Chapter 2

The Lived Experience: Finding Joy Through Working in the Arts

Christopher Klopper
Finding that little space for art in my life is my motivation for getting up in the morning and staying alive.

- Elaine

The arts have been noted to improve health, mental well-being, cognitive functioning, creative ability and academic performance. Engaging in creative activity or attending some kind of artistic event appears to improve physical health (Angus 1999; Baklien 2000; Ball and Keating 2002; Bygren, Konlaan and Johansson 1996; Thoits and Hewitt 2001). This could be due in part to its stress-relieving capabilities. Opening, widening and strengthening social bonds through arts engagement is claimed to also improve one's health (Baklien 2000; Ball and Keating 2002). Bygren, Konlaan and Johansson (1996: 1580) provide a more physiological explanation:

We know that the organism responds with changes in the humoral nervous system – for example, verbal expression of traumatic experiences through writing or talking improves physical health, enhances immune function, and is associated with fewer medical visits.

Attending arts events may be stimulating and relieve stress, leading to improved happiness through life balance and satisfaction (Harland et al. 2000). Active participation in the arts further leads to improved self-concept and sense of control over one's life. There are many reasons why this might be so. Many of the claims have been supported by anecdotal evidence originating from community arts programmes, some of which have specifically targeted poor, marginal or 'at-risk' populations (Seham 1997; Weitz 1996; Williams 1995). Some research suggests that the creation and completion of some arts projects provides an opportunity for participants to succeed and gain some positive public recognition, which in turn can improve their sense of control over their life and self-concept (Fiske 1999; Jackson 1979; Seham 1997; Weitz 1996).

The focus for this chapter is on the connection between self-knowledge and working in the arts and how you use your knowledge of self within your work. The methodology employed is a phenomenologically informed narrative – stories lived and told (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). This allows the telling and development of participants' own stories or lived experience.
What is real in our everyday lives?

'What is real in our everyday lives?' is the fundamental question of phenomenology (Neergaard and Ulhoi 2007: 259). Through the systematic uncovering of life-world experiences that happen, the experience can be shown in a deeper way focussing on the meaning as it was lived. Phenomenologists claim and believe the world and the objects we perceive exist because of the meaning we give to them, through an act of interpretation.

Through the analysis of interview transcripts, emerging themes, ideas and trends were connected to make sense objectively about each participant's conscious experience of finding joy through working in the arts. These themes were based on the questions asked in the interview and covered:

- self-knowledge
- work engagement
- the relationship between self-knowledge and work
- internal and external driving factors
- work and life satisfaction
- heart and passions
- authenticity
- strengths, hobbies, beliefs and values.

Through review of the interviews, an objective understanding of the content and the conscious experience of finding joy through working in the arts was brought to the fore. This chapter is about hearing more about the individual's voice, the true lived experience, as opposed to quantifying or presenting a set of variables of factors.

Case 1: The circle of life

Elaine is a community artist who has worked in non-profit organizations for most of her professional career. Her story of her work journey and how she came to be doing what she does today started when she was a young girl and recollects how her grandmother would show her how to make various items.

We used to sit on her front veranda and my grandmother would show me how to make plasticine vases with jam jars in the middle and how to make Christmas trees and how to make daisy chains and a whole bunch of stuff. So I guess my work journey started way back then where I started making things and then I would just always be looking for ways to make things. I would even take lolly wrappers and make flowers out of them or if I had nothing else to do I'd be out making clover chains because I just liked to make things, it makes me happy. It's just how I was.
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I was led to believe that I was not very good at school. The only thing I was any good at was drawing. I got my first commission when I was in Year Nine. A girl at school loved horses and she wanted me to paint her a horse. So I painted this horse for her. She just thought it was the best thing since sliced bread. Interestingly enough my family didn't like my art stuff at all. I didn't get any pats on the back at home but what I did achieve at home was fixing things. I fixed the taps when they dripped, light bulbs; I took mowers apart and then put them back together again. That's what I liked to do.

My mum taught me how to sew. The beauty of being able to do art stuff is that I could imagine and visualize an outfit, whereas my mum had to buy a pattern and cut it all out. I would just see this thing that I wanted to make. I'd go find some fabric because texture is really important to me, the feel of it, and then I would cut out a piece of newspaper and go this is the shape I want and I'd make an outfit. And so I learned the love of doing things where you could make something out of nothing. It just would materialize through the sewing machine and that would be good.

When I left school I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to be a jeweller because I could imagine these things and I wanted to make jewellery. But I wasn't allowed because I was a girl. Back then you couldn't be an apprentice if you were a girl. Increasingly, the things that gave me most joy involved making something and seeing how beautiful it was when it was finished or solving the problem to make it work for me. But I couldn't do that really well because I wasn't academic and art wasn't recognized at home so it was a real struggle to realize this is what really makes me happy but it doesn't seem to make anybody else happy when I'm doing it. So it was a conflict always as to whether I should do it or shouldn't do it.

So eventually I decided that I could do fashion. I'd become a fashion designer because I could draw and I could make things and I just loved fabric. It wasn't as easy as I thought. I went off to the School of Arts at George Street. But my dad didn't like the company I was keeping because they all had long hair even though that was the look back then. So he got me a job so I had to leave the School of Arts. Interestingly enough he got me a job at a chemist, which happened to be in an arcade where there was a fashion shop. So everyday I'd walk past the shop front and go, I can do that. Then I would go home and make my own outfits. I eventually got myself a job at a bridal shop where I would make the dresses. I'd draw the dresses and make them, and I was quite happy with all the laces and the trims. I guess I made other people happy because they'd come in with their ideas and I'd draw it up and create it for them, and they would go wow, that's amazing!

I felt as if I had to earn a living so I would become an art teacher. But I took one look at how they taught teachers to teach art and I just said no, I couldn't do that, that's just a crazy way to teach art. So instead I ended up completing a two-year course in drawing, painting, spinning and weaving because I had this love for textural fibre. And so I made things for two years, I loved it, I just loved it, which is really funny because being at school I hated; I hated school, I couldn't wait to get out. Going to tertiary education later in life
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started my love affair with tertiary education. And so I seem to go back every ten years to do more short courses but that whole idea of I can spend hours, just on my own, doing this because I can, it just feels good, looks good and smells good.

So after two years of study I decided not to do teaching. This led to having my own label at one stage and I was making money. I was selling stuff to all of the resorts up and down Queensland – running a business. The problem with the business in doing fashion was initially I was doing 90 per cent design and 10 per cent business, but when you actually decide to make a career and a business out of it, you have to do 90 per cent business and 10 per cent design. This took away what I like to do most. So I thought no, that’s not going to work because I’d just got very unhappy and again figures, working out the maths, all involved doing hardball with people trying to get money out of them for your outfits. That’s not what I’m on about.

So when I gave up the fashion I got married (again), we went travelling for six months around Australia. We ended up in Mildura around the grapes. And so I would spend the morning picking grapes and the afternoon painting. I loved that it was idyllic. We were only going to pass through but decided to stay, and this got me right back on track. I found myself in the situation where the guy I was married to was enrolled in the hospitality course and I was hanging out all the time on campus with him. So I just hung out at the art department, oh that’s right, I entered a competition. As it turned out, the gentleman who was the judge of the competition, head of the art department, picked my work. He was very impressed and said: I need one more person, you’ve got to come and sign up and start your Graduate Diploma.

There’s always, always, always drama around my art making. I’d just found myself in this nice place where I could make art, then something would happen. And so it has always been a curse and a gift to my life as I saw it and it still drove me. And it took me to this place, to Mildura and it took me into this learning environment and the university. Every time I tried to do something like this, it just had gone wrong. And it had usually gone wrong on a personal level. It was almost like, ‘Do I really want to put myself through this again? Can’t I just be normal?’ But as life would have it, I found myself in Mildura, at TAFE, starting my first year and I haven’t stopped studying since then.

Art saved my life back then because of the emotional dramas that were going on. Art became a friend instead of a shadow. And then I understood how art worked for me and how I could use educational institutions to progress my work. I negotiated myself through universities all around the east coast because I always had to go here, there and everywhere because of family commitments. But art became my anchor and my saviour. The more I used art, the more I understood what I was doing. I think early on it was just responding, doing something, fiddling somehow; but now I use art, I understand it more. I’ve found my niche. The thing about art is you can reject it as much as you like but if it’s there, it’s there. I used to not make art if I didn’t have a studio because I’d think ‘I’ll have to get a studio first’, but that’s not true. Now I have a school as my studio. That’s the way I see it. I don’t know what it is, but inside me it is just right.
Finding that little space for art in my life is my motivation for getting up in the morning and staying alive.

Initially, a strong driver was to prove that I could do something with my life, probably to my family and the imagined group of people who used to put me down. But I think that has all changed now. That was the internal but I think that has changed. I think now there is an external force that says I've got to find a way to make a living but not separate from my art as it was before. It's now how do I use my art effectively to make myself happy, making my work support me financially.

The sheer exhilaration I feel when I have an idea is such a high for me that it carries me forward. I think you get to a point in your life where you think - stuff it, who cares what they think, I'll just do it anyway because that's what I want to do. And so what is it that I really want to do here? I like putting art together with the making of the art and then writing about it and talking about it and putting it out there for other people and writing children's stories for my grandchildren so they'll read it long after I'm gone. I always used to think, 'What's the point of having a few paintings on the wall, that doesn't really do it.' But the idea of being able to put something out there that is worthwhile makes me feel really good to know that maybe something I've done with these people will be passed on.

My heart and my passion nowadays are actually in publication. It's one thing to put something on a wall, but I've always thought that's just such a dead end place for it to go. That kind of tells my story of my life which seems to be important for me to get out there but not just doing paintings on a wall. I want it to be having something that somebody can take and use because that's important to me. I now feel comfortable and confident enough to write and that's the passion that drives me today.

The relational dialogue between art and life, and life and art, has been evident throughout Elaine's career. Harmonizing the dialogue at various stages has not been melodious. At times the dialogue lulled melodiously and rhythmically, while at other times there was discordant jarring and screaming. What was striking about Elaine's story is how her artistry, creativity and originality have always been evident; the only thing that has changed over time is the medium through which she has explored. Elaine's interview highlighted a range of external forces, both positive and negative, throughout her life that influenced her decisions in regard to the arts and the journey that was undertaken. Regardless of the amount of time elapsed since the stereotypical judgements were passed, their impact can be long and lasting. Despite such effects, Elaine persevered to continue to destabilize the myths that her family and society planted in regard to her love of and participation in the arts.

During the interview, Elaine repeatedly shared the strong relationship that exists between who she is and what she does. It was revealed that because of being constantly swayed from art in her earlier years, she has felt a constant need for affirmation and acceptance for what she does. Even though this experience was lived 50 years ago, Elaine's need for
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affirmation and acceptance has continued to play, whether consciously or subconsciously, throughout her career. During the interview, the factors that initially drove Elaine to pursue her dreams, and in some cases continue to drive her, were chronologically revealed, along with her perspective of how what she does within the arts positively contributes to her life satisfaction:

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It is simply captivating to read how art has woven through Elaine's life. Her grandmother, the cultural custodian of the family, handed down art and crafts and inspired her artistic interests. Completing the full circle of life, Elaine's passion is driven today to capture her art in book format for her grandchildren, for posterity. Maybe the front veranda of yesteryear has been replaced by the digital publication of today?

Case 2: Teaching is a performance

Neal's work journey started when he was six or seven years old when his grandmother and mother said: 'We should put the boy into some singing lessons.' When reaching the age of nine, Neal began to learn the violin, and over the years continued to improve in both violin and voice. As a boy treble, Neal performed various roles with the Australian Opera in the Magic Flute, Tosca, La Bohème and Midsummer Night's Dream. His operatic performances continued for a number of years until his voice broke. At this stage, Neal's vocal skills and training had to start anew.

I didn't do much singing for a few years and then started as a baritone for a while and pushed it up to a tenor. I went to university at the end of my private schooling and went to the Conservatorium of Music and studied a Bachelor of Music Education degree, where it was a combination of educational philosophy and performance. And then from there, I got some singing lessons in Brisbane, so I moved up to the Gold Coast back in 1996 and starting singing with Opera Queensland for three or four years. I did a year with the Ten Tenors, right at the start, when it was all starting and that was a good experience. And then, I had a few years of teaching. I just needed to do something totally different. I did
marketing. I came back into teaching after a few years. I was doing high school teaching at that time, while I was performing in opera. And then, after a few years off, I experienced a few casual days in a primary school, and I'd never done much in primary. I thought, 'Well, this'll be interesting.' So I had a few days and I enjoyed the primary school. They actually laughed at my jokes, even though they weren't funny. Whereas [with] a high school kid, it could be a funny joke, but if Joe Bloggs isn't laughing next to you, I'm not laughing at it, so I thought, 'I like these kids!'

So I started with a choir at the primary school. I didn't have many kids in the beginning because I really didn't know how to get kids interested in that sort of thing. And I underestimated the power of repertoire and how important it was to have the right song choices for children to sing, and it took me several years to realize that. And then, once I started thinking about my music instead of just looking at it and going, 'Oh well, try that or try that,' I actually studied the music and thought about how appropriate would it be for these children or not. Whether they would like it, whether there were some challenges in there, was it too easy? So I really started to think about what I was doing with the music. And from there, the numbers started to grow.

I was in a band at the same time called Hoff & The Antman. I played my violin. The other guy played the 12-string guitar. We did a lot of the hits from the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s. I sang a bit of opera and then I went into Metallica. Really mixed it up a bit and that's what got us a lot of gigs and a lot of corporate functions and weddings and things like that. So we were very busy doing that, because of our different range of styles that we could just pull off like that. So I had the band going and worked two or three days a week at that time, because I had three or four gigs a week and we were travelling around Australia with it. I did that for about seven years. And then, he had a job where he had to be committed and couldn't commit to the gigs, so we said, 'Well, I've had enough. I need a break from this.' It was every weekend for seven years.

I then went full time with teaching and had the experience of the violin plus the marketing that I'd had which really helped me with my teaching, having multiple strings to my bow. It really helped with the way I developed myself as an individual and for the children, as well, being able to bring all those skills together and combine them into various things like the choir and my individual teaching, classroom teaching; I could really sell what I was doing.

I've become an expert arranger of songs, as well as somebody who could sell the idea of a choir to his students, instead of trying to get a child to join the choir. 'Anyone want to join my choir?' It was, 'No. You can't join. You have to do an audition.' So all those skills that I'd learned in marketing now started to come to fruition. I now have one of the biggest choirs in a state school. I've got 78 students in junior choir and 50 students in the senior choir, which represents about 20% of the entire school population, which is huge, where before I was lucky to get 2%.

So then I thought, 'Well, I got some experience with the Australian Youth Choir about four years ago,' with a company, a different company. They didn't really look after me as
far as paying for petrol or anything like that, so after a couple of years I left. And then I thought, 'Well, I could probably do it. I've been watching how that company works. Start my own company with a choir.' Birraree invited me at the end of last year to a concert, which is one of the biggest and best choirs in Queensland. They had a Gold Coast section of choristers, and I was invited by one of the mothers who was the choir manager to come along. It was their last show. They were shutting down their Gold Coast section. It wasn't working financially. I sat and watched the kids sing in this concert. It was very moving. And then I was approached, 'What about you, Neal? Can you start a choir? Can you do something?' I replied, 'I don't know.' And then after a while, I said, 'All right. I'll give it a go!' I spent the entire school holidays establishing a company with vision statements, website and business cards. Advertisements in the newspaper, here was my marketing skills now coming through – I wouldn't have been able to do it without that, because I wouldn't have actually thought I could, which is more than anything. I actually wouldn't believe that I could actually do it. And then having that belief, which made a huge difference with my confidence, I actually believed that I could do this.

We started off in February with auditions of 35 children. About 15 of those were from the other choir that wanted to keep going, so I was happy to keep them happy. 'Hey, I've spent all this time setting the thing up. What are we going to sing?' So I spent time looking through the music and getting this done and trying to be one step ahead of everything all the time or months ahead. And then the choir just grew. Word got around and now it's the biggest choir on the coast. It's now got 93 choristers.

Neal's international notoriety has not only shaped his passion for his current music specialist teaching position in a primary school, but has also guided him as a person. The relationship between who he is and the work that he chose to follow is best explained when he describes how he walked away from following one career trajectory, with which he could not fully commit, towards a career pathway that has afforded opportunity to exploit all facets of his personality and character collectively.

Opera guided me as a person; I was guided away from it, because of who I am as an individual and how I'd like to go down to the pub and have a beer with the boys and not have to be too overly concerned with my voice all the time. Opera singers have to wear a scarf every day and have to be really careful at looking after their vocal asset. It's a lifestyle that can be very lonely. You have to be 100 per cent committed to being an opera singer as far as looking after your voice. I'm too much of an extrovert to be able to pull that role off and it took me years to realize that.

I love arias. I don't like a lot of the recitative, so if you could just take that out of an opera all you would be left with are the arias and they are beautiful. That's why I don't mind listening to the arias. I have sung them before and they are beautiful and part of me does miss the fact that I'm not following that path, but at the same time, I'm doing what's best for me, really, because as a person, I wouldn't be happy. I would be constantly
frustrated with the fact that I can't be myself. So that's where it's been a self-guided discovery-learning process. I didn't know I was going to be doing this choir thing and the original stuff with this other girl that I'm working on and doing that sort of style of work – things have just happened, evolved over time.

So what engages you in your work?

More than anything, I would have to say the music itself. The tingling down my spine. That feeling you can't get with anything else. You know, you can't get it sitting in a math class going, '12 times 12 is 144. Goodness, that's unreal.' You know? You can't – even looking at some artwork, I don't get that same feeling. But being able to teach the kids that and seeing them getting that feeling and having them sing that way or play that way and passing that knowledge down. I think inspiring children is the most important thing, because if they don't like you, it doesn't matter how good you are at teaching, they're not going to take it in and they're going to be thinking about something else. I mean, if you don't inspire them, only half of what you say may go through. If you inspire them, then you can educate them. I think some people get that round the wrong way. They forget that personality plays a huge role in the kids’ learning. Not just the knowledge that you have of the way you teach, but how you react and interact with the children. ‘Hey, don't take it too seriously. We can get better at it, but we can do it in a fun way and we can enjoy it.’

Neal's narrative alludes to his pedagogical approach developed over time in which he has skilfully managed to combine three distinct roles – teacher, performer and musician. While he identifies with each of these titles, it is the combinative approach based on his experiences on and off the stage that inform his teaching style, rapport with the students and maintaining a love for music.

I think of myself as an all-rounder cricket player. One who can bowl, bat and field. One that might not be amazingly good in any one of them, but combining all together becomes really good. Having something that’s unique that hasn’t been explored before. Like, the violin with the choir. I want to have something that I’ve created, because creativity in music is probably my weakness part. As far as coming up with a song myself and going, ‘This is entirely myself’, when I’ve tried it in the past and all I’ve done is put in the 16 bars, I’ve put every single idea I can possibly think of and spent weeks on this one thing, I’m thinking, ‘This is ridiculous.’ And then I’ve got this friend that I work with, she’s really good at coming up with an idea and I’m good when I work with her, arranging that or developing that or putting the icing on the cake and, ‘Hey let’s change that chord and let’s do this’, so together we work really well. When I went to the Conservatorium, composition was not one of the subjects that I explored very much. It was more about performing,
arranging, listening and the history of music and comprehending all those things, but actual creation of your own musical works wasn't something that was there.

External and internal drivers for Neal are centred on his dream of being something. He acknowledges that the dream might change slightly now and then, but having success in one's life emerges through always having a dream and never giving up on that dream.

I think if I ever lost my dream, I would lose out on life. I’d be sad and think, ‘There’s no hope,' and negative, but because I’m a very positive person, I react well to positive things. One of my weaknesses is coping with things that happen that are unexpected that are negative or upset me. But that doesn’t often happen to me. I work on that weakness by keeping myself busy and keeping the music going, it blocks all that out.

Working with authenticity is extremely important for Neal – what you see is what you get. When he first started teaching, he claims there was a lot of sugar coating. He was afraid of what might happen if he did reveal the ‘real Neal’. However, as he has gained experience, not just in teaching, but in all facets of life, he has become less apprehensive in bringing down those walls.

Neal sparked discussion about reaching what he termed ‘career maturity’. He regards himself as having reached maturity in his career, as he is confident with the decisions he has taken and has comfort in the routine of his career, but, most importantly, he finds he is still creating and developing new teaching and learning experiences. This is really important. His own musical journey has cultivated his belief that all young children value appreciating and playing music. They want to hear more music or they want to do more of that. It makes them happy because they’ve been inspired by music. Maybe not just me, but by what they’re listening to. They suddenly have an interest in wanting to learn the piano or there's kids at school where the parents come up and go, ‘They learn the piano because of you. You’re not a piano teacher, but every single day they learn the piano and all they talk about is how you’ve inspired them.’ And if I can just transform one child in my entire career, I’ve done my job.

Finding joy through working in the arts

Both Neal and Elaine revealed the origins of their art influence. In both cases, a family member played a pivotal role through the encouragement of their passions in the arts. Although Elaine and Neal are at very different stages in their careers, it is evident that both have tenacity for the chosen art form and make an enduring contribution to the next generation. It is hard not to recognize the master-apprenticeship relation that grounds many art disciplines in their drive to pass their passion, knowledge and skill on to others. During the interviews,
neither participant saw themselves as a master within their particular discipline of the arts. Although Neal might have promoted career maturity, he did not discount the need for continued learning and development; he recognized that as a teacher, one is always required to upskill as no student or class is the same and society is ever evolving.

By employing the phenomenological interpretation, it is apparent that there is indeed a connection between the realization of knowledge of self and the accumulation of happiness within one's work. The personal narratives that Neal and Elaine have shared so freely highlight the personal impact (gain) working in the arts has had. Their stories tell of developing confidence through sustained resilience, always aspiring towards their dream and ensuring enjoyment, fun and happiness is achieved while finding joy through working in the arts.

References


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