

**COLLABORATIVE AND SELF-REFLECTIVE FORMS OF
INQUIRY IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH**

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Creating knowledge in and for action

Many managers seeking learning find their way onto some form of postgraduate research programme. In this chapter we explore forms of research which are collaborative, self-reflective and action-oriented. These seem particularly likely to be useful to people wanting to develop knowledge in the service of more effective individual and organizational action. They have been influential in the management learning field under titles such as 'new paradigm research' and 'action research'. They are founded on significantly different principles to mainstream traditional social science research and have gained much legitimacy and acceptance since the early 1980s. But they may still be seen as bold and challenging by many people.

This chapter is written as a selective, retrospective story told from our experience of working with ideas about and practices of research in the School of Management at Bath University. We have chosen this form because it is in the community we share with our postgraduate students that we have developed our own approaches and experimented with those of other people in this field. Also we see developing inquiry as a continuing process in which ideas and practice are explored alongside each other, and are lived and tested amongst colleagues willing to support and challenge each other. Developing our educational approaches to working with postgraduate students has been a significant strand in this story. These 'students' are mainly mid-life people who register for part-time research degrees to explore issues which have strong professional and personal significance for them. Each one brings expertise, ideas and values to the research community which contribute, and move our practice and thinking on.

As we tell this story we shall pause to explicate key features of the research approaches we are reviewing, to refer to key writings which have influenced us, and to note current challenges. But we do not want to freeze any exposition in time as if it is definitive. These are formulations in continual process. They are valuable to work with, but the issues they address - such as what is valid knowing - have to be engaged with anew and as an exercise in self-creation for any aspiring researcher. So, we feel that we are continually moving on, repeatedly replenished and tested out in mutually educative, alive, encounters. It is important to state that this is not always easy or comfortable. We have recently advised prospective students that working as we do 'will involve struggles as well as harmonious engagement' and 'will sometimes be delightful and sometimes uncomfortable or painful'. We note with interest that new generations of students seem to enter where we are, we do not have substantially to recap history for them. We take a tentative sense of validation from this, as if our development is in tune with some trends in a more widely-evident, and growing, interest in action research approaches.

We do not intend this chapter to become self-congratulatory. We are pleased with much we have done and do. And this is not a perfect picture: there have been difficult, stuck or conflictual times; we have not been able to work well or fruitfully with everyone who has registered with us; and we have sometimes judged ourselves less than competent, or the situation impossible. We continue to learn—we hope.

This story charts key features chosen retrospectively. It is a reconstruction told for the purposes of showing how ideas and practices have been used and developed within a community. We have structured the account into three phases reflecting shifts in significant issues addressed, educational forms used and staff involved.

Phase 1: Initiating the Postgraduate Research Group

Together with our then colleague Adrian McLean, we formed our first 'Postgraduate Research Group' in about 1980. We suggested this to the postgraduate students who we were then singly or jointly supervising to provide a forum for exploring exciting ideas and research methods, and for discussing people's projects in supportive rather than adversarial ways. We wanted to move towards creating a community of inquiry in which all, including staff, were partners in the learning process. We each brought our research interests of the time into the group. Adrian was interested in organizational cultures, change and ethnography. Peter was just completing editing Human Inquiry with John Rowan (Reason and Rowan, 1981), and especially offered the research form of co-operative inquiry. Judi was developing notions of research as personal process, researching women in management and engaging with feminisms, themes illustrated in Women Managers: Travellers in a Male World (Marshall, 1984).

This group was 'open' in the sense that people joined when they registered with us to do research degrees and left when either they graduated or decided to stop for some other reason. This format could be intimidating for newcomers, some of whom reported staying silent for many months, overwhelmed and resentful as other people used long words or appeared confident. Our meetings were day-long, monthly. In them we discussed literature we had all read and experimented with research methods such as co-operative inquiry, story telling and psychodrama. Also we often discussed or worked with people's research studies in some depth, but mostly these were supported through additional supervision sessions with staff members.

In its very early days the group was quite an uncomfortable, not very trusting place to be. People were unsure of its value, and seemed hesitant, confined. After a while these tensions seemed to reduce, although we cannot now remember whether there were any agreed reasons for them or for their reduction. One related initiative was introducing regular process reviews into our meetings to give space for group dynamic and interpersonal issues to be addressed. (These reviews often slipped off busy agendas, however, as we noted with a jokiness which only occasionally seemed defensive.)

There is another theme here which we realise has been very significant, it is about our development as persons and as educators. This has been facilitated through disciplines such as psycho-therapy and co-counselling; and through our developing friendship and collegiality, which has enabled us to work together robustly and flexibly, with openness and challenge. Major aspects of this are: our capacity to hold a space for people to work in depth with their inquiries; our differences, offering people choice; and how we have learnt to take our authority where appropriate. In the early days of the Postgraduate Research Group we still had much to learn about these issues.

In this phase of development there were six main emphases:

- legitimizing post-positivist inquiry;
- working with different forms of knowing;
- recognising research as often personal and political process;
- developing practices of co-operative inquiry;
- working with other emerging research methodologies; and
- developing congruent practices of research supervision.

We shall look in turn at these strands (taking the story ahead where appropriate to avoid later overlap).

Legitimizing post-positivist inquiry

We realised early on that we were not just advocating qualitative instead of quantitative research, a move which was at the time portrayed in many quarters as suspect and risky enough, but advocating a shift of paradigm, a different way of knowing and being. Peter with others had established this ground in Human Inquiry (Wiley, 1981) and it was being reinforced from other sources. Over the years since the early 1980s we have seen a significant shift from inquirers initially needing to justify their research approach through a well-reasoned rejection of traditional social science assumptions to a much less apologetic and more assertive stance. People are now more likely to claim and define their place within an array of post-positivist approaches which are each developing distinctive flavours and grounds for their own legitimacy.

Early on, though, it was helpful to have clear articulations of the wider trends in knowledge-making. For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985), with whom we established a friendly working relationship, were especially clear in articulating five axioms of an emerging naturalistic paradigm and contrasting these with a positivist paradigm. Their naturalist axioms (p.37) were that:

Realities are multiple, constructed and holistic (rather than reality being single, tangible and fragmentable);

Knower and known are interactive and inseparable (rather than independent, a dualism);

Hypotheses are time- and context-bound (rather than time- and context-free generalizations);

All entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping (rather than there being real, single, identifiable causes); and

Inquiry is value-bound (rather than value-free).

Other sources were charting the challenges to scientific rationalism generally, for example Capra (1982) in The Turning Point, Berman (1981) in The Reenchantment of the World, Gregory Bateson (1972) in Steps to an Ecology of Mind and Skolimowski's early work which led to the recent publication of The Participatory Mind (1995). These, and similar sources, provided valuable reading materials and ideas.

It is interesting to remember how challenging and difficult some of this material seemed at the time, particularly when we tried to explore what it might mean in practice for our thinking and acting. We especially remember, very early in the group's life, reading a report entitled 'The emergent paradigm: Changing patterns of thought and belief' produced by SRI International (Schwartz and Ogilvy, 1979). It documented a survey of a wide range of academic disciplines such as biology, mathematics, physics and psychology and claimed to find evidence of an emerging paradigm shift with common characteristics. The movement charted was from a dominant paradigm which favoured explanations which were simple, hierarchic, mechanical, determinate, linearly causal, based on assembly and objective toward an emergent paradigm which saw explanations as needing to be complex, heterarchic, indeterminate, mutually causal, concerned with morphogenesis and acknowledging perspective.

That first time, members of the group were excited and intellectually stimulated, but found the ideas hard to encompass. What if the world really were to change in the ways described, would it really be possible to think like that? Our heads ached. We went to lunch bemused. Reading the report again some years later, with a new group of students, was strange, almost a non-event. The ideas seemed acceptable, quite easy to incorporate.

Working with different forms of knowing

From these early times we have always been working with what we would call an 'extended epistemology'. This builds on the ideas of John Heron that knowing takes multiple forms and is at least propositional, experiential, practical (Heron, 1981) and presentational (Heron, 1992). Thus:

Propositional knowledge is knowing about. It is the realm of ideas, concepts. It is expressed in words and can be readily debated. This is the main form of knowing recognised in traditional academic discourse, but it is essentially limited. Theoretical knowledge can be held separately and discordantly from practice.

Practical knowing is knowing how to, we enact it. This form of knowing is embodied.

Experiential knowing is knowledge by encounter. It is the pre-verbal ground from which other knowledges arise, it incorporates emotional knowing.

Presentational knowledge is patterned in our perceptions before we catch these with our conceptual, categorising intellect. It is analogic, a matter of form, often only tacitly apprehended (unless appropriate attention is paid). Presentational knowledge can be expressed in images, dreams and narrative.

We have kept in contact with John Heron over the years, for example inviting him to be a keynote speaker at one of our conferences.

Propositional knowledge is given primacy in most academic communities and is the focus of research attention and practice. We hold, however, that these four territories of knowing (at least) are all important, and should all be worked with. Their congruence or incongruence is also important. But primarily knowing is discovered in and for action. Also issues of presentational knowing become important when people want to write from their research. Traditional modes of academic writing are often inappropriate because they reshape and distort what has been discovered by forcing it into incompatible form (see below).

In discussions in the Postgraduate Research Group people would move between forms of knowing, exploring also congruities and incongruities. If a person talked about key intellectual ideas in their study they might be challenged if their presentation seemed to lack engagement (was this propositional knowing without experiential relevance and testing?) or if they seemed engaged in unreflective action, they might be challenged to incorporate the rigour of the propositional.

We also believe that the knowings generated in research are emergent, unfolding. Many cannot be adequately anticipated at the outset. Simply stated hypotheses and grand research plans are therefore usually inappropriate. More often people will work through several research cycles, in which the understandings and puzzles from one cycle become the questions and curiosities for the next. Often the cycles involve regular movements between action and reflection (Rowan, 1981). We would therefore expect people to take research steps awarely and choicefully, and to review periodically what their purposes are. Changing purposes and understandings can be (must be) incorporated into the research design rather than having to be denied or obscured. These ways of proceeding, keeping close to the ground of one's various forms of knowing, seem very different from the linear, large-scale trajectories of most traditional research studies. To many people it is a relief to find that they do not have to take an abstracted, disconnected route.

Recognising research as often personal and political process

From our own work and that of many students we came to recognise how much research seemed to emerge from and address a person's life process, rather than being a purely intellectual, objective matter (Marshall, 1992).

All good research is for me, for us and for them: it speaks to three audiences, and contributes to each of these three areas of knowing. It is for them to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable ideas and outcomes.... It is for us to the extent that it responds to concerns of our praxis, is relevant and timely.... It is for me to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher's being-in-the-world. (Reason and Marshall, 1987:112)

In these statements we were trying to right an imbalance in much academic study, which fails to recognise a vital source of the energy which underpins research.

And later we came to emphasise how much research is also political, as people address issues of power and social positioning, often encountered through their own experience, and seek to change aspects of their social worlds. Recently, for example, we have drawn on the exciting and challenging work of the black feminist scholar bell hooks (for example, 1989) who warns against over-emphasising personal insight relative to political action in academic development. Much research on gender and race is clearly political in these ways. But any inquiry affirming non-mainstream approaches - for example using collaborative action research in a Health Service setting - is likely to have this quality (and so to prove disturbing to someone).

Developing practices of co-operative inquiry

This was a time of working especially actively with the principles and practices of co-operative inquiry, which we see as research with and for people rather than on people.

In traditional research, the roles of researcher and subject are mutually exclusive. The researcher only contributes the thinking that goes into the project, and the subject only contributes the action to be studied.... In co-operative inquiry these mutually exclusive roles are replaced by a co-operative relationship based on reciprocal initiative and control, so that all those involved work together as co-researchers and as co-subjects. (Reason and Heron, 1995:125)

As co-researchers people participate in the thinking that goes into the research—framing the questions to be explored, agreeing on the methods to be employed and together making sense of their experiences. As co-subjects they participate in the action being studied. The co-researchers engage in cycles of action and reflection: in the action phases they experiment with new forms of practice; in the reflection stages they review their experiences critically, learn from them and develop theoretical perspectives which inform their work in the next action phase. The initiating researcher(s) engages with others to establish the co-operative inquiry group, through which people learn to (re)claim their capacities for knowledge creation and so to transform their work and lives. (See also, Heron, 1996.)

Collaboration, more generally, can thus be seen as both an epistemological and political imperative. It enhances the knowledges produced and sits within an emancipatory vision of inquiry. Collaborative practice demands, in addition, an integration of authentic, vulnerable authority with respect for individual autonomy and choice. It is not an easy formula to apply, but requires much skilled attention.

Some people were attracted to register with us because of Peter's role in co-editing the book Human Inquiry and his association with the co-operative inquiry model. Many wanted to adopt co-operative inquiry forms in their research. In the group as a whole we conducted some trial inquiries - for example in one we looked at processes of interpersonal feedback - reviewing the methods and learning more about issues of applying them. Based on these and more recent experiences, it has become increasingly apparent that as people try to adopt any ideal model of research a tension arises between following advocated procedures precisely (which can degenerate into being over-controlling), and allowing the research to find its own emergent form (which can degenerate into lack of systematic rigour). We now articulate and debate this tension overtly with students, hoping to prompt aware and continuing choice in their approach.

Peter edited a collection of case examples as Human Inquiry in Action (Reason, 1988). Introductory chapters made more explicit some of the issues and choices in applying co-operative inquiry principles and models to research practice. These were greatly informed by our work in the Postgraduate Research Group.

Working with other emerging methods

During this phase we experimented with other emerging research methodologies such as story-telling (Reason and Hawkins, 1988), psycho-drama (Hawkins, 1988), subpersonalities exercises, and various approaches to working with qualitative data. As always, 'students' of the time contributed greatly to these initiatives, bringing expertise and ideas and developing approaches with us. The chapter by Reason and Hawkins (1988) includes a key framework generated at this time through a collaborative reflective exercise (p. 84). The framework juxtaposed explanation and expression as alternative modes of working with qualitative data in sense-making, especially affirming the values of the latter as an alternative route.

This was a time of much circle dancing in the Group and at the Conferences we ran (see below), an expertise brought strongly by one member. There were other aspects of the format of our meetings which seemed to us to encourage participation, such as the importance of meeting in a circle (see Reason, 1988 for a fuller account of how the group operated). We note with interest that our meetings now seem more conventional in format, to which we should perhaps be attending.

Developing congruent practices of research supervision

During this phase we developed a process model of research supervision which honoured the personal, political and process natures of research (Marshall and Reason, 1993).

Given our view that research is not an impersonal, external and solely intellectual endeavour, but rather a complex personal and social process, we approach supervision intending to pay attention to a wide range of themes or 'strands of concern'. We see our role as helping bring into the foreground, to make figural in a gestalt sense.... those themes which currently require attention and to help the student work with them. In order to achieve this we are always scanning internally and externally for clues about issues behind those being discussed, incongruities, aspects of the research which are currently being neglected, and so on. We generally surface our ideas and intuitions as suggestions or possibilities, for the student and us to consider. (Marshall and Reason, 1993:118).

During this phase also we initiated the bi-annual Emerging Approaches to Inquiry conference series (the first was in 1986). We wanted to disseminate what we were doing, invite people to share in explorations and make contacts with like-minded people. The themes and visiting speakers chosen for these conferences reflect current interests within our research community. Through them we have developed and maintained contacts with people in the UK and other parts of the world, especially the Department of Management Learning at Lancaster University and the Social Ecology Group at the University of Western Sydney at Hawkesbury, Australia.

Phase 2: Recruiting a New Postgraduate Research Group: Hints of some core curriculum

Moving on to the next phase of postgraduate community history will seem neater in retrospect than it was at the time. Certain things did change, although their timing may not have happened simultaneously. Adrian left to become a consultant. Then, for various personal and professional reasons, we did not register any postgraduate students for a year, despite some eager, talented applications. We renewed our commitment to such work by recruiting a 'New Postgraduate Research Group', a fresh cohort of twelve people. (This ran in parallel to the 'Old' Postgraduate Research Group until 1996, when the latter came to the end of its life.)

By this stage we had largely dropped the 'New Paradigm Research' label. We adopted various descriptions of our work - such as 'experiential', 'self-reflective' and 'collaborative' - to reflect its different facets and our different individual approaches. For example, Judi was developing critical feminist analyses of issues such as career theory; also her work had strong self-reflective strands. Peter was still highly committed to co-operative inquiry, but now saw it as one method within a family of collaborative approaches to action research (Reason, 1994).

The core themes of this phase were:

feeling we had something to teach;
emphasising the primacy of the practical;
respecting diversity in inquiry;

extending approaches to self-reflective practice; and
maintaining permeable boundaries whilst holding a distinctive space.

Having something to teach

In establishing this group we realised that after some ten years of this sort of work, we had perspectives to offer as well as wanting to engage in a community of inquiry with students. The new challenge was both to take our authority as teachers and to remain student-centred. We departed from our previous ways of operating by devising a more formal programme to cover, fortnightly for the first year, wanting to pass on our enthusiasms and to expose everyone to some of the core ideas and models of practice by then available in the field.

During this phase we felt less need to justify or defend our choices of research approach. A whole variety of new forms of inquiry were gaining currency, and we were achieving a reputation for our particular approaches. Developing our practice further seemed far more important than being defensive about it. Our 'core curriculum' for that group's first year included the six emphases outlined above. We also worked actively with Torbert's (1991) notion of action inquiry (see below) and explored feminist work, especially for its insights into the power and politics of knowledge-making.

Another key element was some of the work of Gregory Bateson (Bateson, 1972; well explicated in Berman, 1981). It is impossible to do this justice here. We would, however, consider a systemic world-view as appropriate in much of our work. We also find Bateson's notion of levels of learning valuable. Learning III involves realising that the frameworks through which we see and construe life are constructions, and that none can be proved inherently 'true'. Thus ways of punctuating events, unexamined premises and 'character' as previously enacted become open to question and change. For us, good research - and the development of management competence - involves aspiring to this kind of self-reflexivity. (While we find these ideas appealing, we realise that they too are a frame rather than a statement about reality.)

To pursue the various themes above, readings, presentations and exercises were offered to the group with the intention of generating engaged discussion and experimentation rather than of creating notions of orthodoxy. But this group experience was at times difficult, and even in retrospect we have no clear understanding of why that was. Certainly the chemistry of membership brought tensions, and we were not able to manage the group as effectively as we wished. What we take from this experience is that extended time needs to be devoted to developing a group as a community and also that discussions of individuals' research best take place in smaller forums where trust can be built, and anxiety and competition (which we believe are rife in groups aspiring to postgraduate degrees) minimised.

Emphasising the primacy of the practical

Through reading and meetings with others, we realised that we seemed to have a strong practice orientation. This links back, of course, to notions of an extended epistemology. We had lots of research examples and experiences (our own and those of our students) to complement our philosophical approaches to research. This phase saw a strengthening sense that this was and is our contribution. It is a stance we choose to take in an academic world which still seems to over-emphasize intellectual knowing and is insufficiently concerned about quality action. Our commitment comes partly from seeing what people can do in their lives and organizations by pursuing inquiry in the alive senses of that term. We are therefore committed to education for the whole person and for professional practice, to developing knowledge in, through and for action. Theory and ideas are also very important to us.

Respecting diversity in inquiry

As members of the group each created their own research projects our growing sense of inquiry as diverse was heightened. As Reinharz (1979) concluded, each person has to become their own kind of social scientist. Methods cannot be copied, they must be creatively developed with subtle attention to suit particular individual and organizational contexts. Often the apparent problems which initially seem likely to undermine quality research are the very characteristics which if addressed head-on give methodological creativity and appropriate form.

As a community we were, then, becoming more likely to challenge potential orthodoxies, such as people feeling they should use co-operative inquiry, and to advocate variety as possible, necessary. But within this diversity we were strongly maintaining a collaborative intent.

Extending approaches for self-reflective practice

Research is always from a perspective, in the pursuit of some purpose. All those involved in an inquiry project need to engage in practices which will develop increasing awareness of how their perspectives shape their understanding and action. We have used the term critical subjectivity (Reason, 1994) to describe this kind of self-reflective attention to the ground on which one is standing. It cannot, of course ever be complete, 'clear'. We are not implying 'unbiased' perception. The most important point is that any understanding is always provisional, open to further inquiry. We talk often of needing to 'hold any truth lightly', respecting both its potential to interest, excite or generate action and the impossibility of it ever being 'true'.

Over the years we have explored various ways of developing qualities of attention and self-reflectiveness. At one Conference, for example, we invited a Tai Chi teacher to lead a stream of exercises which we thought would help people to notice more about their personal patterns, and then invited them to consider how they brought these to their research and sense-making. To illustrate: one exercise is called 'sticking'. One person closes their eyes and rests one palm on the top of a partner's hand. The latter is invited to move their hand and the person who is 'sticking' must follow, keeping as

gently contacted as possible. It is remarkable how revealing such a simple exercise can be. It often, for example, reflects back patterns around control, risk-taking and uncertainty-management.

We have found the model of action inquiry, as developed by Torbert (1991; Fisher and Torbert, 1995), very helpful as a particularly elegant and demanding mapping of awareness possibilities. He suggests that an action system (person or community) requires knowledge about four 'territories' of human experience: their purposes (through intuitive or spiritual knowledge of what goals are worth pursuing); their strategies (as choices made through intellectual or cognitive knowledge of possibilities); their behavioural choices (involving practical knowledge of skill); and knowledge of the consequences of their behaviours in the outside world (- an extended epistemology again). The active, self-challenging, scanning of these various frames of knowing provides a rubric of attentional inquiry. Some students use a self-reflexive research process such as action inquiry to explore their own professional practice when more overtly collaborative forms of research would be inappropriate to their research question or dangerous in their professional setting. We have met and worked with Bill Torbert in various settings.

Maintaining permeable boundaries whilst holding a distinctive space

As the story so far may indicate, developments and ideas from elsewhere enter our community and then are actively experimented with. And we also have a sense of our distinctiveness. So whilst we may draw on Torbert's work, for example, we think we use his ideas differently from the way that he does. We think some of the qualities of our distinctiveness are that we acknowledge and hold lightly the influences of humanistic psychology, augmenting these with modifications and developments such as attention to feminist work, to political issues in research and, tentatively, to a vision of the inquiry process as a spiritual quest for meaning in an uncertain world. We strongly emphasise the necessary rigour of individual and collective inquiry as personal and interpersonal endeavours. We especially emphasise the importance of emotional, interpersonal and process competencies in inquiry.

Our approach is partly revealed in our uses of and reservations about post-modernist sources. During this phase of the community's life we became increasingly aware of post-modernist writing, and its apparently growing popularity in management theorising. Our approach to participatory knowing is, we believe, post-modern in several senses, but it is importantly different from deconstructionist post-modern perspectives. While we share with the latter the view that all knowledge is relative and socially constructed through processes of power, we consider deconstructive perspectives typically maintain the fundamental sense of separation incorporated in modernist notions about reality. They could almost be called ultramodern: for they deny any validity of experience, including the experience of being embodied in the natural world. The problem of radical relativism disappears once participation is acknowledged as a component in all experience and all knowledge. Participatory knowing seeks to be grounded in radical experiential encounter with a co-created world, and so may provide a foundation from which coherent meaning and action can develop (Reason, 1994; Heron, 1996).

Phase 3: Formalising the Postgraduate Programme in Action Research in Professional Practice.

In 1994 we established the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, partly to formalise our work in a new postgraduate research degree. We joined forces in this venture with our colleague David Sims and with Jack Whitehead from the School of Education. They had been working together on action research programmes, and Jack had a long history of working with teachers to help them develop living educational theories. We chose "action research" as an encompassing and politically neutral term, although we have some problems with the way it has been used and abused since Lewin first coined it in the 1940s. We wished to emphasize that we were drawing on a range of action-oriented methodologies including educational action research, participatory action research, and feminist inquiry as well as on co-operative inquiry and action inquiry. Similarly we chose the term "professional", despite the possible connotations of restrictive professionalism, because we wanted to engage with people from a wide range of settings who wished critically to examine their practice.

In designing our programme, we started from the premise that our students, as mature professionals wishing to reflect on their practice, were already action researchers in important ways, and that we needed to respect their self directing abilities as adult learners. We needed to find a creative balance between this, our own authority to teach and share our experience, and the need to deliver a programme that was efficient in teaching resources. We designed our programme in three phases: Diploma, Masters and Doctoral. The Diploma stage is not a 'lower' level of activity, but an intensive initial engagement in researching which provides the base for later work and tests the fit between participant and programme. It involves a series of two-day workshops in which we introduce the theory and practice of collaborative forms of action research. During this phase we move down a gradient from being relatively authoritative shapers of activities toward shared responsibility with students. The Diploma phase involves cycles of action and reflection from the very beginning: between workshops students engage in self-chosen mini inquiries. They plan and review these in small staff facilitated groups. Some participants start with clear research agendas and pursue these from the outset. Others are much more tentative, knowing, for example, that they need to reflect at length on their recent experiences before engaging in further experimental action.

At the end of the Diploma stage students write papers reviewing their learning, addressing general issues we have specified. They are also invited to state their own criteria of quality. They present this work to a group of staff and students, and it and future directions are discussed in detail. This is an important transition which we aim to manage as a learning opportunity. It focuses attention on the student's progress, and requires them to write early in their studies. Students may then either transfer to the Masters phase, decide to leave the programme with a Diploma, or in rare cases be asked to leave by staff if we do not think they are likely to be successful in their aspirations. People who transfer on then proceed with their inquiries and either

complete at Masters level or engage in a similar formal transfer process to move to the Doctoral phase.

In addition to the theoretical and methodological concerns discussed above, in this new phase we have especially been focusing or re-focusing on:

representation;
 validity and quality; and
 the balance between different aspects of the extended epistemology.

Representation

Denzin and Lincoln (1995) identify the "crisis of representation" as one of the key moments in the development of qualitative research. As research and writing become more reflexive, moving beyond traditional canons of objectivism, questions arise concerning the authority of the writer to represent experience, and the form that such representation may take. These questions encourage us to pay even more attention to presentational knowing in our extended epistemology. Firstly, representation involves the place of presentational knowing as the often unacknowledged bridge between experiential knowing and propositional knowing; it is the pre-linguistic warrant both for ideas and theories and for action in the world. Secondly, presentational knowing is an important aspect of speaking out to the world, since it addresses how we find appropriate forms in which to represent our knowing. These are especially challenging issues for those wishing to portray their inquiries in concordant ways while also paying attention to traditional academic canons.

In our teaching these issues are partly addressed in the workshop we call "Accounting for ourselves" in which we raise these questions in an attempt to deconstruct traditional notions of academic language and offer students a range of alternatives. We encourage students to experiment with forms of representation and writing, both to portray their experience to themselves and to find creative ways to speak to wider audiences. In research work, Judi Marshall's book Women Managers Moving On (1995) is an exploration of representational form as well as an account of senior women managers. The text weaves between stories written in multiple voices and reflections which invite the reader to engage in their own sense-making as they read rather than take the writer's sense-making for granted.

Questions of quality and validity

Throughout our work we have pondered the nature of high quality research in a participative paradigm: issues of validity were addressed in Human Inquiry and Human Inquiry in Action, and most of our students have engaged in extended discussions of quality issues in their theses. In 1995 Peter and Yvonna Lincoln initiated an international conference Quality in Human Inquiry, with participants from major schools of participative work (Reason and Lincoln, 1996). This conference

emphasized that quality within a collaborative and action-oriented paradigm concerns the nature of practice: if knowledge is derived in and for action with people then the test of quality lies, not in any abstract characteristics, but in its ability to guide effective and ethical action. One test for this when presented with an action-research thesis is to explore the questions: "Has this inquiry helped to develop the quality of aware action among those involved?" "Is there evidence of improved action-inquiry capacities?" This does not mean that we are not interested in questions of creative theory or rigorous evidence, it means that these are seen as accompanying and often in the service of effective practice. We also believe strongly that quality or validity is not guaranteed by method (as in orthodox research) but should be sought in the aware and self-reflective consciousness of inquirers.

Balancing forms of knowing

These reflections on validity lead us to ask ourselves about the balance of experiential, presentation, proposition and practical knowing as represented in a student's eventual thesis. Is it acceptable for a PhD thesis to include profound experiential knowing yet minimal theory? Can presentational knowing, say in the form of a novel, be a research thesis? Our students' work often raises these issues, and we attempt to frame them as questions for creative exploration. When recently discussing the final draft of a particularly unusual PhD thesis (Treseder, 1995), we wondered out loud if it included a sufficiently wide-ranging exploration of literature. After a pause for self-recollection, our student told us forcibly, "There is a lot of theory in this, and you will find it integrated throughout the text. But more importantly, what I have written here is known through my body, my imagination and my practice. The quality of my work is in its integration with my whole being, not simply in academic theory". We accepted her argument, as did the external examiner.

In conclusion

Thus has our practice developed through our own cycles of action and reflection. In some ways we would claim that our practice has developed from uncertain beginnings toward greater maturity. We are now much more comfortable with our authority as teachers and exponents of selective approaches to inquiry, and we find it less difficult to hold our authority and acknowledge the agency of our students. We believe we have developed a programme design which creatively balances pre-arranged structure with emergent form.

At the same time some issues go round and round, re-appearing regularly to confront us, albeit in new forms. There are in the end no firm answers to the dilemmas of working in a learning community. In a post modern world there are no permanent criteria of quality work. We continually ask ourselves how to balance the various components of our programme to give due attention to experience, to theory, to practice. We worry from time to time that we have settled comfortably into a fixed

frame, and are fooling ourselves in claiming we see through our frames. We struggle in our relationships as staff with our diverse interests and emphases. And so on. This is the stuff of a living-learning community of inquiry.

Chapter summary

In this chapter we have reviewed some of the core characteristics of self-reflective, action-oriented and collaborative forms of management inquiry. We have especially emphasised the necessary interweaving of different forms of knowing; the value of cycling between reflection and action in order to develop good quality theory and advanced management practice; the significance of acknowledging and working with personal and political aspects of inquiry; and the importance of developing appropriate disciplines of self-reflectiveness. We have reviewed the influences of a range of potential methodologies such as action inquiry, co-operative inquiry, storytelling and feminist research. We have discussed how we have worked with these ideas and potential practices in our research community - and therefore illustrated our view that research is best supported by working alongside other people, alongside friends willing to act as enemies, and as friends. These practices have included developing a process model of postgraduate supervision; balancing our authority as staff members with student-centred approaches; and working on our own development as professionals and persons. We have located our work as being in the broad fields of post-positivist and action research, showing how we relate to some other approaches and claiming our own distinctiveness, for example in emphasising the primacy of the practical, maintaining an ethic of diversity and enjoying finding appropriate forms for representing research outcomes. During the chapter we have illustrated our concerns with issues of quality - in the practices of research and research facilitation.

We think it is wholly appropriate - essential - that our practice is in the field of management. The approaches to inquiry we advocate greatly enhance the potential for research to be grounded in “real world” concerns and issues, for theory to be applicable in practice, and for management researchers to become more aware, skilled and effective practitioners as a central, rather than auxiliary, outcome of their research.

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