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Meta-morphs: – being a mediator of the 'thin' place and 'thin' experience in the HE classroom. A paper on the experience of creating transformations in HE teaching and learning

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Meta-morphs: – being a mediator of the *Thin* place and *Thin* experience in the HE classroom. A paper on the experience of creating transformations in HE teaching and learning.

Ciara Healy: The School of Creative Arts, Coleg Sir Gar, University of Wales Trinity St. David.

Elizabeth (Tomos) Palmer: University of Northampton

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Introduction

The research which underpins this paper began as a doctoral project exploring archaic beliefs concerning Otherworlds and *Thin Places* in two particular landscapes - the West Coast of Wales and the West Coast of Ireland. A *Thin Place* is an ancient Celtic Christian term used to describe a marginal, liminal realm, beyond everyday human experience and perception, where mortals could pass into the Otherworld more readily, or make contact with those in the Otherworld more willingly. To encounter a *Thin Place* in ancient folklore was significant because it engendered a state of alertness, an awakening to what the theologian John O' Donohue (2004: 49) called "the primal affection." These complex notions and terms will be further explored in the opening chapter of this paper; suffice it to say that these notions are at the core of Healy's practice as a writer, curator and book artist.

The concept of *Thinness* takes primacy in this paper because, in a *Thin Place*, one can view multiple perceptions of reality coinherently. This concept draws from Scientist and Buddhist philosopher Roger Corless' (2002: 16) assertion that all realities coinhere in every human, meaning we are all capable of inhabiting more than one 'Weltanschauungen' or world-view simultaneously. The West Coasts of Wales and Ireland, in particular, are geographical locations that were known to have many *Thin Places* (Nash 2006; Robb, 2014). Consequently, the aim of the doctoral project was to show how this concept of the *Thin*, and its associated stories and myths, continues to have a significant impact on the creative practices of contemporary artists and curators in these locations.

What began as a research project focusing on contemporary curatorial practice soon developed, through conversation with Elizabeth Palmer, into a project which included pedagogical practice. This is because; at the time, we were both working at The School of Creative Arts, CSG University of Wales TSD. Over three years as colleagues there, we discovered that there was a great need for *Thin Teaching* for reasons which will be explored in depth in our second chapter 'Things that go bump in the night.'

We realised that the need for *Thin Teaching* was primarily due to a deficit in social and cultural consciousness as a result of widespread socio-economic deprivation and a particularly low sense of well-being amongst local communities in the geographical area in which we worked.

The literary theorist Marina Warner (2002 :11) in her book 'Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other worlds' suggested that moments of crisis, both personal and sociological often coincide with an increased interest in stories and ideas connected to Otherworlds, to notions of metamorphosis and of the transmigration of souls.

Perhaps this is because they can support us over particularly challenging thresholds in life by helping us to imagine another possible way of being, or another form of reality. In the light of the difficulties encountered during our tenure at our previous institution, it was not surprising that these archaic worldviews became increasingly poignant.

Thin Teaching involves the interweaving of ancient and contemporary world-views and therefore, constitutes an example of what Kiberd (2004) calls "the archaic avant-garde." The third chapter of this paper, therefore, aims to explain how, over the course of three years, we attempted to re-dress and re-orientate our pedagogical practice through archaic ideas in order to create *Thin experiences*. Here, students might be given space to ruminate on the possibility that their existence can be more and can mean more than the categories they believed they belonged to or felt they should inhabit. Central to our argument then, is that certain places and their inhabitants can become revitalised by sensitively considered teaching methodologies.

This raises interesting questions about the role spirituality plays in teaching practice as a tool for healing in the twenty first century. As lecturers in Critical and Contextual Studies, our teaching was primarily concerned with creating a transcendental experience in the classroom, an experience that would connect the student to the numinous. Indeed, we will argue that *Thinness* has the potential to inspire a greater permeability between world-views, which, in turn can offer us a new means of coping with the complex socio-ecological issues we face today.

The remainder of this paper focuses on findings from a small focus group of self-selected students who reflected on the process as a means of highlighting the significance of these ideas. Whilst the evidence from this study to date is primarily anecdotal, we feel the results so far are sufficiently positive to warrant a longitudinal study into the value and impact of creating a *Thin Place* and cultivating a *Thin Experience* in education.

1. Defining the Thin

When reflecting on paintings such as Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights, one cannot help but draw parallels to today. In the late 1400s and early 1500s a paradoxical fear and excitement must have been felt by many when the stories of 'El Mundo Otro', as Columbus coined it, were revealed. As Warner (2002: 31) points out, stories from the Otherworld were a challenge to the emerging authority and rational stability offered by science, in addition they were a reminder of a time when reality was felt and experienced through more complex layers of meaning.

It is interesting, therefore, to see how the concepts of instability, of transformation, of amalgamation and of mutation today, seen no longer as a form of evil, have gained popularity in recent years in literary and visual culture. Perhaps this is because they offer a more sophisticated mechanism through which we can develop more meaningful interdisciplinary dialogues. As was mentioned in the introduction, it is often the case that tales of Otherworlds gain popularity during moments of crisis and they can act as a metaphorical transportation mechanism to new ways of being and thinking.

Today, traces in the archaeological record of places we once imagined or believed to possess some kind of portal into an Otherworld or Underworld can still be found. (Mulk & Bayliss-Smith, 2007). They might include passage tombs, stone circles, caves or even trees and boulders with anomalous shapes. They are found in great numbers in peripheral coastal regions in Britain because the West, where the sun sets, was believed to be a place where the dead could gain entrance to the Underworld more easily.

This is certainly the case in a place called Rathcroghan in Co. Roscommon, in Ireland, where there is a strange cave which was known in ancient times as the 'Entrance to the Underworld', or later, after the arrival of Christianity, as the 'Gateway to hell' (Waddell, 2009). The cave at Rathcroghan, or Owneygat as it is called, was a multi-functioning space. It was a place where Druids reputedly trained the young of the community. Those wishing to become Druids were sent into the cave as part of their initiation or rite of passage. They would spend days and nights in the cave, without food or water, battling the daemons of the underworld, and the daemons of their own inner psyches. The cave, according to archaeologist Professor Waddell (2009) was also the home of Queen Morrigan, a fertility Goddess, a War Goddess and also the underworld inversion of Queen Maeve, one of the most celebrated Queens in Irish history - a woman who also had a penchant for stealing other people's livestock! So, the cave was a place of fertility rites, of rites of passage for battle, a place of transformation.

To enter this cave is a strange and intimidating experience. After crawling under a heavy stone lintel set into a hawthorn hedge one enters a small chamber. To the left is an opening wide enough to fit one person at a time hunched over or lying down. Through this opening there is a drop of approximately ten feet into a large chasm in the earth, pitch black, dark and dripping. It requires a lot of courage to enter into this second chamber. It is by all means a step into the unknown.

The story of the cave at Rathcroghan is a useful metaphor for the ways in which we all take a leap of faith into the unknown when we enter into HE education and how the learning environment, like the cave, can become a multi-functioning space of endings, renewal and new beginnings. Across the course of the paper we will use metaphors from the mythology of *Thin Places* to represent elements of the student experience. This is because the core focus of Healy's doctoral research and the underlying theme in our educational strategies is the way in which the invocation of archaic modes of being can generate social change. Therefore, our *Thin* approach to teaching is derived from interconnecting and making coinherent four seemingly separate streams of thought.

The first of these strands is sociological. Research focused on patterns in religious and spiritual thinking in the 21st Century has recognized that there is a growing 'zeitgeist,' for want of a better word, currently developing in Western Europe, which involves a movement away from what the Religious theorists Heelas and Woodhead (2005) call the authoritarian ideologies of the 'Congregational Domain' towards a more relational 'Holistic Milieu'. Their longitudinal study into spiritual practices led them to believe that this transformation in spiritual life is possibly greater and more significant than the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. It must therefore be acknowledged that the ideal of the Holistic Mileau - which they define as being concerned with inclusivity, subjectivity, relationality - once existed as a perception of reality in Wales as in other areas in Western Europe when topographical anomalies were seen to possess symbolic value. The sociological aspect of Healy's doctoral research suggests that the spiritualties of life, therefore, are a growing force and are particular to place. (James, 1983; Mulk & Bayliss, Smith 2007; Turner, 1969; Van Ganeep, 1960 De Botton, 2012; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Ecosophy as a concept, and as a pedagogical practice, constitutes the second strand of this research because it unhooks human and non-human beings from attachments, structures and benchmarks that maintain traditional dualist oppositions. (Guattari, 1989 : 22; Edwards et al, 2012; Finn, 1992). Storytelling as a means to support experience and interpretations of life and death constitutes the third strand in thinking on *Thinness* (Warner, 2002; Woolf, 1931; Giudici & Vecchi, 2005). The final strand is concerned with the coinherence of all of these different subject positions. (Corless, 2002; James, 1983) Their

points of confluence bring *Thinness* into being; their coinherence is what sustains *Thinness* as a way of being. Ultimately then, this project is concerned with facilitating a community with the opportunity to reclaim some agency by helping them to reconnect with world-views and modes of being that did not and consistently do not fit into the perception of reality claimed by Modernity.

Healy posited that these findings cannot be isolated from larger cultural and educational issues. Consequently, we have developed and reflected upon a non-hierarchical framework for teaching, which attempts to address the constructs that prevent transformation from taking place in learning. These include social and cultural conditions, cultures of fear around academia and issues with literacy, health and well-being. Indeed, across the last three to four academic years we recognised the increasing urgency with which the outlined philosophical; and indeed theological, positions ***needed*** to be addressed in our HE Classroom. In our teaching of Critical & Contextual Studies, these socio-economic, cultural and political factors were crippling student development.

The application of Healy's research to our educational practice therefore became a starting point for thinking about the ways in which we might, as teachers, enact Shamanic practices and invite and guide our students to inhabit more than one world view simultaneously, as a potential strategy to cope with these problems.

2. Things that go bump in the night.

At the beginning of our tenure we inherited a number of negative *'monsters,'* which arose out of three principle problems which will be addressed individually through the following section. The first '*monster'* was that of a culture of fear amongst staff and students in relation to what Critical & Contextual studies was and what it represented. The second *'monster'* can be defined in terms of literacy, terminology and language barriers. The third *'monster'* which needed to be addressed can be loosely delineated as difficulties around social & cultural consciousness.

Analysis of the qualitative statements collected, has begun to validate our belief that this 'culture of fear' emanated from five core concerns around Critical & Contextual Studies. Firstly, and most predominately, around notions of ***value***; students were deeply concerned that their identity and opinions would be submerged or disenfranchised. [See appendix one for a selection of student responses] On further discussion with students in class and in tutorials, these seemed to be perceived as antiquated, and predominately masculine, academic discourses. Students were too fearful to believe that their stories, opinions and conjectures could be *as* valid a perception of reality as the rationalism deployed by logical positivist scientific

knowledge and methods. We hope to capture some of these more complex elements around value in the longitudinal study.

All these concerns were profoundly linked to the second fear around issues of ***understanding***. Here, many students expressed concerns over feeling 'out of [their] depth' and therefore 'feeling foolish'. This, in turn, linked directly to the third and fourth fears around ***success*** and ***failure***, whereby students wanted a safe and positive environment that allowed room for failure as a means of learning and were concerned that this might not be the case. In addition students expressed much concern about being unable to succeed either because they did not have the necessary skills, prior knowledge or understanding of requirements to excel. The final fear expressed by students' encompassed concerns that the content would be '***boring' and, or irrelevant*** to the students as arts practitioners.

The second *'monster'* in terms of literacy, terminology & language barriers was manifested through concerns students expressed around their written and verbal capacity, particularly in terms of limited vocabulary. A further complication was uncovered in terms of bilingual directives. Many students had completed all their prior study through the medium of Welsh. Whilst they had the option to complete assignments in their first language, many opted not to in order to be able to apply their knowledge to places beyond Wales. Fears around capability in an unfamiliar tongue regularly surfaced. One example of this can be highlighted in a statement from one bilingual student who feared that she 'would struggle with the change from writing art essays in Welsh for my A levels, to a few years later writing in English' [See appendix one].

Both of these '*monsters*' mutated into a third monster, which need to be addressed and which was also, probably, the most pressing. As already outlined, this can be roughly delineated as difficulties around social and cultural consciousness and a possible explanation can be found in some statistics on Carmarthenshire gathered form the Office of National Statistics in 2008, compiled by the National Assembly for Wales Commission (2008).

It was discovered, for example that 6 % of Carmarthenshire's areas fall in the 10% most deprived areas in Wales and the majority of its areas are more deprived than the Wales average. Only 0.9 % of citizens from a Non-White Ethnic Group live in the Carmarthenshire area, making it a predominantly White and Christian population. (74.6% Christian, 0.2 Muslim, 0.7% Other, 24.6 % No religion). Its Welsh speaking population is 50.1 % compared to the national average for Wales of 20.5%. It is a place of high unemployment (27.5 %), and a place where long-term poor health is also higher than the Welsh national average (26.3%). The number of

people of working age with no qualifications is 19.4%. This figure is higher than the national averages for all of Wales, England and Scotland.

Finally, and most significantly, to our research is the emotional wellbeing of the population in this area. In the 2012/13 Survey by the Office of National Statistics on Personal Well-being Across the UK, Wales was ranked as having the highest percentage of low personal well-being in the whole of the United Kingdom (11%). A greater proportion of people in Wales in the 2012/13 survey rated their life satisfaction and sense of feeling worthwhile as very low, compared with other countries in the UK and the UK as a whole. (Office for National Statistics, 2013)

Our hypothesis was that this level of poor wellbeing was not only caused by the socio-economic issues outlined above, it was also associated with a disconnection from more ancient native animistic thought processes and approaches to spirituality. This became the second reason why the teacher as Shaman and facilitator of reconnection became relevant to our pedagogy.

To contextualise our point, it might be useful to briefly outline the complex history of Carmarthen. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, it was once the largest town in Wales. It was a place where the Romans built a fort in AD75, a place that housed a rich and diverse religious community up until the arrival of the Normas in 1093 and where, in the 12th Century it was associated with Merlin (Welsh *Myrddin*) from the Authurian Legends.

Robb (2013: 116) identified that certain points along the West coasts of Wales and Ireland in pre-Roman times were believed to be significant entrances into the underworld because they were on solstice paths. Summer and winter solstice angles were crucial points of reference for ancient civilisations. These paths were carefully measured and were both scientific and religious. Because the sun's light fades in the West, the system had a certain psycho-geographical logic. This perception was intrinsic to the Druidic creed across Western Europe before the Roman invasion. It was connected to the Pythagorean belief in the immortality of the soul and a life after death.

The influence of the Druid world continued to inspire and adapt itself into Christianity in Wales. Many priests continued to pursue botany, star-gazing and observations of what Robb (2013:134) calls the "inner laws of nature." In Carmarthen, many significant religious orders developed including an Augustinian Priory and a double-cloistered Franciscan Friary. These religious orders often built their churches and sanctuaries on existing pagan sites of worship. Robb (2013 : 284) points out that the merging of Pagan and Christian forms of

worship are surprisingly evident in the British solar network. On the Whitchurch Meridian line for example, he points out that Abbeys and Priories were strung along "like beads on a rosary." Tintern Abbey, Chepstow Priory, the monasteries of Llandogo and Dixon, the church on Glastonbory Tor constitute other significant examples.

Both the Friary and Priory in Carmarthen played a major role in the cultural life of Wales, where many notable Bards wrote and recited. The Friary was also a favoured resting place of county families and included tombs of Edmund Tudor, father of Henry VII. The virtual erasure, therefore, of these long standing forms of worship from Carmarthen following the Reformation allowed for many archeological and architectural calamities to take place. Today for example, the ancient Franciscan Friary in Carmarthen is buried under a Tesco super-store. Many ancient sacred pre-Roman burial places connected to Merlin were poorly excavated prior to becoming a high-rise car park (ironically named Merlin's walk). There is now very little archaeological evidence left in the town of this diverse and interconnected history. One could therefore argue that the loss of sacred 'presence' once held in this landscape has had a limiting and restrictive impact on the psyches of those who now live there. Healy's hypothesis is that socio-economic issues are not solely responsible for low well-being in a community.

Similar patterns have taken place in other countries. For example Bäckman (2005) and Mulk & Bayliss Smith (2007), in their analysis of the demise of the Sami sacred geography, explained how initial interactions between the Vikings, the Norse and the Roman Catholic Mission created different mutations in perception on notions of what was 'sacred' in the Sami world-view. However, importantly, the knowledge of the 'Noaidi' (tribal leaders and the Druidic equivalent to a Shaman) was never *replaced,* they just became one of many possible people in a community capable of giving answers to the fundamental questions of life and death. It wasn't until the arrival of the Lutheran Mission in the first half of the 16th century, that this complex and coninherent world-view was turned into a reductive world-view. Under state sponsorship new churches were built inland at traditional Sami meeting places, so that by about 1700, Bäckman (2005: 37) notes that the Noaidi was finally out manoeuvred as the one responsible for the well-being of Sami society. Later, when the memory of the Sami world-view had been virtually forgotten, their sites of worship were mined and excavated for mineral resources.

This trajectory is echoed in Carmarthenshire's history. The complex socio-economic profile of the area combined with this deeply disenfranchised community meant that the learning environment, inevitably,

became a place where doubts and fears surfaced as students were invited to challenge, contest, question or enter into different worlds of knowledge. There was a sense in which Friere's (1970) ideas seemed pertinent within these conditions despite the cultural and temporal distance between his writings and the scenario we found ourselves in. In addition, Wegner-Trayner's (2014) argument that the current era is one where issues of identity take precedence perhaps more than ever before, and that education has a responsibility to guide students in their identity construction also seemed deeply significant. We decided that our students therefore needed *Thin* experiences to allow them to transcend the confines of class, nation and culture yet at the same time remain connected to and protective of the place they inhabited and the ecosystems with whom they co-inhabited.

3. Ways to bring in the light – moving towards Thinness.

As lecturers, therefore, we had choices to make about our mediation and our role in assisting students toward Otherworldly experiences that would foster new ways of being and thinking. As a result; we sought a methodology that endeavoured to transfigure the classroom into a liminal place; providing a *Thin* place for relational and social interstice in uncertain lands. This methodology had three interwoven strands that attempted to combat the negative social factors outlined in the previous section. The strands encompassed the development our own personal sense of liminality, permeability and transformation through our own academic and practice-based research which was then transferred into the classroom; the creation of sessions that specifically explore such themes and finally reconfiguring assignments to allow for a depth of engagement with these issues.

To allow for the development of these strands, our pedagogy is rooted in notions of experiential learning and is informed by the wealth of writing around the importance of intuitive and creative opportunities for development outlined by writers such as Robinson & NACCCE (1999), Craft (Craft, 2003; 2006; Craft et al., 2001, 2008, Craft & Jeffery, 2004), Gardener (1993; 2008) Sternberg, (1999) and education systems such as Steiner and Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al., 1998; Giudici & Vecchi, 2005). All of which are inspired by European and American Strands of progressive education such as Piagetian constructivist and Vygotskian socio-historical psychologies (Rusk, 1967) and contain elements of *Thinness*. This has been combined with developing methodologies for Higher Education, which are centred on facilitation and mediation in opposition to didacticism. (Dennick & Exley, 2004; Reece & Walker, 2007)

These positions are amalgamated toward the notion that learning happens as result of interpretation of

experience and that the purpose of education is to provide paths to and environments that foster meaningful interpretative experiences. (Cobern, 1993). Learning, then, is an interpretative process, which involves a discursive relationship between teacher and pupil and peer to peer; in an environment that invites challenge and negotiation and is co-operative in nature. The student in this context is an active agent, not a passive recipient, and the learning is constructed on the basis of their prior knowledge; prior and current experiences and feelings as well as through the socio-cultural environment. Learning environments and activities need to foster interpretative events that allow students to make their own meaning. In this regard, it is an integrative model that infuses learning experience, environment and content for transformation. (Mughal & Zafar, 2011)

In practice these theories helped us to develop experiential, intuitive and creative session activities such as trialling and making opportunities as a means to explore art and design theory. For example, Palmer created a number of sessions were students would construct an artefact in response to a particular practitioner or aesthetic paradigm then as a class, students would 'make their own meaning' by grouping and regrouping these artefacts in relation to theoretical themes. Constructing histories in this way allowed students to recognise multiple 'belongings' in order to challenge linear discourses.

Artefact handling, story-telling and metaphors act as sensory experiences and portals to new realms of knowledge. Healy and Palmer presented students with sample papers, film clips, visiting lecturers, images, artists' books and other ephemera in order to engage multi-sensory approaches to theoretical study. In addition, Healy authored and delivered specific modules around liminality, place, spirituality and sacred geography incorporating and modelling her own research practices into the sessions. In a sense, as practitioners we modelled ways of being and thinking as co-participants with the students. As a result collaborative projects would often develop. (See Fig 1.)

Fig 1: 'Drawing Breath', Elizabeth Tomos (Palmer), 2012. Dancer: Lauren Heckler (Student)

All of these methods were conducted in interdisciplinary mixed groups providing opportunity for threshold-crossing experiences through the merging and interconnectedness of transdisciplinary thought and action. The lectures were, therefore, specifically based on themes and not disciplines. As a result exercises became about recognising the connecting points between pluralistic discourses across multiple disciplines.

In terms of assessment for *Thin Experiences*, the development of the Personal Dictionary created a synthesis between theory and practice. As a medium it allowed a pluralistic textual and visual response to the Otherworlds of knowledge and experience that the students had been exploring. It offered students an alternative way of expressing the layers of understanding from their academic research and particularly the interstice between multiple ways of being, making and thinking. In addition, it allowed space for their personal reflections on how that research had been transformative in both a visual and textual manner.

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Fig 2: Examples of personal dictionaries 2012-2013

4. Data discovery

During the three years of our tenure we had a wealth of anecdotal experiences. However, in order to begin to truly substantiate these experiences, we wanted to better capture what was happening. In recognition that by its nature this subject matter is somewhat intangible, the study has been undertaken using a mixed methodology. Students were invited to participate by answering seven quantitative questions followed by an opportunity to submit a statement where they could further elucidate on their answers to the questions. The statements were then used for qualitative analysis and coded using Nvivo software.

The seven questions asked students to agree or disagree with statements about their experiences within Critical & Contextual Studies. This was in order to identify the extent to which they would align these experiences with spirituality and transformation and to get a sense of whether these experiences had been fairly universal.

Within the quantitative data many students identified themselves as spiritual (Fig 3) and it rapidly became clear in the qualitative statements that for a high proportion of those that answered yes, this view had been developed through the lecture programme. Students often said they wouldn't have originally considered themselves spiritual but do now.

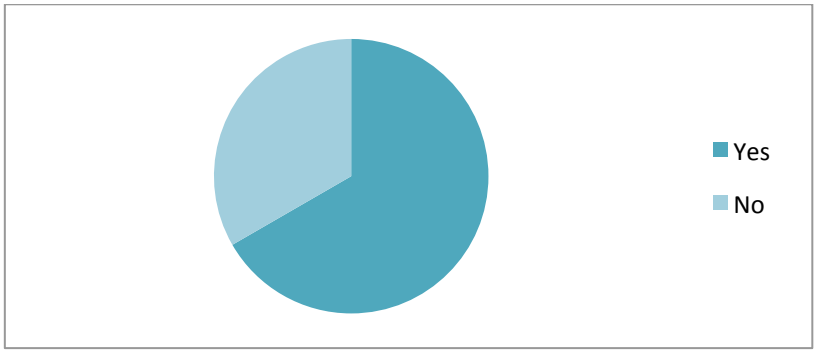

Fig 3: Student responses as to whether they consider themselves to be spiritual.

Thinness itself was a low recognition term in this study but its synonyms (Self Awareness/Transformation/Altered Perception/ Hope/ Transcendence/ Liminality/ Growth) proved useful whereby students self-selected words that resonated with spiritual experience from a list of the above terms. All the words were selected at least once but self-awareness formed the highest incidence. (Fig 4)

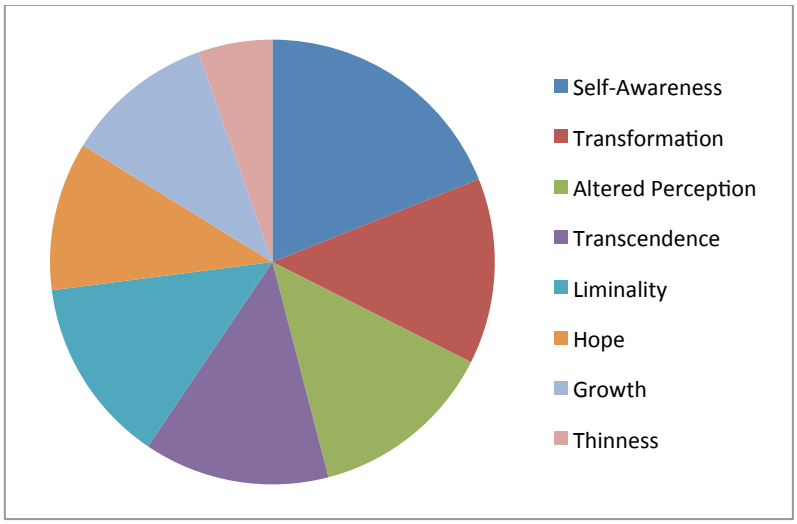

Fig 4: Synonyms for spiritual experience selected by students from list on questionnaire.

These terms, along with other synonyms, also appeared in the qualitative statements and overall, in both the quantitative and the qualitative data it became apparent that synonyms for spiritual experience and *Thinness* were widely accepted. The term spirituality itself, however, particularly in relation to the classroom caused students some uncertainty, or certainly to struggle with a means to fully articulate what was happening in their experience.

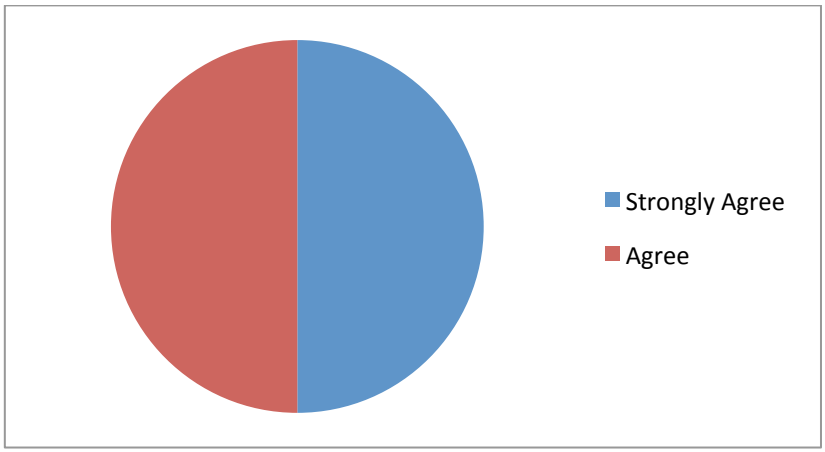

Fig 5: Critical & Contextual Studies gave me access to new realms of knowledge.

When asked if Critical & Contextual Studies gave access to new realms of knowledge, (fig 5) all participants answered positively, none to date have either disagreed or been neutral in their answer. One participant answered with qualitative statements rather than ticking boxes and so has not been included in the quantitative data for this reason. However, their qualitative statements strongly suggest that this student's answers would also have been positive. Similarly, positive results can be seen in relation to the question around the lectures engendering different thinking (Fig 6), views of self and the world, (Fig 7) and being a transformative experience. (Fig 8)

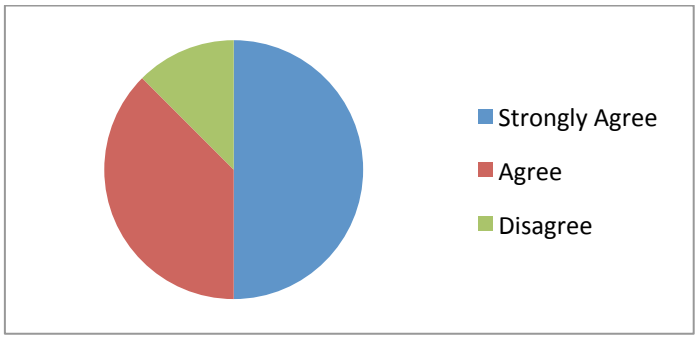

Fig 6: Critical & Contextual Studies made me think differently.

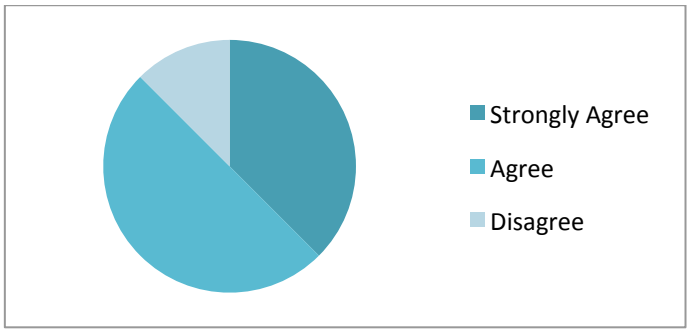

Fig 7: Critical & Contextual Studies changed my view of myself and my world.

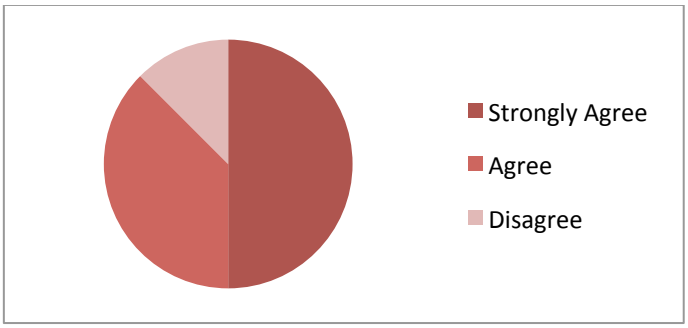

Fig 8: Critical & Contextual Studies was a transcendental/ transformative experience.

For reasons which are unclear from the data itself, students that answered negatively in the quantitative section, spent some time in their qualitative statements articulating the ways in which they felt their thinking, experience, views and knowledge had developed. This would suggest that transformative experience has taken place in these students but that the language or formation of the questions has not resonated with the student.

The results from the qualitative statements the students have provided have been far more useful in uncovering incidences of *Thin* experience. When analysing the statements, it was primarily the inductive approach which was used in order to identify key themes arising from the student responses without a set framework. As with the quantitative it became clear that whilst synonyms and metaphors for *Thin Experience* were utilised and explored the terms *Thin* itself was less present. [See appendix two]

Some students were often unsure whether to classify what had happened to their learning as a spiritual or *Thin* experience per se. That said, some students developed some very pertinent ways of expressing the *Thin* experience, articulating 'a breakthrough, a feeling of being on the threshold, an anticipatory tickle' or 'a hopefulness of more to encounter, like walking into the light'. Furthermore, a high proportion of the sample indicated that the experience had been profoundly beneficial. [See appendix three]

Two core themes emerged from the data in terms of the necessary elements that *engender* transformatory *Thin* experiences. The first core theme centred around the types of knowledge and experience that students valued for transformation and *Thin* experience. The second core theme articulated the ways in which they felt this happened. Within this second core theme an additional five strands can be identified. Firstly, the need to feel valued; secondly, the importance of strong and positive interrelationships; thirdly, the significance of

particular strategies in the sessions themselves; fourthly, desired staff attributes; and finally, the learning environment.

4a. Phenomenological Knowledge & Experience

Regarding the first theme, the students were very clear when articulating the importance of knowledge and experience that is phenomenological in nature. [See appendix four] References to knowledge of this type formed the highest recurring incidence in the transcripts whereby every statement referred to the development of knowledge around issues of identity and place in the world including human experience, philosophy and ways of being. Some statements articulated these ideas specifically in relation to terminology around spirituality, liminality, *Thin* Places, and *Thin* experience. Students were clear that these themes had been the most valuable to them, had been core in the transformation of themselves and views and that they now hold an increased desire to continue to seek out knowledge and experience of this in the future.

4b. Engendering the Thin Experience

The students were equally articulate about how they felt this knowledge and experience was best fostered. [See appendix five] Firstly, the qualitative statements demonstrated a high incidence of statements articulating that feeling valued had been instrumental in their experience. Students articulated that only when they are respected for their opinions and openness is a core tenet of the classroom, is the transcendence able to take place. This acted as a direct counter to fears outlined in the earlier section '*Things that go bump in the night'.*

Secondly, the statements emphasised the importance of the relational and the dialogical in terms of shared knowledge and experiences both in terms of discovering 'learning companions', the importance of discussion in terms of relationships with both peers and staff. In terms of our sessions, students were very clear that good quality, short, tailored, informal lectures that are engaging and exciting were fundamental in creating good quality learning experiences for transformation. In addition, concepts must be presented clearly; be stimulating and thought provoking in order to engender further individual exploration. They should also be discursive with a strong support structure that includes one to one tutorials and online aids as well as a responsibility for the H.E classroom to stretch the imagination.

Furthermore, in terms of staff attributes the students felt that Critical and Contextual Studies must be delivered by strong communicators who are clear and concise, approachable, stimulating, inspirational, thought provoking and engaging. Similarly, in terms of the environment students felt that the classroom was a place that felt comfortable and safe, where mistakes and failure were valued, where there was a strong structure of support and where they could meet and make 'learning companions'. Students also felt staff led by example and, importantly, never made them feel 'stupid.' It became abundantly clear that transformation in the student in terms of fostering *Thin* experience is absolutely contingent with a synergy between the learning environment, learning materials and interrelationships.

5. Limitations & Discussion

The primary limitations of the study as previously indicated are that the data to date is based on a small sample of students and much of the other examples utilised currently remain anecdotal. In addition, there are potential difficulties around the data collection in terms of the questions posed. When looking to address such a specific area of their experience, it is difficult to do so without using language that then has an influence on their statements. Furthermore, some questions may need reframing prior to the longitudinal study to lessen the researcher's impact and to provide greater clarity for the students. For example, in retrospect the question posed about changing views of self and the world should have been separated as some students differentiated between the two issues in their qualitative statements. This, primarily, seemed to be due to the way in which they wanted to articulate *how* they felt they or their views of the world had changed. Although, more often than not, there was clear evidence in the statements that the students felt they were linked, the students still answered neutrally or negatively seemingly out of this desire to differentiate between the two developments.

As mentioned previously, students who answered negatively in the quantitative data collection often contradicted these positions within the qualitative statement. This has been problematic in terms of analysing the data and coming to reasonable conclusions about their experiences. It further highlighted that the quantitative questions were potentially misleading in terms of data in that the negativity seems to be indicative of disagreements with the wording of the statements rather than an absence of the underlying notion. As a result the qualitative statements were far more significant in terms of uncovering student experiences.

The findings of this study are indicative of two linguistic issues in particular. Firstly, that the incidence is there, but language to articulate *Thin* experience is implicit rather than explicit. Secondly, that there is a prejudice

against the concept of 'spirituality,' in other words it has become a monster by association! It is difficult to circumvent this problem in uncovering whether or not instances of Thin experience are in fact taking place. This is additionally problematic given that the nature of the *Thin* is intangible; an issue many students identified with.

However, given the level of positivity towards different understandings, ways of being and phenomenological knowledge combined with students articulating the extent to which it had impacted on them holistically; one must conclude that affirming the co-existence of multiple worlds was clearly welcomed by the students.

6. Conclusions

This paper has argued that the concept of *Thinness* can create a new 'zone of discovery' in minds disciplined by what Marina Warner (2002: 11) describes as 'conscientious' and 'elaborate didacticism.' In considering the effects of *Thinness* on our students, we follow Guattari's (2008) ecosophical argument that we need to discuss our existence using more than one register. This is because, he argues, we have spent too long attaching ourselves to single archaisms and structures, which are no longer relevant to, or serve us adequately for, our current socio-ecological crisis. We draw on Guattari's (ibid) concept of the 'incorporeal universe' (where all frames of reference disappear) when we argue that a Thin approach to education can help participants move beyond their individuated concerns and see the self-in-relation. A Thin approach to education cultivates a broader and richer vocabulary of place, and in the context of this research it looks beyond Wales as a geo-political or socio-economic entity, what Guattari (ibid) calls the 'existential territories' or 'reductionist world of limits' to a place that can be more than the perceived categories that define it – a place with many portals into Otherworlds. *Thinness* then, is a form of spiritual Ecosophy. When embedded into a pedagogical practice we argue that it helps us to develop a sense of connectivity between fellow human and non-human members of a community.

We argue that the learning environment can become a place where *Thinly* presented visual and textual stimuli can trigger previously unacknowledged or unconscious emotive and spiritual responses. Or, as MacFarlane (cited in Evans and Robson, 2010 : 67) said, it might allow us to *"fall into the kind of intimacy with places, which might also go by the name of love or enchantment, and out of which might arise care and good sense."* A *Thin* pedagogical approach therefore raises interesting questions about the future role of the Lecturer as a mediator and facilitator for reconnection in a fragmented world.

7. Continuation

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Over the past three years we have created intuitive and *Thin* experiences in the classroom, and next year we plan to develop this further. Therefore, it is our intention to carry out a longitudinal study to further explore student experiences of the *Thin.* In order to better clarify the shifts in knowledge, understanding and values we intend to take statements before, during and after modules in our new institutions. This, we hope, will allow us to better analyse the transformations taking place through alterations in answers across the course of the programme. In so doing we hope to be able to better qualify the development of *Thin* experiences in the full knowledge that by its very nature it is shifting. We hope to particularly track those modules that address Place based issues as well as theories on Aesthetics, Beauty and the Sublime in order to see whether these subjects intensify the results.

In addition, our research is extending into alternative platforms. The Arts Council of Wales has offered funding to test these ideas in a more public realm. Healy will be curating an international group exhibition at Oriel Myrddin Gallery in Carmarthen in 2015. This exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue with 5 commissioned texts from A Franciscan Brother, An Astrologer, an Astrophysicist and A poet as well as a symposium that will explore life, death, the other-world, as well as places and signifiers that articulate the boundaries between the 'now' and the 'after.' Invited speakers from seemingly disparate disciplines such as archaeology, theology, transformational / past life therapy, ethnography and philosophy will also contribute to the project.

An educational outreach programme that will involve local school children will help to nurture and promote these ideas. They will be invited to enter a critical writing competition that responds to the show. Place related lectures will be presented in the gallery during the run of the show and an open call to all students across all disciplines has already been advertised, inviting them to submit work on Metamorphosis and Otherworlds. This will be exhibited in the college gallery in conjunction with the international show in Carmarthen.

What unites all of the speakers, writers and artists invited to contribute to this project is their desire to investigate, to seek answers to and to stimulate debate for students on profound questions about the meaning of our lives in this current climate, and our place and purpose within it. They all recognise and hope to show through artworks and conversation that the globe of life, as Virginia Woolf (1931) once put it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air.

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Author Biographies:

Ciara Healy is a Curator, Book Artist, Writer and Lecturer in Art at the University of Reading. She was the former Programme Director of Critical and Contextual Studies at The School of Creative Arts, CSG University of Wales TSD in Carmarthen. She studied Interdisciplinary Fine Art and completed an MPhil in Curatorial Studies at The Dublin Institute of Technology in 2005. In 2011 she was one of the selected writers to be awarded the WAI & Axis Developing Critical Writing on Contemporary Visual Arts Programme. She has written numerous catalogue essays and critical reviews for Art Review, Circa and This is Tomorrow. 'Thin Place' constitutes the practice-based element of her doctoral research at the UWE, Bristol. Previous curatorial projects have taken place at the National Irish Visual Arts Library; Dublin and the Lewis Glucksman Gallery; Cork. Her Artists Books are housed in many public and private collections including TATE Britain Artists' Book Collection and The V&A National Art Library.

See: www.ciarahealy.com

Elizabeth (Tomos) Palmer is a multidisciplinary practitioner and lecturer. Her practice explores issues of place and artefact; engaging with palimpsests of both real and imagined histories that connect person; object & site. She has just completed postgraduate qualifications in Education at Trinity St David and in Multidisciplinary Printmaking at UWE Bristol; and is undertaking an MA in Fine Art at the University of Northampton from September. In January 2014 she took up post as Academic Practice Tutor at University of Northampton, following working in Ciara's department since 2010 as a lecturer in addition to her role as BA (Hons) Multidisciplinary Course Leader.

See: http://elizabethtomos.wordpress.com

Appendix One: Sample of coding for 'fears':

Reference 1 - 1.07% Coverage 'not understand the concepts'

Reference 2 - 0.60% Coverage 'the terminology'

Reference 3 - 1.87% Coverage 'unable to complete the assignments successfully'

Reference 4 - 2.27% Coverage 'doubtful that my opinions would be taken seriously'

Reference 5 - 1.59% Coverage 'afraid I might find the lectures boring!'

Reference 6 - 2.23% Coverage 'did not even know what 'Critical and Contextual Studies' was going to be about'

Reference 7 - 0.66% Coverage 'Feeling out of my depth'

Reference 8 - 0.69% Coverage 'I feared looking foolish'

Reference 9 - 1.57% Coverage 'my own ego had something to do with it at the beginning'

Reference 10 - 7.84% Coverage 'would struggle with the change from writing art essays in welsh for my A levels, to a few years later writing in English'

Reference 11 - 1.16% Coverage 'feeling 'naughty''

Reference 12 - 4.53% Coverage 'I just completed the first six essays since I left school over 40 years ago! Certainly worried about it!'

Reference 13 - 1.70% Coverage 'that it was all beyond me'

Reference 14 - 2.01% Coverage 'The penny takes a long time to drop at my age'

Appendix Two: Sample responses to terms Thin & spiritual experience

Reference 1 - 0.80% Coverage 'difficult to answer'

Reference 2 - 0.76% Coverage 'impossible to 'see''

Reference 3 - 6.65% Coverage ' it's a little like gardening. Ciara plants a tiny seed and over weeks of months that seed grows inside my mind and the branches become other questions and sometimes answers.'

Reference 4 - 3.02% Coverage 'a breakthrough, a feeling of being on the threshold, an anticipatory tickle'

Reference 5 - 2.47% Coverage 'a hopefulness of more to encounter like walking into the light'

Reference 6 - 5.35% Coverage 'Using theorists as guides, I started to seek self-knowledge, as a consequence my family have learned to meditate, we practice twice daily and our lives continue to improve beyond measure.'

Reference 7 - 3.06% Coverage 'Before Critical Studies I was an 'anti-spiritual' person. Now I am a completely spiritual person and proud!'

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Reference 8 - 4.95% Coverage 'maybe the fact that old art is connected to religion'

Reference 9 - 3.47% Coverage 'I 'm not too sure. Maybe the gaining of new knowledge?'

Reference 10 - 1.26% Coverage 'Not a clue on this one sorry.'

Appendix Three: Sample responses on the effect of Thin experience

Reference 1 - 5.87% Coverage 'To transcend is getting to know yourself and finding understanding. With this came an understanding those around me, and how the world works, this is the most important thing that I have learned in my life.'

Reference 2 - 3.92% Coverage 'Engaging fully in critical studies has changed the lives of myself, my husband, my son, his partner, and my daughter, all for the better.'

Reference 3 - 5.55% Coverage 'Sharing this knowledge with others has become a priority in my life. Transcending into a higher learning or knowledge is a radical feeling. The experience has been very empowering and humbling.'

Appendix Four: Phenomonological Knowledge & Experience

Reference 1 - 3.62% Coverage. 'esoteric beliefs and concepts'

Reference 3- 4.10% Coverage 'Discussing spirituality and concepts such as thin places and liminality'

Reference 4- 37.67% Coverage 'help me reflect on my identity and place in the world.'

Reference 5 - 4.92% Coverage 'anything related to humans and how the world has come to be the place it is today'

Reference 6 - 3.89% Coverage – 'I mostly enjoyed lectures and theorist that dealt with finding a gentler way of being in the world and how to expand that to the world.'

Reference 7 - 2.47% Coverage 'engaging was finding companions in the exploration of 'place''

Reference 8 - 3.46% Coverage 'continued to find experiences and quotes and discussions that made me question myself; my own beliefs, ways and feelings.'

Reference 9 - 5.61% Coverage 'The 'light bulb' moment in helping me to get to know myself was when Ciara showed a picture from the holocaust and asked who had, once learning for the first time about the holocaust felt changed. I instantly realised that man's inhumanity to man was at the core of my confusion in this world.'

Reference 10 - 1.32% Coverage 'explore within myself'

Reference 11 - 1.43% Coverage 'Colonialism, feminism, consumerism […] all linked'

Reference 12 - 1.23% Coverage 'empathy and love and kindness'

Reference 13 - 3.06% Coverage 'Before Critical Studies I was an 'anti-spiritual' person. Now I am a completely spiritual person and proud!'

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Reference 14 - 5.87% Coverage 'To transcend is getting to know yourself and finding understanding. With this came an understanding those around me, and how the world works, this is the most important thing that I have learned in my life.'

Appendix Five: *Engendering the Thin Experience*

Value

Reference 1 - 2.03% Coverage 'respected for my opinions, encouraged to voice them'

Reference 2 - 3.82% Coverage 'allowed to express original thought is something rare and delightful in my academic experience.'

Reference 3 - 0.48% Coverage 'being complimented'

Reference 4 - 1.11% Coverage 'huge boost to my self-esteem'

Reference 5 - 0.48% Coverage 'being valued'

Reference 6 - 1.15% Coverage 'rewarded for our contribution'

Reference 8 - 4.50% Coverage 'being encouraged to contribute (and with a sense of humour!) certainly differs from other classroom experiences'

Interrelationships

Reference 1 - 2.47% Coverage 'engaging was finding companions in the exploration of 'place',

Reference 2 - 3.79% Coverage 'Related and informal'

Reference 3 - 3.15% Coverage 'partake in discussion'

Reference 4 - 4.95% Coverage 'Tutorials – having tutorials aimed towards my specific essay was invaluable'

Reference 5 - 16.26% Coverage 'great forum to voice and discuss ideas.'

Sessions

Reference 1 - 2.87% Coverage 'concepts presented in a way which was clear and stimulating'

Reference 2 - 2.63% Coverage 'made reading, watching a film, play or viewing Art work a thrill'

Reference 3 - 3.58% Coverage 'empowered me with knowledge and I quickly learned that no matter what, I could find answers if I wished, and I did wish.'

Reference 4 - 1.61% Coverage 'informative'

Reference 5 - 3.79% Coverage 'made me excited to research further'

Reference 6 - 3.02% Coverage 'good lectures in an informal format'

Reference 7 - 3.02% Coverage 'lectures tailored to certain aspects'

Reference 8 - 9.51% Coverage 'Short lectures that keep me engaged. Short and sweet – not so long that my

brain melts, but informative enough to get me thinking and researching.'

Reference 9 - 27.98% Coverage 'I didn't get the feeling that I was being drowned in the information'

Reference 10 - 13.17% Coverage 'Everything was explained clearly'

Reference 11 - 26.75% Coverage 'available on Moodle to help aid your research, notes and essays'.

Staff Attributes

Reference 1 - 6.41% Coverage 'inspirational teachers, ones who make me want to learn more'

Reference 2 - 1.60% Coverage 'Both Ciara and Izzy were engaging and thought provoking.'

Reference 3 - 3.78% Coverage 'They were open to questions and ideas and never once made anyone feel uncomfortable if they were asked to explain something further.'

Reference 4 - 2.49% Coverage 'The encouragement and positivity of lecturers made the learning process very rewarding.'

Reference 5 - 4.30% Coverage 'Ciara seems so knowledgeable that we got a great taught experience.'

Environment:

Reference 1 - 1.11% Coverage 'comfortable, yet challenging'

Reference 2 - 1.00% Coverage classroom felt comfortable and safe

Reference 3 - 0.60% Coverage 'safe to make mistakes'

Reference 4 - 1.60% Coverage 'safe to think like there was no box to think outside of!'

Reference 5 - 1.80% Coverage 'strong structure of support'