first pancake' one of them would say. The other would respond with 'I'll have sugar and lemon with mine', and so it went. The conversation would include references to yogurt, honey, strawberries among other things. As they grew older, they contributed more and more, laying the table, getting things ready, and eventually offering to make the last batches of the pancakes, so Dad could sit down and eat his. These gestures were their way of showing their gratitude and kindness. Generally, the meal ended with a wonderful feeling that everyone had enjoyed another Pancake Day, confirmed by sweetness in the mouth and warmth in our bellies.

However, this year things went very differently. It was my turn to cook dinner. I had planned to make hamburgers, but had not made a start by the time my two sons, now 23 and 26, arrived from work. I had just arrived from the shops with the ingredients. Now, I probably do not need to tell the reader that most young men tend to have large appetites, but in the case of my sons, that is an understatement. They verbalise it from the moment they set foot in the house. Cries like 'Feed me, Dad!' and 'What's for dinner?' are the common greetings. I admit this tends to put some pressure, if you are the one meant to make dinner. But this time, they started making dinner, without even complaining! I just went along and sliced tomatoes and cheese. Dinner was made very quickly. When we had finished, one of them said we would now have pancakes and asked everyone how many they would like. By the time we finished clearing up the remains of the first course, freshly made, steaming hot pancakes were placed on the table. Delicious!

### **Reflection**

As I ate my pancakes, I couldn't help feeling this was a wholly new experience. I had a strong sense that roles had been reversed. I was now taking the back seat. Instead of being made guilty at not having prepared dinner early, my sons had taken over and got on with it. So, what happened? Perhaps, they took into account that I had been shopping, so I couldn't have cooked. However, such displays of logical thinking just don't happen when they are hungry. Another possibility is that they have accepted that Dad is now getting a little slower. In any case, the focus of this reflection should be on me and my learning, not theirs. I realised that the wheel of life had been turning all this time and I hadn't noticed. I had continued to perform my role in the same way, or so I thought. This small episode was teaching me that I have to update aspects of my self-concept, to use a psychologists' notion. Many readers may share the idea that nothing has changed as they grow older, except the exterior, that they feel the same as when they were younger. However, reflecting on how my sons treated me on Pancake Tuesday suggests otherwise. So, what are the main changes in me? Indeed, this is too big a question to answer in a vignette, but at least writing has allowed it to come to the surface.

## **Vignette#99**

**Domain:** Language and Communication

**Title:** Choosing Words Carefully

### **Narrative**

Several years ago I participated in a national writing programme called 'Writing is Primary'. This action research project was funded by The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to support the teaching of writing in primary schools. The study provided opportunity for teachers to work alongside authors to develop an understanding of the art and craft of the writing process. For me, the experience was life-changing; the insights that I gained were revolutionary. The author Nikki Siegen-Smith supported my school; her pearls of wisdom still chime true with me today, even as I write this vignette. Nikki explained the importance of choosing words carefully – "Jasen, are your words pulling the reader towards your writing, or pushing them away?" This powerful question prompts the writer (author) to focus on the reader. The writer needs to anticipate the thoughts and feelings of their audience; the writer must select words for effect, or they are in danger of pushing the reader away. We rarely write solely for ourselves, so to attract the full attention of the reader is important, essential really.

This week I have been supporting trainee teachers with their academic writing skills. I have also helped students to compose their personal statements, in preparation for applying for teaching posts. From the outset, I explained that 'they held the pen!' Again, this is one of Nikki's gems. I was not about to mark their words, nor tell them what to write. They were the author, and I was their editor; we would be learning partners for writing. The students were in charge of the words they chose, but my role was to challenge them to choose carefully. I would offer them alternative phrases, but these were only suggestions – they could ignore anything that I said, with no judgement. The trainees were not used to working this way. Many felt uncomfortable at first, expecting me to instruct them, but as the sessions progressed the students were quick to revise their own words, often stating: "That's much clearer now – that's the way I want it to be read."

### **Reflection and Learning**

How often do we consider the effect of our word choice in our daily lives? I like to consider that my language is typically measured, but in these emotionally draining times, my words might be released too quickly, and push the listener away. I pride myself on choosing words carefully for EduTwitter, but perhaps I need to be as self-critical in everyday contexts. In the author and editor writing partnership, the author is supported to reflect and revise. Importantly, the editor poses questions regarding purpose, clarity and intent. I like to view the relationship as: Pose - Ponder – Polish. Working this week with trainee teachers has confirmed my belief in choosing words carefully, but not just for writing. I could have easily pushed the students away from me with ill-chosen words. I am happy to say that I didn't. Thank you Nikki – always!

## **Vignette#100**

A Virtual World Experience:

### **Domain Work**

I presented with a former colleague last week to an international audience comprised of academics who work in subjects related to the Holocaust and museum staff about gamebased activities related to the Holocaust and World War II. My area of expertise is teaching and learning in adult education and of course being a member of the charity: The Gathering the Voices Association. Gathering the Voices. There is only six of us in the group. Fortunately, however, my colleague is an expert on the subject of developing serious computer games.

My colleague and I carefully timed our presentation. He ensured all the slides looked professional. He even very kindly offered to run the slide show. All I had to do was to talk to my slides. However, when it was my turn to speak I found the act of speaking to the screen, knowing that there were over 100 people from all over the world listening, was quite terrifying.

I think part of this fear emanated from the fact I am a baby boomer (generation X) and knew that most of the population were from the millennials (generation Y) or even generation Z (those born post 1995). In reality although my voice seemed to me to be quite shaky, the audience did not ask me any difficult questions. Most of the questions were extremely detailed serious computer game questions. Who would have thought the various IT programmes that people use when designing a game could attract so much interest? Although, I realise I am being slightly facetious, there was a lot of discussion around using serious computer games as a teaching tool with regards to Holocaust education.

### **Reflection**

I realise that part of the reason I volunteered to present is that I recognise that it is an important aspect of my engagement with lifelong learning. However, I cannot believe the length of time I have taken in preparing a fifteen - minute session. I have tried to rationalise why I am worried about this teaching experience. After all I have over thirty years' experience of teaching in adult education; a PhD on the subject of 'Engaging adult learners with independent learning and critical thinking to enhance citizenship and employability'. I have concluded that since I have retired I have very quickly lost confidence in my own ability. In the past, I would have 'knocked up' a presentation in twenty minutes; now I agonise over every word, phrase and slide. And sadly, I am now totally addicted to the designer tool on Powerpoint. So, I am now trying to view this as a positive experience; I have contacted academics whom I last saw over four years ago. Even though I may not have seen them on line, as there were too many to see on the screen, I have made contact again. And I have heard back from people across the world which is a good thing in this time of isolation and we have chatted about the important things in our lives – family health and how well our coping strategies are working.

## Vignette#101

Vikki Pendry Vignette 3

### Promoting Independence

I have had various conversations this week in professional circles where the theme has been to find ways of helping teachers to help learners become increasingly independent. Independence is rightly regarded in my view as an important characteristic entwined with resilience, efficacy and attitudes towards citizenship and identity. In many textbooks in Pakistan I heard this week, learning activities focus on repeating what has been presented for example to check what has been learnt rather than creating an opportunity for reflecting on meaning and analysing information. Some online training materials for teachers in Ghana reportedly place too much emphasis on letting teachers 'get on with it'. So, the challenge is to give teachers just the right amount of support (how do we find out how much support they need?) in order for them to be able to give learners just the right of support to become increasing independent. Sometimes this is referred to as scaffolding. Get the structure right but allow for flourishing and context specific colours around and within it.

### Reflection

I have spent much of motherhood preparing my son for independence. I zip up his coat...then don't mention a coat at all when we go out to encourage him to make the coat/no coat decision on his own. I place food in a funny face shape on his plate...then leave the recipe book open ready to be interpreted, implemented and evaluated. I buy his clothes...then give him an allowance to navigate Sports Direct specials.

My son is now 16. He is funny and handsome and bright and bold. ***He is increasingly independent.*** He makes his own plans, cleans his room (mostly), set his alarm(s) to get himself ready for 'school' and suffers the consequences of his 'independent mistakes' with reasonable humility. I should be pleased shouldn't I with his development? Of course I am. But there is also a sense of loss, a persistent nagging anxiety of 'what if he....?' and some rejection. Planning for independence in the classroom feels very different from the reality of seeing your child grow, stumble, stagger and regain his stride. I find the whole teenage journey fascinating, wonderful and terrifying in equal measure. He needs his wings...but I'm not I'm quite ready for the flight