

# 5. Questions of Scope and Form

## The Learning History Workshop

In this chapter two different inquiries are interwoven into a discussion of a key event of the research: the learning history workshop in February 2008.

The first inquiry relates to how this piece of action research might achieve a wider scope and so get past the problem of the single-case. This question was introduced in the last chapter, and the learning history workshop was part of my response to it. The second inquiry was into the form of learning history. It crystallised as a result of what I had learnt from the design of the workshop and from the event itself. This inquiry was an exploration of the different forms that might carry the essence of a learning history. On the face of it the two inquiries might seem to be quite disconnected.

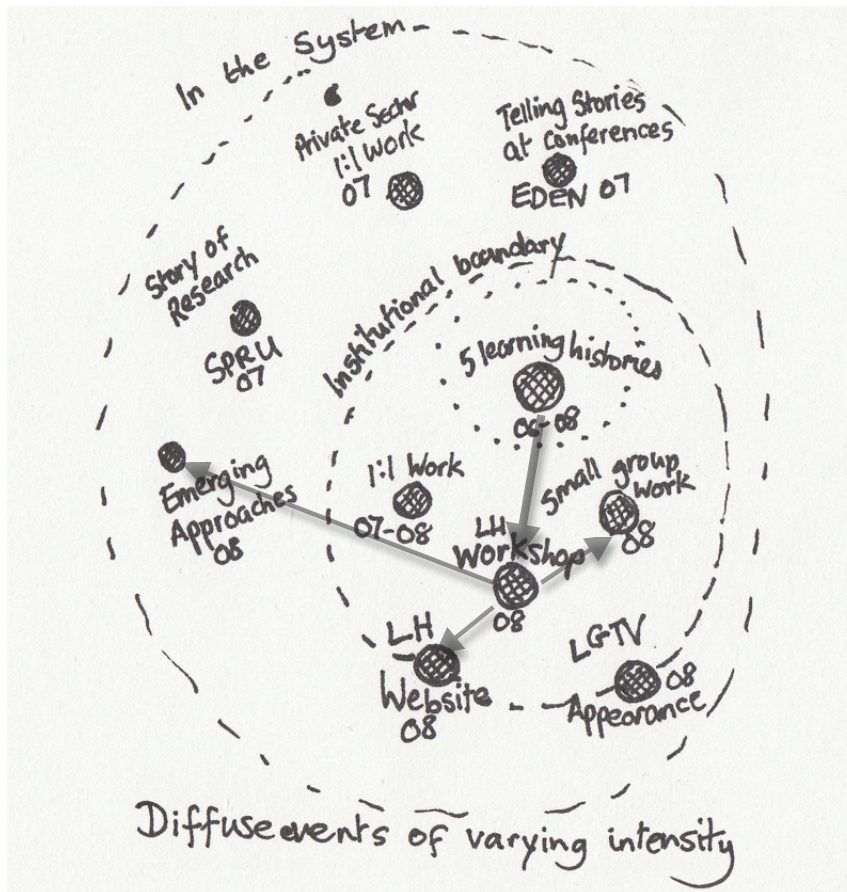
In this chapter I will start with that first inquiry about scope which will lead to an introduction and discussion of the learning history workshop event. It is in reflecting on that event in its own right that the second inquiry on form starts to come to the fore. Finally in my conclusion I will reflect on how the two inquiries became linked for me.

## Inquiring into Scope

In Chapter 4 I proposed that the institutionally-situated learning history I was developing had the potential to achieve a scope that went beyond the limits of the single case. However I noted too that with learning history, whether it was situated in a single organisation or otherwise, there seemed to be a real and practical challenge of sustaining energy in the process all the way through to the diffusion step. These challenges were not always brought to the fore in the literature and were in danger it seemed to me, of becoming normalised as just part and parcel of a learning historian's troubled life. I felt I needed to confront this question of sustaining energy head on because it directly impacted on the scope of my research and therefore its purpose. If I were to make a difference at the institutional level then the process would need to create

interest and engagement there.

Part of my approach to sustaining energy was to be light on my feet across the institutional field. Instead of drilling down into one organisation, I spread my research energy more thinly across more organisations and put some energy into creating connections between them. I was guided by Gustavsen and his advice to 'create many events of low intensity' (Gustavsen 2003 p.97). In the sketch below I show some of these events. Many are detailed or referred to in passing in different parts of this thesis.



**Figure 27 Different events that occurred in the duration of the research**

The diagram depicts events spreading out from that first central event of the research: the creation of the five individual learning histories. Then within the institutional field (note the boundary) and outside of it various things occurred that included conferences, seminars, a website, even an appearance on the local government TV channel. The diagram to a degree represents successive inquiry cycles. For example the arrows show how the first cycle of creating the learning histories gave way to a second cycle of inquiry at the learning history workshop which in turn led to further cycles of inquiry further out in

the system.

The diagram illustrates my attempts at increasing the scope of the research. Note that for now I exclusively refer to 'scope' and not 'scale'; I will distinguish the two terms later in this chapter. It shows that the events I orchestrated were similar in nature to what my reading of Gustavsen suggested. They were distributed events; they varied considerably in their intensity and they varied too in the degree to which I might know if they had some consequence. So the small group work 'event' occurred over six months, it involved a set of ten participants from my local council B&NES and from these participants I could request feedback. In contrast to that, my appearance on local government TV took a few days of preparation, a few hours to tape and was then subsequently broadcast to all local authorities soon after. Apart from witnessing a peak in my website hits there was no real way of knowing the effect it had. As I explained in the last chapter I knew I could not hope to build a social movement from scratch but I was interested instead in connecting to ongoing processes of change in a meaningful way. So the different experiments and events I orchestrated had this idea in mind.

Here I will hone in on a central event on the landscape shown above – the learning history workshop in February 2008. This was the experiment where I could try to push out the bounds of learning history scope. It also helped me to articulate some of the ideas behind 'learning history in an open system' that I presented in the last chapter. At the workshop by inviting others to participate in the research alongside those who had been featured in the learning history the aspirations of joint celebration and inspiration would be served. Protagonists would feel valued and rightly celebrated for what they had done. On the other hand the new participants would be able to participate in that celebration by sharing their own stories, thoughts and ideas. In this way a whole new and possibly louder buzz in the system might be created and so the scope would be widened. In the next section I discuss this workshop as an event in its own right but also in terms of its possibilities for increasing the scope and consequence of the research.

# The Learning History Workshop

I want to pause here and dive into a bit more detail on the felt experience of creating resolve around this event. This is a retelling of how this workshop came to be but from a less rationalised perspective. I do this to surface how the shifting plates of my inner experiences (conscious and sub-conscious) and outer conversations moved together to lead somehow to decisions or, as in this case, moments of resolve. This then is a short back-story – a zooming into some of the subtle detail of human experience that airs some of the doubts and fears and hopefully rescues this account from becoming too sanitised.



## A back story – July 2007

So right from the start I was keen to confront this issue of ‘getting the system in the room’. As I engaged with participants I could see that it would be difficult to get them to take time out to come to Bath for a workshop. I tried to warm them up in interview to the idea of a workshop and I got a reasonable response but not one I felt would translate into them physically boarding a train. ‘How am I going to get past this?’ I worried. As time proceeded, the key to confronting it seemed to lie with the open-system approach – this ‘push’-‘pull’ idea. I decided that the only way to get anyone to engage with the histories was, counter-intuitively, to get loads of people to engage with them. So to create a bit of a buzz about them just like Adrian had created a buzz around the Merton rule. In supervision in July 2007 I remember gloomily sharing this insight with my supervisor Peter. I looked down at my shoes and admitted that I still didn’t know *how* I might attract loads of people in, but it was the thing to do and the fact that it was just weighed like a burden on me. And in the week following that meeting it continued to play on my mind. But a few things happened that led to a shift in my resolve.

First, I was very encouraged by a positive meeting I had with insider Steve Waller from the I&DEA in early July<sup>18</sup>. In our meeting he really engaged with the idea of the

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<sup>18</sup> Described in Chapter 2. Steve also was a protagonist in the Nottingham Declaration learning history

workshop and gave me his full support. As my mind whirled I could start to see, how, with Steve's support this workshop could happen. Second, and I only see this now when I return to the journals of the time, I had a dream which I had written into a poem.

### **Dreams of Flying – written July 2007**

An opera Diva sings  
Poised at a window above  
I dive out into the blue night  
as Piano cadences  
my arms flap  
hopeful and wild  
the thin air  
cannot catch the feathers  
that sprout sparsely  
multicoloured plume  
vertically I fall  
once more  
a graceful corkscrew  
heaps onto a moss bank

I had forgotten about this dream until I started to write this chapter. Yet when I find it now I remember it seeming significant to me. I remember wondering if this said something about the beauty and inconsequential nature of trying something even if it does not quite work. Dreams of flying recur for me at times and it seems when they do they represent aspects of inward growth. Though I am only just beginning to see this emerging as a pattern.

The culmination of all this dreaming and whirring was a realisation that I had to approach this whole event in a much more bold and presumptuous way. I had to face right into it. In a sudden moment of clarity I wrote to Peter asking him for full project support:



### **Extract from letter to Peter, July 2007**

Very much reflecting on the supervision with you earlier this week I have decided to really make the workshop fly and to stop being so terrified by it. In this case I need to go for it and stop messing around being tentative and casting myself as a kind of Tiny Tim character in relation to it. So if I manage to achieve some energy around it then I would really like a good strong project backing and support if that was possible. This isn't too different from what we discussed - but I'd like to be able to be a little more presumptuous about the event being important to the project. In practical terms this simply means assuming the action research team attend so they can guide conversations at café tables but it also means I'm asking you to financially support the event. Of course it'll emerge as I go along and if it compresses back into something small then fine but I wanted to talk about this workshop in a positive way and include it as a project event.

Peter replied in full support. Geoff Mead, a colleague at the centre, and my second supervisor was engaged to work with me on the design and facilitation and so it started.

## **Choices in the telling**

In this chapter I have been particularly concerned with how to achieve congruence when telling about the learning history workshop. There are multiple layers to it: there is the back-story of getting it to happen: the nitty gritty of drawing on networks, picking up the phone, e-mailing strangers, working contacts, making choices. Then there is the back-back story of my own emotions and life in relation to all this: the hopes, the worries and the way all this soaked into my family life. And there is the event itself: the design of it, the form it took, the subsequent ramifications from it and so on. During the event a colleague Chris and I stood at the back wall while the groups worked on the learning histories. "You know what this is", she said, "It's a collective appearing act – we are making visible here what is normally not spoken about". Chris was making a reference to Joyce Fletcher's writing on relational practice with which we are both familiar.

Postfeminist Fletcher's influential research with female engineers led her to argue that a whole gamut of skills that are often termed 'soft' or 'feminine' and have to do with team-play and building and maintaining relationship in the workplace tend to be systematically ignored or 'disappeared' due to the gendered nature of that workplace. She called this

phenomenon a 'disappearing act' (Fletcher 1999). Here at the workshop – by enlivening the human stories of the learning histories we were involved in a 're-appearing act' of the complexity, the mess and indeed the relational human aspect of these kinds of projects. I have often thought of the workshop since in those terms. As an event overall it was 're-appearing' what often gets taken for granted and by doing that it was implicitly saying 'this is important', 'this is important'. So when it comes to writing about it, I am naturally quite mindful as to what it is, from this complex story I choose to 'appear'.

## Choice of form – a digital story

To help 'appear' some of these different levels, I have chosen to offer my description of the workshop in the form of an eleven-minute digital story. A digital story is a powerful new form of storytelling that has emerged in the mid-90s as digital media opens up new avenues and possibilities. Inspired by ideals of cultural democracy and community participation, a group of media artists, designers, and practitioners came together in San Francisco and created this new form whereby people could tell a personal story by combining music, voiceover, digital photos and text. Inspired by the San Francisco work, Dr. Daniel Meadows of Cardiff University and Karen Lewis of the BBC created "Capture Wales"<sup>19</sup> – an award winning 8-year project where people from communities across the country were guided in a process that helped them to create a digital story about any subject personally important to them. It was in December 2008 that I heard Karen Lewis speak about this project. As she shared the resultant stories I became very excited. It was feeding the inquiry on learning history form that had been developing over the course of the research but that crystallised out of the workshop process.

So at the time of writing this thesis I have just embarked on a new inquiry, which is on the crossover between digital story and learning history. And my first attempt at a digital story is shown here to try to convey some of the complexity of the workshop as well as to represent a point of an ongoing inquiry into form and method. This inquiry will be described in more detail later in this chapter.

This choice of form does not evade the choices mentioned earlier regarding what to

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/galleries/pages/capturewales.shtml>

appear or not. In making those choices I have held in mind two kinds of audiences. The first are my examiners. I would like to show that the workshop was a piece of quality participative action research that makes a contribution on method. The second kind of reader is any peer researcher or consultant who might find something of value in this short history of mine. Symbolising this constituency is my co-supervisee Nick. Nick is an experienced facilitator who currently works to host networks of rural activists in virtual networks and face-to-face encounters. Nick is a real person who, in supervision, directly asked me to bear someone like him in mind when describing this workshop. The digital story then is a first loop of inquiry. It is the first I have ever done and so represents learning by doing rather than a finished product.

At this point I'd like to invite you, the reader, to put on the DVD with the 11-minute story of the learning history workshop. It is supplied in the appendix.

## **The learning history workshop – a digital story**

Now watch the 11-minute digital story:

The Learning History Workshop

This is a QuickTime movie, which is on the DVD supplied in Appendix F as additional material. It should play on all PC/MAC platforms. To play it you need the latest version of QuickTime (currently 7) which can be downloaded from

<http://www.apple.com/quicktime/download/>. The sound is poor and it may best be listened to with headphones or speakers.

## **Reflecting on the digital story experiment**

Diving in and doing this digital story has been an intense and a rewarding experience. It has been interesting to observe the intersection between my learning of how to operate the technology (I used Imovie for the first time) with my learning on how to use a new form of presentation. In fact the two were not distinct as I blundered forward, cowed by technical difficulties, some of which were too time-consuming to overcome. The movie crashed over and over again as I imported pictures. The audio clips from participants were not quite accurately cut. And the sound levels of my audio voiceovers were problematic. Some of the voxpops are drowned out by the music. It is a little long. Were I to do it



again it would be different. I would change the tone of the voiceover. It still somehow sounds like a singsong victory narrative to me though I tried to avoid this tone. I could not quite commit to whether this was a story or a more conventional report. In the end it drifted toward the latter and lost some of its conviction as a result. I would use fewer images and choose them more carefully.

On the other hand it has been exhilarating to express something visually and in a new way. And this has had surprises for me too. When I looked at the finished product I noticed that it had a certain elegance in places that was not foreplanned but seemed to happen naturally through the process. For example I like that the workshop itself only takes up about a third of the movie as this places the event more accurately in relation to all the background work that went on around it. I like how the storyline of reading the histories seems to have emerged as a central thread. I like how the soundtrack of the music fits the story – the first piece is tense and then when the workshop starts the second piece picks up pace and adds the right level of drama. And I like the inclusion of the video clip for what it says but also what it doesn't say: the weary rub of my eye, the slightly manic laugh and the fact that my daughter has been drawn into the whole event and is aware of it. This hints though does not dwell on the private spaces that lie behind any piece of public work. So in summary it has felt like a very creative process. It has been a liberation from the straight-line writing of which there is so much in this thesis. The next cycle of inquiry will involve showing this video to others with my usual learning history questions: what is your interest? What is its relevance to you? But for now it serves as a first attempt to tell a complex story in a new way. It represents a part of my learning history and in its form illustrates where my inquiries on form and method have led me.

## **Reflecting on the workshop**

In this section I will reflect on the workshop in terms of the event itself. A week before it my colleague Gill asked me: 'what would the event be like for you to feel it was a great success?' I replied that there was a hierarchy of success. First, people needed to turn up! After that I was looking for engagement, lively conversation and a sense of something new happening. And lastly I wanted people to learn – though I was not sure how I would know if they had. It was hard to put into words what my hopes really were. I

was genuinely interested to see how the design, that was the fruit of so much thinking and so many discussions would play out. Success had something to do with how it did.

In the event my hierarchy of success was traversed. People did turn up. And once I had done my presentation I could settle into watching for that quality of engagement. I watched out for lone, bored faces. For silenced voices. For domineering characters. And I noticed laughter, eager anticipative faces, informal conversations between old friends and quiet tête-à-têtes between experts and newcomers. There was a good quality of participation I concluded and when I look at the pictures I feel this comes across. That something I had been looking for happened – in my gut the event felt very successful.

In March 2008 the Lowcarbonworks team collectively reflected on the event during a project meeting. I taped that session and I will draw it now into my more structured reflections on what worked, what didn't and how the design played out.

The design had sprung to life exactly as planned in some places and unexpectedly in others. The gamble of the 'big read' had worked, we all agreed, to set a reflective tone for the whole event. The move from the quietness of that read to small conversations worked exactly as intended guiding participants forward from individual to collective reflection. The graphical facilitation also played the vital role as hoped. Together with the learning history booklets the posters enlivened the workshop aesthetically. On a deeper level they reflected a presentational way of knowing that was consistent with the overall message of the workshop. In places the design exceeded my hopes. The analytical work where everyone approached the thematic graffiti wall was high-energy and exciting in a way that delighted me. My colleagues echoed the positive liveliness of this activity and said it was a good example of a major strength of the event which was that the material was mostly self-generated and participative. In this way experiential, propositional and presentational knowing were being brought together in a fresh way. The rhythm, the movement between elements of the workshop flowed well mostly though not always. A large group exercise where participants first created posters about each of the five histories in small groups and then milled around to look at them had been a little confused. Though the photos capture some great moments during that exercise, I doubt that the original purpose of using the posters to communicate about the different learning histories was fulfilled. Overall there were possibly too many elements. Mixing 'story' and

'analysis' may have been an elegant plan but in practice it meant time was short. My action research colleagues noted that though the "story circles" did surface interesting vignettes these might have been fruitfully built upon. Instead we moved swiftly on to analytical work. Finally we all agreed that the closing session "best foot forward" had fallen flat. In it we had asked participants to reflect individually: what can I do next? And what can we ask others to do? Colleagues noted, and the data I gathered confirmed this, that people lapsed at this point back into simpler quick statements. We agreed this did not do justice to the event that had just taken place. Chris put it nicely when she said that the challenge is: 'how to hold their feet in the fire' and suggested that some reflective writing might have been more appropriate. I agree. But writing this I recall how by the time we got to this exercise, people were ready to leave. Would they have had energy to force themselves back into a quiet reflective space? Or should we just accept that closing this kind of event can have no happy ending? It will always involve participants looking at their watches with their minds wandering back to the world they are about to step back into. My conclusion is that a simple closing ritual might have been best.

Overall my colleagues and I felt unanimously enthusiastic about the event. We all agreed that an unexpected pleasure from the whole experience had been coming together as a team to work together in the world. I echoed this feeling strongly. Working collaboratively with Geoff, Chris and later the whole team was intensely rewarding and deepened my relationship with my colleagues as well as with the original research participants who turned up on the day. This was one of those side effects that caught me unawares even though I was the one who was writing and opining about the power of coalitions and collaborative leadership.

I have tried to reflect in a balanced way about the workshop. Yet I read the enthusiasm with which I have just concluded and pause now...wanting to temper this fanfare. What might have been different? I wonder if I might have been braver? Might I not have tried to convene a larger group of people so as to make more of a difference in the system? The moment of resolve that led me to think big in the first place was good but did I hold that resolve sufficiently? I struggle to balance this kind of reflection in. I am proud of what happened and what we as a team achieved. And at the same time I want to make sure I am telling it for what it was. Another workshop; another event that did make 'a buzz'

alright but that buzz eventually just faded away. Scope broadened for a moment. But did anything scale out from this? What, if any, were the enduring consequences? With this question I think we start to look at where scope meets scale.

## Reflecting on enduring consequences

The event ended on a high with a flurry of warm goodbyes and plans to stay in touch with each other in the future. I had decided not to ask for feedback forms. Expecting a complex experience to be evaluated in terms of flat soundbited feedback just didn't seem congruent. Nor did I want to be seduced by enthusiasm at the point of departure. It meant little in terms of actionable learning. I planned instead to put a reflection point in three months afterwards so that participants could better gauge if they had they actually done anything as a result of the event. The workshop had surely increased the knowledge in the system about the five learning history projects. It had amplified these stories. It had also created some kind of learning experience for participants. But I wondered what scope did this step up to the next level of inquiry really have? Had it any consequence beyond the event itself? And was it of consequence to any people other than those who attended?

There were some immediate consequences. Jane and her boss David from B&NES had attended and, riding on their enthusiasm, the B&NES small group work was immediately confirmed. Discussions between Jane and I took on a new vigour as we both sensed a real opportunity. I know too that some participants did also stay in touch with each other afterwards. So new connections were made.

My approach to the research was also immediately impacted. Enthused by the energy of the workshop and keen to keep that momentum of increasing scope going, I embarked on a new experiment in learning history that would sit between the second- and third-person domains. My original plan had been to write up an institutional learning history of our joint workshop explorations and to send that to participants. However on my return to my desk I decided instead to experiment with writing this up as a live blog website and putting this in the system<sup>20</sup>. This would be a 'live' and participative learning history that

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<sup>20</sup> [http://academicmum.typepad.com/lcw\\_learning\\_history\\_inno/](http://academicmum.typepad.com/lcw_learning_history_inno/)

would unfold more openly by offering participants the opportunity to join in *as I wrote*.

With the website I was deliberately applying that push-pull energy of open system working. I would be making visible to the system my research process and the discussions that had taken place with one constituency of stakeholders. I hoped this discussion might continue and that, by revealing it, other stakeholders might be drawn into it in a way that would improve the overall quality of participation. For example I had audiotapes of the short 3-minute stories that had been told at the workshop. I arranged to get them transcribed and planned to share them back via the website. These might evoke further conversation among participants I thought. And they also might create further conversation in the system. Together with the iconic histories these stories would form an even more robust platform for celebration and inspiration. I liked how this possibility linked to the design principles of the workshop. It felt elegant to me. In short I was excited by all this congruence, challenge and possibility. It was interesting to explore this new form and I went at it with gusto. Two months later my website was ready to go live:



**Figure 28: The institutional learning history - as a website**

It was at this point I asked participants for their reflections on the event. Only four of the original 26 participants replied, though all very positively. One wrote:

The event was a huge inspiration. On my return prompted by the opportunity presented by the “Big Green Challenge” (a £1 Million prize fund for innovative community carbon reduction projects) I persuaded my local Parish Council to back a local bid. I organised a meeting in Flitton Church Hall and to my surprise the hall filled up with people and we brainstormed 50 ideas for reducing carbon in the Parish. I filled in the on

line application form only to find that we were the 700<sup>th</sup> applicant. Our chances of making it through to the next round seemed slim. But we have just heard that we are through to the last 100 communities and we now need to firm up on our ideas and seek match funding.

Participant feedback (via e-mail), June 03, 2008

One reply was left on the website from a participant from Southampton:

Impressed by the learning history and the Feb. workshop I have used the example as part of our Big on Energy conference (9th June) which showcases the Southampton District Heating project nationally. My intention is to highlight how partnerships develop and what has to be done to sustain them to achieve results rather than simply list what we did.....ensuring that 'things that happen' always lead somewhere.

Participant feedback (via website), June 03, 2008

What sense could I make of this? Few people were willing to reflect a few months after the event. Those that did offered rich and valuable reflections citing actions they had taken as a result. Overall they described themselves as having been inspired. On the other hand website conversations between participants did not break out as I had hoped. I monitored hit rates and was surprised that even the photo albums were not overly browsed. I had expected that people's curiosity or even vanity might draw them back in to look at the photos.

I could only conclude that the space opened up by the event had now closed off again. And this makes perfect sense, reflecting as it does the initial challenge the workshop was trying to address: sustaining energy. Here I was at another level of the system, again doing something unfamiliar and without real formal backing. It had no reality unless I kept saying that it did. I reflect now that all this work has indeed been like an appearing act but one that will always be cast in the light of its inevitable disappearance. The trick is to keep things in appearance for just long enough to make some kind of a difference.

Feedback from a further participant illustrates this point well:

It is interesting to note that I left the workshop with a buzz that lasted for a couple of months, far longer than I expected and longer than any other workshop I attended but now that buzz has subsided I find myself wanting another fix - to renew the excitement and enthusiasm I felt through the energy of the group and the learning that evolved.

Participant feedback, May 2008

Without sustained energy it seems, the energy for change will eventually subside. This affirms the earlier discussion of the problem of the single case and the limited potential of a single event for lasting change. It was experiencing this limitation in practice that made me particularly determined to work over a sustained period with B&NES.

On the other hand steady hits over months on the website indicate ongoing interest from somewhere in the system for this work. However this seems at best unpredictable and the level of engagement shallow. Few, if any, browsed into my more reflective pieces on questions bubbling up from our findings<sup>21</sup> so the collaborative inquiry I'd envisaged on these points simply did not happen. At one point I saw how one of the stories was getting a lot of hits and then noticed ruefully that its title was: "Long Distance Intimacy". It was a short account of the benefits of videoconferencing technology in reducing business travel though I suspected some of the web searchers had been searching for a more salacious tale.

So my second- to third- person experiment was not working as I expected. At a certain point I decided not to go on populating the website in the way I had originally planned. I re-privatised my research processes and dropped – for now – the idea of an online conversation around an unfolding piece of collaborative research. Instead I put my energy on the website into making it an inviting and engaging piece of communication – almost as a piece of marketing. This 'failed' experiment contributes to other experiments with online communities and networks over the past years from which I am gathering a

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<sup>21</sup>For example this entry that asked [Do we have time for setbacks and lulls?](#)



wealth of evidence that online communities are difficult to get to work.

The website now exists as an artefact from my work. It is in the system and I monitor hit rates on it. At time of writing (early 2009) these are averaging at about a dozen a day and peak sometimes towards 50 (see Figure 29 below). I have had some interesting approaches out of the blue as a result of it. Only last week I was contacted by someone inquiring for more details about one of the short 3-minute stories that had been told at the workshop and that was published on the website. Spikes occur from time to time when the work is published or described elsewhere.

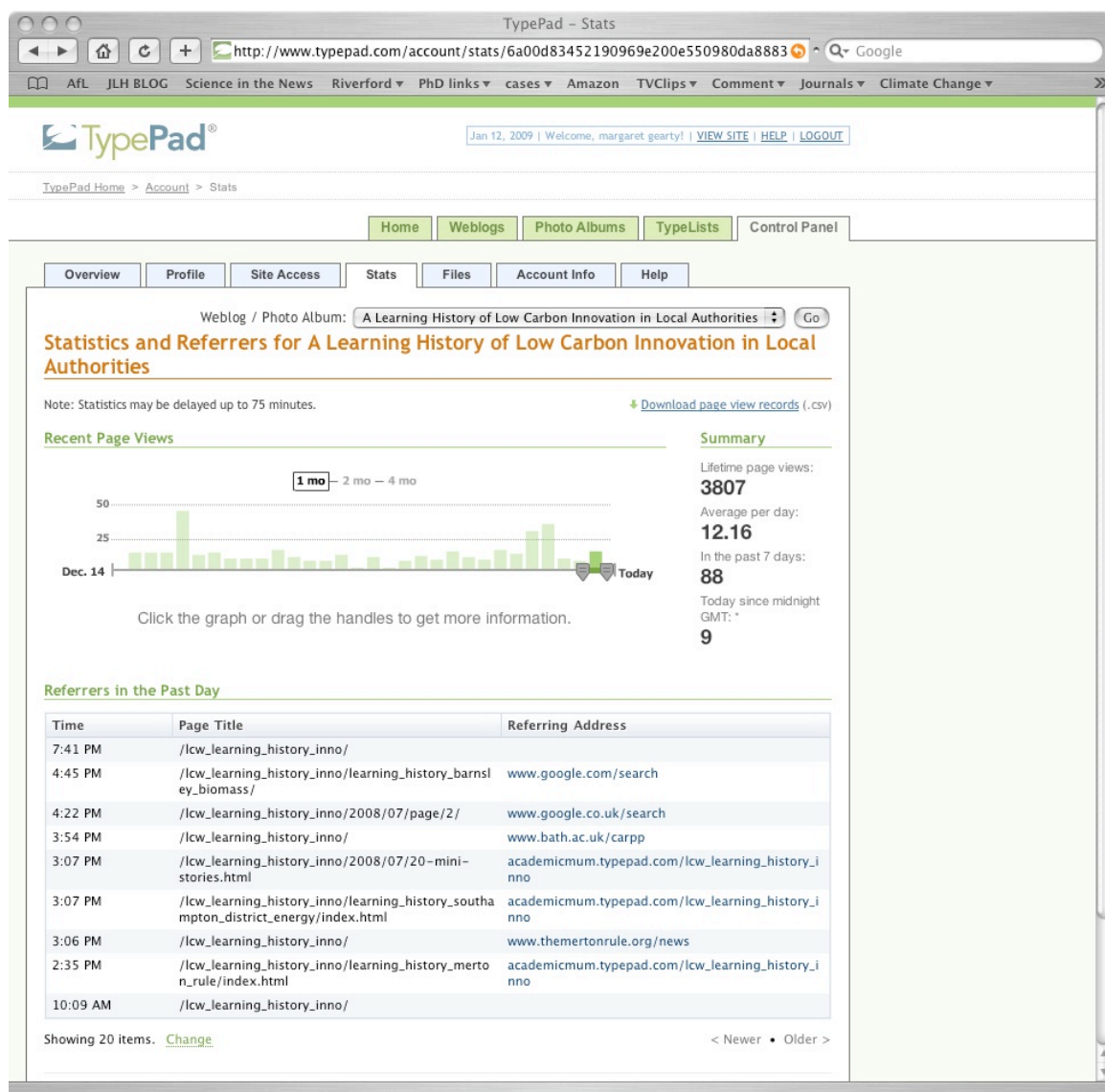


Figure 29: Jan 2009. Hit rates on the website Dec08-Jan09

## Summarising reflections: scope and scale

The workshop and the website after it successfully broadened the scope of the learning history by increasing the participation in the research and extending wider invitations into it. In this way the stories were amplified much more broadly in the system and further stories were added. However the challenge of sustained engagement that had dogged me at the organisational level followed me up to the systems level. I found that here again the scope was only as wide as the energy I was willing to put into broadening it. I wondered how there might be enduring consequences if, like a spinning top, I always needed to pump it to get it to spin. I reflect now that the broader scope I achieved resided largely in the second-person domain, though of course I cannot be sure of that. Scale, as I understand it now, is achieved when the face-to-face encounters of the second-person lead to self-sustaining and self-generating occurrences beyond. This did not occur with my work. So I distinguish scope as being necessary but not sufficient for scale. Scaling occurs when the scope is sufficiently broad through connected sites of activity *and* some other alchemy occurs. Perhaps this is the connection I referred to earlier. Though a small research project cannot create a whole new movement it might, by connecting its sites of activity to ongoing similar sites, still contribute to scale in a helpful way. I think it would be an interesting further line of inquiry to look in more detail at making this kind of connection with a view to contributing to scale.

Away from the field of local government, the learning history workshop also had rich and interesting consequences for the research itself as it generated some interesting new lines of inquiry on method. One of these in particular linked to the form as the next section will describe.

# Inquiring into Form

I had started with a theoretical question mark over the effort involved in writing a learning history. Chapter 4 explained why my single learning history needed to be less time-consuming to create than the MIT version of learning history. That chapter also explained my commitment to narrative. These two factors together implied that from an early stage in the research there was an inquiry as to what form my written learning histories would take. In Chapter 9 I will describe in more detail how a commitment to story influenced the written form. More broadly though there were principles of learning history form that were not just confined to how it was written but applied more generally to how I went about my work. My concern with congruence led me to be exploring these principles from an early stage. So for example in December 2007 when asked to talk about my work to MSc students at Bath I had done a 10-minute learning history type presentation on Merton. I had used my voice to narrate the story against a background of timed images and quotes. This went down well. What I saw then as being congruent, I see now as an articulation of another kind of learning history 'event' the form of which adhered to some generic principles. But it was only really through the design and experience of the workshop that I started to see that learning history form applied to the work overall. Learning history did not need to be so distinctly split between 'artefact' (with form) and 'process' (without). Different events or media could be part artefact, part process and as such these might carry the essence of learning history form. With the workshop I was starting to articulate what that essence might be:



## The characteristics of a learning history (independent of the medium)

- It tells a jointly told tale or tales
- There is a storyline that links the stories in some way
- It has humanity and dwells in the messy complex detail of human experience.
- It represents the voices of others – directly or indirectly
- It mixes story and analysis
- It distinguishes different kinds of voices by naming them (reflective, analytical, theoretical...)

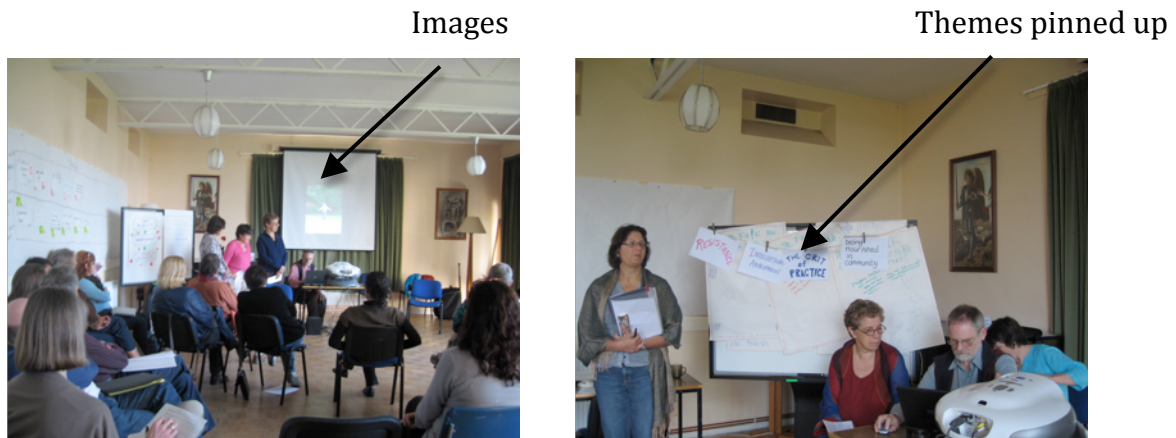
- It mixes different forms of visual, aural and written presentation

My inquiry on form was gradually liberated from being just about the written learning history artefact and more about the essence of the approach. With the creation of the blog website to chart what we had learnt together at the workshop I was exploring the online form of learning history. Though I didn't write them down at the time I realise now that it the above set of characteristics had guided my choices as I structured and designed the website.

In the wake of the learning history workshop, a buzz started to build up around learning history within our wider research community about the different ways it might be used and this started to blossom into a collaborative inquiry. A friend and colleague Paul Pivcevic and later other colleagues at CARPP wanted to explore how learning history might be reduced down and made more portable so that it might be effective more quickly as a vehicle for learning in other action research and consultancy programs. It was here then that the inquiry into scope started to meet questions of form. The push to develop a quicker form of learning history than my single learning history form interested me. If the form could be further distilled, then histories could be created more quickly. More might then be linked together and amplified into the system thus broadening out the scope. But I was concerned too. Had I not already gone far enough cutting down learning histories? Paul's question was partly but not wholly motivated by a pragmatic desire to operationalise learning history more effectively but also, as importantly, with less cost, to use on action research programs. Embedded as I was in the research I had mixed feelings about reducing the 'cost' of learning history and so the enthusiasm with which I entered into these discussions was accompanied by a degree of high-minded commitment to retaining the purity, as I saw it, of the form.

So it was a blend of questions, thinking and events that led this inquiry into form forward. My colleagues' questions on portability met my questions about scale, form, congruence and myth and pushed me to consider just how reduced a learning history might be. And this was a question that colleagues and I explored with action researchers at the Emerging Approaches to Inquiry Conference at Hawkwood College in September 2008. At this conference participants were invited to create short, rough-hewn learning histories in a matter of two days. The learning histories were not written but were short

10-minute multimedia presentations the exact form of which could be chosen by the participants. I will only allude to this exploration here, showing a picture of it in action, rather than describe it in full. I mention it to point at how the inquiry into form rolled forward, drawing other people in and linking with other colleagues' questions.



**Figure 30 New kinds of learning history 'events' at Hawkwood in September 2008**

With this experiment we were really starting to play around with the boundaries of learning history and what is possible (and not possible) in a situation with minimal support and little time. From this, and from other discussions and sites of inquiry not described here, I have come to the conclusion that the creation of a learning history 'event' (be it a presentation, a document, a film or otherwise) does require craft, some time, some skill and dedication to a storyline especially if the intention is to communicate to third parties. Quality of the 'event' needs to be assessed in relation to what the project has set out to achieve however. If it is intended that the learning history process will produce a meaningful vehicle to communicate learning and information to others then more craft is required. However not to be underestimated is the learning to be had from engaging in the process itself. At Hawkwood, the final presentations of the short learning histories created by participants were kaleidoscopic and sometimes confusing in terms of what they conveyed. What was striking however was how, by engaging with the exercise, participants honed in on some of the key ethical questions I had been grappling with for months. For example, after just two days, rich ethical and methodological conundrums like: whose voice counts, how to present a diversity of people's voices, how to invite participants in and how to conduct an analysis were surfaced and brought to life by participants. This experiment highlighted that working with the form of learning history can itself be a rich learning process and one that is, to

an extent, independent of the final artefact.

In late 2008 a research program called Appetite for Life kicked off that proposed the use of 'a kind of learning history' to share snapshots of the experiences of children in secondary schools in Wales in relation to food. I am participating in this project which is being run by Paul and our colleague Sue Porter. With a team of some twelve action researchers we are exploring new forms of portable learning history that might work in this context. As ever I hold on to some of my high-minded ideals about purity of form and the tension for me is trying to understand when I am just being high-minded and when I need to be high-minded. The inquiry goes on.

## Summary

This has been a complex chapter. At the heart of it has been the learning history workshop. But surrounding that is a discussion of questions on scope and form that have woven across it. I have shown the learning history workshop as a digital story to show what the event was like but this 'showing' also illustrates where my inquiry into form has led me which is to look at the crossover between digital story and learning history.

The workshop event has been judged (by me) to have been successful as a piece of second-person action research. However the use of the website to bridge from this into 3<sup>rd</sup> person action research is judged to have been less successful, at least when judged against the original purposes of enabling wider change at the system's level. In the next chapter I will discuss quality in the research and how it relates to declarations of 'success'.

By drawing into this chapter a discussion of learning history form, I have shown how events and inquiries overlap in sometimes unexpected ways. From the learning history workshop came new questions about form and methodology. So not only the content of the learning histories were amplified at that event but also the approach itself. This surprising consequence brought questions of form and scope together. By exploring portable forms of learning history, new avenues for broadening its scope continue to be explored in an enduring way.