Part C

ACTION RESEARCH, PLAY AND POETICS

Chapter 9, Action Research in Silver Street-2

9 Action research in Silver Street-2

Introduction

The inquiry into the aesthetic of Silver Street, so far described in Parts A and B, now takes on a different turn. Much of my reflection till now may be described as first person inquiry. Although this personal reflective voice will continue through to the end of the thesis, in parallel I now bring other voices into the narrative in the form of second person inquiry. In this chapter I describe my first piece of action research in Silver Street. Its purpose was to find ways of making service users' experience more person-centred through flexible and varied offers of activities, – that is, more like the normal life that most people enjoy.

The function of my continuing first person inquiry was to learn more about the aesthetic in this new way of working and assess how a heightened awareness of it contributed to my practice.

In this chapter I aim to,

- describe the first two days of my facilitating this action research with front-line staff
- analyse the experience and reflect on the issues it raised
- feature the ways my developing focus on the aesthetic in practice influenced how I worked.

The context of this cooperative inquiry

The day opportunities service had chosen to launch its version of the Government's *Valuing People* initiative, under the general title, *Different Days*. Its intention was to reduce a dependency on the pattern of mini-bus delivery and collection of people to spend five days a week in the Centre throughout 51 weeks a year. *Different Days* would involve developing more flexible support to enable people to lead fuller lives.

Presenting it under this title can be seen as an expressive manifestation of the corporate aesthetics of Silver Street. Carter and Jackson (2000) identify two main elements to organizational aesthetics; they argue,

'First, that in producing an aesthetic what an organization does, intentionally and/or unintentionally, is to structure both form and content in such a way as to elicit a positive response from all those with whom it has any transactions. Secondly, that the way that this is done generally involves a profound denial of the reality of the organization(s).' (Carter and Jackson, 2000, p. 189)

The term *Different Days*, I was later to discover, was regarded as in some ways alien to staff. Although there was clearly a strong aspirational intention on the part of managers in choosing this name, the initiative might be seen by some stakeholders as a form of anaesthetic or denial of the reality of the actual day-to-service that they knew. I therefore approached the project holding in mind the likelihood that the group might have framed the initiative in this way. My hope was that we could, through collaborative inquiry, re-story and re-enact aspects of their professional practice, without ourselves contributing to some form of denial. This would mean accepting the pace and depth of inquiry that we as a group were capable of, rather than aim to meet externally set objectives at any cost.

McKnight (1995) problematizes the commoditization of care through state funded service delivery and contrasts this with the care that families and communities offer spontaneously in some cultures. The staff in Silver Street bridge both worlds. Several have family members who attend the Centre, including the manager whose brother has profound physical and mental disabilities. Richard, the Centre's caretaker-cum-general factotum, has a sister with learning disabilities living at home. A staff member, lan, told me how he had grown up with a school friend who, following brain damage as a boy through a medical accident, was now in lan's Silver Street unit suffering from profound degenerative disabilities. I later discovered that this was one of the sons of the person whom we were to meet on a visit to the local MENCAP branch.

So there is a close family network between some staff and the people for whom they provide a service. Although it is tempting to see this as a form of hybrid between McNight's commoditized state care and community or family care, the overall ethos of day centres still currently feels to be that of a statutory service. The *Different Days* project was part of an initiative to square this circle so that service users regain some of the independence and choice that more person centred programmes might offer. I was conscious though of working between the organizational an-aesthetic of this change initiative and people's individual experience derived from day-to-day service delivery.

I therefore determined from the start that I should work on this project *with* rather than *for* those close to the front-line of service provision. I sensed a strong awareness of alignment between my commitment to a participative action research approach and the equally

participative striving to involve people with learning disabilities within the planning and development of their own more independent living. Although we would be working within the framing of the *Valuing People* policy for people with learning disabilities, the inquiry had to focus on developing local community meanings and values in day-to-day participative practice.

Silver Street-2, an action research project

It had been agreed that I should facilitate a programme of five one-day events on the theme of *Different Frontline Days*. I had extensive discussions with the Centre manager and explained that I would be using a collaborative approach with staff to inquire into what offering a more flexible service would mean for them and for the Centre. She was very supportive and the fact that I had already established a relationship with the Centre through my volunteering there eased the pathway.

I produced a one-page programme, outlining the following objectives,

The programme will enable you to:

- re-examine assumptions and values about independence, choice and inclusion for people with learning disabilities
- learn from reflection on current practice
- develop a person-centred practice that better meets people's needs.

Prior to the start I prepared and circulated the written invitation; a copy is shown overleaf.

'Different ways of working together

This is my invitation to you to find different ways of working together during this programme.

Using your experience and expertise

Within this group there is considerable accumulated experience and expertise in working with people with learning disabilities. Each of you brings your own unique understanding of this. I hope we can set up a way of working where this is valued and recognised. My role is to facilitate this process.

Planning the programme together

Although I have mapped out the overall direction of the programme, I would like to involve you in planning what we do week by week and how we do it.

It is up to everyone to develop 'different days' for and with service users, so that it seems appropriate that we should also be finding a different way of working together. To make space for this I suggest we set aside time during each day to do any necessary review and planning to keep us on target.

Involvement of service users

The voice of service users needs to be heard either in person at stages within the programme and/or through your advocacy for them.

We need to talk through how this might work; what ideas do you have?

Recording what we learn

We need to capture good ideas and messages to share with others not on the programme. This may involve using our skills in writing, drawing, painting, taking photos, video, etc. I shall be writing and taking some pictures as we go along. This is an invitation to anyone in the group to contribute your own material.'

This written statement contained the most important elements of difference in ways of working which I hoped would become part of our shared practice. It was appreciative of the quality of much of their work. I had also tried to prepare the ground for this aspiration to work in different ways together.

Nevertheless reading this note again with the hindsight of more practice experience, I would choose to do things differently now. I would explore in a face-to-face dialogue how we might work together. I can see that the particular rhetorical stance of my note might for some have raised rather than lowered anxieties about what they had been asked to participate in. I take from this a greater sense of responsibility to follow aesthetic pathways, which are congruent with those of the people in the group, particularly in the early stages of cooperative learning about each other. Face-to-face connection has the spontaneity and flexibility of play; it provides the opportunity for an on-line interactive shaping of dialogue, which cannot occur in text. This observation contributes to the theme in this thesis concerning the congruence between the choice of forms and the intrinsic aesthetic of the moment. This moment called for a seriously playful dialogue.

Week 1

I now describe below the beginnings of a working relationship between us during Week 1.

ournal ... Beginning to connect, 11/5/2004

Journal

We assembled in the Irish Centre for Day 1. This former secondary school has seen better days. But what it lacks in investment and maintenance it makes up for in the friendliness of the centre staff. I look down on a nursery playground and across to a new housing estate, where I am later told, Victoria Climbie suffered such an appalling end to a short life.

One by one people arrive and we begin. We review the programme as a whole and I talk through the written invitation to regard this as a different way of learning.

Commentary

I often have a strong sense of occasion at these moments, which I can only compare with my previous experience of waiting to go on stage, when for a period of two years I regularly did this. Not to say that I confuse facilitation with acting; rather they both have in common for me, a curious mix of slightly painful expectation and adrenalin rush, and a calm, quiet sense of anticipatory pleasure and well-being. I compared my brief experience of learning disabilities with theirs, which in some cases ran for well over a decade. I explained that I was not therefore coming to this programme as an expert in their profession; rather I was bringing my insights into how we can learn better together.

We discussed how we might involve service users.

People with profound disability and often physical disability are based at the main Silver Street building. Some are non-verbal or choose not to speak. We decided that it would not show respect to them to invite them to join us. We did however discuss how their views and voice might be heard in our reflections on practice. (See later for a reference to the activity that we set up to be completed between Week 1 and Week 2.)

Those people with moderate learning disabilities who meet in satellites of Silver Street, present a different opportunity for participation. It may be that we can invite some of them to join us later. Indeed several of those who work in the 'Green Peppers' café nearby did arrive at midday with our buffet lunch. Glenn hurried round the room shaking hands with everyone. This seemed a fleeting but natural piece of connection. As I read again this treatment of the issue of service user participation, I feel that I am skating on thin ice. If action research is to involve the whole community to whom the issue belongs, service users should have been there.

In making a distinction though between profound and moderate disability, we were recognizing the unacceptability of trying to 'impose' participation on profoundly disabled people for whom our activities together would have made little or no sense. Also their physical needs could not have been met in this building.

The case is different for people with less profound disabilities. Although for this project we worked as a staff group, with the focus and space that this provided, in the final of the three Silver Street projects, which I describe in Part D, staff and service users were both fully involved. On the topic of recording I urged people to think of ways of visualising as well as writing material. I had brought along some basic art materials to help make this possible. I have in mind that they may compile sufficient records in their folders that we may have something to offer as evidence of what has been achieved. It'll be interesting to see this coming Tuesday if anyone takes up my suggestion of using other than text to illustrate a short case study of a user. My reason for encouraging these forms of expression is that by breaking out of the conventions of spoken and written language, other equally valid meanings may be defined and refined in the group. Another of my hopes was that their gathering or creating visual or audio material might lower any barriers individuals had about writing, and in fact I was to discover that writing did not come easily to some people in the group.

The invitation to work with other media did not, however, bear fruit until later in the programme, when some people compiled examples of ways of communicating visually with non-verbal service users. Participants responded positively though to expressive activities in our own sessions together, as the post card activity described below shows.

I can hear how in the left-hand column I am writing with more than half an ear turned towards my audience of participants; I am advancing my rationale for arts-based expression as if this would convince participants, – too easy an assumption.

What I learned from this was that the active introduction of expressive processes needs to be handled more sensitively and only in pursuit of the needs of the group's inquiry. There should be a period of induction when people can gain confidence by working together with a choice of different forms of representation. I would now try to judge how congruent such activities were to the intrinsic aesthetic of a group, before offering them. It is a basic principle of play, – I take these activities to be a heuristic and creative form of play – that it only becomes play when voluntarily entered into.

'What do you want us to do?'

As the morning progressed, I begin to tune into the sense of unfolding play in this initial process of relationship building.

A participant called Beverley, who is new to me, challenged me to recognize that the management's motivation for providing this programme might be more to do with placating workers in an endeavour to make the Centre's action plan stick. She hedged her parries around with a fleeting apology for making things difficult for me. She did so in a lightly flirtatious way, wrapped around by an assumption that she could win me over to some form of collusion with what she was about to say. I wondered in the moment how to interpret and respond to this play. I experienced it on reflection as a testing out of my position, with an element of manipulation, a way of trying to marginalize my authority within their system.

In fact I felt well prepared to respond to it, because I did not want to draw on the referred authority of the system, but my own authority as a person entering it and wanting to learn with them.

Behind the energy and flirtatiousness in this encounter, I was aware of the stresses of the organization coming through.

Journal

I explained to the group that I was trying to set as few of the rules as possible. "What do you want us to do?" Beverley asked me about the next activity. I restated its agreed purpose and returned the question by asking her and the group how they wanted to respond.

Picture yourself

We explored people's expectations of the programme by using picture post cards. I had brought in fifty or so cards and people worked in small groups, choosing a card, which expressed how they were feeling about participating.

Commentary

This note probably makes the exchange sound more brusque than I remember it being. It does though show the tricky balance in a more participative form of facilitation between providing necessary structures and conventions and not reducing people's sense of ownership of learning. A postcard picture of a park prompted a comment about the wish for greater contact with the community. A picture of food – "We make the choices of what they will eat. I like to get up and decide what I'll eat each day. We don't allow them that."

Lucy chose a Caribbean clapperboard house in bright sunshine and then noticed it was a church. "We should give them more culture, more religion." We talked about what that might mean. Another card of a group of men manoeuvring a statue in a park suggested `co-ordination', working together. A series of pictures of stages in the building of the Eiffel Tower prompted a reference to the fact that the service was in transition.

I was asked why I hadn't selected one. I found a painting of three standing women, their faces not painted in. I said that I liked the prevailing blue and the mystery of the painting; like the group I hoped that we would learn a lot more about each other – that we would acquire faces. I earlier referenced in Chapter 3 Heron's (1989) succinct coverage of this issue as, 'deciding for others, with others and for oneself.'

This challenge made me aware that I was still hovering somewhat uneasily between being 'directing' and 'participating'.

I now think it is not necessary that I as a facilitator have to participate in every activity. In fact doing so could be a disincentive to others, if my way of doing it unintentionally becomes the model for how it should be done.

Mapping out directions

We moved on to consider the Centre's published *Different Days* Action Plan, as this was the formal initiative that framed our co-inquiry. By way of preparation I had asked for a copy of this document to be provided for each participant in the project. We also looked at the executive summary of the government's white paper, *Valuing People*, that I had copied for them.

I asked people to spend twenty minutes in pairs familiarizing themselves with both documents. As I watched them, I realized that this was not something that motivated them greatly. Perhaps they already were overly familiar with them. Somehow I doubted this though. A discussion followed.

Journal

Much of the discussion around these papers took us back to questions of authority and legitimacy. "Whose plan?", "No new money", "Why weren't we involved earlier?" I found myself not wanting to slip into the role of defending the intentions of those outside the room. I simply said that there seemed to my eye to be many things in these documents that we would want to see happen.

I couldn't comment on the process of planning because I did not know how it had happened.

It is really useful sometimes not knowing too much!

Time-line activity

I sensed that this group needed more time to connect with each other and to be recognized for the quality of work and commitment to individual service users that was beginning to be evident in the group. We engaged in a time-line exercise. I had prepared A4 sheets with a framework which invited people to think back over the last ten years and plot significant stages in their own lives and relate these to events that they could recall from the national or international arena. Along the centre of the landscape format page was a line which invited them to add notes on their personal history of working with people with learning disabilities,

Commentary

This felt like familiar ground; I was glad that this alienation had surfaced so early and that I felt confident in declaring where I stood in relation to it. It was not my issue, but I recognized that it was theirs, at least for the time being. particularly with regard to steps they had experienced in creating a more flexible and user focused service. This prompted a lot of animated discussion in small groups as people learned more about each other's families and personal histories in Silver Street and elsewhere.

We transferred details from these sheets to a large wall display of flipchart paper and again as people decided what to 'publish' in this way there was a buzz of energy. I allowed the activity to run for quite a time as I intuitively felt that it was what the group needed more of.

What the time-line activity taught me

This expressive activity had about it qualities that I was beginning to find in other activities such as *story circles*, to which I referred in the previous chapter. I could summarize these qualities as follows.

- They made minimum demands on individual's reflexive capacity at a stage when they were not yet ready for more sustained and shared inquiry.
- They offered a light but enabling framework, in this case the A4 form and the wall chart.
- They encouraged a fluid and easy mix of brief writing and speaking.
- They offered a multi-voiced and cooperative way of expressing where the group was at this moment, as they assembled their material on the wall.

Humour and play

In the afternoon we thought through the programme objectives together and started some collaborative planning for the next couple of weeks.

We concluded the day by agreeing that we would each do a short study of one service user. I asked what they thought it would be useful to include in such a study. The group drew up a simple brief. I urged them to be adventurous in how they recorded what they observed.

I want now to feature a moment in Day 1 for the light it throws on the intrinsic play that was to be threaded through the following weeks.

Journal

Towards the end of the day, Beverley said in a whole group final session, "So – we're going to meet up again next week, are we, Alan?" To which I replied, tongue in cheek, "You make it sound like an assignation." A voice from elsewhere in the room said, "There, that showed you, Beverley." I thought that the group was beginning to find itself in relation to each other and me. No doubt there will be more exploratory forays next week.

Commentary

This encounter with Beverley had for a moment become a spontaneous piece of theatre, her dialogue with me turning the rest of the group into spectators, their attention focused on an unexpected outcome. Brief though the exchange was, its playfulness was only possible because we both knew that in some sense it was not for real. Her question was cued by its introductory 'So' as a marker to all of us that what would follow was a bit of a tease. The rest of her question contained an implicit collusion which I chose in the moment to surface by reference to an assignation.

What this taught me about humour and play

Read cold on the page, this micro encounter might still seem to leave many questions unanswered. What is lost in my attempt to analyse it so far, is the sense of playfulness and laughter which maintained us in the level and quality of relating that I judged would be constructive. For this encounter to become play, we had to live intuitively in the moment. For it to remain play there needed to be a level of trust. I had to believe that I could relate to her whilst recognizing the theatricality of the enticement and she equally needed to know that I was open to enjoying this playful but innocent connection.

I am aware that humour is a conspicuous part of my way of creating relationships. When humour occurs spontaneously in the moment, laughter and a changed flow of dialogue provide instantaneous feedback. I have tried to work out how I sense when humour in practice is well managed or not. In my list of evidence, I would include:

• Non-verbal

Evidence of a mutual perception and mirroring of posture, gesture and proximity – when I feel we are warming to each other.

• Dialogic

Evidence of increased capacity to handle ambiguity and irony; this often finds verbal expression in the words that prompt the laughter, such as 'assignation' in this example.

• Intentional

Acceptance that the humour in whatever makes us laugh or smile together, is intended positively.

• Relational

A recognition of affinity with and increased trust in the other.

(A buoyant good humour was to develop in the group. When Navado had swung so nonchalantly far back on his chair that it collapsed into firewood beneath him, we laughed a lot, – having seen that he had with some agility saved himself from injury. This was the stuff of slapstick comedy.)

A general sense of wellbeing was often to pervade the room over the coming weeks. We listened to Miles Davis' 'A Kind of Blue' and other music volunteered by members of the group, whilst eating excellent sandwiches delivered each day from the *Green Peppers* cafe.

Week 2

I now move on to describe the way this inquiry developed in Week 2.

ournal ... They are not doing what I hoped! 18/5/2004

Journal

Commentary

I arrived with a bunch of flowers I had picked from our garden, this in response to the drab circumstances we will be working in. It is already unseasonably hot and as the day progressed, our room became stuffy, despite our opening all the windows.

I am also carrying some anxiety on arrival, about the demands of our programme that in Week 3 we would be meeting managers and going out in the afternoon to community venues which as yet we had not identified.

I recall feeling a sense of physical anxiety, as I locked the car door and struggled with the flowers, my case and a box of materials up the stairs. I am feeling a tension between this experience of democratic practice and my former modes of running events.

As a warm-up and a way of re-connecting we start by sharing a few stories of what we have been during the week.

Last week we had agreed to do a small study of individual service users to identify something about their likes and dislikes with a view to finding changes which would make a difference for them.

I decided that it will be a very long process to hear about each person's study in the whole group. There are eleven people today as Ian has joined the programme this week, his having been last week on a tall ship sailing across the Channel with disabled people.

I divide them into two sub-groups. As I do so, Navado says, "How will you know what we have done?" I say that it is more important that people listen attentively to others' stories, than that I should hear them all, but I'll eavesdrop on each group. I wonder again how far this line of not claiming the role of hub and the arbiter of discussion in the group is realistic or helpful for them. This is compounded by my growing sense of the group's low self-confidence and energy today. I have learned that in these situations I have to notice what my body is telling me, through increased pulse, heartbeat and stomach. This is a time to pause for breath to look from a staircase landing out across the view and be calm for a moment.

Possibly I should have found a way of sampling some or all of the stories in the large group. Navado's intervention was saying that they needed me to hear, and by inference, approve.

I chose otherwise, trying to avoid this teacherly role and they found this odd and did not play. The best part of the day involved a complete switch of activity and medium. Before and after lunch we saw a video called *Road Trip* that I had come across. It was made by a performing arts project in South London, called Heart'nSoul. This project is run with the active participation of its client group – people with learning disabilities. I had seen the programme on Channel 4 earlier in the year and traced the makers through the C4 website. It depicts a group of people with learning disabilities on a tour by double-decker bus round Britain, including, by coincidence, a visit to Bath. At each stopping point they take turns to do *vox pop* interviews with people they meet in the street.

The group was drawn imaginatively into this viewing. It seemed to offer a vision of freedom from the constraints of a day opportunities centre, a vision of the possibility of a way of living which you would certainly describe as 'different days'.

Conclusion

These first two days were marked by a meta-level of sense-making for all of us as to what the 'different' way of working might begin to mean. Until this became clearer to us, the focus on the cooperative inquiry issue of developing a more person-centred way of working with people with learning disabilities, would still be a bit diffused. However, I felt there was time for this to change.

With regard to my own parallel inquiry into the aesthetic in practice, these days offered many useful insights. I notice several perspectives about these two first days of Silver Street-2 that deserve some final brief comment.

Play

I have noted the sense of play that ran through some of the encounters on this first day. It revolved around sizing up each other and a focusing on the purpose and nature of what we were to work on together. The time-line exercise that we completed in the morning had the effect of pushing back some personal boundaries as people took a chance on revealing more about themselves, their lives and their families. Standing at the large wall display and adding items, people moved around each other with the energy and vivacity of a performance.

Despite the unpromising environment, there were moments when, on this and subsequent days, the setting became irrelevant, unseen, unfelt, – an example of the timelessness of deeply involving play to which Gadamer (1975) and Huizinga (1938) refer.

Some people were known to me quite well, others less so or not at all. In particular quite new to me, were Lucy and Beverley who were to prove influential in the way the play of the group unfolded. Beverley's teasing engagement with me, and mine with her, was the most direct expression of curiosity which was no doubt present for the group as a whole.

Navado's holding back during the time-line exercise suggested to me that he was more curious than most. He appeared for a moment to be a person who might spoil the game. Once he had overcome his initial caution about me and/or the group, his contributions became strong and characterful.

Poetics

The exercise with the postcards was an example of evocative processes I referred to in Chapter 8, *The expressive aesthetic in practice*. It acted as a trigger to dialogue. The images on the cards tuned imaginatively into the feelings and dreams of people. They also became symbolic representations of unfulfilled hopes and needs, for example, the need for more religion and culture in the daily experience of the centre. In Shotter's terms (1993) the dialogue that we were opening up was full of anticipation of future meanings, – 'Where is this going?', 'What will this invitation to collaborate entail?'

So much of the meaning of the experienced moment was locked into the other-than-verbal – for example, the intonation, the vocal dynamic, the ethos of the room, my growing experience of relating to the person or group, a capacity in the group to listen, a selectivity about the value of what this or that person said or did. These all became part of our intrinsic aesthetic experience of this small community. The sound of the language and its resonances in the room resembles music, a form of poetics within which the words are embodied.

Action research

In this chapter I aimed to attend to, and reflect on my developing experience of action research, as this cooperative inquiry began. More than ever before, I found myself striving to define my facilitative role with the group as one of taking part in co-inquiry. I was clear from the start that my role was to support our learning, not of course the only person to do so, but with an acknowledged leadership function in doing this.

The most significant issue for me so far had been the complexity of trying to achieve what Heron and Reason refer to as 'an enabling balance within and between people of hierarchy, cooperation and autonomy', (Heron and Reason, 1997, p. 287). I began to trust more the sense of sharing responsibility for where our co-inquiry would lead. At the same time I was exploring some of the potentialities of my role of facilitation. For example, the initial rocky moment of Beverley's challenging whether this was a management palliative, a sop to the workers, may, if left unchecked by me, have spiralled downwards into a place of scepticism and denial.

The shaping of each day's progress and the activities seemed to me to be a form of creative bricolage, using the available constituents of people, the moment and serendipity to ring the best play out of the days.

I pause now in the account of this second Silver Street project. I regard it as a record of work in progress that raised many useful questions about my action research facilitation. I have used this material to explore how my decision to work within an action research approach played out in practice, a process that I will continue in subsequent chapters.

I will now turn my attention in Chapter 10, *Play in Practice*, to consider in greater detail the theme of play and drama, as it was evident to me throughout the next significant stage in this Silver Street action research project. In particular I shall describe what I found to be a remarkable next session at Silver Street where the process that we were using together was challenged by a participant.

Vorking sketch – Beneficial action, 12/5/06



Midway through the writing of this thesis I made myself the following note,

'The purpose of my inquiry cannot be solely to become the shrewd interpreter, the person who carries around a private portmanteau of theories which give me great insights into behaviour, almost like a secret weapon which is only made public in third person propositional writing.

The theories that I am exploring in this thesis are for a purpose and need to be returned to action, to complete the cycle of an extended epistemology that has action as its summation. What do theoretical insights bring to living and practice? If there is no good answer to that, I am probably not engaging in action research.

How will this make a difference to my practice or through this thesis contribute to others thinking about practice? Posing this question taps into a recurrent concern I have in reading the literature, about there being two worlds. One world is propositional and concerned with the detailed analysis and interpretation of everything from the mundane to the spiritual in organizational life, according to current paradigmatic perspectives. The other world is experiential and practical and is concerned with new actions and experiments in living. At their best, texts give a sense of these two worlds coming together. This is the importance of accounts of action research which aspire to generate shared theories-in-use leading to beneficial action with, and for individuals and communities.'

This working sketch holds me to the discipline of keeping practice and theories-in-use in dynamic interaction.