

Common Threads

Common Threads:
A Discursive Text Narrating Ideas of Memory
and Artistic Identity

By

Adele Flood

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

Common Threads:
A Discursive Text Narrating Ideas of Memory and Artistic Identity,
by Adele Flood

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In memory of Rosa Anna Cura and Joe Gregory,
My grandparents who told me their stories and allowed me to dream.

I dedicate this book to my sons,
Benjamin, Daniel and Matthew.
And to my grandchildren
Tomas, Clementine, Lindsay and Lachlan

May they keep the memories alive, tell their own stories
And forever speak with strong and creative voices.

CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	ix
Acknowledgments	x
Summary	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter One.....	14
Weaving Worlds	
<i>Beginning narrative research, the role of the storyteller, personal experiences and influences in art education.</i>	
Chapter Two	44
Journeys	
<i>Life stories: repositories of the events recorded and constructed as personal narratives. Writers in different genre use metaphors to provide meaning, Lives are recorded in fragments of time</i>	
Chapter Three	79
The Life Stories	
<i>Using the authorial voice to introduce the participants, the ten artists' life stories are constructed as narratives.</i>	
Chapter Four.....	98
What Kind of Bear?	
<i>Methodological questions of narrative and the interviewing process. Application of the hermeneutic ways of knowing contribute to the systems model: "Constructing Personal Narratives" to generate the interview questions.</i>	

Chapter Five	125
Story Time	
<i>Exploring discourse and elements of storying to communicate meaning. The plasticity of childhood memory, identifying and interrogating ideas of self within internal and external realms of being, through personal story and through existing literature.</i>	
Chapter Six	149
Unpacking	
<i>Interrogation of the existing literature and individual stories to explore acts of will, and the reflexive nature of humans. The creation of family myths and acts of telling stories to bring a self into being.</i>	
Chapter Seven.....	173
Textscapes of Lives	
<i>Investigating the transcripts as data, creating constructed interior and exterior textscapes that reveal important emotional driving forces within the creative individual.</i>	
Chapter Eight.....	205
Contours of Self	
<i>The ‘flow of life’: Dilthey and hermeneutic ways of knowing, Searching the interior voices to reveal ways in which the participants respond to art making, childhood memories and the creation of artistic identity.</i>	
Chapter Nine.....	230
Bringing the Threads Together	
<i>Constructing the communal threads from the individual participants. The data reveals the common threads of practice and the artists’ emotional response to medium.</i>	
Chapter Ten	244
Endings and Beginnings	
<i>The findings, new knowledge, and implications for future art education.</i>	
References	270

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Illuminating Experience	34
Figure 2: Snake Boy	71
Figure 3: The Gold Fish King.....	72
Figure 4: Gold Fish King Article.....	73
Figure 5: Gold Fish King and Wife	73
Figure 6: Dance Troupe.....	74
Figure 7: Frangipanis.....	75
Figure 8: Going to Town	76
Figure 9: Constructing Narratives A.....	115
Figure 10: Constructing Narratives B.....	115
Figure 11: Constructing Personal Narratives.....	117
Figure 12: Converging Spheres of Creative Being.....	152

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SUMMARY

The book *Common Threads* explores ideas of artistic identity and memory contained within the narrated stories of ten textile artists. It reveals how individuals bring a sense of linearity to fragments of memory and create a cohesive sense of self through telling their life's story.

The author, a practising artist and an experienced visual arts educator, engages with the reader in a discussion of ideas of self, identity, and memory through both figured worlds and the cultural meanings and understandings of the various roles individuals have within communities of experience and practice.

Common Threads begins with questions of the place the past holds in the formulation of the present and the future. It identifies the influences upon art education practice and how the delivery of art teaching has impacted upon individuals within the education system. It also identifies early learning experiences outside the formal sector and the influences those experiences have had on the participants and the author.

Found within the stories, are the internally driven imperatives to create, as well as the internal and external realms that are revealed from within the artists' own words. The writer investigates the levels of discourse and understanding that are needed when coming to terms with personal identity in particular cultural roles and, in this instance, the role of an artist. Assumptions and boundaries regarding the perceived role of the artist are questioned.

By employing a systems model, the author constructs new ideas of interrogating identity and art practice. The model, "Constructing Personal Narratives", brings into focus the hermeneutic circle of learning and identifies the importance and need to provide opportunities for lifelong learning. The stories told by the participants who returned to the formal education sector later in life reveal the profound effects adult learning had upon their lives. The writer reveals how the model generated the interview questions that provided the rich biographical content that emerged within dialogues.

Included also are personal writings from the author's memory and personal journals that provide examples of the place of memory and the manner in which individuals go about constructing stories across time.

The individual artists' words are investigated and analysed in terms of childhood memories, significant others and formal education and from these the landscapes of text, titled "textscapes", were created. The inner textscapes reveal the feelings of the individual participants in terms of: Families of Origin; Significant Others; Significant Events; Formal Learning; Current Life Situations; Acts of Will; Self Perception and Response to Medium. The exterior textscapes reveal the external life events of each participant.

From the individual textscapes, five communal threads are created. Strands of meaning are gathered together and these form the constructed landscapes of text, which reflect the common threads of feeling that are shared by the participants. The themes identified and used to combine the inner feelings are: Response to Medium; Current Situations and Attitudes to Creativity; Childhood Memories; Formal Learning; and Self Perception.

Common Threads contains ten chapters constructed in the form of a narrative, with references to significant theorists in the fields of social science, philosophy and education embedded throughout. The voices of the participants and the author are found, woven and interwoven, throughout the whole text.

Emerging from the stories, the following observations are made explicit:

- Arts practice forms an essential anchoring mechanism for each of the artists.
- The feelings and inner personal rewards that art making provides for the individual.
- The relationship between the subjective position of the individual and the exterior world.
- The hermeneutic circle of knowledge: its application to narrative enquiry.
- textscapes and threads as constructed devices that provide access to subtexts of emotional responses to events and ideas of self.

- Formal education experiences within the primary and secondary sectors had little impact upon the choices of the individuals to practice as artists.
- Positive formal learning experiences were attached to specific individual teachers.
- Significant others outside the formal learning sector had a strong impact upon the artists' ability and desire to undertake creative pursuits.

The common threads of experience and feelings of the ten participants and the author are revealed and from these emerge deepened understandings of both the place of stories within our lives and how stories can further our understanding of what it means to be an artist. Emerging from these stories are implications for teaching practice; these are presented as observations and questions in terms of how educators should be part of the learning experience with those they educate.

INTRODUCTION

In 1943, Sir Herbert Read's seminal text "Education through Art" changed the face of art education forever. In it he introduced the idea of learning through art. John Steers (2001) recounts a lecture given by Sir Herbert Read at an open meeting at University College, London, on the 3rd January 1965 in which Read declared that: "Education through Art" was a revolutionary policy, that education would be revolutionised and a power unleashed that the world would hardly imagine. In the pamphlet produced for that meeting he stated:

"We declare that our foremost aim is the establishment of an education in art which will develop the imaginative and creative powers of children, and that to the outside world must seem as harmless as any cause that ever brought two or three people together. But those who have followed through the implications of this aim know that it is packed with enough dynamite to shatter the existing educational system and to bring about a revolution in the whole structure of our society." (Steers, 2001: 219).

The dynamite to which Read referred was the idea that education should be child centred, and that each child required a special type of education suited to individual needs and development. It was to be based upon ideas of an aesthetic education in which the "senses upon which consciousness and ultimately the intelligence and the judgement of the human individual, are based." (Read, 1961: 7). He argued for an integrated, organic form of education that emanated from play and that incorporated feelings, sensations, intuition and thought (see p: 223). Read argued that spontaneous expression is inherent in life, that "collectively, as well as individually we live out an inherent but evolving pattern." He continues: "Every man (sic) is a special kind of artist and in his originating activity his play or work he is doing more than express himself: he is manifesting the form which our common life should take in its unfolding." (1961: 308).

It was a radical position taken by Read: to suggest that children should be allowed to develop their ideas through their feelings and sensations and that thought and intuition should be seen as valid forms

of knowledge exploration that would evolve through their own creativity. The creativity that is manifested is what I would term the inner voice of the individual. These child centred ideas of art education are the ideas that have given rise to the perception of art as 'free expression'. Steers (2002) says, "This view of art education as an undisciplined free for all where anything goes still persists." (p.4).

This book stems from the ideas of learning "through" art and has arisen from my belief that as humans we can and do learn through our senses, our personal thoughts, our reflections upon experiences we have had, our intuition and our feelings. It also reflects my strong belief that art making is anything but undisciplined, and entails learning experiences that are valuable and essential to the education of all individuals, whether they wish to become artists or not.

To explore notions of identity and creativity, I will explore a number of important issues about the manner in which ten individuals have constructed their life stories and created their artistic identities through their memories and experiences. It is through their stories that I have sought to understand, specifically, the ways in which events within their life histories and educational experiences have impacted upon their ability to enact their desires to become artists. As Erben (1998) states,

"The *specific* purpose of the research will be the analysis of a particular life or lives for some designated reason for example in examining the world of work it may be appropriate to look at the biographical routes by which given individuals become teachers, nurses, prostitutes, librarians, actors, etc." (p.4).

The initial impetus for this exploration came from my own experiences as an artist and an arts educator. It was also prompted by my views of current education practice and the direction in which I see education to be going. Current ideas of learning that are dominated by on-line learning and distance education are at odds with what I understand the needs of learners, and specifically learners within the arts, to be. Czikszenmihalyi (1997) argues that: "the arts are increasingly seen as dispensable luxuries that must prove their worth in the impersonal mass market." (p.11).

I have chosen to explore these ideas using a narrative mode of inquiry because I feel that much can be learnt from the life stories of

artists who have been through an education system and continued to work within their chosen medium of textiles, despite its marginalised place in the fine arts world. It was the rich data available through life's experiences that I wished to find through the stories of my participants.

Because I had to make assumptions about notions of personal identity and the cultural relationships of art making, educational trajectories and personal life histories to realise the specific research purpose, I chose to focus on textile artists as I felt I shared similar life experiences within that area of arts practice. While the stories are in response to textiles practice, the artists speak very much in general terms about making and creating, and in fact many of them share with me an ability to work across several media. Their observations are applicable to all modes in which they choose to represent their ideas, with many of the artists working in several media at once. Essentially I have been asking questions about how individuals, through their life histories, memories, educational trajectories and creative processes, establish a sense of identity. And, from within those stories, how these elements contribute to the self-identification of an artist.

To further inform and deepen our understanding of the importance of life histories in the self-identification as an artist, the following questions may help us further in considering the wider contexts of self-identity, with particular reference to educational practice.

- What common elements can be identified within the life histories, educational trajectories and creative processes of textile artists?
- How do cultural frames impact upon career choices of textile artists?
- In the construction of identity what are the important memories that inform their artistic practice in a chosen field.

Through the narratives of ten textile artists, I will reveal how individuals bring together various facets of life histories: the personal and communal forces that have impacted upon the way they have positioned themselves to develop a cohesive sense of self, and to identify themselves as artists.

The artists

The textile artists live and work in the major cities of Melbourne and Sydney. They are all engaged in other work as their paid employment, but see their art making as an essential component of their lives. They are within the age range of mid 30's to mid-60's. They were all interviewed three times in their homes or in places in which they felt comfortable. The stories told during those interviews form the basis of the research.

The interviews took place over the period of 18 months; two of the artists did not wish to be interviewed after the first interview, and one artist moved and could not be subsequently located. However, I continued to use their stories as told in the first interviews as my approach was based on ideas of narrative and storying of life events.

The artists were located using the snowball technique. I believed it was imperative that the artists self select, as the stories I would be asking them to tell could at times be intensely personal.

The artists exhibit their works in commercial galleries and they all invited me to view and talk about the works they have created. However this book is not about the actual art they have produced but, rather, it is focused on the artists' constructions of their life stories, and recollections of the influences in their lives that have affected their ability to undertake their arts practice. It is about their response to the medium: their feelings, intuitions, sensations and thoughts.

Issues of gender arose within the stories, as they unfolded during the discussion. The emphasis is on the story, and the decisions made have been treated as part of those events as narrated. It should be noted, however, that I could find only one male textile artist who would be interviewed. I approached several and they were unwilling to have their stories recorded or used. This in itself raises issues of gender: in particular the observation that women are more willing and able to discuss and reveal their emotional responses within a dialogic situation. Also evident are issues regarding the timing of when participants were able to respond to and undertake alternate pathways. Regarding female artists' decisions, Mishler (1999), in *Storylines*, has devoted considerable discussion to this issue of gender in terms of work and practice, and provides some observations regarding the context of time,

location, experience and attitudes of women who are at varying crucial times (turning points) in their lives (see pp.97-101).

Direct quotes from the participants' transcripts can be found throughout the text. They reveal the "respondents' depth of emotion, the ways they have organised their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences and their basic perceptions." (Patton, 1990: 24).

The Process

I felt that a narrative methodology would best provide access to the kind of information being sought. The rich data gained from the life events as told were analysed, and common aspects of the participants' stories were identified. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, and open-ended questions were employed to allow the participants' understanding of the world to emerge. As Patton advises, the task of the researcher is to provide a "framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view about the world or that part of the world about which they are talking." (1990: 24).

These common aspects were also compared with my own personal experiences, and these were the common threads that I sought to establish. They also provided the facility to become closely attuned to the emotional dimensions of experience and as Jackson (1998) notes:

"By pausing to consider how we feel about the situation that we are in, no matter how dim that feeling, we effectively contribute to its transformation." (p.14).

In pausing to reflect upon the recorded events of my life and the stories of my participants, I begin to transform the stories into ideas and questions of identity and memory. At this point, by using the reflective voice that I am now employing, I am engaging you, the reader, in a similar process of reflecting upon the ideas that I am placing before you, in the hope that you also contribute to the transformation of knowledge. Dewey says:

"In reflection, the extrinsic reference is always primary...in the situation which follows upon reflection, meanings are intrinsic, they have no instrumental or subservient office...every reflective experience

adds new shades of such intrinsic qualifications...[It enriches] the immediate significance of subsequent experiences.” (see Jackson 1998:15).

The practice of reflecting upon experience, the introduction of hermeneutic philosophy and the application of Dilthey’s principles, made it even more appropriate that the narrative form of recording be employed. The development and application of the model *Constructing Personal Narratives* (Chapter Four) was employed to construct the questions and make visible the processes engaged in enabling the interaction between the inner and outer realms of the individual, thus exemplifying the hermeneutic circle of learning.

To that end, I have chosen to create a narrative that contains the research content, the data in the form of narratives, my own personal stories as exemplifiers of issues regarding identity, memory and narrative, and the findings that I have produced in part in the form of landscapes of text.

This work generates a deepened understanding of the nature of artistic identity and, therefore, has implications for educational practice. It reveals to the reader new levels of understanding in terms of artistic identity ‘through’ the words and stories of the artists, and through the words and stories of the researcher who is also a practising artist.

Because I share strong common experiences with my “participants”, I have engaged in dialogues with the artists that, while enabling their voices to be heard, have led to their ideas of artistic self being revealed. By weaving my voice through and with the artists, I have enacted hermeneutic ways of knowing, and the voices have become interwoven through common frames of interpretation. In further chapters I will raise this issue again, with particular reference to hermeneutics and ways of knowing.

In *Common Threads* I acknowledge and affirm from the outset that this work bears my signature: that my self is ever present. Bensen (2001) tells us that people, when called upon to take control or rechart their lives, turn to narrative, because “telling one’s story especially to oneself is a key navigational strategy in turbulent times.” (p.56). The artists’ stories within *Common Threads* make clear the manner in which these individuals have recharted their lives, and their narratives provide

the rich material from which the following significant new knowledge has emerged:

- The model *Constructing Personal Narratives*, based upon the standard systems model, has made explicit a structure for relating the subjective with the exterior world of the individual and within the model exists the hermeneutic construction of knowledge and learning;
- The common threads as identified, which reveal the characteristics or features that the artists and I have in common in terms of family history, schooling and creative experiences;
- The textscapes: constructions that offer a means to extract and observe the subtext of emotional responses to events and ideas of self;
- The threadsapes: constructions that offer a wider view of how a group of people who work within a broadly similar field can share and express similar emotional responses to events and ideas of self;
- In these constructs the hermeneutic circle is made explicit in its application to the narrative enquiry;
- Through the narratives of the participants, I re-examine notions of what it means to be “an artist.”

The application of the model makes explicit that learning is a life-long experience. It reflects a broad conception of learning and takes learning from the confines of a formal education sector, and places learning as a central element of personal growth and self-identity. I have used my own personal recollections and experiences to exemplify issues under discussion while also crossing boundaries or fields of knowledge, which make it an interdisciplinary discursive exploration of identity, memory and the manner in which individuals create a cohesive sense of self.

It seemed appropriate that a discursive form of writing, that engages the reader in experiencing the constructed narrative, should be employed. To that end I engaged in writing about the lives of the artists as a text that, in itself, is a narrative discourse.

Text and Form

“Lives are texts: texts that are subject to revision, exegesis, reinterpretation and so on. That is to say encountered lives are taken by those who account them as texts amenable to alternative interpretation.” Bruner, (1991:129)

When thinking about creating *Common Threads* it became evident that I had to choose the way in which I would present the voices of the artists to the reader. I was conscious that I wanted to construct and create a text that assimilated and melded the words of the artists I had interviewed with my own. I wanted to create a texture of narrative. The more I came to read about narrative methodology and the role of story telling in the individual’s life, the more determined I became that I would write in a way that reflected my belief in the process of storying and the power of the voice. I was aware that I was constructing a narrative that had to contain the ideas and theories across a number of disciplines and in doing this I was crossing some boundaries of content that I believed needed to be crossed. Bruner elaborates further on ideas of text when he says,

“A text is a conceptually formulated narrative account of what a life has been about. That it is an account carried in memory or carried in memory in such a way as to be capable of generating shorter or longer versions of itself.” (1991:130)

As the writer and creator of this text I was responsible for engaging the artists in acts of remembering and telling their life stories and I was required to formulate and make explicit the conceptual framework within which I undertook the exploration. An important aim of the research concerned the application of narrative methodology to investigate ideas of memory and identity. By acting as narrator and choosing a narrative form of discourse, I have exemplified the narrative methodology and, as narrator, it was important that I found ways of tying the events and ideas together.

Eisner (2001) tells us that the

“selection of a form of representation is a choice having profound consequences for our mental life, because choices about which form of representation will be used are also choices about which aspects of the world will be experienced.” (p.52).

I have chosen the narrative form to make explicit the ways in which stories meld together to create the texture of the narrative. Within the text are many stories and in those stories are the aspects of the world I wished in the first instance to highlight. Given the unfolding nature of discovery within narrative, the unexpected and consequential knowledge that emerged as the research evolved was also highlighted.

Ricoeur, (1992) when describing the process of telling another's story, says that "by narrating a life of which I am not author as to existence, I make myself co-author as to its meaning." (p.158).

By narrating the ten stories I have become the co-author of the told lives. In doing this I bring to the world, through my mediated position, aspects of artistic lives that I wish made known. I employ my voice to reveal and create the emplotment. It is not merely descriptive, as many narratives can be when recounting a singular event; here I assimilate the events of many lives, including my own, so that they become part of a cohesive whole: that is, the overarching narrative *Common Threads*. For as Maan (1992) tells us, "the function of narration is to artificially order discordant experience by emplotting it." (p.12). Erben explains that "these narratives (whether past, present or future) are the cohering mechanisms that make up comprehensible human experience." (1998: 13).

In the text of *Common Threads* I weave together my own stories and observations with the artists' stories and the theories and ideas of knowledge that I have found relevant. I have looked to different forms of text — fiction, poetry, children's literature, my own creative memories recorded in journals — to add substance to the structure of the narrative I have created. In doing this I have explored others' ideas of narrative, while at the same time found ways to expand my own personal narrative. Using the stories of self and others I have been able to reflect upon the important issues of life through the substance of the life stories being told.

Marcus (1994) notes that

"recounting one's own life inevitably entails writing the life of an other or others; writing the life of another must surely entail the biographer's identification with his or her subject whether these are explicit or not." (p.273).

By processes of narrative discovery in *Common Threads*, I reveal what characteristics I have in common with the artists. The recounting of their lives has led me to a heightened self-awareness and has enabled me to recount my own story as well. Within this narrative, also, is the unfolding discussion of how I discover and extract the artists' inner voices and create new landscapes of text, which I have called, in the case of the personal voices, "textscapes", and the communal voices, "threadscapes".

When reading personal narratives, Smith (1993) tells us that we find ourselves "immersed in complex issues of representation, ideology, history, identity and politics as they bear on subjectivity."(p.392). I have consciously and deliberately chosen the narrative form. In doing this I have taken into consideration my own subjective position as storyteller and, within the narrative, all those who will enact the functions of communication. Ricoeur's ideas of the hermeneutics of self suggest that we must be concerned with questions of who enacts the functions of speaking, narrating, listening, and who is the subject of the narration.

Many people speak in this work, many listen, all ten artists and I narrate our lives and the artists are in the first instance the subjects of the narration. As I engaged further with the process it became evident that I too, through the reflective process, became the subject of narration.

Maan (1999) tells us that

"Narrative is not an alternative to truth and reality; it is the mode in which truth and reality are presented." (p. 70).

Instead of saying that truth and reality are presented, I would suggest that truth and reality are (re)presented. The narrative contains the substance of the story I wanted to tell and the way I wished to tell it: the narrative and the narrators are to be found in the co-joined voices of my own self and the artists with whom I spoke.

In true narrative form I should try to find why this might be so and when reading this text you will experience many times when I turn to questions of where we have been and where we are going as we journey through the lives we lead. Many times I turn to my own memories to glean further understanding of the role of story and its place in

interpreting and understanding human behaviour. I have briefly reflected upon Read's ideas of child centred learning and how such learning creates individual expression while the liberation of the inner voice comes from allowing the expression of personal feelings and thoughts.

From my childhood I have memories of many rules that were designed to silence my voice and the voices of other children as well. It was a time in which that kind of family and that kind of schooling was seen as acceptable:

"Don't speak until spoken to"

"Don't speak with your mouth full,"

"Children should be seen and not heard"

"if you can't say anything good don't say anything at all"

"keep your eyes open and your mouth shut."

"hold your tongue my girl!"

To this day, I don't understand why it was so important to keep children quiet and to have to hold onto one's thoughts. I did not like being silenced then and still do not like it today.

In *Common Threads* I wanted my voice to ring clear. I wanted to make understood my belief in the importance of story and the place that storytelling has in the development of a person's self-identity. By creating this narrative I wanted to bring to the world my inner voice and inner voices and desires of the artists whom I interviewed. I wanted to create a pathway that moved between the personal and the external and formed a bridge between disciplines and paradigms. I wanted to provide a strong voice that would sit within the text while at the same time revealing the strength and creativity of the artists I interviewed. I wanted to place before the external world the stories that the artists and I have encountered as we undertook the discussions.

From these artists, who have agreed to be heard, we might all come to understand and accept the need for strong and confident voices that speak to the world and the important place that art education holds in enabling this to occur.

As the discussion unfolds, I will engage with issues of methodology, and a wide range of literature across several disciplines. The chapters,

linked by my voice and the voices of the participants, explore ideas of identity and narrative and memory.

In Chapter One I outline the approach I adopted and discuss the processes of narrative, and the role of the storyteller. Questions of where we have come from and where we are going are raised and discussed. Art education practice is contextualised and linked to a direct relationship with the English system. In this chapter, it is suggested that we need to revisit the ways in which art education is delivered. I introduce the 'personal voice'; by experiencing others' stories we can begin to make sense of our own stories.

Chapter Two begins with metaphors of journeys and ideas of life stories as fragments of time. Teachers are seen as conductors or signposts for meaning. My personal reflections of influential books and memories are examples of the way significant places and events can be used in constructing life stories and self identity. The functions of memory as the repository of storied event, the recording of cultural history, through the creation of personal narratives, allow further understanding of the way artists interact with the world.

Chapter Three, writing as the author of biographical accounts, I present each of the artists' life stories from the given information from the interviews. In doing this I introduce the reader to the participants and the co-voices within the constructed narrative of *Common Threads*.

Chapter Four begins with questions of what kind of stories individuals want to hear and tell. There is discussion of how we make sense of the world and what knowledge and shared discourse is needed to enable mutual understanding of art making experiences and the establishing of an artistic identity. The model is constructed to enable the development of the interview questions and focuses on questions of the past and queries what the future holds in store.

Chapter Five is concerned with the plasticity of childhood memories and the way such memories imprint themselves on our lives. The cultural scripts and the figured worlds of practice help determine our frameworks of identity and boundaries of self. The ideas of internal and external realms of being suggest that art making is an internally driven imperative.

In Chapter Six it becomes essential to discuss the reflexive nature of humans and their ability to translate life events into discursive form. While such reflexivity is accepted in this chapter, an individual's agency and will is considered in terms of enacting desires and the manner in which the artists respond to the exterior world as they sit at the convergence of both the inner and external realms.

Chapter Seven is concerned with the role of the artist as a recorder of images or fragments of memory. The exploration of the artists' words within the transcripts leads to the construction of a series of textscapes: the text landscapes of their memories and stories. These are constructed, non-linear representations of the artists' creative lives.

Chapter Eight contains an interrogation and discussion of each artist's interior realm as exposed from within their textscape. It reveals the inner feelings and beliefs held by the individual artist with respect to ideas of artistic identity and creativity

Chapter Nine continues the process of landscaping the inner feelings. From the textscapes, the threads are constructed. They consist of the communally held feelings and beliefs across themes that have become evident as common to the artists. They reveal how the artists speak about feelings and their responses to making and creating across the following themes: response to medium, current situations, childhood memories, formal learning, and self perception. It is here that the new text or narrative, which consists of all the threads of the individuals' stories, is brought together.

In Chapter Ten, the common threads between the artists and myself are identified. From the stories of the artists much has been learned about the nature of the artistic self. From the observations and reflections upon the needs of such individuals, the importance of teaching as a communicative act is established. Coupled with this is the obvious need for us to see education as a life-long process.

I will now commence the journey of weaving words, stories and lives to actualise the narrative *Common Threads*: the first words encountered are those of Lyotard.

CHAPTER ONE

WEAVING WORLDS

“The people are only that which actualise the narrative... they do this not only by recounting them, but also listening to them and recounting themselves through them.”

—The Postmodern Condition (Lyotard, 1979: 23)

Stories come into being through the medium of a storyteller. By gathering threads of voices and memories together, as Lyotard suggests, I have actualised the narratives of ten individuals. As well as listening to and recounting the narratives of the artists, I have also recounted many of my own stories.

The role of memory and life histories in the construction of an artistic or any other identity requires important issues to be addressed such as: what common elements can be identified within the life histories, educational trajectories and creative processes of textile artists? How do cultural frames impact upon career choices of textile artists? And, in the construction of identity, what are the important memories that inform the personal choice of career? From within the artists’ life histories, it will become evident how the personal and communal forces have impacted upon the way in which they have positioned themselves, so that they may identify themselves and practice as artists.

Weintraub (1975) links autobiographical writing with the desire for an increased personal understanding. He says, “The genuine autobiographical effort is guided by a desire to discern and to assign meaning to a life. This effort is usually dominated by a writers’ point of view.” (p.824).

My personal voice has a strong presence in *Common Threads*, and through my own stories, that are at times interwoven within the text and at others removed and contained by borders, I explore my own understanding of story and memory. It is an exploration that is firmly grounded in both

my own story and the stories of the artists, five from Melbourne and five from Sydney.

Each of the artists has stories worth telling and as they actualise their own narratives, they take us on journeys of their individual artistic selves. They explore through their personal recollections their families of origin, their schooling and their journeys that go beyond schooling and into the adult world. In essence, the form of the book is a series of multi-layered narratives, each interacting with and through the voice of the researcher. While the stories are engaging in themselves, they also provide opportunities to explore notions of self and identity. As individuals, we have many selves and while this must be acknowledged, in this work I will pay particular attention to the “inner” voices of the participants; voices that in the past may have seemed lost or not heard at times. These interior, emotional voices I have exposed from within the collected transcripts. They are found in the words directly associated with their art making that the participants use to express their feelings and experiences.

I remember painting. There's a photo of me painting in the garden. I can remember that – out in the garden painting on this easel. (Susan)

I had always had in mind from an early age, around eight or nine, that I was going to be an artist when I grew up. (Kathryn.)

It was just after the war and we had just gone back to school and my father gave me a box of coloured pencils. All through the classes I was just touching it, I wanted to touch the colours. (Fiona)

To allow the inner voice of the creative artist the space to be heard has been an ongoing interest for me as an educator. Virginia Woolf mused upon her need to create as follows:

“I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else...All artists I suppose, feel something like this. It is one of the obscure elements in life that has never been much discussed. It is left out in almost all biographies and autobiographies, even of artists.”

—Moments of Being. (Schulkind 2002. p.86)

She was explaining why she continued to write while others around her were making preparations for the war effort. The obscure elements to which Woolf refers are those that artists often address in terms of being “driven” or having a “need” to create. It is in the inner voices of the artists

that we will find the substance of the creative response and, from the memories of the participants, the value and importance of creative experiences will be made explicit.

By doing this, I willingly enter into the age-old minefield of questioning the relationship between the external world and the internal world of the individual, and in doing this I provide a place for their inner voices and mine to be heard within the external world.

Without doubt my mother was the most predominant person. She was always very creative herself and watching her painting when I was really little always intrigued me. (Annie)

As a little girl, I remember an exciting time. I was given a Christmas present. It was a paintbox and the first thing I wanted to do was to go out and sit on the path and draw the violets with the little drops of water. So that's my first memory of drawing. (Hannah)

The nine women and one man engaged in my exploration have all been honest and very generous in sharing their stories and in doing so have provided a rich landscape of memories from which this new narrative has been constructed.

There are other voices that are to be found within this work. They are the voices of the philosophers and educators who have been part of the ongoing dialogue in which ideas of memory, self and identity have been explored. Also added to these ideas are discussions about artists, creativity, and education. All these voices have been filtered through my personal views on education and artistic identity that I have formed over many years as an artist and an educator. The words of others that I have included here have, over time, become part of my new narrative. This is a function of storying; as we take on the stories of others and increase the knowledge we have, we embellish and inform our own stories and, in doing so, we construct a new narrative.

Because our life stories are ever changing and constantly being (re)constructed, we continually seek understanding and meaning through the telling and retelling of events. Mishler (1995) states: