CHAPTER FIVE

WORKSHOP ACCOUNTS:
EXPLANATION AND EARLY WORKSHOPS

Part 1. Explanation of the coming chapters

From the Spring of 1994 until the Spring of 1996, I kept detailed records and reflections in my journal during workshops I facilitated. My aim in journalling was, as I explain in the introduction to my account of the Harare workshop (Chapter Eight), 'to have a record to examine and interpret, rather than to illustrate or prove some theory or viewpoint'. That is not to claim objectivity but to say that I aimed to be open to what was happening and being said, and aware of my own behaviour and responses. When the workshop in question was over, I produced an account, written as soon as possible after the event, and based on those detailed journal records, and with an additional layer of commentary and reflection. I also kept more general reflective notes in my journal, and occasionally written more consolidated reflective pieces. The ideas generated and recorded in this way were absorbed into subsequent thinking and writing.

The written accounts and reflections chronicling my work and thinking as a 'conflict resolution trainer' working across cultures, constitute together a record of my research process and provide the data for its conclusions. They tell the story of my action and reflection, describing the challenges I experienced as a facilitator of particular processes with particular purposes, and the ways I thought about and dealt with those challenges. They provide evidence of the place of respect in this work, and suggest some of its many meanings. At every stage along the way, my records, oral and written, have been submitted to my supervisor and research colleagues for scrutiny and challenge, so that I have been helped to avoid, or to reassess, easy assumptions and inadequately based conclusions. The discipline of constant record-keeping, and of reflecting both on my own and with others, and the re-reflecting involved in writing the accounts, was a key process in my inquiry and my development as a researcher.

The workshops I have recorded took place in a wide variety of places and brought together participants from many areas of conflict. More often than not the group was in itself multi-cultural. In some cases the facilitation team was culturally mixed; usually the facilitators were from a cultural background, or backgrounds, different from those of some or all of the participants. After two years of intensive record-keeping and written reflection, and a major review of my research up to that point, I decided I had enough full workshop accounts, and that from then on I would write more selectively. I would go into workshops with my by now habitual questions and existing experience in mind, being open to and noting things that added some new perspective or insight, or that filled out and corroborated information I had on some issue, or that raised an issue I had so far missed. I have facilitated many worships in this second two year phase (Spring 1996 - Spring 1998), and have drawn on the additional experience and insights they provided, both in my commentary on the accounts presented in these chapters, and in my concluding chapters. In one case, I have included journal extracts from later workshops at the end of an earlier account, since they are so closely related to it.

I have given a good deal of thought to the question of how to order these workshop accounts and other pieces: whether to try to organise them according to salient themes, or types of workshop, or geographical location. But the themes which have emerged from each workshop have always been multiple, assuming different forms and combinations in each case, and not to be understood without their context. I have had to weigh the advantages of analysis, and the thematic clarity it can bring, against the vital, integrated complexity of stories. Morris Berman says of Gregory Bateson that he 'instinctively knew that most knowledge was analogue, that realities lay in wholes rather than parts, and that immersion ... rather than analytical dissection was the beginning of wisdom' (Berman 1982: 234). And Judi Marshall describes the feeling of dissatisfaction engendered by dismembering interviews to arrange things under different headings: a sense that this '*robs* the individual case of its wholeness' (Marshall 1981: 396). In the end I have decided to allow my accounts to tell their story, keeping, by and large, the chronological sequence of my writing, and using all the accounts of my work up to and including January 1996. I have made one or two changes in their order, to bring together workshops of similar types, but I have been able to do this without much disruption to the overall sequence and the developmental thread of my inquiry. Many themes emerged from these accounts in the

process of their writing and in subsequent reflection and conversation. They will be noted in my ongoing commentary and are often taken up in subsequent cycles of inquiry and accounting. I will reflect upon them further in Chapter Nine and in my conclusions.

I begin with two workshops which took place in the first few months of my research. They are workshops of contrasting character: a contrast which will be a matter for later discussion in relation to evaluation of the kind of training support work that I am engaged in. The next chapter is headed 'Intercontinental Workshops'. It includes an account of a workshop organised by an international church body and held in Geneva for participants from many different countries and several continents. The second account in Chapter Six is of a gathering of trainers, rather than a training workshop. The trainers came from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, the USA, and Europe. 'Working With Specific Conflicts', is the title of Chapter Seven, which includes accounts of workshops held in Lebanon and with groups from what was Yugoslavia. The last of these 'accounts' chapters (Chapter Eight) is about 'Multi-Regional/ Continental Workshops', and describes work done with African women trainers from across English and French speaking Africa, and with CR practitioners from different parts of the Former Soviet Union and what used to be known as Eastern Europe.

I hope that through this ordering and framing of my accounts I shall be able to tell my story with some clarity, revealing the unfolding process that I have lived, and showing how the glimmerings of at least some bits of answers began to emerge - raising new questions and posing new problems; revealing also the evolution of my sense of my self in the midst of all this, and my approach to my own practice. I have tried to hang onto and develop the four threads of my inquiry: the meaning and significance of respect; the fitness for purpose of my theory; my respect as a facilitator in these different circumstances, and the inquiry process itself: my learning journey.

I shall be naming particular questions and themes as I go: they are embedded in the text of my accounts, and indicated in their framing. But I hope too that the reader will enter into the accounts and engage with their meaning in her/ his own way. After the chapters in which my

workshops are described and reflected on, I shall draw together my emerging ideas and reflections on different themes and issues.

I shall reproduce the accounts for the most part in their entirety, with minor editing. Where I do some pruning, or use linked extracts or summaries, I do so not because I wish to remove material I find uncomfortable or counter-evidential, but in order to avoid undue repetition and reduce the overall volume of my material, while retaining what seems to be of real significance. I feel - and hope that the reader will feel - that the different pieces of writing brought together in this section, while varied in length and content, do have a certain coherence, from the simple fact of emerging from a particular phase of one working life and attention; a phase in which the habit of written recording of action and thinking became a central aspect.

The writing collected in these chapters is uneven in style and quality. My accounts begin uncertainly, and as I got into the recording process, it seems as if I became almost compulsive about it, not wanting to miss out anything, determined to tell the whole story, so that what I wrote is perhaps over-detailed and undigestable, or at any rate undigested. As I went on, I became, it seems, more relaxed, and at the same time more focused. I had a growing sense of what the issues were for me, and became more trusting of my own feelings as to what mattered. I think my writing becomes correspondingly less laboured, freer - though the events and questions I reflect on are certainly no less complex.

I am aware that these observations on my writing are based more on feedback from my supervisor and research colleagues than on my own spontaneous discernment; and because I wished the nature of my accounts to reflect my developmental journey, I have left them unaltered in character, with only minor editing or expansion for the sake of clarification. (New perspectives and other voices find their place in the commentary.) One of the difficulties for me as an action researcher has been to keep - or find - any distance from what I have written - even some time later. My workshop accounts tend to draw me back into the events and feelings they describe, and whereas I find it relatively easy to reconsider the interpretations and reflections my writing contains, assessing the quality of the writing itself is largely beyond me. (One exception to that, however, is what I am able to notice, increasingly, about my style: that it is often over-

complicated, like my thinking - trying to include too many possible angles and provisions, and therefore too many clauses! Over-complication is maybe a reason for the way some of my accounts weave about. I have introduced subheadings into some of them where I felt they helped to track the threads of this weaving.)

I have, in the course of my accounts, written not only about my own behaviour and thought, but about the behaviour and words of participants and colleagues. For the reasons given in the explanation of my methodology, I have done so without their permission (though not always without their knowledge). I hope I have not often done so without respect. However, I have felt it appropriate to disguise their identity by changing the names of people, and describing the organisations concerned, rather than naming them.

Part 2. Early workshops: purposes and questions

The two workshops which will be presented here, through extracts from the relevant accounts, took place in the first few months of my research. They were very different from each other in nature. The second was of a kind not represented elsewhere in my accounts, but of which I have had further recent experience, and which I consider useful and important.

ROSTOV

The first major piece of work I undertook after joining the CARPP group was a two week training seminar organised by a London based organisation working for the 'prevention, mitigation and resolution' of violent conflict. This workshop was held in April 1994, in Rostov, at the edge of the North Caucasus region of the Former Soviet Union: a region riven with conflict. I went with the organisation's training officer (here named Ruud), its regional officer (David), and a co-facilitator (Jo). I had decided in advance to focus on the question of openness in facilitation, and my account begins by describing the feedback I received on my openness in

team planning sessions, and the balance I achieved between receptiveness to the ideas and opinions of others and readiness to make my own input.

My account was, as I wrote in my introduction to it, 'a condensed, ordered and, where necessary, explained version of the notes I made during and immediately after the seminar, recording my own reflections and feedback received from my colleagues.' On rereading, and in relation to my writing up of subsequent workshops, this account felt somewhat laboured and monodimensional. Nonetheless, it was a useful beginning, helping me to develop habits of close attentiveness and self-awareness, and signalling some important areas for future attention. I present here extracts which illustrate both the character of my writing in this account and some of the issues which were raised in this first workshop, all of which recur in subsequent accounts (with the exception, significantly, of the other one in this chapter).

My first extracts summarise the observations which had been made during and after the Rostov workshop on my behaviour as a trainer, in particular my openness:

'All my colleagues remarked on my openness of approach and delivery. Ruud said that he thought I was very balanced, and that that was 'one of the things that made me so good.' I was open, listening, but also actively eliciting, guiding and contributing. One thing Jo particularly congratulated me on was an intervention I made early on, when the group was being very undisciplined and inconsiderate, breaking their own ground rules by holding private conversations during sessions. I spoke clearly and for myself, saying how I felt about what was happening, and it had a remarkable effect.'

I noted, however, that there had been times when I had held back some potentially useful or needed intervention because I questioned its appropriateness or was afraid of causing irritation. Nonetheless, at the end my co-facilitator

'said he had liked the way we had been able to be pretty open in front of the group about our co-facilitation process, for instance, openly discussing dilemmas.'

A colleague not involved in the facilitation commented on

'the open way Jo and I seemed to work together and remarked that we must have prepared the relationship - which we had, in a meeting, quite openly and explicitly, sharing our anxieties and trying to describe ourselves to each other and make some agreements.'

I have found, over these years, how important it is to establish trust and clear understandings, if co-facilitation is going to work well. Another passage in my account discusses the dynamics of co-planning:

'We all agreed that our team planning process was open in itself and I was felt to be open within that process. Ruud commented that if anything I tended to give in too easily to his or Jo's point of view, and David observed that I sometimes just closed my eyes or lay down when I was too tired to go on, rather than stating my needs. Jo felt that sometimes in the planning he censored himself in relation to me, feeling I would not want to hear more ideas, or that I wanted to know where I was and wouldn't want to leave the agenda too loose. It wasn't that I didn't invite openness, but that he didn't want to 'push' me into things I'd find difficult (or he thought I would!).'

Jo and I have since facilitated many workshops together, and have become less tentative in our working relationship, knowing more about each other's style and preferences and therefore more able to know how to respect ourselves and each other.

This close attention to the intricacies of working closely with someone else awakened me to the dynamics of co-facilitation, which are a recurrent topic in my accounts.

Planning sessions also raised the question of the balance between the exercise of power and responsibility by trainers, and openness to the ideas and wants of participants. In my account I wrote:

'Ruud said that I struck a good balance in our planning sessions between being open to the thinking and wants of the participants and my/our own ideas of what would be useful and what would work. This view co-coincided with my own notes at the end of one day: 'I think we are still planning together in a pretty open way, and planning an open process. We really have taken into account the views and interests of the group, but also used our own wisdom in planning how to meet them'. '

If openness was a value that I and my colleagues wished to live out in this workshop, it also presented problems:

'David expressed some concern about the way our openness was experienced by the participants, especially in the first days of the seminar. We were being open to their needs and concerns and evaluations and responding very fully. The problem, if it was a problem, was that we were maybe not responding to their cultural expectations about learning: expectations concerning authority and leadership and didactic approaches. On balance he felt we had to go through the initial discomfort of this mismatch, explaining ourselves as coherently as possible (which we did).....In the event, the group seemed increasingly at ease with our style.'

These are the dilemmas raised by using a deliberately co-operative and nondidactic facilitation style, beginning with an open agenda, in a group not used to such methods and expecting to be 'taught'. They are part of the wider issue of working within a culture which is authoritarian in its habits and values in a training process whose assumptions are egalitarian. The whole idea of participatory problem-solving in conflict, in which the parties to the conflict are treated and behave as equals within a process, and third parties are involved as facilitators rather than arbitrators, is a very unfamiliar one in the former Soviet Union, as it became clear in this workshop:

'Mediation, a matter of great interest to all participants, is also a matter of facilitation. The group seemed able to absorb the idea of impartiality, but found that of facilitating a process - rather than suggesting or imposing solutions - very difficult. Perhaps they were not even convinced of its wisdom. We in turn found it difficult to know how to respond, but I did at least give voice to what I had observed. The idea of brainstorming options, being imaginative and even wild at first, was also clearly very foreign and not really taken on board - which provided us with good food for thought. This is a question of useful means rather than one of fundamental principles.'

A basic belief in human equality is, however, fundamental for me, and this was to be the first of many workshops in which I felt challenged in relation to this belief, particularly on the question of gender equality:

'Another cultural question, one not confined to the former Soviet Union, was that of gender. I was frequently, if not constantly, aware of it during the seminar, but did not in any direct way raise it with the group - not even the question of inclusive language - though I did raise it constantly with my colleagues. They were generally sympathetic to my concern, but clearly did not feel it acutely as I did. I was constantly aware of the macho attitudes of the men in the group (ie the substantial majority) and of the acceptance, most of the time, by the women of strong gender roles and patronising behaviour. We discussed at one point in the training team the possibility of using at least one session to look at gender issues, and I mooted the idea of a 'female pronouns only' day; but we never followed up on these discussions. We were trying to respond to the group's wants in our agenda, and this was not one of them. However, I think the whole issue of domination and authoritarian approaches was one we did not perhaps sufficiently address, and of which the gender question is one key form.'

At the conclusion of my account I wrote:

'the whole issue of domination and authoritarian approaches was one we did not perhaps sufficiently address - of which the gender question is one key form.' Just how to respond respectfully to hierarchical views in workshops predicated on egalitarianism remains for me a key dilemma, one which runs like a thread through subsequent accounts.'

This account also includes a brief discussion of the impact on the workshop of the need for translation to and from English - another recurrent theme in subsequent workshops. It is closely related to the question of cultural norms:

'The necessity for translation made a major contribution to the misunderstanding of tasks and questions, and also made it harder to detect when things were going wrong. As the seminar progressed, we learned to convey our meanings better by the use of examples and by modelling answers; but this in effect meant more talk by us, and therefore, of necessity, with the additional time needed for translation, less time for us to listen.
Sometimes difficulties over words were also difficulties over concepts - as with the word 'facilitator', for which there is no translation because there is no social or educational equivalent. (The nearest word we got to was 'tamodan' or toast-master at a dinner or other festive or formal occasion.) Leadership is traditionally understood very much in terms of authority or hierarchy.'

Introducing new concepts often has to be done without available words to embody them: a difficult task indeed. This points to the enormity - and the questionableness - of what is being attempted. Later in my account I wrote:

'I feel that on the question of equality as against hierarchy, co-operation as against domination (including the gender question), we didn't have the basic bricks for our construction, or a common foundation on which to build. As in U.K. society, only more so, experience and expectations are of authoritarian systems and imposed solutions. This seems to me a fundamental challenge to cross-cultural training and the core values on which we want to base it. Maybe if we use processes which help people feel as accepted and engaged as possible, and engender the maximum psychological openness, we can make headway in this area; but we have to recognise that this agenda of ours may not be shared by most of our participants. I need to think much more about this.'

I have thought more about the whole complex of questions contained in that paragraph. They did not present themselves again, I think, quite so starkly; but in a sense they were ever-present.

A recurrent question at a more practical level, the question of how best to use time in a workshop, was one which I discussed briefly in my final reflections:

'Broadly speaking I think we covered the content areas it makes sense to include in a course of that length and for such a group. Naturally it would have been desirable to do more of everything: more on communication skills and on the things which get in the way of good communication, particularly prejudice and strong emotions; more on mediation and some work on negotiation without third party intervention. Looking back, I wonder if we didn't spend a disproportionate amount of time on concepts and analysis as compared with skills. Maybe that time spent was also important, but if we had streamlined our thinking and presentation, perhaps we could have achieved more in less time.'

I have since concluded that whatever one does, and however one does it, time will be insufficient: that is, insufficient to do everything; but an opportunity to do something. The following paragraph suggests what we did achieve in that workshop and what I have come to see as the most important things to be accomplished:

'I think what participants did learn was to think for themselves, about conflict and responses to it, with some useful approaches to help shape that thinking, and a sense of the possibility of understanding situations and people sufficiently to begin to find ways into a problem and to unravel it. I think they also learned something, through our whole process, about listening and imagination, respect and empathy.'

One other question came up in this workshop:

'On the way home, Ruud commented to me that I hadn't read any poems during the seminar - a thing he had known me do before. I think that was because Jo was there as well as him and that I would have been embarrassed in front of the two of them, afraid of being seen as sentimental or as having misjudged the mood of the group and offered something inappropriate.'

Later I reflected:

'I think the 'existential' dimension is one we largely avoided. Perhaps that was playing safe and well advised. Maybe existential matters are beyond our remit. I wonder. If people are to find the motivation, courage and stamina, or the clarity of purpose, to undertake the very difficult work of conflict resolution in such areas of turmoil, they need to maximise the resources that come only from the deepest parts of themselves, and our seminars should make some attempt to address that need.'

I found this account interesting to re-read, because it combined a collection of training issues which have re-presented themselves in subsequent workshops: time and how to use it; the overriding importance of raising awareness and offering new perspectives (as against filling people with 'knowledge'), coupled to cultural resistance to such a pedagogical approach; the learning that comes through the lived experience of the workshop itself, with the modelling of CR values through that process; the appropriateness and/or realism of wanting to transfer attitudes which are foreign to those prevalent in a given culture; and the place given (or not) to philosophical underpinnings. Further experiences of work with groups from post-Soviet countries will be described in section four of my accounts.

BELGRADE

The next workshop in which I was involved took place in June that year, in Belgrade. I wrote some reflections on this and earlier pieces of work in Belgrade for Adam Curle, when he was writing a book (1995) on 'positive response to contemporary violence'. Those reflections, which were quoted in the book, were included at the beginning of the previous chapter.

I want to include this workshop here because it gives another point of reference, another perspective, for my ongoing thinking about the purpose and appropriateness of training and facilitation as a form of intervention from outside.

To describe the purpose of this particular workshop, I shall quote from the funding proposal I wrote:

'The group MOST (an acronym meaning 'bridge'), at the Antiwar Center in Belgrade, has asked Diana Francis andJo Mackintosh to spend these days with them in order to facilitate a review and evaluation of their work and the planning of its further development. They will assess with them their training needs in these and other areas and facilitate advanced training sessions in relation to group maintenance and management, mediation, community development, prejudice reduction, and conflict resolution training. The considerable experience of the participants will furnish rich material for reflection and learning, in terms of both analysis and skills.

This is a group which is making an important contribution within Belgrade and beyond, both in training for conflict resolution and prevention, and in actual community work and mediation. Its members work in difficult circumstances and under considerable pressure. Outside support makes a difference. As the group's secretary wrote in their letter of invitation,

"We would be more than pleased and more than grateful if you could come here. It is really nice of you to say we are experts now, but we all agreed that your visit will be very useful and will mean a lot to us. We will feel more confident and more like 'experts' after your visit. We do feel it is important for us always to check and recheck our skills and knowledge."

I have quoted these paragraphs because they show several important things. The first is that 'training' takes many forms. This workshop was in one sense not a training workshop, but one for evaluation and planning. However, to the extent that participants reflected on and learned from this process, it was also training in how to do things, including how to structure thinking. The

163

workshop also provided learning on the learning process itself. In my workshop report, I described a 'sculpting' exercise through which we explored relationships within the group. Afterward we reflected with participants on the exercise itself, considering it as both a tool for exploration and an awareness training tool. In these ways, this workshop had a training element, as well as helping the group to forward its own thinking and clarity and build relationships.

The second important point which emerges from these paragraphs is the range of functions of outside facilitators and workshops like this, which I discussed more fully in the piece quoted in Adam Curle's book and in the previous chapter. Whereas much of the work I do does have a clear educational purpose, it is apparent from this explanation of our work in Belgrade that the provision of emotional space and support can be a very important - if sometimes unnamed - function of such workshops, and that the role they play in group formation can be of great value for future work and networking.

The third point I want to raise in relation to those quoted paragraphs is really more of a question or dilemma. The paragraph I quoted from our letter of invitation was a response to a letter of mine, in which I suggested that the group was well equipped to do its own facilitation. In saying the visit would 'mean a lot to us' the writer is confirming the importance of moral support; but she is also resisting the idea of the group's own expertise. On the one hand I recognise from my own experience the value of being helped by having an outside facilitator in order to step back and review things; on the other hand I sense some dependency. I will pick up this point in relation to a later discussion of work with people from the former Yugoslavia.

I did not write a special research piece about this workshop: only a report for the committee which was supporting the work. The report was purely descriptive and very detailed, so that I do not wish to reproduce it here. However, at the end of it I wrote:

'From our daily evaluations and this final round, together with comments made to us outside of sessions, it would seem that our time with the group was useful. Apart from the help which participants got with their own issues, the workshop seemed to deepen the relationship between the different groups represented. Our friends were insistent that outside support is of great importance to them. In addition to its 'task' function of facilitating reflection and the development of new skills,

164

it also fulfils the 'maintenance' function of psychological and emotional support, with someone else carrying some of the responsibility for a short while and holding the process. Above all, it relieves the sense of isolation and imprisonment felt at present in Serbia: a feeling particularly hard to bear for those who so abhor government policy and actions.'

Maybe I did not see fit to write a special research account of this workshop because of the pressure of other work, or because I had not at that stage got into the hard discipline of writing up every workshop I facilitated. But maybe also it was because it seemed so different from most other 'training' workshops: more the facilitation of a group's reflections on its own progress and needs. But I think now that this may be a particularly useful form of learning by doing, applied training. It is possible only when the client group is already formed, or in formation, and has a particular job it is doing, or wants to do. Working with such groups is much easier to evaluate than work with ad hoc groups brought together in a temporary way for a workshop, since there are clear and immediate purposes to be met which have been identified by the participants. So it was with the first workshop I had done with this Belgrade group - at that time a group-in-formation. They needed training to carry out their purposes and they needed to use the training workshop as a vehicle of group formation. Both of these purposes were achieved in that they were enabled (as they said) to establish themselves and get on with their chosen activities.

Most of the workshops described in the accounts which follow are like the Rostov workshop, in that their content is of general application, albeit often focused on participants' own situations; workshops designed to introduce an approach to conflict and offer some tools for understanding and handling it. More recently, however, I have worked several times with groups of people in one geographical location, wanting to learn and plan how to take action together. Since the usefulness of an intervention is related, in my thinking, to its respectfulness, I will return to the relative benefits of these different types of workshop in my concluding chapters.

In these early months of my research I had begun to experience what it was to be engaged in the process of inquiry. The Belgrade workshop raised no cultural questions, and no real issues about facilitation or theoretical assumptions. That was, I think, because of the nature of the workshop, in that it was working entirely practically, with the needs and experiences of a particular situation, and in a group already committed to the ethos and assumptions of conflict resolution.

In the case of the Rostov workshop, I had gone with a view to concentrating on my own behaviour, and I think that was a good place to start. But I was also immediately confronted by cultural issues to do with respect in relation to pedagogy and in relation to conflict. My theory was not challenged in any specific way, but - more importantly - participatory approaches to handling conflict were, tacitly, heavily challenged. So Rostov provided me with a rude awakening: an excellent beginning for my inquiry.