

## Prologue coming through the undergrowth

*“How delightfully the fishes are enjoying themselves,” exclaimed Soshi.*

*“You are not a fish,” commented his friend, “how do you know that the fishes are enjoying themselves?”*

*“You are not myself,” answered Soshi; “how do you know, that I do not know, that the fishes are enjoying themselves?”*

Taoist dialogue

*Experiences are both the quicksand on which we cannot build and the material with which we do build. . . . A method has to be found that makes it possible to work on experiences, and to learn from them.*

Frigga Haug (2000: 146)<sup>1</sup>

*I must understand the world from my point of view, as a person claiming originality and exercising [her] personal judgement responsibly with universal intent.*

(Polanyi, 1974: 327)

This prologue represents both the “last loop” of this PhD process and a next cycle of inquiry, written in response to my examiners’ comments and questions on my thesis and the conversations surrounding this feedback, including the viva itself<sup>2</sup>.

This part of my ongoing inquiry specifically seeks to express additional propositional clarity around the validity of the processes, ways of inquiring and forms I have chosen to generate a PhD thesis (addressing a framework which I am both questioning and seeking to comply with). In addition, the viva and surrounding end-of-PhD discussions have prompted me to consider broader questions for the continued unfolding of this inquiry into the future.

The examiners have specifically asked me write this prologue in order to prepare readers for the innovative approach I have chosen to explore through my thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Haug, F. (2000). Memory work: The key to women’s anxiety. In S. Radstone (Ed), Memory and methodology pp. 155-178, New York: Berg.

<sup>2</sup> The viva took place at the University of Bath on 15 November 2006. My examiners were Dr Mark Baldwin (who I refer to as “Mark” when I quote him from the viva) of the Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, UK and Professor William Torbert (who I refer to as “Bill” when I quote him from the viva) of the Carroll School of Management, Boston College, US. Bill attended via video conference. Both examiners have agreed that they can be directly named and quoted in this prologue.

## Your experience as reader

Throughout the thesis you are about to read, I have consciously chosen to develop and use forms which stay close to my lived experience and unfold in the thesis writing and imagery in ways which are congruent with that lived experience. Form and content intertwine and I give primacy to coming up from the undergrowth of experience rather than down from the abstractions and ideas of the intellect (Judi, my PhD supervisor<sup>3</sup> said in the run-up to the viva: “*you could have reached beyond your lived experience through groundless intellect... but this has not been your project*”). As my examiners both pointed out, the implications of this are that as a reader, you are likely to feel both the “*agony and the ecstasy*” (Bill) and the “*joy and difficulty*” (Mark) of what for me has been an extremely rich set of encounters. During the viva, Bill said that readers would be able to be more playful when reading this thesis if they were told in advance that: “*it isn’t neatened up inside, and as a reader you’ll go through feelings of overwhelmed-ness and not-fitting-stuff-together-ish-ness... this is a kind of aesthetic, and so [readers] are being asked to repeat, in some ways, in microcosm, the experience of the researcher herself.*” My examiners also recognised that this thesis has a range of potential readers: academics, international development professionals and education professionals (and I would now add theatre clowns to the list as well). Bill asked me about how this work “*contributes to a body of cumulative knowledge?*”:

- If you are an **academic**, this thesis contributes to the body of knowledge which says “this is what action research can look like when ‘presentational’ knowing is given priority over ‘propositional’ knowing” and “this is what a management PhD thesis can taste like”;
- If you are a **international development professional**, this thesis contributes to the body of knowledge which says “this is how we, as individuals, might respond generatively to rapidly worsening environmental and social justice (without burning ourselves out in the process)”;
- If you are an **education professional**, this thesis contributes to the body of knowledge which says “this is what we, as educators, might attend to in transformational learning for the pressing issues of environmental sustainability and social justice”;
- If you are a **theatre clown**, this thesis contributes to the body of knowledge which says “exploring and embodying the clown archetype is useful and needed in the world today as a response to the pressing issues of environmental sustainability and social justice”.

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<sup>3</sup> Professor Judi Marshall (who I refer to as “Judi” when I quote her from the viva) of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, School of Management, University of Bath, UK.

## Qualities and validities

Both examiners explicitly asked me to articulate more of my thinking on issues of the validity and qualities of this work. In the thesis, there are two linked chapters – *Trusting the Mapmaker: validity and presentational knowing, parts one and two* – which address: first, issues of finding relevant criteria for judging the quality of presentational knowing; and second, the application of such criteria to this thesis. During the viva, I added to this by drawing on a taxonomy which was originally developed (by my colleague, Dr Gill Coleman<sup>4</sup>) to articulate different positions when theorising gender issues (ranging from conformist to more radically questioning). In discussion with my examiners, I outlined four levels for considering quality<sup>5</sup> and validity issues in order to frame my understanding of the ongoing development and social construction of validity as an academic discourse:

1. **Equipping the researcher** - learning how to comply with, retro- or force-fit conventional positivistic academic quality criteria (what Kvale calls “the holy trinity” of validity, reliability and generalisability<sup>6</sup>) to the inquiry. This means not explicitly questioning frames, implies a particular reaction to authority and power (being a “good girl”), or indicates a conscious choice to “cloak” the work in conventional dress as a way of influencing for change<sup>7</sup>.
2. **Creating equal opportunities** - trying to expand on the lists of what makes validity and quality. There’s lots of this work around (for examples, see Sparkes, 2001, 2002 and Lincoln, 1995). I have found it relatively easy to create, find, incorporate lists of “alternative”, contextually specific, non-foundational quality criteria to “replace” or “augment” conventional validity criteria. I find that the criteria I and others generate have large areas of overlap and commonality. Here is another list I produced during a train journey just before the viva – both “off the top of my head” and deeply informed by my thesis experience. Notice how similar it is to other lists (see pages 177-185, 338, 341 of the thesis for examples):  
*Is the inquiry grounded in lived experience is and the representation of that inquiry evocative of that lived, concrete experience?*  
*Is the work resonant, does it ring true for the reader?*  
*Is the inquiry, of which the thesis is a part, sustained, emergent, attentive, lively, engaged, and rooted?*  
*Does the work stimulate the (active) reader to incorporate their own experience as they read and (re)create their own personal meanings?*  
*Does the work linger? Is it memorable? Is it engaging?*

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<sup>4</sup> Coleman G, 2002, *Gender, Power and Post-structuralism in Corporate Citizenship: A Personal Perspective on Theory and Change*, JCC 5, Spring, Greenleaf Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> My preferred term.

<sup>6</sup> Kvale S, 1995, *The Social Construction of Validity, Qualitative Inquiry*, Volume 1, Number 1, pp. 19-40, Sage.

<sup>7</sup> With the possible exception of this prologue, this thesis isn’t particularly choosing to work at this level, although of course I have chosen to use (and am grateful for) the structure of an academic PhD as a crucible and discipline for my inquiries over the last five and a half years.

*Does the work prompt the (active) reader to reconsider (and maybe reconstitute) their own actions in the world (in ways which they intend to lead to greater environmental and social justice... or in ways which actually do lead to greater environmental and social justice...)?*  
*Is the work plausible / believable?*

3. **Valuing difference** – with the aim of creating deeper change, this level is about explicitly questioning the assumptions, and seeking to expand and redefine the framing behind, what makes a piece of research (including its processes and representation) of value, count as knowledge. This level seeks to reshape the landscape of institutional space. In the UK at least, this has been a particular issue in the world of practice-based arts PhDs, for example, when art researcher Fiona Candlin<sup>8</sup> says: *“I suggest that instead of trying to make art practice fit academic regulations it would be more productive to use the practice-based PhDs as a way of rethinking academic conventions and scholarly requirements”* (Candlin, 2000: 96). I understand this level of understanding to question and seek to expand the *epistemological capacity*<sup>9</sup> of academia and the transformation of how academia constructs meaning. The work of valuing difference is also political. Kegan asks: *“[how do we] resist our tendencies to privilege what is familiar and judge critically what is different?”* (Kegan, 1994: 204), and continues by saying: *“this tendency exacts its cruellest price on the unpowerful and the excluded when the powerful and the included make right and true that which is merely familiar to them and make wrong and false that which is merely strange to them.”* This thesis seeks to work at this level, particularly when considering the extent to which a fuller presentational knowing is excluded and unpowerful in academic discourse.
  
4. **Resisting dominant discourse** - at a still more fundamental level, this part of the taxonomy problematises the whole mindset that leads to (potentially maniacal) validity and seeks to emphasise the ongoing social construction of quality, qualities and validity. Educational psychologist, Steinar Kvale suggests that we look at ways to live *“that go beyond a pervasive distrust and scepticism of social interaction and the nature of the social world. This amounts to creating communities where validity does not become a primary question in social relations, neither in the scientific community nor in society at large. The question then becomes how we shall live so that we do not have to continually pose questions of validity”* (Kvale, 1995: 37-38). This is why in the thesis itself I chose not to emphasise validity issues as a major explicit thread of the work. By allowing my text to speak for itself, I am questioning the nature of propositional knowing and the ways in which it (legitimately) gets expressed in academia. I want to acknowledge the difficulty of working at this subtle level. Whilst Goethe

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<sup>8</sup> Candlin F, 2000, Practice-based Doctorates and Questions of Academic Legitimacy, *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 19.1, pp96-101, Blackwell Publishing.

<sup>9</sup> See Kegan R, 1994, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, Harvard.

says: “*don’t look for anything behind the phenomena; they themselves are the theory*” the designers Gunnar Swanson and James Suttar pragmatically respond with: “*which is easier said than done. To be able to ‘see’ a phenomenon as its own theory requires a subtle rearrangement of our interpretative faculties—a grasping for what one sees as a meaning, and not just for some abstract ‘meaning’ of what one sees.*”<sup>10</sup>

Bringing together all four levels addressing issues of quality outlined in this taxonomy, and in response to my examiners’ questions, I asked myself: “*in what ways do I believe my thesis could be of value to someone else and is more than (just) my story?*” This thesis:

- Carves out wider space in the field for broader, more experimental ways of creating theses in the field of management education, in ways which start to follow through on and reflect the implications of adopting an extended epistemology (as advocated in the field of action research). The thesis does this at two levels – in the main body of the work itself and in explicitly more experimental and “daring” ways through four interludes;
- Provides a framework for engaging with presentational knowing in congruent, inquiring, close-to-experience ways;
- Offers concrete examples from my own and others practices of what a more fully realised presentational knowing might look like in first, second and third person action research practices;
- Shows embodied micro-practices of power in a variety of contexts and situations, and demonstrates the extent to which under- and over-privilege is mutable and contingent;
- Illustrates and values the humanity, humility, inevitability and desirability of not knowing and fragmented knowing;
- Shows a sustained and multifaceted attempt to reduce and rebalance the primacy of intellectual knowing in an over-privileged Western mind;
- Particularly through the practices of clowning and the experiences of working in Moradabad, offers evidence of how coming to know through one set of experiences can directly inform coming to know in a different sphere of life;
- Makes clear that moving into and prioritising more participative, presentational ways of being and knowing takes time – to build trust with clients and colleagues and to carve out space in a working life;
- Offers five foundational and interconnecting themes for working with many ways of knowing in situations where human and ecological flourishing is important (*multi-layered, “thick” emotion – playfulness – contact across irreducible difference – the obligated witness – conviction – see pages 343-401 of the thesis*).

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<sup>10</sup> Swanson G and Suttar J, 1997, A conversation about studying typography, Introduction to Virginia Commonwealth University’s Design Education In Progress Volume 1 Typography (see: [www.gunnarswanson.com/writingPages/TypographyConversation.html](http://www.gunnarswanson.com/writingPages/TypographyConversation.html)).

## How do I know I'm not just kidding myself?

During the viva, my examiners expressed an interest in how I go about checking (with my behavioural self, with others and the outside world and against my own sense of purpose and intentions) any beliefs I might have in my inquiry or claims I might make for this thesis to be of value to others (like those listed above). Mark worded it as: “*how do we know the validities of what’s presented here?*” For example, with reference to my writing on seeking alternatives to patterns of domination and subordination in my ILO work (see pages 268-273 in the thesis), Mark asked how I knew if I was “*moving authentically up the ladder of participation or just kidding [my]self?*” Similarly, Bill asked me to propositionally point out with more clarity what he saw as “*the tremendous validity of [my] kind of work*” as particularly demonstrated, in his opinion, through feedback from a student, Pauline, on her experience of my facilitation work (see page 318).

In this section, I will first point towards specific examples of my sustained practices of seeking or coming to know that I’m not just kidding myself. Then, I will point towards instances in the thesis where I gain feedback and offer evidence of my practices of reframing and expanding the qualities of my presence and visioning. I engage in and welcome feedback on my practices to guard against both unthinking, imposing agency and getting lost in a mushy infinite regress of relativity. There can be no guarantee against misinterpreting my own actions, which will inevitably spawn unknown (undesirable and desirable) unintended consequences. I make my comments here whilst bearing in mind that “*in a sense, there isn’t an answer to these things because the way we understand it is going to be the result of a continuous, never-ending discussion about how these things all fit together*” (Mark).

- **First, how do I (self-) check and critically (self-) reflect on my “specific behavioural practices to achieve desired outcomes”<sup>11</sup>?**

*How do I check in with myself?* Throughout the thesis, you’ll see me engaged in a wide range of practices in my day-to-day living which encourage me to reflect critically on my own actions. To help me dwell in experiences for longer and share those experiences with others, I make considerable use of freefall writing (for example, see the chapter called “*Do you want to improve the world? learning with the lowers*” for sensuously detailed writing on working in Ghana, India and Sri Lanka). To help me stay curious and attentive, particularly during my work with the “lowers”, I engage selectively (when appropriate and non-intrusive) in photography (most of the photography in the thesis is my own, see examples on pages 186, 209, 288, 374-376). If I

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<sup>11</sup> Torbert refers to this practice of looking for congruence between performing and assessing as generating and responding to “*single-loop feedback*” (see Torbert W, 1999, *The Distinctive Questions Developmental Action Inquiry Asks*, *Management Learning*, Volume 30(2): 198-206).

have more time, I stay close to the phenomena I am experiencing through drawing (for example, at Chartres (page 49) and, in the second interlude of the thesis, through Goethean Science). Similarly, I often “ground myself” in my work in financially poor countries by going walking in the evenings (see footnote 151, page 201). When I am working with the uppers, more often based from my home, such “grounding” takes the form of swimming, yoga, meditation or (more often) stomping around the local woods. Sometimes, if I need to dwell “in the whole”, I simply nap for ten or fifteen minutes to relax my mind and allow some clarity to emerge. Less-generative sleepless nights also indicate I am processing complex information.

*How do I check out with other people?* I check, seek and welcome feedback from others. This is evidenced in the thesis through discussions with and feedback from (for example) MSc students Pauline and Rachel (pages 318-319), ILO local colleagues Yao, Samuel and Robert (pages 280-281) and members of the Sri Lankan team (pages 236, 282). You’ll also see me making sense offline with colleagues and friends (even if I am working alone on a project, for example, the email to Carole (page 226) and the exploration concerning money with Diana Francis on pages 232-233). Much of this type of checking out is connected in time and space to particular projects I am working on and has a discipline and rhythm which is contextually specific<sup>12</sup>. In ways which look more obviously systematic, the ongoing discipline of my clowning practice brings with it formal structures for incorporating self-reflection, tutor and peer feedback (as has the process of generating this PhD at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, with its structure of learning groups and open workshops). I value extroverted sense making (as well as self-reflection) – what others notice me doing which I may not notice myself, or not give myself credit for is an important source of data for me. With some friends, these discussions have gone on for decades and are a source of long term learning and much amusement.

- **Second, how do I question the frames within which I am working?**<sup>13</sup>

First, I’d like to say that the clown archetype is constantly reframing and transgressing accepted boundaries and norms. Learning to express the qualities of this archetype in the extreme form of the clown has freed up my practice elsewhere. For example, when working with the lowers, I have gradually learned to hold open the ambiguous space of where imposition and invitation meet (see the chapter called “*Do you want to improve the world? learning with the lowers*”). In this arena of my work, I have also expanded my (and my

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<sup>12</sup> For example, during one ILO trip to Ghana, I arranged for my client, who would be in Geneva, to call to check in and make sense together at 7.30 each morning as the day began.

<sup>13</sup> Torbert refers to this questioning and noticing process as one of “*changing one’s way of strategizing and, thus, the way one defines and measures practices and results*”. He calls this “*second order, double-loop feedback*” (Torbert, 1999: 196).

client's) understandings of the implications of and approaches to social marketing (pages 269-273). In addition, in my work with the uppers, particularly that with the MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice (where frame-questioning is part of the *raison d'être* of the whole programme), I seek to question frames as part of my everyday practice (for examples, see: page 305, where I decide to act with editor-in-chief agency to facilitate a creative process; page 318, where I notice a student's difficulties in getting her voice heard; and footnote 200, page 336 where I reframe my responses to an unsuccessful dialogue with a senior academic from "shutting off" to consciously "withdrawing energy from an intractable problem"). Similarly, the forms I have chosen for this thesis represent another level of conscious frame questioning strategies.

- **Third, how do I change the qualities of my present awareness and actual visioning?**<sup>14</sup>

Developing ways of encountering the world through presentational knowing is not just a matter of switching *epistemological styles* (Kegan, 1994: 201), nor of representing propositional knowing in "prettied-up" ways. Allowing the form and complexity of my (and academia's) practices of presentational knowing to evolve is a matter of expanding *epistemological capacity*, of "*a journey of increasing epistemological vision*" (Kegan, 1994: 201).

My sustained engagement with the disciplines of improvised theatre clowning and my gradual re-valuing of presentational knowing as a whole have enabled me to revise my awareness and receive the world differently (see pages 59-61, 401-405) – in ways that aren't necessarily reducible to propositional knowing (remember Isadora Duncan's quotation: "*If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it*"). For example, the resonant learning of coming onto the clown's stage with *nothing* and trusting that *something* will happen has directly affected the ways in which I approach the mysteries of what, quite literally, might be round the next corner in Moradabad (or even the viva itself). In addition, the archetype of the clown demands the development of a capacity for paying simultaneous, multiple attentions to my inner responses, those of my clown colleagues, the props on stage, the audience and beyond (see footnote 30, page 44). Through my clowning (and my more limited Goethean Science) practice, I have come to allow unknowns to be unknowns, to reveal themselves in their own time and for me to know by *acquaintance* (see page 48 of the thesis) rather than grabbing at an *unearned familiarity* (Kegan, 1994: 207).

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<sup>14</sup> Torbert refers to this as "*third order, triple-loop feedback*" which he says increases the likelihood of congruity between one's visioning, strategising, performing and assessing (Torbert, 1999: 196). I understand these practices to relate to expanding one's epistemological capacity (Kegan, 1994: 202).

## Some ongoing inquiry questions

Perhaps inevitably, these end-of-PhD discussions have stimulated my reflections on how my inquiry (and actions in the world) might develop next. These questions might make more sense once you have read the thesis and I encourage you to return to them then:

- How might the forms for presenting propositional and theoretical knowing be evolved and developed beyond (but including) the stylistic conventions of normalised academic texts, such that they are rendered more whole, more inclusive and more accessible?
- How do I continue to develop my own engagement with presentational knowing (how do I get to know and evolve the potential of my own presentation forms in service of wider issues of environmental and social justice), such that this becomes a more embedded part of my ways of being (ontology) as well as ways of knowing (epistemology)?
- What structures, contexts, disciplines, people and support do I need around me in order to enable my presentational knowing to develop?
- How do I (re)develop my agency in appropriate, inquiring ways, whilst retaining an embodied, practical commitment to communion, participation, inclusivity and diversity?
- Where and how might I choose to place myself to influence for change within the ILO as climate change and emissions issues gain prominence, curtailing air travel?
- How do I contribute towards deepening participants' learning on the MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice as the “content” issues (and ways of dealing with them) become more “normal” and “mainstream”?
- How do I understand, allow and encourage my own flourishing whilst keeping issues of critical humility and hubris in mind?

# Thesis structure

My examiners both experienced a “looseness of structure” (Mark) on first reading the thesis, so here is a new diagram to help you keep the whole in mind whilst reading:

