
13 Cooperative Inquiry into Organizational Culture: The Wrekin District Council Experience

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In February 1987 a colleague, Adrian McLean, and I embarked on a cooperative inquiry with a group of people in Wrekin District Council, an organization of 1200 people. Our purpose was to explore their organizational culture and arrive at a portrait of it. Our sponsors, the Local Government Training Board, wanted a model of 'good practice' to publicize. Managers in the Wrekin wanted to evaluate the effectiveness of cultural changes they had been trying to implement over the preceding four years. What other members of the group wanted was less clear at the outset. As initiating researchers, Adrian and I shared the LGTB's agenda, but with some reservations. The Wrekin was already being paraded as a model, and we wondered if their value as 'exemplars' would be undermined by people saying 'Oh no! Not them again!' Before describing our experience in the Wrekin, I shall set the scene by saying a little about cooperative inquiry as a philosophy and form of research, and by raising some question areas.

Some basic themes in cooperative inquiry

Cooperative inquiry is a loosely defined term for research conducted by a group of people committed both to exploring their experience and making sense of it. There may be an initiating researcher, but they are not expected to take full control of the inquiry. In the various phases of research, described for example by Rowan (1981) as 'being', 'project', 'encounter' and 'communication', collaboration and participation are advocated. Core sources on this form of research are Reason and Rowan (1981) and Reason (1988).

Cooperative inquiry is not just qualitative, it is post-positivist in its key assumptions. People are considered to be self-directing, capable of

making sense of their own experience. 'Knowing' is taken to be multi-faceted, incorporating at least propositional, practical and experiential aspects (Heron, 1981). Knowing is generally seen as for and in action, incomplete if it is disembodied or separate from practice. Self reflection is vital to research in this mode. Participants need to develop 'critical subjectivity' to know and evaluate their own processes of knowing. There is no absolute truth, rather respect for multiple perspectives. Validity takes on new meanings (Heron, 1988). It is enhanced by engaging in repeated cycles of inquiry. Initially the interests guiding the research are surfaced and pursued. Later, tentative conclusions are explored, tested out, refined.

These hints at the realm of cooperative inquiry give some idea of how demanding such research can be, how personally challenging. Some people think it an élitist approach because of its injunctions for high quality personal awareness. There are also, in some writings, hints of ideal models. There are important tensions here, most to be lived with rather than resolved.

I do not believe that there is 'one true way' to do cooperative inquiry; there is a multitude of possibilities. At the same time I think choices need to be made awarely and with appropriate self-questioning. People who are fully engaged in cooperative inquiry are likely to be highly creative in the forms they choose for research. But I hesitate if people then think that 'anything goes'. I want to know that the research is rigorous, in some appropriate way, questioning its own process internally and externally. Systematic attention to both the emerging knowing of the inquiry and the process is valuable to prompt high quality reflection and action.

There are dilemmas of control and direction, which raise important issues of power. The experienced researcher may initially 'educate' other participants in the principles of collaborative research and its possible forms. This taking of power is often appropriate and models being powerful to others. If other participants never discover their own power, or by subtle means the initiator stays in control, however, this may be a degenerative form of education. These issues, and others, will be touched on below. I would now like to outline the story of cooperative inquiry in the Wrekin (see Marshall and McLean, 1988, for a fuller version).

Working with Wrekin District Council

The people we worked with were chosen to represent different organizational levels and departments. They were:

Joy Bailey – play leader

Terry Brookes – principal engineer

Danny Chesterman - personnel officer
Pam Edwards - housing welfare officer
Anne Hewitt - employment development assistant
Annette Lewis - print room supervisor
Gordon Little - street lighting technician
Mick Paish - bricklayer
Brian Piper - senior estimator/surveyor
Derek Shaw - housing centre manager
Tony Smith - area foreman
Brian Wright - janitor

The work of the cooperative inquiry group went through three major cycles of action and reflection. There were four main meetings, each a day long, at roughly monthly intervals. There was also a shorter meeting directly before the presentation of the research findings to the senior management team and the project sponsor. Adrian and I were also collecting data by interviewing people throughout the organization and by just being around, gaining an ethnographic appreciation of the culture. We fed this data and our emerging ideas into discussions with the group.

Cycle I: forming the cooperative inquiry group and starting to explore culture

Table 13.1 shows the main cycles of inquiry and the issues covered at each of our meetings. Adrian and I did extensive preparation for the first meeting in April. We made a long list of expectations and possible

Table 13.1: *Cycles of reflection and action in a collaborative analysis of Wrekin District Council's organizational culture, 1987*

CYCLE I: FORMING THE COOPERATIVE INQUIRY GROUP AND STARTING TO EXPLORE CULTURE

Initiators (Judi and Adrian) surfaced possible issues; planned first meeting; consulted with Postgrad Group at Bath.

Meeting 1: April

Introductions and expectations
Base groups on what people wanted from the project
Input and discussion on organizational culture
Input and discussion on cooperative inquiry
Planning first data collection
Checking individual commitments and problems
Evaluation of the day

THE WREKIN DISTRICT COUNCIL EXPERIENCE

Initiators tape-recorded reflections on first meeting; consulted with postgrad group.

Data collection through interviews and self-reflection.

Meeting 2: May

Reviewing activities since last meeting

Feedback to Adrian and Judi on draft workbook

Subgroups generate lists of emerging themes

Whole group discussion

CYCLE II: LOOKING AGAIN, AND MORE WIDELY

Meeting 2 continued: Planning further data collection

Initiators tape-recorded reflections on meeting; consulted with postgrad group.

Data collection through interviews

Meeting 3: June

Process review and agenda negotiation

Subgroups generate lists of emerging themes

Whole group discussion

Evaluation of project so far

Initiators tape-recorded reflections on meeting; consulted with postgrad group.

CYCLE III: DRAWING THE PORTRAIT TOGETHER AND COMMUNICATION

Initiators analysed accumulated data and drew out key cultural themes; drafted report

Meeting 4: July

Detailed feedback and discussion on draft report

Plans for presentation

Initiators revise cultural portrait

Meeting 5: September

Presentation of findings to senior managers and project sponsor

Celebration of work done

problems; for example whether our academic perspective would be seen as inappropriate by others. We decided to take clear control in this meeting. Our purposes were to introduce other members to notions of organizational culture and cooperative inquiry (the focal aspects of the project) and prompt discussions about the purposes and processes of the

research. We realized that we had expertise in such issues, and did not want to deny this in a falsely egalitarian approach. We also devised procedures such as base groups and asking questions about why people were part of the inquiry, and whether they wanted to continue to be, to encourage others to participate and start to contribute to decision-making.

We found, from our questions, that people thought it 'akin to an honour' to be asked to participate. They thought that the council has many positive qualities and were happy to help publicize them. They had reservations as well, things were not perfect, and welcomed an opportunity to incorporate this 'realism' in any portrait. Their main concerns were that they may not find time for the research because of heavy workloads.

This meeting was more 'successful' in several ways than we had dared to hope. From the outset, members of the group took an active, inquiring, reflective approach. In the first round of statements of how people saw the project, some noted that there were no 'cynics' ie, people who were not committed to Wrekin culture, in the group. They thought this exclusion could jeopardize the validity of the findings. Also, organizational culture as a perspective (looking at the taken for granted, the subtle processes of 'how things are done around here') seemed to fit well with the Wrekin. People seemed used to being aware of process, and had finely developed senses of style and how well things fitted with 'the Wrekin Way'. As we introduced notions of culture, other group members quickly used them and illustrated from their experience. We felt we were giving them frameworks and a language for ways of seeing they had already adopted. Further, the notion of working collaboratively seemed sympathetic to the culture. They were pleased that we did not want to use traditional methods of 'research *on* people', and liked our ideas of 'research *with* people'. Within the group collaboration had been noteworthy. Everyone had contributed to the day; there had been little sense of hierarchy and no pattern of deference. At the end of the day we reviewed how things had gone. Again group members brought up issues to do with research process and validity. Monitoring the inquiry already seemed a shared endeavour.

In this open atmosphere of exploration, Adrian and I reviewed our plans as we went along. We realized that we had been too ambitious in thinking that the group would now be ready to go out and ask other people about the organizational culture. Also, in this plan we had overlooked the group's own expertise. We proposed instead that we circulate a draft workbook which we were in the process of writing and which included exercises for surfacing one's appreciation of culture (McLean and Marshall, 1988). Group members readily agreed to this plan. In the month before the next meeting, people mainly worked individually; some also started exploring issues of culture with co-workers.

Researching as multiple conversations

My image of this project is of multiple arenas for conversation. The Wrekin is an informal, discussion- rather than memo-based culture, and much debate went on there. Two other arenas Adrian and I used were very important for our abilities to reflect on the research process and on our actions. At times we took questions posed in one of these arenas and shared them with the inquiry group.

We were members of a staff-student postgraduate research group at the University of Bath, with our friend and colleague, Peter Reason. At various stages we discussed the project with this group. They were both challenging and supportive, helping us reflect on decisions we were making, and particularly on how collaborative our relationships with those at the Wrekin could be said to be. At the outset they were, for example, particularly suspicious about whether we were controlling the agenda too much from our own research needs.

We also found it helpful to tape-record conversations after each day of meeting with the Wrekin inquiry group. We usually did this back at the hotel, over a relaxing drink. We reviewed group process, challenged ourselves on issues of collaboration and validity, and reflected on what we seemed to be learning about the organizational culture. Doing the research together was, in itself, very helpful. We could relax and notice in a way that the solo researcher may find difficult. We could model dialogue whilst with the group, as we reflected openly on the process or debated interpretations of culture. We also found out, through this project particularly, that one of us is typically more sceptical, the other more accepting, and this gave us different perspectives to look from in synthesizing an appreciation of the culture.

Cycle I continued: sense-making

The second meeting, in May, saw several significant developments in group process. Adrian and I had done less direct preparation. We started the day inviting everyone to say something about what they had been doing in their life outside 'work' since we last met. There was a positive, relaxed and friendly feeling in the group from the start. We spent the first hour reviewing what people had been able to do in the month, what obstacles they had encountered, and with Adrian and I hearing back the other members' comments on the draft Workbook. This latter activity seemed in retrospect to have important implications for equality of power in the group. The comments were not all positive, although offered in a constructive tone. We felt vulnerable, and said so. The feedback was very helpful, and many of the ideas were incorporated into the revised version. That we were willing to be vulnerable, and the trust in the group it implied, seemed to set important markers for our process.

The rest of the second meeting was mainly spent going through the data on culture people had generated. Subgroups (the initial base groups) met to put together lists of emerging themes. This material was then discussed in the whole group. The emphasis was on exploration and entertaining 'tentative hypotheses', rather than on pinning down the meaning.

Cycle II: looking again and more widely

Towards the end of the day we planned a further phase of data collection. The group generated a long list of people whose views should be covered. They particularly wanted to include those at the bottom and periphery of the organization, and those in close contact with the public. They did not want a head office, senior management view of the culture to predominate. The question of cynics was addressed. As people took responsibility for contacting different groups, most decided to elicit the views of a possible cynic or two. The list also influenced the next phase of interviews that Adrian and I arranged.

The activity during the following month was impressive in several ways. People innovated in terms of their strategies for exploring culture. Some used workbook formats, adapted to particular audiences, others devised their own approaches. It is interesting how confident members of the group became about inquiring. We wrote: 'We felt that they had a fund of knowledge about how to do research which our presence was helping them to tap' (Marshall and McLean, 1988). A wide range of people, numbering well over a hundred, were contacted in some form or another. This spreading effect belies the image of qualitative research as necessarily small-scale (although there is no inherent fault in the latter). What did happen, however, was that approaches were tailored to the particular group contacted, allowing differences of perspective to speak through clearly.

We met again, for the third day, in June. By now Adrian and I were doing little prior planning. This meeting felt initially more haphazard. As we questioned this we realized that we were experiencing aspects of the Wrekin culture. People there are into action; a catch phrase was 'ready, fire, aim'. The group was feeling impatient to move on and look at implications of the research.

The mirroring of research content in the process

Throughout the inquiry we found that the form of the research mirrored the content (in this project organizational culture) in illuminating ways. For example, the other members of the group were sometimes impatient with questions (Adrian and I) posed about how the research process was going. But as issues became salient they *were* raised. The group returned often to the question of what claims we could make for the portrait we

produced, whether it reflected all important parties' views, how sure we could be of the conclusions we drew. These are all key questions about validity. What we learnt was that they arose in their own time, and related to possible action. We found people engaging in *reflection in action* rather than treating these activities as separate. We identified the primacy of action as a key feature of the culture; we therefore paid continual attention to the balance of action and reflection in the research, noticing if action (as the culturally favoured mode) seemed to be taking over.

I think cooperative inquiry will often involve this mirroring of content in research process (it may be apparent in more traditional forms of inquiry too). I have certainly experienced it in other projects. The researchers therefore need to be alert to the possibility and willing to treat aspects of process as 'data' rather than issues for research management. This can offer a certain freedom. The group does not have to work 'correctly'; whatever it does is relevant and needs appropriate attention and respect. This attitude can, however, leave individuals vulnerable and could be an excuse for not addressing conflict. It is not, therefore, a licence for abdicating responsibility.

Cycle II continued: sense-making

Despite our lack of planning, Adrian and I clearly had aims for the day. They were to review the further material collected by group members and move towards an overview of the culture. Other members of the group were initially very reluctant to set aside their previous analyses and look at the new material. They thought nothing significant would emerge. We persisted in this suggestion, working from a commitment to research cycling, expecting that further analysis would generate richer appreciations. Also, the rest of the group were now impatient to hear what ideas we had on the culture. We had all previously treated Adrian and my speculations as equal in worth to those of Wrekin members, but now they wanted to hear from us more clearly. Each sub-group accepted the other's strong insistence. This meant that Adrian and I needed time to pull our ideas together. We repeated the format of the previous meeting. Small groups generated lists of themes and illustrative examples, and then we discussed the material in the whole group.

As I now write about these dynamics, there are obviously expressions of difference. I do not, however, remember these discussions being difficult; rather there was a sense of honest confronting. My main concern was that the ideas Adrian and I generated might seem more important than those of other group members and might become an over-valued reference point. We did not discuss this possibility explicitly, rather I carried it as a prompt to noticing into the next stage of the meeting.

Adrian and I spoke first, but our views were not accorded particular

power. The rest of the group were surprised that their new analyses took their understandings of culture further. That day we seemed to be getting to grips with some of the conflicts and paradoxes of the organization's culture; we looked in detail at the shadow side of some of its more impressive characteristics. At the end of the discussion, members of the group questioned, and sought to re-balance, the more negative tone of our conversations. (A key cultural injunction in the Wrekin is 'be positive'.)

Except in this important respect, we did not achieve a synthesis of all our data on the culture. This seemed far too difficult to do in the group at this stage. Adrian and I volunteered to take the available material away and produce a first draft of the case study for discussion. In this we departed from a collaborative ideal, and perhaps tacitly colluded with the group when they attributed us with more expertise than them in this area. We accepted this role, however, only on the understanding that they would discuss the draft fully with us and add further sections themselves if they chose. In retrospect this decision still seems appropriate given differences in past experience, time available and types of commitment to the research.

To close the day the group evaluated the project so far. The Wrekin members were satisfied with the validity of the process and with the power they had been able to exercise, but pointed out that they could not yet judge the product.

Cycle III: drawing the portrait together and communication

The third cycle therefore started out with Adrian and I going in detail through all the sources of data we had and meeting to surface core themes in the culture. We also felt that there were some metaphors appropriate to the Wrekin, ie, that it was like an adolescent and had a right-brain way of acting, which might be worth exploration. We subdivided the writing and produced a draft report.

It is worth noting that we had not seen most of the 'research data', such as interview notes, generated by other members of the group. We did have their flipcharts of emerging themes, and we had taken copious notes of all discussions and examples from our meetings. We felt relatively comfortable with this, but appreciated how much it departed from the traditional researcher image of 'capturing' all the data. The mutual trust involved in proceeding in this way challenges the initiating researchers' needs for control. Part of our sense of security came from having interviewed people ourselves and having lived in the organization over a period of time. We had grounded appreciations of the themes we had discussed in the group on which to draw.

The fourth group meeting took place at Bath University. We wanted to repay some of the Wrekin hospitality. We went page by page through the

draft report. This process was less relaxed than previous meetings. The group generally endorsed the cultural portrait we presented, but wanted to clarify and qualify many points and to open up some issues to further debate. They were particularly sensitive about any mention of local government political matters. We agreed that Adrian and I would revise the portrait and check it with the group before the presentation of findings scheduled for September. This we did, to the other members' satisfaction. We had identified a web of ten themes in the culture, each with a positive and a potentially degenerative aspect. Achieving this balanced appreciation was important to us all. The Wrekin is an impressive organization in many ways, but it is not without its shadow side.

Adrian and I had initially been sceptical that any organization could live up to such a positive image. As we came to know the Wrekin, we became increasingly impressed by the organization as a whole and by the people we met. We liked and respected them; we felt very 'at home' when there. There was a danger that we would not want to explore the negatives, that we would become acculturated, co-opted. As we felt ourselves aligning with those at the Wrekin, we therefore maintained a critical awareness about this. Seeking distance and detachment would have been a parody of being 'objective'. We preferred to work with our ability to be critically subjective in the midst of the inquiry process.

Adrian and I led the presentation. The whole group was present, and other members spoke to many of the issues in the discussion. We were all pleased with the work we had done. There was a sense of completion, satisfaction, pride and celebration. The feedback was congratulatory, thoughtful and challenging. The Wrekin managers felt that cultural change had been achieved in the last four years, and, characteristically, started posing questions for the future.

Further developments, and an evaluation of outcomes

The culture work in the Wrekin did not stop there. The Culture Club, as they have become known, continue to meet. I hesitate to use the word (as it appears in the volume title, it may be wearing thin), but the group seems 'empowered' through the conceptual and practical languages of culture and research that the inquiry process introduced them to. They negotiate specific projects with the chief executive and directors and pursue them using cycles of inquiry. They then produce frank and challenging reports and presentations. Their role has survived a change of chief executive. The group has deliberately rotated its membership and key roles to maintain its abilities to take fresh perspectives and to stand outside the culture when necessary. Sometimes themes from the original 1987 report

prove illuminating. The adolescent metaphor seems particularly to have resonated and lasted. In Spring 1990 the group contacted me again, and I occasionally meet with them to provide an outside perspective to their work. That this process could be sustained is further testimony to its 'fit' with the Wrekin culture.

That is one outcome. The research process paper (Marshall and McLean, 1988) is another. From the feedback we have received, it seems a useful contribution to the literature. Adrian and I have drawn on the resulting portrait of the Wrekin in our training, consultancy and teaching work. Some people in local government were reluctant to hear, yet again, about this much-publicized organization. I have become better at telling the story in inoffensive ways, or raising awareness of the process of rejection. I still use the Wrekin as an example of an open, responsive, largely egalitarian, 'can do' and continually learning organization – also noting that every theme has its potentially degenerative aspect.

The original aim of circulating the Wrekin portrait more widely was never achieved. It often happens that cooperative inquiries generate action and enlightenment and change the lives of participants, but are not as adequately portrayed in writing and publication. The final portrait we produced (McLean and Marshall, 1989), was 91 pages long, and therefore unsuitable for general release as a Local Government Training Board publication. At the time, Adrian and I did not feel able to produce the requested 'slim version' because the richness of the picture seemed irreducible. Then our lives moved on to other projects. The portrait is available, on request, but has not achieved the circulation its model of possible organization really deserves.

I am used to judging this 'project' a success. In writing this chapter, I note with interest that I had not carried major regrets about this lack of dissemination, although I now feel some. The continued living of the inquiry in the Wrekin and in myself has seemed more significant. I notice that wider publication was an initial prime, and contracted, commitment for Adrian and me, which we did not fulfil. Instead we produced a document which has been useful to the Wrekin itself and to some others willing to take an in-depth look at the dynamics of a particular culture. It seems our allegiance had shifted towards the Wrekin and away from our sponsors; it would have been worth questioning this movement more clearly at the time.

In this there is another typical lesson from cooperative inquiry. Groups tend to start out with multiple, diverse, interests. Part of managing the research process is the negotiation of interests, with due attention to issues of power. There are also multiple, often unexpected, outcomes. Sometimes the original 'purpose' of the inquiry, such as writing a PhD thesis, gets left behind in the life-learning people do. Any criteria for

'success' identified in advance may become inappropriate – but reflection on this issue, too, requires critical subjectivity.

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