

## Chapter Five

### Reshaping my Professional Identity

In the two weeks since I finished writing *The point of no return*, I have continued to reflect on the overarching question that my thesis seeks to answer and it strikes me now as both much simpler and more profound than I had imagined.

Amongst the mock graffiti on the cover of *Human Inquiry* (Reason and Rowan 1981) is a new version of an old music hall joke: “Who was that research I saw you with last night? That was no research, that was my life!” And the fundamental belief that living and inquiring are inseparable leads to my question (this time in my own words): **What does it mean for me to live my life as inquiry?**

In previous chapters I have inquired into my life as a man, my conduct in loving relationships, my search for healing and now I want to inquire into my professional practice. Immediately, however, I hit a snag. What is my profession? After nearly thirty years in the police service, the obvious answer is: *Policeman*. But the reality is less straightforward. I have many professional interests – policing, organisational consulting, research, storytelling, leadership development to name a few – so that I find it difficult to define a single professional identity. Of course, in these postmodern times, I am far from alone in this.

Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin (Connelly and Clandinin 1999) address this phenomenon in their study of teachers’ professional identities. Their central argument, though developed in the specific context of teaching in schools can, I think, be applied much more widely to the question of professional identity. This quotation from the opening chapter of their book *Shaping a Professional Identity: Stories of Educational Practice* suggests a narrative basis for defining and understanding professional knowledge, identity and practice, which I find compelling:

Increasingly, as our work progressed, we came to see teacher knowledge in terms of narrative life history, as storied life compositions. These stories, these narratives of experience, are both personal – reflecting a person’s life history – and social – reflecting the milieu, the contexts in which teachers live... this context is immensely complex and

we adopted a metaphor of a professional knowledge landscape to help us capture this complexity.

I find this metaphor extremely helpful. It holds and conveys something of the multiplicity and diversity of my own professional life. With others, I inhabit such a landscape. As I survey and explore this professional knowledge landscape, I shape my own professional identity which, in turn, is embodied in my practice and brought to life in the stories I tell and am told. My professional practice is directly related to my intimate knowledge of this landscape and its possibilities. Sometimes I work within its borders and constraints. At other times, for example when seeking to influence the behaviour of social formations (such as the police service) I am trying to change the landscape a little.

Connelly and Clandinin use the phrase “stories to live by” to refer to professional identity, bringing together narrative understandings of both personal practical knowledge (i.e. individual practice) and the professional knowledge landscape. This seems to echo the notions of *narrative identity* and *self-story* that were so prominent in my search for healing.<sup>1</sup> The personal and the professional intermingle and sometimes amalgamate in our stories.

We view the landscape as narratively constructed: as having a history with moral, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions. We see it as storied. To enter a professional knowledge landscape is to enter a place of story. (Ibid p2)

### **The map is not the territory**

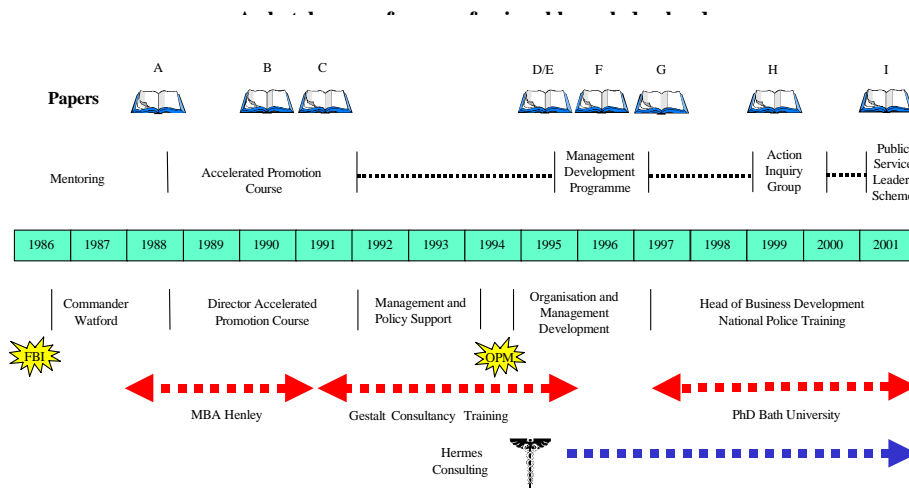
In attempting to unravel (or should that be ravel?) my professional practice, I need to look back at the territory I have been exploring for the past fifteen years or so. Explorer-like, I have brought back a few artifacts, a host of travellers tales and a map – not an accurate Ordinance Survey map but a crude sketch, drawn from memory.

I have chosen to begin in 1986 because by that time I had begun to ask questions about my professional life having hitherto more or less accepted a conventional view of policing and attempted to meet other people’s expectations of my various roles. I talk

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<sup>1</sup> See *Healing Journeys*

about this “awakening” in *Police Stories*.<sup>2</sup> If you have not already done so, this would be a good point at which to turn to the appendix and read this account of my professional life in the police service. Originally written in 1998, it includes many of my “stories to live by” though they tend to follow quite closely the narrative line represented in the map by the list of job titles immediately below the datum line.



As the top line of the map indicates, inquiring into my practice and writing about what I am learning has become a habit. Since 1988, I have regularly punctuated my professional life with similar forays into the public domain: sometimes for academic publication, sometimes for police and other practitioner journals. The following key to these papers indicates the range of issues I have explored in this way. These too are part of my professional knowledge landscape and I will call on particular references from time to time in the context to which they refer.

KEY TO PAPERS

- A – Organization Culture – FBI Quarterly (Mead 1988)
- B – Challenge of Police Leadership: Contribution of the Special Course (Mead 1990)
- C – Mentoring: A Police Case Study (Mead 1991)
- D – Millenium Management for a New Age Police Service (Mead 1995a)

<sup>2</sup> See *Police Stories – Opening up*  
<sup>3</sup> See *Police Stories – Coming into my own*

E – Middles, Endings and Beginnings: Organisational Death and Rebirth (Mead 1995b)

F – Danger: Men at Work (Mead 1996)

G – A Winter's Tale: Myth, Story and Organisations (Mead 1997)

H – Mentor and Athene: Supervising professional coaches and mentors (Mead, Campbell et al. 1999)

I – Developing Ourselves as Police Leaders: How can we inquire collaboratively in a hierarchical organisation (Mead 2001)

Returning to the map, I also want to highlight here my six-month secondment to the Office for Public Management (OPM) in 1994.<sup>4</sup> Again, a significant turning point, taking me outside the police service for the first time and expanding my professional knowledge landscape by introducing me to the commercial practice of organisational consulting across the public sector. It was this experience that prompted me in 1995 to form my own company Hermes Consulting as a vehicle to continue and develop this work. Through this medium, I have followed my interests in coaching, mentoring, supervision (of consultants, coaches and mentors), conflict resolution, board development, large group facilitation and, latterly, storytelling in organisations.

Twice I have held posts in the police service with a formal responsibility for designing and delivering educational programmes: first as Director of the Accelerated Promotion Course (APC)<sup>5</sup> – formerly known as the Special Course – a national “high fliers” scheme for outstanding young police officers selected as having the potential for senior command: second as self-styled Head of Organisation and Management Development for the Hertfordshire Constabulary<sup>6</sup> when I introduced the Management Development Programme (MDP) for middle-ranking police and civilian managers. Sandwiched in between these appointments, was a spell as Head of Management and Policy Support in Hertfordshire<sup>7</sup> – a difficult and dispiriting time giving rise to some of my darker stories and enlivened only by the challenge and satisfaction of training as an organisational consultant at Metanoia, a Gestalt Psychotherapy Institute in West London.

Currently, I work as Head of Business Development for National Police Training – an internal role with no remit to design or deliver educational programmes. Nevertheless, through my work at CARPP, researching for this PhD, I have convened and facilitated an

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<sup>4</sup> See *Police Stories – Stepping out*

<sup>5</sup> See *Police Stories – Doing what comes naturally*

<sup>6</sup> See *Police Stories – Working on the edge*

eighteen-month long collaborative inquiry amongst middle and senior ranking police and civilian managers in the Hertfordshire Constabulary on the theme of *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* (known as the AIG – Action Inquiry Group). At the time of writing, I am also involved in putting together the Action Inquiry element of the new Public Service Leaders Scheme for prospective senior leaders in the National Health Service, Civil Service, Local Government, Police and Voluntary Sector, launched by the Cabinet Office in March 2001.

Taken together, the various landmarks on the map of my changing professional knowledge landscape show how the centre of gravity of my professional identity has shifted from *policeman* to *educator*, though I was not able to articulate this unambiguously until the image of the gate<sup>8</sup> revealed to me that my purpose, that which I serve, is learning and encouraged me to proclaim: “I am an educator, though not solely and not necessarily a police educator.” To which Jack Whitehead responded (in an email dated 27<sup>th</sup> March 2001):

I do think that you are an educator. I think educators do seek to influence the learning of others for good. I think you are like me in recognising that you can't claim to have educated anyone other than yourself because your educative influence has to be mediated through the creativity and critical judgement of the other before the learning can be judged as “educative”

Jack is right in saying that I share this view of education, though it has taken me many years to clarify my thinking and develop my practice in this direction. Furthermore I am, as Jack might say, “a living contradiction” (Whitehead 1993), that is to say my practice often diverges from the educational values that I espouse.

In the rest of this chapter I want to inquire more deeply into my practice as an educator through some of the “traveller’s tales” and “artefacts” I have accumulated over the past fourteen years or so exploring my professional knowledge landscape. Though I could perhaps tell other stories that derive from my wider consultancy practice I have decided to concentrate on the three major police educational programmes for whose design and delivery I have been responsible:

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<sup>7</sup> See *Police Stories – Fighting back*

<sup>8</sup> See *Interlude IV: The point of no return*

1. Accelerated Promotion Course (APC) 1988-1992
2. Management Development Programme (MDP) 1995-1997
3. Action Inquiry Group (AIG) 1999-2000

I think this approach will provide the best opportunity to unearth and track any underlying themes and patterns over time – as important indicators of my embodied values, my living standards of practice and judgement. In doing so (though not my specific aim in this thesis) I acknowledge that this amounts to creating my own “living educational theory” (Whitehead 1993). In exploring, understanding and conceptualising my educational practice, I am greatly influenced by Jack Whitehead’s work in this area as well as by our regular supervisory conversations. My sense of where we part company is that I am interested in my educational practice as part of a wider set of living inquiries - responding to the question: **What does it mean to live my life as inquiry?** Whereas I think, for Jack, the identity of educator is so well established and deeply embedded that he might subsume my question within: **How do I improve my educational practice?** This is a fine point but an important one for the form of this thesis in which my living inquiries into other aspects of my life (as a man, in loving relationships, in search of healing) stand in their own right as equally significant and valid inquiries as this exploration of my professional practice as an educator.

Therefore, as I explore each of these three police educational programmes, I am holding a variety of questions in mind. First to do with *purpose*: What was I trying to achieve? What did I want to use my educative influence for? What were my motives and intentions? Second to do with *means*: How did I go about it? In what ways did I use my educative influence? What ideas, models and theoretical resources did I draw on? Third to do with *outcomes*: What was the result? What evidence do I have that my educative influence brought any benefits to individuals, to the organisation or in terms of improved policing?

As I examine the three programmes in turn, I think you will see how – as a researcher – I come to enhance my own sense of the rigour of my scholarship of inquiry by progressively articulating claims in relation to my educative influence that are more

specific, grounded in data and supported by evidence. In relation to the first programme, I acknowledge that there is “precious little documented evidence” and relate a couple of critical incidents from memory to illustrate my practice. In the second, I am able to draw upon some written comments from participants to support my claim to be using my educative influence for good. In the third, I draw upon a mass of documentary material (including an independent evaluation) to substantiate particular claims made in a published paper about the programme.

I am also equally interested in how the personal and professional come together in these tales: In what ways were these experiences part of my life as inquiry? Where do the official (“sacred”) and unofficial (“stories to live by”) stories coincide and where do they conflict? Some of these issues, too, may come out in the telling and in my reflection on the telling.

### **A passion for police education**

#### ***Accelerated Promotion Course***

When I left Bramshill in 1976 after graduating from the “Special Course” I swore I would never go back.<sup>9</sup> In the end I did return, twelve years later as Course Director, determined that never again would students be subjected to such a harrowing second-rate experience. Taking this job on, in 1988, with no formal training as an educator, was a huge challenge and, ultimately, the source of enormous satisfaction. In *Police Stories*,<sup>10</sup> I refer to this period as “my professional Camelot – a golden time in which I was the right person in the right place at the right time.”

During my three years “at the helm” (an appropriate metaphor for Director, I think) I built on the work of my predecessor who had made a radical shift from traditional didactic teaching methods to *facilitated self-development*. He was strongly influenced by what was then called the “Lancaster School” of self-development – John Burgoyne, Roger Stuart, Tom Boydell, Mike Pedler and by John Heron’s work on facilitation at the Human Potential Resource Group at Surrey University. I followed his lead and these early works

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<sup>9</sup> See *Police Stories – Getting on*

<sup>10</sup> See *Police Stories – Doing what comes naturally*

(Burgoyne and Stuart 1978; Boydell and Pedler 1981; Heron 1989) continue to shape my understanding of andragogical practice.

What I found on my arrival was a brilliantly conceived course but with a staff group that was disaffected and incapable of working collectively, falling student numbers and several major elements of the programme (including a highly elaborate and expensive operational simulation) in complete disarray. I devoted myself to closing the gaps between the rhetoric and the reality of the course; recruiting and leading an effective and committed tutor group, making the curriculum more coherent, the delivery more robust, doubling student numbers, and actively managing the numerous and complex in-force elements of the programme. As Director I was consciously trying to help participants achieve at least three major outcomes.

First and foremost was to equip themselves with the interpersonal skills and awareness to survive and thrive as whole people in the, sometimes hostile, climate of the police organisation, particularly during their passage through the middle ranks (the narrowest bottleneck in the cultural sausage-machine). I wanted them to be able to handle themselves well and not be afraid to challenge their environment en route to the top. Too many of my contemporaries had adopted either the “Animal Farm” strategy (keeping one’s head down and waiting until senior rank before trying to change anything – with the result that most of the pigs became farmers without realising that they had been assimilated to the point where they could no longer see what needed to be done) or the “Kamikaze” strategy (challenging everything and everyone indiscriminately no matter how slim the prospects of success – with the result that they crashed and burned, falling off the promotion ladder or leaving the service altogether). There had to be a better way.

My second main objective was to contribute to student’s long-term development – to prepare for an unknown, and unknowable, future. Given the time frame (ten years or so before reaching senior command), the speed of change and the degree of uncertainty about future roles, it seemed to me that the most useful focus would be at the meta-level, i.e. learning to learn, developing the ability to absorb and learn quickly from new experiences. Our curriculum and learning methods were therefore designed to this end (see table overleaf).



Thirdly, I wanted students to connect with their own passion and sense of purpose. There was much talk at the time of “the butterfly men [sic]” who never settled long enough in one job to make a real contribution to police effectiveness, who made a career out of having a career. I voiced my expectations to each new intake, reading a favourite passage from Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s *Flight to Arras* (Saint-Exupery 1987):

He [sic] who bears in his heart a cathedral to be built is already victorious. He who seeks to become sexton of a finished cathedral is already defeated. Victory is the fruit of love.  
(p239)

The Special Course/APC was my cathedral in the heart and I did my best to live this vision every day with mixed results.

| <b>Learning Areas</b>  | <b>Learning Methods</b>   |
|--|---|
| Practical knowledge<br>Professional knowledge  | Unstructured group process<br>Structured experiences<br>Reflection and discussion<br>Instruction and modelling<br>Practice, coaching and feedback<br>Individual and group tutorials<br>Focused workshops and seminars<br>Self and peer assessment |
| Sensitivity to environment<br>Communicating<br>Problem solving<br>Assertiveness<br>Helping skills<br>Team skills |   |
| Mental agility<br>Creativity<br>Resilience<br>Proactivity  | Outward Bound<br>Exercises and simulations<br>Mentoring<br>Networking<br>Action Learning<br>Audit   |

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|--|--|
| Self-knowledge<br>Learning ability<br>Humility |  |
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**Elements of Special Course/APC Curriculum<sup>11</sup>**

I cannot say with any real confidence how successful all these efforts were. It was a long time ago, things have moved on and we did not keep much data or evaluate the programme very rigorously. I can say, back at Bramshill in a different capacity ten years later, that I see many of my former proteges returning on the Senior Command Course before promotion to Assistant Chief Constable. We occasionally exchange fond memories over a glass or two and I sense that many of them still value the experience of those months together. However, there is precious little documented evidence to substantiate any claims I might make for having used my educative influence for good.

The Special Course (which I later renamed the Accelerated Promotion Course, having carried the label “Special” like a millstone round my own neck during my early years in the service) is described in some detail in an article I wrote for Management Education and Development after two years in post (Mead 1990) and I researched the mentoring element of the course for my MBA dissertation (Mead 1991). Rather than go over this ground again here, there is probably more to be learned about my practice from a couple of “critical incidents” – key moments that are still vivid in my memory.

The first of these occurred a few months in to my new role whilst helping a small group debrief an exercise. One member of the group (let’s call him John) was given feedback by several colleagues that they found his habit of smiling at their critical comments ingratiating and irritating. This was news for John who had believed that his equable and well-mannered persona was both popular and effective. As he struggled to make sense of this (still smiling it should be said) I had a strong hunch that if we could enable him to express the anger that seemed to be lurking below the surface, he might gain some useful insight into his behaviour. However, I also realised that I did not have the knowledge or skill to facilitate such a process properly. It would have been unwise and unethical to

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<sup>11</sup> Table adapted from Mead, G. (1990). “The Challenge of Police Leadership: The Contribution of the Special Course.” Management Education and Development 21(5): 406-414.

deliberately plunge him into such deep and uncharted waters, so we pulled back from the brink and stayed at the level of “talking about” his anger rather than expressing it.

A few days later, I spoke to my friend Graham Stickland, a much more experienced management trainer and developer, about this incident and asked him what he might have done. He endorsed my hunch as probably accurate and described how he might have set up a safe exercise (pushing and experiencing resistance) to enable John, if he so wished, to amplify and then express his repressed anger. “Brilliant,” I thought and asked Graham where he had learned this kind of technique. “Gestalt therapy,” he replied and recommended a particular therapist. Taken together with an earlier experience of discovering my own lack of emotional literacy which I described in the opening paragraphs of *Healing Journeys* as a “defining moment”, this was sufficient for me to decide that, for professional as well as for personal reasons, I should enter therapy myself, which I duly did (eventually qualifying several years later as a Gestalt based organisational consultant<sup>12</sup>).

The educational principle that this incident established for me, once and for all, is that as a facilitator of other’s learning, it behoves me (for practical and ethical reasons) to work on my own process at a deeper level than I expect to be working with others: “Educator – educate thyself.”

The second incident arose from my belief that there should be no assessment of students during the developmental phases of the Special Course/APC at Bramshill (though workplace performance should be rigorously assessed). I had been led to believe when I took over as Director, that this was in fact the case and that was clearly the “contract” with students. You can imagine my horror when, about ten months later, I discovered that there had actually been covert assessment of students (albeit in broad categories of achievement) and that this information had been passed to members of the Extended Interview Panel who had selected them for the course, some of whom had direct responsibility for the same students’ future careers. I was appalled. I could not condone this deceit or let it continue. My initial response was to contact the Director of Extended Interview, a senior and well-respected Chief Constable, who had some difficulty seeing what I was making all the fuss about but accepted that (at the very least) I found myself in

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<sup>12</sup> See *Police Stories – Stepping out*

an intolerable position and agreed that he would forgo the assessment information, in favour of a personal briefing from me on the general progress of the course, without naming individuals.

This seemed an acceptable compromise, so my next task was to speak personally to every group of students on the course, tell them what had happened, apologise for my (unwitting) deception and for the fact that others had been “economical with the truth”, accept and endure their outrage with as little defensiveness and as much dignity as I could muster, and promise that it would not happen again. We got over it. My honesty and forthrightness mitigated the damage that had been done – as one student said at the time: “Thank you. I’ve never known a Chief Superintendent apologise for anything before.”

My resolve on this matter was put to the test once more, at the annual meeting with the Commandant of the Police Staff College and the Director of Extended Interview at which they consider evidence and recommendations from students’ own Chief Constables about their continuation on the course and further promotion. When considering a borderline case, the Commandant turned to me and said:

“Well Geoff, you saw him on the course. How did he get on?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that, Sir. As you know, students are not assessed at Bramshill whilst on the course,” I replied.

“Yes,” he rejoined. “But you know whether or not he’s any good. How did he get on?”

“Even if I was able to tell you Sir, I think your decision should be based on the evidence of his performance in-force, according to the prescribed process.”

“Mr. Mead,” his voice rising. “You will tell me what you know.”

“No Sir. I will not.”

At that point the meeting was adjourned and I was taken aside for a private “audience” with the Commandant.

“Mr. Mead, you are making life very difficult. Are you sure you know what you are doing?”

“I believe so, Sir. I have given my word to the students and will not break it. This is a resignation issue for me.”

“Very well,” for he was not an unreasonable man, “can you suggest a way out of this impasse?”

“If you feel you do not have enough information on which to base your decision,” I offered. “I could go back to his Chief Constable and ask for further evidence and clarification.”

So that is what we did. Honour was satisfied and I kept my job. The student in question was withdrawn from the scheme by his Chief Constable on the grounds that his performance in-force was not good enough to warrant early promotion. I had guessed that might well be the outcome and I could indeed have “saved us all a lot of time.” But the decision was made for the right reasons, by the right people and the issue of assessing students on the developmental phases of the course at Bramshill was not raised again during my tenure.

### ***Management Development Programme***

Returning to Hertfordshire in 1992 after three years at Bramshill was difficult. As I wrote in *Police Stories*<sup>13</sup> and in *Danger: Men at Work* (Mead 1996), I left an environment in which I was valued and passionate about my work, for one in which I felt alienated from colleagues and from the dry managerial work I was called upon to perform as Head of Management and Policy Support. After two years I managed to arrange a secondment as Visiting Fellow to the Office for Public Management<sup>14</sup> and, fired up by this experience, began to think that it might be possible to create a role for myself in Hertfordshire that would allow me to contribute some of what I had learned about management development (MD) and organisation development (OD) over the past five or six years.

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<sup>13</sup> See *Police Stories – Fighting back*

<sup>14</sup> See *Police Stories – Stepping out*

Peter Sharpe, the new Chief Constable, agreed that I should return to Hertfordshire and spend a few weeks exploring the possibility of a role which he called “working in circles around the boxes.” During the next month or so, I conducted twenty-five in-depth interviews with senior managers and other interested parties assessing our needs in relation to MD and OD. A key message I brought back was that we were “leaving people behind” – particularly middle managers, whose jobs were being dramatically changed by the adoption of Total Quality Management. This approach, deriving from Japanese and American management gurus called for a shift from the traditional top-down command and control hierarchy to a bottom-up support pyramid, and placed responsibility for decision-making closer to the “frontline” – thus leaving middle managers in the paradoxical position of being held more accountable than ever before for operational performance and being expected to slacken their customarily tight supervisory reins in favour of team development and individual coaching.

The unintended result was the de-skilling and de-motivating of a key group of staff, crucial to the organisation’s performance but seen by many (both from “above” and “below”) as anachronistic and resistant to change. This logic persuaded the Force Policy Group to commission me to research, design and deliver a programme to address the development need of police and civilian middle managers, and to establish a Management Development Steering Group, chaired by the Deputy Chief Constable to oversee and support my work.

In preparing a Management Development Strategy for the force and in designing the Management Development Programme (MDP) I thought back to what I had learned from my time as Director of the Special Course/APC. One major difficulty we had encountered then was the separation of classroom learning from the daily realities of working life – so a prime concern in the MDP was to integrate them as far as possible and, by doing so, to meet both individual development needs and wider concerns about managerial competence and organisational performance. My ideas were enriched and informed by notions of the *learning organisation* or *learning company* that were gaining currency at the time. Once again, Mike Pedler, John Burgoyne and Tom Boydell were leading the way with *The Learning Company Report* (Pedler, Boydell et al. 1988), *Towards the Learning Company* (Pedler, Boydell et al. 1989), and *The Learning Company: A Strategy for Sustainable Development* (Pedler, Burgoyne et al. 1991). Their work and the Foundation for Management Education paper *Management for the Future* (Barham,

Fraser et al. 1988) all pointed to a highly focused approach to training provision, characterised by the convergence of work and learning.

My second underlying objective was to construct a programme that would cut across some of the old cultural norms of the organisation – particularly the traditional separation of the Constabulary into two camps: police officers and civilian support staff. This divide also tended to reinforce a parallel split between men and women (the majority of police managers being male with the reverse pattern among civilian managers). I also wanted to soften the rigid rank/grade hierarchy by inviting a broad band of middle managers to take part. All these aims could be tackled together by judicious mixing of the various learning groups.

A third (undeclared) goal was to enable me to get involved in some “hands-on” educational work once again. I had found my vocation at Bramshill and missed it dreadfully. I knew that I had the skills to facilitate high quality learning and wrote myself into the design as co-facilitator of all the major “set-piece” events. It would be a great opportunity to hone my skills and develop my educative practice.

By September 1995, the MDP was ready and about sixty people came forward to take part, supported by their Divisional Commanders and Heads of Department. So began the first annual intake of a scheme that has endured for six years and provided development opportunities for over two hundred and fifty middle managers. Unlike the Special Course/APC, I have not published a description of the course design or methods. Perhaps the simplest way to give you an indication of what it looked like is to reproduce a summary of the course aims and curriculum from the original explanatory pamphlet.

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| <b>MDP – AIMS and CURRICULUM</b> |
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I am very conscious that these bare bones do not convey anything of the quality of participants’ experience or of the nature of my educative practice. Despite “hot debriefing” each element of the course and a formal evaluation, little remains on record of participants’ views, though I do have a few transcripts of conversations with several MDP “graduates” who responded to an invitation to meet at Bramshill in December 1997 to

review their learning with me. Of course, these are highly selective accounts – I was looking for positive outcomes – but they may give some feel for what was achieved.<sup>15</sup>

**Sara:** I arrived at the door of the MDP feeling very devalued, de-motivated and not supported. The value of it for me has been a new support network which has enabled me to get through the last eighteen months, to get some positive feedback from the people I met, to learn some new personal development skills, to question people who criticise me, to allow myself to have time. I've also decided that I can look after myself and put myself first in many situations where previously I would have put myself last.

**Mary:** In my own life, there are the deals and adjustments I've had to make to do with health which have coloured my perceptions of what value I need to get out of the years from this point onwards... I've looked at how I'm approaching work and trying to judge whether I'm following my own agenda or whether I'm allowing the agendas to be dictated to me.

**Dave:** The communication side of it is becoming far more important in terms of facilitating, negotiating... It is that sort of people interaction... I can sort of see that I'm an individual and I've got needs and actually I need a bit of looking after now and again... and other people probably need the same.

About ten days after attending the Phase Two residential workshop, which I co-facilitated with a colleague, Alec Parrott, another participant sent an unsolicited email to the Chief Constable about her perceptions of the event:

**Andrea:** The MDP Workshop was a unique and fascinating learning experience for me personally, and I know for many others who have attended the programme over the last two years. It was uniquely different and significant for me because it was about being helped to change WHAT I am doing, rather than the common experience of a training course teaching me simply to UNDERSTAND more about what I SHOULD BE DOING. "Learning about" doesn't always lead to managers doing things better. This workshop didn't educate me, in fact it didn't "teach" me much in the traditional sense of the word, but much more importantly, it helped me DEVELOP. It was about self-awareness, self-development and learning... about being helped to change BEHAVIOURS... about how to change things in the REAL WORLD... Management is very much about relationships and the workshop really made management, as a whole person activity, a reality. It was physically, emotionally and intellectually draining! So much more than the usual

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<sup>15</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to preserve confidentiality



information and education on a training course. And I feel that I am significantly better equipped to manage, as a result of my experience.

These glimpses into participants' minds lend some support to my claim to be using my educative influence for good. All these statements are congruent with my wish to serve "the kind of learning which is life-enhancing, increasing the possibilities for being and doing in the world and which also leads to a fuller expression of loving relationships."<sup>16</sup> Andrea's email to the Chief Constable is an especially powerful affirmation of the value of the MDP to, at least, some people. However, I am also aware that they do not attribute insight or learning to any particular intervention I might have made as a facilitator. Rather, they tend to substantiate my claim to exert educative influence through my ability to affect policy-making, secure resources, and design effective educational programmes.

In a recent email (27<sup>th</sup> March 2001) Jack Whitehead encouraged me to acknowledge my capacity to influence social formations, to "mobilise" a systemic response in support of my educational activities. At the time, I struggled to understand the relevance of his point, but now – thinking about the MDP – I see exactly what he means. I may be fascinated by the micro-skills of facilitating transformational learning, but my real contribution to the police service (to Hertfordshire Constabulary in the case of the MDP) has been imagining and bringing into being several large-scale and enduring educational programmes, through my understanding of organisational politics and my willingness to engage with, and persuade, key stakeholders. With the MDP, as well as designing and delivering the programme, my educative influence was exercised through creating the organisational climate and infrastructure within which learning and development could flourish. I am thinking here of how I involved many senior staff as mentors to participants, of how I established a Resource Centre to support open and self-directed learning, and of how I persuaded the Chief Constable to issue a Development Charter telling every member of the Constabulary what they were entitled to, what they were responsible for, and what they would be encouraged to do to further their continuous learning and development. Thank you Jack for helping me to reassess and appreciate an important and undervalued aspect of my professional (educative) practice.

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<sup>16</sup> See *The point of no return*

The only other tangible evidence of the impact of the MDP that comes to mind is the regularity with which its graduates were promoted. This was especially true for police officers (for whom there continues to be greater job mobility and better prospects for advancement). On one memorable day in January 1998, six out of seven people promoted to Chief Inspector had been through the MDP. Some of the civilian managers also achieved notable successes in terms of new jobs and promotion – some finding the confidence and self-belief to look outside the Constabulary to develop their careers.

### *Action Inquiry Group*

In early 1997 (at the same time as I began the CARPP programme) I returned to live and work at Bramshill, leaving the MDP in the safe hands of my friend and colleague, Roger Barrett. For about eighteen months, the vicissitudes of separating from my family and subsequent divorce dominated my life, sapping my energy, turning my thoughts inward, and leaving me with little interest in developing my practice as an educator.

During this hiatus I continued to read widely and gradually, through the CARPP programme, began to engage with various notions of collaborative inquiry – in particular, the form that Peter Reason and John Heron call “co-operative inquiry” (Reason and Rowan 1981; Reason 1988; Reason 1994; Reason 1994; Heron 1996; Reason and Heron 1996). Its democratic and participative ethos appealed to me. As I came across actual examples of co-operative inquiries, I felt that such a process could help me move closer to the ideal of genuinely Adult-Adult relationships in my educational practice.

Although I had left Hertfordshire I was grateful to the Chief Constable for supporting my application for a Bramshill Fellowship<sup>17</sup> and I wanted to put something back into the Constabulary. I hoped that we could build on the perceived success of the MDP and, after some negotiation, launched the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* Action Inquiry Group (known as the AIG) in late 1998. This time, I went into the project not just as an educator but as a researcher too. From the outset, I envisaged that the AIG would be interesting and significant so I took special care to record and document the process as fully as possible – with audio and video recordings, photographs and images, transcripts of our meetings, letters, reports and reflective writings – enough material to fill a

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<sup>17</sup> See *The Men's Room*

bookshelf and more than enough material, I suspect, upon which to construct a whole PhD!

As part of the research process, I recently wrote an article which describes this project in some detail – in particular, the politics and practicalities of attempting a form of collaborative inquiry in such an obviously hierarchical organisation. I am hoping that my work with the AIG will prove to be a rich source of inquiry into my educational practice and I think it would be both useful and appropriate to use the full text of the article (Mead 2001) as a “base camp” from which to further explore my professional knowledge landscape.

**Developing Ourselves as Police Leaders: How can we inquire collaboratively in a hierarchical organization?**

Accepted for publication in *Systemic Practice and Action Research*

**Introduction**

“Improving the quality of leadership is a crucial issue for the police service. Learning about theories of leadership is not enough. What really matters is for each of us to understand and improve our own unique practice as leaders.”

This was the challenge taken up by a mixed group of police managers (including the author) in the Hertfordshire Constabulary<sup>18</sup> in an eighteen month long action inquiry – *Developing Ourselves as Leaders*. For most participants, the results have been positive, exciting and tangible (though hard to quantify). However, we also found that doing collaborative inquiry in the police context had particular problems – not least that of creating a safe learning environment in an overtly hierarchical organization in which neither the democratic and emergent processes of collaborative inquiry nor the kind of transformative learning claimed by some members of the Action Inquiry Group (AIG) sit comfortably.

This paper will examine some of these difficulties and our attempts to overcome them – hopefully in a way that will prove useful to readers contemplating or actually doing collaborative inquiry in an organizational setting. I shall say something about the *rationale* behind choosing an action

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<sup>18</sup> A provincial police force in the United Kingdom (an organization of some 3,000 police officers and civilian support staff).

inquiry approach before considering some of the *politics and practicalities* of the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project in more detail. Finally, some tentative *conclusions* will be offered on the basis of this experience.

### **Why Action Inquiry?**

As an educator and senior police manager, I have long been interested in the challenges inherent in police leadership and leadership development (see, for example (Mead 1988; Mead 1990; Mead 1995a) By 1998, I had come to the view that all methods of leadership development are based on assumptions (usually implicit) about the nature of leadership. Warren Bennis, one of the most respected and enduring commentators on the subject, described it as the most studied and least understood phenomenon in social science (Bennis 1989). In fact, though common usage sometimes requires it, the word “leadership” has little meaning in the abstract. We might even say that it only acquires meaning in action – “leading” as opposed to “leadership.”

My assumptions about leadership reflect this basic epistemological position. I take it that leadership is an active process, not an abstract quality. Leadership is not the prerogative of the few but is distributed throughout the organization: exercised day-to-day by many at all levels. Nor is it a zero-sum game in which the more I lead, the more you follow. Rather, it is a complex and often paradoxical practice, uniquely exercised by each of us in particular circumstances, which we can develop and improve over time.

It therefore follows that effective methods of leadership development must be able to support a multiplicity of individual inquiries whilst holding a common focus (in this case, that of developing ourselves as leaders). They will benefit from diversity of membership – particularly in relation to ethnic origin, gender, level and area of responsibility, police and support staff. Because practice changes over time, it requires an iterative process not a one-off event. And because practice is multi-dimensional it is essential to work holistically across all four domains – experiential, imaginal, propositional and practical (Heron 1992; Heron 1996).

Thus, when I wanted to offer a leadership development programme to the Hertfordshire Constabulary as part of my PhD research, some form of collaborative action inquiry capable of encompassing all these dimensions and domains seemed to be called for. Drawing on writer-practitioners such as Donald Schon (Schon 1983), Mike Pedler (Pedler 1981), William Torbert (Torbert 1991; Torbert 2000), John Heron (Heron 1992; Heron 1996), Peter Reason (Reason and Rowan 1981; Reason 1988; Reason 1994; Reason and Bradbury 2000) and Jack Whitehead (Whitehead 1993), I adopted the nomenclature of Action Inquiry to describe what I envisaged: practitioners coming together as a community of inquiry, encouraging and challenging each other

as they engaged in real-time, real-life development over several cycles of action and reflection with the process of the group designed co-operatively to meet emerging themes and interests. I hoped too that the term Action Inquiry would be sufficiently understandable and intriguing to attract potential co-inquirers.

**Politics and practicalities**

As Coghlan and Brannick (Coghlan and Brannick 2001) observe:

While doing any research in an organization is very political, doing research in and on your own organization is particularly so... Indeed it might [even] be considered subversive (p64)

Although my experience of doing research was limited, I had got my fingers burned often enough as a senior police manager<sup>19</sup> to be very aware of organizational sensitivities and of the need to avoid activating its “immune response” to the action inquiry project. In the event, political dynamics moved into the foreground on several occasions. Rather than cluster them together, I prefer to consider them in the particular contexts in which they arose.

In hindsight, I can identify six main phases of the action inquiry – outlined in Table 1. In this section, I will follow them in rough chronological order, highlighting the politics and practicalities of doing the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project.

*Doing the groundwork*

The process of seeking sponsorship and support for the project began in late 1997, about a year before the AIG was initiated, when Peter Sharpe (then Chief Constable of the Hertfordshire Constabulary) agreed to support my application for a Bramshill Fellowship<sup>20</sup>. I wanted to obtain a fellowship for two reasons: because it represented a commitment to fund my studies and, even more important, because it would give my research some official recognition and legitimacy. We were both keen to ensure that I would provide some “return” for this investment in my development and my plan included a proposal to conduct some form of collaborative action research (at that time, in the area of men and masculinities) in the Hertfordshire Constabulary.

| Phase | Theme | Main Activities | Timeframe |
|-------|-------|-----------------|-----------|
|-------|-------|-----------------|-----------|

<sup>19</sup> See *Police Stories* ([www.actionresearch.net](http://www.actionresearch.net))

<sup>20</sup> A national scheme to support police officers researching topics of relevance and concern to the police service as part of higher level degrees at recognised universities

|   |                             |   |                              |
|---|-----------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| 1 | Doing the groundwork        | - Personal sanction from Chief Constable<br>- Consultation with influential peers<br>- Get support from HR and Training         | Sept 1997<br>-<br>Sept 1998  |
| 2 | Getting the group together  | - Letter of invitation to 300+ managers<br>- Briefings for 50+ potential participants<br>- Set-up meeting for committed members | Oct 1998<br>-<br>Feb 1999    |
| 3 | Creating a safe environment | - Establishing my role as co-facilitator<br>- Contracting “ground rules” for group<br>- Sharing personal stories, hopes, fears  | Feb 1999<br>-<br>April 1999  |
| 4 | Sustaining the inquiry      | - Developing individual inquiry questions<br>- Meetings every six to eight weeks<br>- Holding each other to account             | April 1999<br>-<br>June 2000 |
| 5 | Accounting for the learning | - Individual papers from members<br>- Extended review of learning<br>- Multiple, creative techniques                            | Oct 1999<br>-<br>Feb 2000    |
| 6 | Bridging the gaps           | - Feeding back results to organisation<br>- Presentations at police conferences<br>- Independent evaluation of project          | May 2000<br>-<br>Ongoing     |

**Table 1 – Phases of the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* action inquiry**

The Chief Constable’s endorsement of my Bramshill Fellowship sanctioned the project in principle and proved invaluable when I began to sound out other potential supporters during the summer of 1998. By this time I was outside the organisation, seconded to National Police Training, and I was anxious to “test the waters” back in Hertfordshire. Over the course of several weeks I had long conversations with several erstwhile colleagues who I felt would be open-minded and sympathetic, whose judgement I trusted and who I knew to be influential “opinion-formers” in the organisation. They were happy to lend their personal support to a collaborative inquiry process (indeed, two of them subsequently joined the group) but encouraged me to reconsider my intended focus on men and masculinities – which they saw as too narrow, confrontative and exclusive.

Their views tended to confirm my own doubts about the readiness of other members of the organisation to tackle this issue “head on.” It occurred to me that a more creative approach would be to invite men and women into a space that, by its very nature (i.e. community, collaboration and diminished sense of hierarchy) would challenge deep-seated notions of hegemonic

masculinity. Gender issues, including masculinity, might emerge naturally in such a group if they were really as significant in the organisation as I imagined them to be<sup>21</sup>.

So I reformulated my proposal to cover a more general inquiry into leadership practice among men and women across the organisation – *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* – and subsequently put it to the Training Manager and Head of Human Resources on that basis. They were both quite excited by the idea and willing to support it, provided it was offered as a complementary development activity clearly outside the scope of the existing structures for management development. This degree of “distancing” from mainstream training activity was understandable and probably quite helpful in differentiating it in the minds of potential co-inquirers.

Even as a senior “insider”, getting high level support for the action inquiry project required persistent and delicate negotiations. Powerful players needed to be convinced of the potential benefits of this approach and reassured that, though challenging, it did not represent a fundamental threat to the organisation. In managing the micro-politics of these interactions, I found it helpful to present myself as a “tempered radical” (Meyerson and Scully 1995), as someone authentically committed to the mission and goals of the organisation who is also seeking to bring about radical change in some aspects of the way it does business. This ambivalence – this state of living contradiction – is a powerful spur to action but, as I have written about elsewhere<sup>22</sup> can also be an uncomfortable and uneasy position to occupy.

It no doubt helped that I was also able to call on my track record as director of other successful management and leadership development programmes<sup>23</sup> to establish my credibility and competence in the field. Despite these credentials, doing the groundwork was a slow and painstaking business – but absolutely essential to securing the levels of access and support it would take to get the project “off the ground.”

#### *Getting the group together*

By October 1998 we were ready to launch the group. Working closely with Roger Barrett the Force Development Manager, a letter of invitation was drafted, refined and sent out to over three

<sup>21</sup> In the event, the topic arose only once - six months into the life of the group – when we shared our respective experiences of being men and women in the police organisation. I still believe that it is a highly significant issue for the police service which demands (though might still not be ripe) for further research.

<sup>22</sup> See *Police Stories* ([www.actionresearch.net](http://www.actionresearch.net))

<sup>23</sup> Having directed the Special Course (a national scheme for young officers with outstanding potential) from 1988-91, and the MDP Management Development Programme ( for middle managers in Hertfordshire) from 1995-1997

Comment:

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hundred middle and senior managers throughout the Hertfordshire Constabulary. We wanted to offer the chance of participating to as wide a range of people as possible without being overwhelmed by potential participants. So, after much debate, we set eligibility-criteria based on rank or grade. Although setting an arbitrary cut-off, these grounds had some logic and were defensible in terms of existing organisational practice.

Between fifty and sixty people responded to the letter by coming to one of the briefing sessions, some of them familiar faces, some new to me – men and women, police officers and civilian support staff of many ranks and grades. To the non-police reader this may not seem particularly noteworthy but such heterogeneity is still comparatively rare in police management and leadership development programmes. The briefings were designed to help people make a positive decision to opt in to the action inquiry or to decide, without any stigma, that it was not for them.

The underlying principle was that of voluntary, informed self-selection. I spoke a little about the rationale for offering this opportunity to focus on leadership and said something about the participative and democratic ethos of action inquiry. I talked about the possibility of transformative learning and asked people to decide if they wanted to take part using their head (Do you have enough information? Does it make sense for you to do it?), heart (Are you intrigued, curious, drawn? Does it feel right for you to do it?), and will (Are you able and willing to meet the commitment? Do you really want to do it?).

I then told the story of *Jumping Mouse* – a wonderful Native American tale of journeying, sacrifice and transformation (Storm 1972). It is a long story – twenty minutes or so – and telling it felt like a risky thing to do. The possibility of ridicule was high. Nevertheless, I had been talking in a fairly conventional way about a radically different way of learning and I wanted to be more congruent. It was a defining moment. As I looked at the audience I saw some eyes glaze over whilst others began to sparkle with interest – choices were being made. We closed the session with questions and a general discussion and everyone was given a short paper reiterating the main points of the briefing and a reply slip with which to notify their decision within three weeks.

Sixteen people confirmed their intention to take part and we arranged a preliminary meeting in mid February 1999 to resolve any outstanding issues and to set up the inquiry group. Not everyone could make the meeting (a consistent and seemingly inevitable feature of organisational life) but there were enough of us to share some hopes and expectations and to arrange a series of meetings over the coming year beginning with a two-day residential event in April to kick start the inquiry process.



By staging the process of self-selection (invitation, briefing, written reply, preliminary meeting), and with a bit of good luck, we had managed to recruit a manageable number of committed people. It also turned out that the final group was well mixed in terms of police officers (8) and civilian support staff (8), and in terms of men (10) and women (6). There was also a wide spread of police ranks and civilian support staff grades from many different specialties and locations. We could not have asked for a more promising start.

### *Creating a safe environment*

This issue was always present to some degree, and was figural in the early stages of group formation and, again, towards the end when we considered how to feed back our learning to the organisation and beyond. It featured strongly at our inaugural residential event in April 1999. Twelve of us came together at the Police Staff College, Bramshill from Friday lunchtime to Saturday teatime (a fair blend, we thought, of work and personal time). As we moved through the weekend, three main issues about the safety of the learning environment arose.

1. Within the group – how did group members want to behave towards each other and be treated?
2. My role as facilitator – how would I offer leadership and to what extent would I participate as a co-inquirer?
3. Outside the group – what were the appropriate boundaries with the organisation and how could they be maintained?

We addressed the first issue in several ways; sharing our hopes, fears and life stories in a series of creative exercises, gradually deepening trust and empathy by taking small risks, allaying some of our concerns by building relationships and getting to know each other. We also spent some time mid-way through the process generating ground-rules for the group, such as:

- Confidentiality – we own our own stories
- Feedback – challenge with respect
- Listening – allow others to speak uninterrupted
- Honesty – tell it like it is
- Pro-activity – take responsibility for our own learning
- Process – flexible, fun and realistic

The list is neither surprising nor startlingly original. What matters is that these agreements were generated organically by the group on the basis of shared experience. We knew what they meant for us and we never needed to refer to them again.

I found the second issue – my role in the group – a particularly knotty one at first. Clearly I had initiated and convened the group. I was the only person with prior knowledge and experience of collaborative inquiry and, as if this was not enough, I also held the most senior rank/grade.

Concerned that these factors might distort the group dynamics and make it impossible to establish peer-relationships, I had played down my role at our preliminary meeting in February, stepping out of the limelight for fear of dominating the group. Unfortunately it left the stage bare so that our meeting was stilted and confusing. It was “good enough” not to put too many people off (though three of them did drop out afterwards) but we could so easily have fallen at this first hurdle. I debriefed the experience with Roger and consciously decided to play a more active role (though still rather tentatively) on the residential event in April.

Two things occurred that weekend that shaped my subsequent role in the group. On Saturday morning, two members of the group challenged me to stop “playing small” and encouraged me, in the words of Nelson Mandela<sup>24</sup>, to allow myself to be “brilliant, talented and fabulous”, to “let your own light shine”. They made it very clear that they did not need me to stand aside for them to be powerful too. It was a lesson I hope never to forget. Thank you Judy and Carol.

On Saturday afternoon, as we coached each other in formulating our individual inquiry questions, I offered: “How can I lead (in) this process of Action Inquiry with authenticity, integrity and joy?” By making my leadership within the group an object of inquiry, any taboos or awkwardness around it seemed to fall away and I continued to lead wholeheartedly (if sometimes inexpertly) for the remainder of the project. The fact that I had so publicly committed myself as a co-inquirer did much, I believe, to reduce the distortion of hierarchical power in the group. I was personally powerful but not because of my rank.

The third issue – that of the relationship of the group with the wider organisation – also manifested in several ways. Although all members of the group had identified themselves as exercising leadership in the organisation, and all were committed to working in its best interests, for some there were also strong feelings of alienation – a concern that “I can’t be me” in the workplace and an equally strong desire to “be me” in the AIG. [There was a feeling of unease and a fear of making oneself vulnerable by stepping outside cultural norms.

Comment:

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<sup>24</sup> From a poem by Marianne Williamson quoted by Nelson Mandela in his inaugural speech as President of South Africa

Some members of the group were actually in hierarchical working relationships (there were three boss-subordinate dyads/triads in the group). Could they deal openly and honestly with each other in the group – and what effect would that have on their outside relationships? For the most part, the “confidentiality contract” and sensitive mutual exploration of these edges defused potential problems – though one member did withdraw from the group because he felt that his presence was inhibiting a more junior colleague. As the group became more established there were few, if any, signs of reticence or reservations about these outside working relationships.

The issues of authenticity and alienation, however, continued to be a puzzle. Why should we (for I shared some of these feelings) be so concerned about the tensions and contradictions between our personal and professional personas? Why were we so driven to explore them? What underlay our intuitive sense that finding some resolution of these dilemmas was crucial to improving our effectiveness as leaders? Paradoxically, it seems that some of the very qualities and activities that are required to achieve high standards of organisational performance – originality, creativity, co-operation and relationship-building – are not highly valued in a “command and control” culture.

Comment:

At the time, Roger Harrison’s notions of organisational *alignment* and *attunement* helped me make sense of this phenomenon. Alignment refers to the focusing of individual effort and will on organisational objectives, attunement to promoting healthy relationships and quality of life within the organisation. He argues (Harrison 1983) that a healthy, effective organisation will find a balance between these two dimensions. Perhaps, in a highly aligned organisation, the AIG was providing much-needed opportunities for attunement. The supportive behaviour that was so apparent among group members would suggest that this was so. Indeed, as one reader of an earlier draft of this article suggested, perhaps the most radical (and useful) thing we did was simply to create a space within the organisation in which we could “be ourselves.”

Comment:

More recently, I have found support for this suggestion in Jurgen Habermas’s notion of “communicative spaces”:

...in which people come together to explore problems and issues, always holding open the question of whether they will commit themselves to the authentic and binding work of mutual understanding and consensus (Kemmis 2000)p100

It is this, says Habermas, which makes communicative action and the healing of the system-lifeworld split possible. It might also help to explain how the strong personal focus in the Action Inquiry Group contributed to some very tangible organisational benefits.

### *Sustaining the inquiry*

Of course, every collaborative inquiry will follow its own unique path but a number of practical issues arose in sustaining ours, which may be of interest. The first, to which I have already alluded, was the difficulty of getting everyone to meetings. We held five interim meetings, six to eight weeks apart with an extended review of our learning at a second residential event in January 2000. We never had a “full house” and no one (not even me) managed to get to all the sessions so we could not afford to be too rigid about what constituted membership of the group. A few dropped out never to return, one person “joined” halfway through and some stayed on the fringe. Nevertheless, there was an identifiable core of ten who remained deeply involved throughout. Work pressures often impinged on meeting times despite pre-arranging the dates of meetings for the whole year – and without such advance planning it is doubtful whether any of the meetings would have been sufficiently well-attended to be worthwhile.

At the residential event in April, each member of the AIG formulated his or her own individual inquiry question under the umbrella: “How can I improve the way I exercise leadership in the Hertfordshire Constabulary?” The focus on our own practice informed each subsequent cycle of action and reflection. As individual inquiries gathered momentum, I found that it took a considerable amount of energy and attention to hold the whole process together. Although we shared the tasks of arranging venues and of “rounding people up” for meetings, a good deal of the work came my way – from negotiating a budget to cover our costs for the year, to writing innumerable letters keeping members in touch with developments and making sure that those who could not get to particular meetings were kept in the picture.

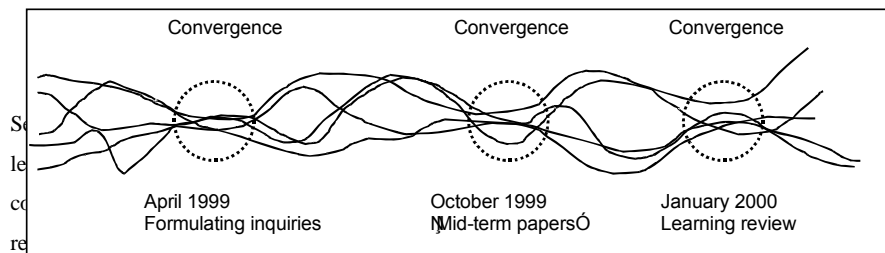
We found that the simple act of sharing our stories, telling each other how we had been getting on with our inquiries, was enormously powerful – both to deepen the relationships between us and as a way of holding ourselves and each other to account. We quickly got into the habit of tape-recording our sessions and sending copies of relevant sections of the tapes to individuals to aid further reflection. Most sessions began with an extended “check in” of this sort and then followed whatever themes emerged. On one occasion, following a “spin-off” meeting arranged by several women members of the group, this led to a fascinating exploration of gender and leadership. We learned to trust the process of action inquiry and that, in an organisational setting at least, it needs to be sustained by careful cultivation and lots of energy.

### *Accounting for the learning*

Although much of the time we concentrated on supporting each other in our individual inquiries, we were also curious to see what common themes were emerging. This desire seemed to arise

quite naturally after about six months and we agreed that each of us would write about what we were learning about our own leadership practice as a result of our inquiries and circulate it within the group. In the event, nine papers were produced, which we took to our meeting in October 1999. We discussed each paper in turn, checking for clarification, offering feedback to the author and noting our own reaction. A few days later, Roger and I met to listen to the tape recording from which we distilled what seemed to be key statements and themes, which in turn were circulated to the group for comment and consideration. Our “mid-term paper” proved to be an extremely useful exercise both in terms of getting a feel for where the group had got to and of providing a mirror to individual members.

Our paths then diverged once more until we came together for an extended review of our learning at the second residential event in January 2000. (See Figure 1 for an illustration of the patterns of convergence and divergence during the inquiry) Again, we met from Friday lunchtime until Saturday teatime at Bramshill – eight of us – collaboratively designing the process on the basis of some questions and principles we had decided previously. We used three different activities to provide accounts of our learning. First, we all brought objects symbolising what we had learned about ourselves as leaders. Each of us, in turn, displayed the object on a central table and spoke about what it meant. The “presentations” were recorded on videotape and the objects gathered together for the weekend to represent and hold the energy of the group.



friends). These were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Third, we spent some time making visual representations – pictures and collages – responding to the question: “What has the story of the AIG looked like for me?” These were then displayed round the room and we took it in turns to speak about our images, using the video camera once more to record the event. The material from all three activities was later copied, transcribed and fed back as a record of the learning and as a stimulus to further action.

We closed the meeting by reviewing what we wanted to share about our learning with others, who we wanted to share it with, and how we could make it safe to do so. As in the early stages of the inquiry, strong concerns were expressed about how “the organisation” would react to what we had

been doing. By this time, however, we had come to believe that it was possible to bridge the gaps – provided we were politically “savvy” going about it, for example:

- Challenge but do not confront or criticise
- Choose the right audiences (15% is enough)
- Continue to respect individual confidences
- Seek the new Chief Constable’s seal of approval
- Use the learning to add value to existing programmes
- Maintain contact with each other for mutual support
- Be content to sow seeds – don’t try to do it all at once

Finally each of us made public commitments to take specific actions to begin the process of communicating our learning to others in our own organisation, and beyond to other researchers and practitioners.

### *Bridging the gaps*

From the organisation’s point of view, the most immediate benefits of the inquiry are to be found in the improved leadership practices of its members though, of course, there are so many variables in human behaviour that, whilst one can ascribe these benefits to the AIG, one cannot “prove” the connection. In police-speak, we may have reasonable grounds to suspect, but we cannot prove the case beyond all reasonable doubt. Fortunately, there is considerable room for manoeuvre between these two standards – perhaps we could be satisfied with “on the balance of probabilities”?

Although I have expressed it rather flippantly, what we discovered, as soon as we began to try to communicate what we had been doing, were some significant epistemological gaps, major differences in our understandings of what constitutes useful and valid knowledge. Guy Claxton (Claxton 1997) speaks about a propensity to believe that people have only learned something if they can codify and reproduce it (which may go some way towards explaining the current fashion for leadership competency frameworks and the like). But that would be to oversimplify the matter – what we met, as we sought to communicate our learning, was not hostility but a mixture of interest, pragmatism and scepticism.

I personally briefed Paul Acres, our new Chief Constable, in May 2000. He expressed considerable enthusiasm about promoting “leadership” in the Constabulary and urged me to speak with the Head of Human Resources to make practical arrangements for bringing the benefits of the research back into the organisation. I did so in June and we agreed, in principle, that I would

advise and “shadow” an in-house facilitator if another action inquiry group was formed. To date this has not happened but I have become more closely involved in some other leadership development initiatives in Hertfordshire.

Seeking a wider audience, with three other members of the AIG, I offered a workshop on *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* at the high-profile 2000 ACPO Research Conference<sup>25</sup>. We expected about fifteen participants but found that there was a huge interest in the workshop – over forty delegates came to our session – where we described the process of the AIG, presented some of our individual and collective learning, and made ourselves available for small group discussions. We had some lively debates. Delegates were not unsympathetic but most were somewhat sceptical. Typical of their comments were: “I can see that you are all very enthusiastic and believe that you have learned a lot, but can you prove it?” “How have you evaluated the impact of the course [sic] on organisational effectiveness?” “Yes, I believe you but I’d never be able to sell it back in force without some sort of evaluation.”

Comment:

This was a blow – what better evidence of the effectiveness of the process could there be than us four living examples presenting our learning to the conference? If these delegates, broadly representative of the U.K. police service were not convinced, what chance did we have of persuading others of the value of our approach? But these arguments also pointed the way to how we might begin to bridge some of the gaps. On the advice of one delegate, I approached the Home Office Research Unit with the suggestion that they might fund an independent evaluation of the impact of the AIG. I am happy to say that, after some delay, they agreed that this would be a useful strand of their overall research programme and, at the time of writing (March 2001) the evaluation is actually taking place.

One stipulation of the invitation to tender was that the research should be conducted in a way that is congruent with our own collaborative methodology and contributes to our further learning. As a result, the researcher will be presenting the provisional findings to the AIG for discussion and feedback as part of the analysis. The independent evaluation is a high-risk strategy, and one could argue that no external examination could ever capture the richness of our experience, but if its findings tend to confirm our claims of improved leadership practice, we may be at least halfway across the bridge.

Comment:

An even more ambitious attempt to influence public policy was sending a short case study on the AIG to the Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit as a contribution to their research and still-awaited report on Public Service Leadership. Within a couple of weeks I found myself sitting

<sup>25</sup> ACPO – Association of Chief Police Officers

round a Whitehall table with members of the “Prime Minister’s Leadership Project” team. There was some interest in our work and a shortened version of the case study (which I never saw) was included in early drafts of the report (which I also never saw). Although it was dropped from later drafts “on grounds of space”, the Cabinet Office has, in recent weeks, accepted a proposal to deliver the Learning Set element of their new Public Service Leadership Scheme through facilitated Action Inquiry Groups which I will oversee for the next three years. Our work in the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project has provided the foundation from which we can extend the focus on leadership practice and the improvement of service delivery across the public sector.

### Conclusions

Comment:

Did we manage to inquire collaboratively? I think the answer is a qualified “Yes”. There is ample evidence in the transcripts of our meetings and in the accounts of our learning to substantiate the claim that, at the individual level, we created and took opportunities for transformational learning: learning that was grounded in our day-to-day practice as we variously engaged with the demands of delivering a high quality service in the complex environment of contemporary policing.

The emerging findings of the independent evaluation confirms these claims, suggesting that members of the AIG have been assessed by colleagues as having become calmer, better able to work under pressure and more strategic in their outlook. Nearly all members of the Action Inquiry Group described the process as worthwhile and rewarding. Here are some of their comments recorded at our penultimate meeting:

“Now I have really got some sense of direction as you can see in this picture...”

“I need a helping hand sometimes to get to where I want to go... that’s when I come to the group”

“We shared our inquiries and from that came the learning and the feedback”

“The thing about this has been the honesty... in these sessions we have said when we disagree and why we disagree with somebody”

“It is about light and focus and being able to find your way through the dark”

In case this is beginning to sound like yet another “victory narrative” of action research (MacLure 1996), I should point out that it did not work for everyone. Several members of the group “dropped out” – generally pleading lack of time though one said she was bringing “too much



emotional baggage” to the group and that her continued presence might interfere with other people’s learning. Although I think she was mistaken in this regard and overly self-critical, one has to respect her decision to withdraw.

Furthermore, it would be fair to say that – as yet – our collective learning has had less impact. We are still struggling to communicate the benefits of a collaborative approach to leadership development to a wider police audience, hampered by a training orthodoxy that places a high value on *uniformity* (role definitions and competency frameworks), *compulsion* (if it works, everyone should do it), and *assessment* (preferably pass or fail). Perhaps the independent evaluation of our work will lend weight to our own voices. We have certainly learned that, as sense making and knowledge creation move in to the public domain, they can become highly politicized and the potential difficulties of conducting collaborative inquiry in a hierarchical organisation such as the police service should not be under-estimated.

Comment:

For me personally it has been an immensely satisfying experience. I have become a much more confident and effective practitioner of collaborative learning, more willing to “let my light shine” and more conscious of the choices and choice-points in such a process. We, for example, were quite a closed group: we adopted an informal, loose approach to the action-research cycle: and we focused quite strongly on our individual leadership practices. Had we communicated more openly with others during the life of the group (say by publicising our “mid-term paper”), had we adopted a more rigorous pattern of action-research, had we addressed systemic leadership issues, we may have had fewer (and narrower) gaps to bridge later on. Yet I’m not sure I would make many different choices if faced with similar circumstances. Members of the group came with strong personal agendas, which demanded a high level of safety and, thus, confidentiality in the early stages - and I was reluctant to reinforce the prevailing hierarchical culture by imposing too much structure or discipline on our proceedings.

Like other forms of collaborative inquiry, Action Inquiry is not a standard technique that can be applied (like a coat of paint) to meet every need. It is a sophisticated and powerful approach to human inquiry, with enormous potential to help us improve both individual practice and organisational performance. To realise this potential it must be crafted to its particular circumstances and context. There are no guarantees of success but, with a little courage and a lot of determination, a little imagination and a lot of energy, much is possible.

Critically re-examining the text of the article in terms of my scholarship of inquiry, it is clear that I have made several claims about the outcomes of the AIG that need to be more fully substantiated in the context of a PhD thesis. In particular I claim that sharing our

stories in the group was a powerful vehicle for deepening relationships and holding each other to account, that we created and took opportunities for transformational learning, and that the process had tangible benefits for both individuals and the organisation as a whole. Shortly, I will address each of these purported outcomes in turn but let me follow the pattern of earlier sections about the Accelerated promotion Course (APC) and the Management development Programme (MDP) by turning first to issues of intention and method.

Reflecting on my intentions in convening the AIG, I can identify several complementary aims. In terms of “first person inquiry” <which Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury define as addressing the “ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act with awareness and to choose carefully and to assess effects in the outside world while acting” (Reason and Bradbury 2000)> I was looking for a vehicle to explore my own educational practice – to develop my skills as a facilitator of what, in *Healing Journeys*, I call “transformational learning.” I had been pushing the boundaries of my private consultancy practice – allowing myself to be more fully present with my clients, more spontaneous and creative in the moment, and more willing to trust their own wisdom and resourcefulness<sup>26</sup> - and I wanted to bring these aspects of my educational practice into my “mainstream” work in the police service. The article gives some indication of my struggle to do this – to lead the process of action inquiry “with authenticity, integrity and joy.”

In terms of “second person inquiry” <which addresses “our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern, for example in the service of improving our personal and professional practice both individually and separately” (ibid.)> the article relates how I let go of my earlier intention to focus the project on the issues of men and masculinities in the police when preliminary discussions with trusted colleagues confirmed my fears that it would have been a step too far. I was content therefore to invite people to take a much broader view of leadership so that, by the time the AIG was convened, our aim was to contribute to the quality of police leadership by inquiring into our own practice as leaders. We held this theme throughout the inquiry, both collectively and through our individual inquiry questions. Our claims to have improved our practice

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<sup>26</sup> E.g. in my work as a supervisor of professional coaches and mentors Mead, G., J. Campbell, et al. (1999). “Mentor and Athene: Supervising professional coaches and mentors.” Career Development International 4(5): 283-290.

are rather glossed over in the article – though examined in more detail and corroborated by the independent evaluation of the AIG commissioned by the Home Office Policing and Crime Reduction Unit (Southgate 2001). Again, I shall return to this question shortly.

Lastly, in terms of “third person inquiry” <which, according to Reason and Bradbury (op.cit.), aims to “create a wider community of inquiry involving persons who, because they cannot be known to each other face-to-face (say in a large, geographically dispersed corporation), have an impersonal quality”> I was conscious that the very act of setting up a collaborative inquiry would challenge some of the organisational norms of male hegemony and hierarchical relationships. Whether we succeeded in making any long-term impression on these norms is open to question, but the amount of hostility and suspicion expressed towards the AIG generally (and to me in particular) by some quite senior and powerful non-participants testifies to how much our way of working and being together challenged “official” thinking.

Recently, I have found Stephen Kemmis’s explication of Habermas’s theory of communicative action (Kemmis 2000) extremely helpful in making sense of the personal-organisational dynamics at play in the AIG. He describes the “de-coupling” of the system and lifeworld under the economic and political conditions of modern society. Certainly the drive towards rational-purposive action is very strong in the police service and its logic of functional rationality is increasingly at odds with a less instrumental and more holistic sense of personal identity. As Kemmis says:

Under the conditions of advanced differentiation characteristic of late modernity, whole realms of social life are co-ordinated in terms of purposive-rational action and functional reason, with the requirement for mutual understanding and consensus being more or less suspended. Under the imperatives of systems functioning, people simply ‘get on with the job’, as it were, without requiring a justification for what they are doing in terms of authentic personal assent (p96)

[Such alienation can create] conditions of fear [which] do not readily favour creative approaches to organisational, personal, social and cultural development – the kind of playfulness that supports transformational work (p98)

For some people, deeply-ingrained in the logic of functional rationality, enterprises such as the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project are anathema to what they might see as a necessary split between the personal and the professional – the very split which our collaborative inquiry process sought to redress. The article describes some of the ways in which we have tried to bridge the gaps between the AIG and the wider police service and mentions a recent success in the introduction of similar groups into Cabinet Office’s new Public Service Leadership Scheme. Of course, writing for the public domain and seeking to influence the development of leaders across the public sector are also forms of “third person inquiry.”

Having explored questions of *purpose* (my intentions in convening the AIG) and *means* (what we actually did) we are left with the third, and most challenging, area: *outcomes*. Earlier, I identified three particular claims in the text of my published paper *Developing Ourselves as Police Leaders* (Mead 2001) about the outcomes of the AIG: that sharing our stories in the group was a powerful vehicle for deepening relationships and holding each other to account, that we created and took opportunities for transformational learning, and that the process had tangible benefits for both individuals and the organisation as a whole.

As I continue to grow and develop as a researcher, I realise how important it is to enhance the rigour of my scholarship of inquiry by grounding such assertions (to have exercised my educative influence with others) in data and supporting them with specific evidence. Let me therefore take these three claims in turn and critically examine the evidence.

**Evidence of evaluating effectiveness in practice**

In this section, I shall examine evidence for the claim in my paper that:

We found that the simple act of sharing our stories, telling each other how we had been getting on with our inquiries, was enormously powerful - both to deepen the relationships between us and as a way of holding ourselves and each other to account.

On reading this paragraph in an early draft of the paper, my supervisor Jack Whitehead wrote:

This seems to me to be a really important claim and one that we could all learn from. If you have any evidence to show anyone evaluating their effectiveness in practice, in relation to any of their values, do bring it along to share on Thursday.

I find this a very helpful way to frame the issue: can I substantiate my claim to have exercised my educative influence with others by presenting evidence of their embodied learning – stories of their practice changing over time – in their own voices, through dialogue or through their own reflections in words and images?

We tape-recorded many of the sessions of the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* inquiry group including a long session in January 2000 when eight of us met to review our learning during the inquiry (AIG). I mention this in the paper - each of us responded in turn to the question: *How has your practice as a leader changed and improved through the AIG process?* I think there is some evidence, in all of these interviews, of members of the group questioning and evaluating their effectiveness in practice. I'm not sure I would say that we were consciously evaluating our practice in terms of explicit values. Rather, the values tended to be implicit in terms of our inquiry questions and the leadership behaviours we aspired to.

Here is one such interview (I have altered the names to preserve confidentiality). John had been working on empowering his staff and had received feedback from his boss that they actually found him controlling and intimidating. He was shocked by this and determined to change his practice to be more in line with his implied values. Here are some extracts from the transcript of an interview in which he talks about learning to

behave differently towards his staff with pleasing results. The extracts are quite long because I want my analysis and interpretation to be open to question and isolated phrases taken out of context would not allow this.

John's emotional response to the events he describes may not be apparent in the transcript. His distress at discovering how his staff viewed his behaviour is very evident in his tone of voice on the tape-recording, as is his delight at finding a positive reaction to the way he decides to handle his relationship with his new office manager. Nowhere does he name his espoused values though it is clear that he believes it is important to empower his team and to value them as human beings. I think this is sufficient evidence to show him "evaluating his effectiveness in practice, in relation to his values".

My interpolated comments on the dialogue are shown thus: *[italics]*

**John's new management style**

**John:** I think, for me... I've got to talk about where I've realised I was at the beginning, and where I'm trying to be now. Because I haven't got to where I want to be, but I know what it's going to look like...

*[Now John begins to describe his past controlling behaviour as a manager. By characterising it as "terrible" he is implicitly valuing a more empowering and humane approach]*

You know, because I was actually acting as a buffer to all sorts of things, because my team were thinking they had to come through me first, rather than getting on and doing stuff. And because I was... I'm not very available, I'm all over the place. And they weren't doing things until they could come and ask me... ask permission... You know... it was like "Please sir, can I go to the toilet?" ... kind of thing... Which is terrible. And I hadn't realised how I'd got myself in that position. And I really had to work hard to get back. As I said, I had gone down a terribly long blind alley... that it's been quite a struggle to get back out of.

*[Rose responds with a helpful, facilitative question – encouraging John to engage with his experience of behaving more congruently with his values]*

**Rose:** So how have you changed?

*[John responds with a specific example of “new” behaviour with results that seem to reinforce his desire to change – “I thought well right, okay, I’m doing the right thing here”]*

**John:** By experimenting. I remember one bit where I made a conscious decision - I had a change of office manager, and my initial action I thought to do was... I sat in my office and I wrote “I’m going to get her in here, and I’m going to say – ‘these are my expectations’ blah blah blah blah”. And then I suddenly thought “Well, hang on a minute! She applied for the job, and she wanted to do the job. And so she’s probably got ideas of her own. And she doesn’t need me to tell her what to do. Why don’t I just see what happens. And if I need to do a little bit of nudging and steering, then fine, but.. let’s see what happens”. And in fact by letting that person set her own agenda, she actually then came to me two or three days later and said to me “I want to do this, this, this and this.. and I thought I’d better tell you first”. And all of the things were things that... Two of the things were on my list, and two others were even better ideas than I’d got on my list. And I thought “Well, right, okay, I’m doing the right thing here”. And in fact, she has really grown as a person, but it’s helped me to grow as a leader by not trying to have her on a choke chain, which was what I was doing a lot.

*[Rose asks a probing question, which elicits confirmation of the change]*

**Rose:** So it’s like a change of... a *complete* change of leadership style... would you say?

**John:** Yes. I’ve cut the chains a lot. I’ve had to really let go. Because I’ve been a very “on top” kind of leader in the past. But I think people have found me alright to work for because I’m a reasonably affable kind of person, but I’m sure that people I’ve worked with must have... I probably need to go back and ask sometime... But I’ve probably made sergeants feel very intimidated because I’m checking on them all the time, or asking them this, and asking them that, rather than letting them get on with things. And to actually let people go, has been really nice.

*[Rose appears to reinforce John’s pleasure in his more congruent changed behaviour]*

**Rose:** That’s good.

**John:** Because they are actually doing better than they would have done if they were coming through me.

**Rose:** That’s a really positive experience then, isn’t it?

John: Yes...

### Transformational Learning

In this section, I shall examine evidence for the claim in my paper that:

There is ample evidence in the transcripts of our meetings and in the accounts of our learning to substantiate the claim that, at the individual level, we created and took opportunities for transformational learning: learning that was grounded in our day-to-day practice as we variously engaged with the demands of delivering a high quality service in the complex environment of contemporary policing.

Again, I was challenged by Jack Whitehead who wrote:

I'm wondering if you could trace the kind of dialogical learning, which seems to be implied by your term transformational learning. When I say "trace", I'm meaning both to describe and explain the "transformational learning."

This time I find it more helpful to stay with my own framing of transformational learning (rather than to respond to Jack's suggestion that the term implies a form of dialogical learning). I responded:

I want to respond to your invitation but I'm not quite sure what you mean by dialogical learning so let me stay with my own term for the time being. I guess I am using the term to represent qualitative shifts in perception (and self-perception).

This qualitative shift has variously been labelled as *Learning III* (Bateson 1973) *Reframing* (Watzlawick, Weakland et al. 1974) *Triple Loop Learning* (Torbert 1991) and *Transcendent Learning* (Borredon 1998). However, the explanation I find most useful (and which accords most fully with my own experience) is the *Gestalt* notion of the "aha" moment as an old gestalt (or pattern of understanding) dissolves and a new gestalt emerges from the dissolution. In the Gestalt model, letting go of old patterns of



understanding is a pre-requisite to the emergence of new patterns – unlearning as well as learning.<sup>27</sup>

This unlearning, featured in the accounts of several members of the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* group (I characterise this elsewhere as “the dark night of the soul”). I think the quality of relationships we established in the group provided sufficient levels of trust, challenge, support and confidence for members to allow themselves to move into and through the void (i.e. being uncomfortable, inconsistent, out of control and “incompetent”) so that some of these qualitative shifts occurred.

Let me give an example (at least what I think is an example) of such a moment of transformative learning, which one member of the inquiry reported at a group meeting last June (2000). I have changed her name to preserve confidentiality. As before – and for the same reasons – this is a lengthy extract of a transcript of tape-recorded dialogue. What the text cannot show is the delighted animation and sense of wonder on Jane's face as she told the group about this experience. Her realisation that she was no longer afraid seemed to have shifted a long-standing pattern, which had caused her distress and limited her effectiveness for many years.

My interpolated comments on the dialogue are shown thus: *[italics]*

**Jane's revelation**

**Jane:** I have had one interesting experience which I can only attribute to some of the learning on this course, and it was something that caught me completely out of the blue. Shall I go on or am I waffling on too much?

**Geoff:** I am fascinated.

**Jane:** OK. Well... one Friday afternoon when I was visiting at XXXXXXX (police station) and I saw a sergeant and just said “How are things going?” and it was sort of “Don't speak to me, I am so cross,” and this chap was beside himself and he was really irate. He was clutching in his hand a memo I had written in which I had deliberately tried to be non-judgemental... but he had got the wrong end of the stick and convinced himself that one sentence had implied some sort of criticism,

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<sup>27</sup> See *Healing Journeys* for a fuller exploration of “transformational learning”

and he was in a dreadful state. He was a great big fellow, he couldn't stay still, he had sweat dripping off him, you know, I really thought he was going to have a heart attack. He was really just beyond himself.

*[Now Jane identifies a qualitative shift in her self-perception when she realises that she is not frightened – an “aha” moment I am claiming to be an example of transformational learning]*

And I was just saying to him “You know, actually I think you have got this wrong.” Suddenly this little thought just bubbled in my brain and it said, “You are not frightened.”

*[Later she reflects on her experience of the incident, describing her learning as a kind of “revelation”]*

And afterwards I was thinking, you know, as you do when you have gone through this sort of learning experience, “You know, there is something in that, I ought to think about that some more.” And in a way it was a kind of a - it was a revelation - and I don't know whether it's partly life experiences or what have you, but perhaps I realise why some of the communication problems I have had in the past, when dealing with, particularly groups of sergeants and front line police officers, has actually been rooted in a fear, that they are actually intimidating and powerful and you feel vulnerable and you know...

*[Although Jane is reticent about the details, she goes on to describe a period in which she appears to have made some connections between the immediate experience of not being afraid and other aspects of her life in what she calls kaleidoscopic “glimmers of enlightenment”]*

There are all sorts of ideas that came out of this... it was a couple of hours afterwards and I had an opportunity to sort of just really collapse, relax and I was trying to just unwind, all these things were sort of churning up in my brain and I was getting like all these little glimmers of enlightenment, and in the end I decided that actually I had got to put a stop to this because it was as if it was just too much. It was like a whole kaleidoscope that kept sort of working round my brain and every now and then it would freeze and you would think, “Oh, is that what that meant.” You know? Really strange experience, but its one I'll never forget. It left me feeling sort of, quite – “Oh I don't know how much more of all this enlightenment I can take, in one fell swoop.” Really strange, it all seemed to come at once like that.

*[In her final reflection, Jane appears to be rather unsettled by the strangeness of her experience. Her transformational learning – if that is indeed what it is – was clearly not easy or comfortable]*

### Individual and organisational benefits

In this section, I shall examine evidence for the claim in my paper that:

From the organisation's point of view, the most immediate benefits of the inquiry are to be found in the improved leadership practices of its members though, of course, there are so many variables in human behaviour that, whilst one can ascribe these benefits to the AIG, one cannot "prove" the connection.

I am careful not to claim that there were benefits in terms of improved policing. There may have been but policing is such a complex affair, with so many extraneous influences that I cannot identify any such effects with confidence. The question is therefore, what evidence do I have that my educative influence brought any benefits to individuals or to the organisation as a whole?

I want to adduce two distinctly different forms of evidence to address this question: a personal and very subjective account of one person's journey through the AIG (which focuses on individual benefits) and an independent evaluation of the impact of the scheme by a Home Office researcher (which attempts to gauge its impact on the organisation).

At the same meeting at which the dialogue between John and Rose was recorded, we also used words and images to make a creative representation in response to the question: *What has the story of the AIG looked like to me?* I was delighted that this exercise was introduced and facilitated by another member of the group and that everyone – including me – engaged with it so readily and with so much imagination and openness. One member of the group, let us call her Flora, used a selection of postcards to make a book of her journey.

I think you will agree that the images she uses illustrate her story with wonderful clarity and power. They testify to the benefits of her educational experience and, to the extent that I enabled that to happen, also to my educative influence. Flora's text (words and images) clearly identifies the benefits she believes she got from being a member of the AIG: *"I've come to accept that it's OK to be all these people", "it's made me look at*

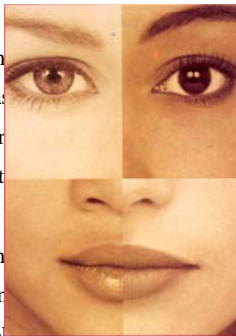
## Chapter Five: Reshaping my Professional Identity

*me*, “now it [my confidence] is this big”, she has come through a “dark tunnel”, “now I have really got some sense of direction”, she is “happy to walk in there [at work] and get stuck in”.

Of course, these perceptions are self-reported and their significance can be questioned though her growing self-confidence is evident in the video-recording of her presentation of her “journey” to the rest of the group. Shortly afterwards she also successfully applied for promotion to a more senior grade. By convening the AIG and facilitating the group over eighteen months in ways that supported Flora as she educated herself, I think that I can claim to have influenced her learning for good. All I did was to help her unlatch the gate. Her presentation is reproduced here verbatim, transcribed from the videotape and her original handmade book.

### Flora's journey through the AIG

**Flora:** What I have done is to make a book... and I am here in the book... this is me when we started [face], how I felt... lots of different people... Now I have come to accept that it's OK to be all these people... that is what you have to be. The next meeting we had, I chose this postcard [Stonehenge]... that image represents a journey. I was heading towards that light behind the stones...



telling myself, and the support I receive from the group.



woman] is how I felt at the time, but you can actually see the light coming in the doorway if you look up... If ever it happens to me again, I must remember to look harder for that light.



on as you can see in this picture [phone box]... and so an wading] in a gallery on holiday... actually I saw the it it all day... If I had won the lottery I would have h. This is how I feel at work at the moment... It is an here and get “stuck in”.

decided to buy and read more books this year... and when there is my notebook I started which is really important to me. Now I would like to read you “The Path Less Travelled” by Robert Frost because that is how I have lived my life and as part of leadership that is actually what you have to do...

As a group, one of our concerns was how to communicate the organisational benefits of what we were learning with our colleagues in the Constabulary and with the wider police service. As I described in the article, we were rather nervous about exposing ourselves in this way and thought carefully about how we might safely “bridge the gaps” between our lived experience of the AIG (our “life-world”) and the harder-edged culture of the organisation (the “system-world”). We acknowledged that what we had learned about ourselves and the ways in which we had improved our individual leadership practice was highly situated and particular to each one of us. We did not seek to present any generalisable propositions about “good leadership”, preferring instead to offer our embodied knowing (in the form of our day-to-day practice) for scrutiny.

After our first attempt to communicate in this way, at the ACPO Research Conference in May 2000, we realised that we needed to take another tack to overcome colleagues’ scepticism. With the agreement of all members of the AIG, I approached the Home Office Research Unit and asked if they would undertake an independent evaluation of the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project. It took six months but they did eventually appoint Peter Southgate, an independent researcher, to conduct a full evaluation. He began, in December 2000, by interviewing me and taking copies of papers and transcripts of our meetings – from which he extracted our specific claims under three headings: *Shifts in self-perception, Behavioural changes, and Tangible benefits for the organisation.*

He then tested these claims by interviewing all the members of the AIG (including several who “dropped out” for various reasons) followed by a selection of their peers, line-managers and staff (looking for confirmation or disconfirmation of our accounts). After several weeks he presented a draft report to members of the AIG to critique, taking note of our comments and feedback in his final report (Southgate 2001). I think the 15,000 word report presents a fair picture of the life of the AIG and of its impact on the organisation. It has the merit of being compiled independently though it is not without its biases - for example, despite our explicit disavowal of lexical definitions of leadership, the researcher comments:

The AIG members had not really thought too much about what leadership meant until they got involved in the group. In fact, they had few straightforward definitions of leadership to offer, either before or after the AIG experience.

Importantly, the report tests our claims from a third-party perspective – and generally endorses the value of further exploring the potential of such collaborative forms of leadership development. I want to include some extracts here as further evidence of my educative influence – and of its limitations. I shall focus on what the report has to say about what members of the AIG gained from the experience and what benefits it had for the organisation. These verbatim extracts have been edited for the sake of brevity.

### **Developing ourselves as leaders: a report on an action inquiry group**

Home Office Policing and Reducing Crime Unit

Peter Southgate

February 2001

#### ***What did the members gain from the experience?***

Three areas of change were identified by the group: self-perceptions, behaviour changes and tangible benefits to the organisation, all of which overlap to a fair extent. The following three sections combine statements recorded at the time with statements made in the recent interviews about how participants experienced the AIG and how their managers or staff saw them change.

- (i) Shifts in self-perception

- I now feel I have the 'right to be there' when representing the force at events.
- I have a better understanding of my strengths and needs and those of others.
- I am able to be more detached – a more balanced attitude to life and work.
- I realised that I am the same person at home and at work.
- I feel less stressed, even though I have a greater workload.
- I recognise when I am slipping back and stop myself.
- I feel good about myself. I don't feel I'm letting anyone down.
- It reaffirmed my confidence in my own competence
- It was OK to be me and allow myself to 'shine'.
- I tell myself 'I can do it' instead of 'I can't do it'.

(ii) Behavioural changes

- I am more self-confident in delivering presentations to groups.
- I put more effort into 'working behind the scenes'.
- I am more adventurous, more analytical and challenging.
- I am more confident and relaxed when communicating with others.
- People feel my mind is on them more now when we're talking.
- I have improved my time management and increased my workload.
- I start and end each day by walking through the office talking to people.
- Rather than try to provide all the answers I now just look for the questions.
- I try to pass confidence on to others by recognising small achievements.
- I no longer just say what I think without worrying about the consequences.

(iii) Tangible benefits for the organisation

The kinds of benefits which members experienced were not likely to be ones producing very immediate or obvious results of the kind which others could very easily 'see'. But the various comments showed some very important benefits for the organisation: it now has some people working for it who have an increased enthusiasm, vision and strategic view of the job.

### *Was the AIG of benefit to its members?*

Some said they described the AIG to their colleagues as a course, though it was not this in the conventional sense. It was really a 'learning experience', a 'journey', a 'very personal development'. Although it was not therapy in the normal sense, some did use this word about it; and it was certainly felt to be a life-enhancing and regenerating experience. In more traditional training terms it was about: understanding leadership skills; relationships with staff and colleagues; how managers behave; building teams; and getting co-operation from others.

In general, the benefit which all claimed to have experienced was that they had learned how to reflect more upon what they were doing, in their work and their lives. This reflection had led them to take a clearer, more strategic, view of what was needed in their work, and they had become more calm and better organised in often stressful situations.

### *Was the AIG of benefit to the organisation?*

The AIG was not intended to teach people specific skills or pieces of information, so there are no simple 'learning objectives' which can be used to define criteria for measuring its success. The benefits for the organisation cannot be quantified in terms of staff 'qualifications' in this way, but must be seen in terms of having more confident, clearly focussed and strategically thinking employees. Most of the AIG members claimed that this is what they were as a result, and there were managers who were ready to endorse this view by commending their staff for good performance. Some of the AIG members had started to take small initiatives themselves to try and improve working and practices and relationships in their part of the force, so these too can be seen as tangible benefits of the experience. Steps were also being taken to use some of the elements of the process in future management development training programmes.

Beyond this, it is not easy to identify 'tangible' benefits, because the AIG was not really designed to produce them, certainly not in the short term. The evidence of its impact is that some managers and staff have seen an increase in qualities such as enthusiasm, calmness under pressure and strategic vision on the part of people who were in the AIG. But against this there are the views of those who saw no differences or benefits.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, the various comments made by the group members about the meaning of leadership suggest some fairly positive and significant changes being brought about by participation in the AIG. It could be unwise to draw conclusions from this particular study about the relevance of an



AIG in other contexts but, on the basis of the positive reactions to this particular exercise, it seems that further explorations of its potential would be justifiable.

The report is a pragmatic rather than a scholarly document, which summarises the anonymous views of members of the AIG and some of our peers and line-managers. It thus broadens the base upon which our claims are grounded without offering much direct or specific evidence of particular individual or organisational benefits. Of course, I am pleased that it lends some weight to our claims to have improved our leadership practices [for example “some managers and staff have seen an increase in qualities such as enthusiasm, calmness under pressure and strategic vision”] and I hope that we can find ways to use its findings to encourage wider use of such collaborative ways of working.

But what strikes me most forcefully is just how dull and flat the language of the report is. What it presents is abstract and removed from the excitement and passion of our experience in the group. I find personal stories, such as the one Flora tells through her use of images, so much more evocative and convincing but, as we discovered at the ACPO Conference it seems that these are liable to be discounted by the rational-purposive logic of the “system-world”.

### **A path with heart**

There are many more stories to be told about the AIG but I think that I have shared enough travellers’ tales from these explorations of my professional knowledge landscape to show how my educational practice has developed over the past decade or so. I want to reflect on these experiences, to see what patterns and themes there may be and what they might have to say about my embodied values – the living standards of judgement and practice that constitute what Jack Whitehead would call my “living theory of education”.

For several hours, preparing to write this section, I have been asking myself two questions in relation to my practice as an educator over this period (say 1988-2001): What has changed? What has stayed the same? And, as I re-read this chapter and ponder, the answer seems quite clear. By and large, my core beliefs about people, educational processes and the educative relationship have remained constant, whilst there have been marked differences in the way I have tried to put them into practice as an educator. Let

me try to articulate these core beliefs, what Donald Schon (Schon 1983) might call my *espoused values*, beginning with people.

Transactional Analysis proposes four basic existential positions between “I” and “other.” The first three: I’m not OK – You’re OK, I’m OK – You’re not OK, I’m not OK – You’re not OK, are unconscious choices, having been made early in life, whereas the fourth: I’m OK – You’re OK, is a conscious adult decision. As Thomas Harris puts it: “The first three positions are based on feelings. The fourth is based on thought, faith and the wager of action” (Harris 1967). Attempting to live in accordance with this belief calls upon me to respect my own person and that of others. It comes out in a strong sense of fair play and desire for justice, which undoubtedly contributed to my decision to become a police officer. I suspect that it grew out of my childhood experience of being bullied at school and my rage at such a violation.

Alongside this “ethic of rights” I think I also developed, at an early age, an equally strong “ethic of care”. Carol Gilligan (Gilligan 1993) uses these two terms to contrast parallel stages of psychological development in men and women. However the death of my father, when I was four, produced in me the desire to protect others from harm. As an adult, this has developed into a profound sense of duty and service – often to the point of putting others first. I believe it was this “ethic of care” that led me to stay, perhaps too long, in an increasingly unhappy marriage. Now I am aware that I must temper caring for others with the need to care for myself.

A third core belief about people is that each of us has a basic right to self-determination: that within the bounds of not causing undue harm to others, we are each entitled and capable of determining who we are and how we want to live our lives. At a minimum this demands tolerance of others and, at its best, a celebration of the glorious differences and diversity of humanity. There is no place (at least in my *espoused values*) for racism, ageism, or sexism. I demand the right to be me and I honour your right to be you. As a corollary, I believe that each person, through self-awareness, is capable of choice and is therefore responsible for their own behaviour.

As an educator, I have a passion for learning and a belief that it behoves me to inquire deeply into my own life and practice as I offer myself as a resource to help others learn too. My purpose in life is to “unlatch the gate” – as I wrote earlier, I serve the kind of learning that is life-enhancing, increases our possibilities for being and doing in the world

and leads to a fuller expression of loving relationships. It follows that making an artificial distinction between personal and professional aspects of our lives is unhelpful and, so far as people are able and willing, I believe that educational processes should enable us to integrate these two dimensions in pursuit of a satisfying and worthwhile life.

Another educational value is to acknowledge the primacy of our own experience, the power of our imagination, our ability to make meaning, and the importance of our practical knowledge (know how). John Heron (Heron 1989; Heron 1992) has called this “manifold learning” - a term which I would like to adopt as indicative of our unique and multiple epistemologies. It seems to me crucial to work across all four domains – perhaps even to emphasise those that are commonly neglected or under-valued. In many organisations, including the police, scant regard is given to people’s creative capacities and I believe that it is vital for both the effectiveness of organisations and the well being of individuals that this imbalance is remedied.

Finally, I come to my beliefs about the nature of a healthy educative relationship. Jack Whitehead and I agree that “to educate” is a reflexive rather than a transitive verb. We can exercise educative influence with others but, ultimately, we can only educate ourselves. Many years ago, I found inspiration in Carl Rogers’ famous book *Freedom to Learn* (Rogers 1983). In his essay on *The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning*, he proposes three essential facets of an educative relationship:

First of all is a transparent realness in the facilitator, a willingness to be a person, to be and live the feelings and thoughts of the moment. When this realness includes a prizing, a caring, a trust and respect for the learner, the climate for learning is enhanced. When it includes a sensitive and accurate empathic listening, then indeed a freeing climate, stimulative of self-initiated learning and growth, exists. (Ibid. p133)

These three elements: authentic presence, positive regard for the other and an empathetic quality of attention are touchstones for the kind of educative relationships I want to establish. Rogers has encapsulated quite beautifully something of how I need to be in order to embody my core belief “I’m OK – You’re OK” in my educational practice. Martin Buber too, touches the essence of this quality in his notion

of the “I-You” relationship, in which both “I” and “other” are fully and mutually present (Buber 1970) and in his description of the:

... special humility of the educator for whom the life and particular being of all his [sic] pupils is the decisive factor to which his ‘hierarchic’ recognition is subordinated” (Buber 1947).

I tried to articulate a similar view of an ideal educative relationship, using my own words, when framing my inquiry question as part of the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project: “How can I lead [i.e. exercise educative influence] in this process of Action Inquiry with authenticity, integrity and joy?”

But the acid test – where my “living theory of education” becomes apparent – is in my educational practice, what Donald Schon (Schon 1983) might call my *values-in-action*. For the most part, I am content to let my narratives of the three police educational programmes speak for themselves. However, I do think that there is an underlying pattern that is worthy of note.

Contrasting the Special Course/APC with the MDP, I notice a change in my language from tutor/student to facilitator/participant, which, I believe, mirrors a deeper shift in my practice. With the Special Course/APC, although we spoke much about *student-centred learning*, and we did indeed work in ways that were much more respectful of course members than had been the case in my time as a member of the Special Course, we still kept a pretty firm hold on both the content and process of the course. We recognised, even celebrated, individual difference but when push came to shove, we – the staff – were definitely in charge.

The MDP was conceived as a contribution to achieving *a learning organisation*. Although designing and managing the process, I had a much greater sense of relaxing my hold on the content of the programme. Participants determined their own objectives, wrote their own action plans and were encouraged to be creative in looking for opportunities to develop through their day-to-day work. No one assessed their learning at any stage – they were responsible for judging whether or not they had

met their own needs. Using the language of Transactional Analysis (Berne 1964), I would say that my educational practice had moved from a Parent-Child relationship to something closer to (but not yet fully) an Adult-Adult relationship.

Although I convened and proposed the initial inquiry question for the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project, both content and process were designed and facilitated collaboratively. My language has shifted again to that of co-participant/co-inquirer. I inquired actively into my educative practice just as my colleagues inquired into their leadership practice. We helped each other learn by exercising our educative influence with each other. We framed our own inquiry questions, decided our own goals, took personal responsibility for how far (and in what way) we pursued them, supported and challenged each other, and determined our own standards of practice. I would describe us as a *community of inquiry* and I think it is fair to say that we generally operated in the mode of an Adult-Adult relationship.

The three programmes represent a gradual move towards the embodiment of my core beliefs and values in my educational practice. I cannot pretend that I always manage to enact them fully – I would be a secular saint if I did. Too often I find myself silently judging others, impatient that they do not see the world my way, or full of self-doubt and fear that I have nothing to offer. But these voices are transitory, I know them for what they are, I can let go of them, remembering that my existential position towards others, I'm OK – You're OK, is enacted moment by moment through mindful choices.

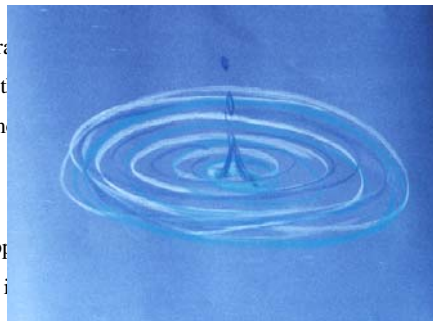
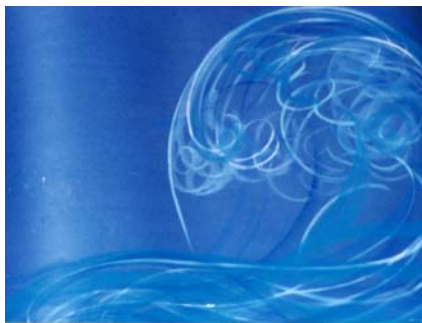
I could go on to analyse my practice in each of these programmes more systematically but, as so often, I think that metaphor and image will convey my meanings more evocatively. With that in mind, I want to close this chapter with my reflection on what the story of the AIG looked like to me – recorded in words and pictures at the same time as Flora made and presented her book of postcard-images to the group. My pictures were drawn with pastels on coloured paper and the words are taken from a transcript of the session.

**What did the story of the AIG look like to me?**

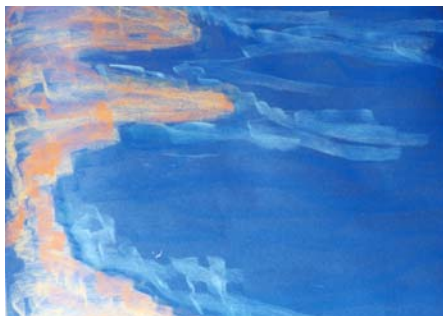
**Geoff:** These are all images of water. When we sat down to talk about this, images of water kept coming into my mind so I decided to go along with them and see what they are about. This

journey has not been a smooth one for me, not like climbing a ladder rung by rung but more sinking and swimming, going round in waves. Waves were the first thing that came into my mind – quite dramatic and powerful.

I have felt a real shift in this experience. I was saying to Judy that, when we started, I felt as though I was the container – that if this process for us was about sharing anything, I assumed that I had to hold it. What has happened to me over the last year is that I have realised that it is much, much bigger than I am. I don't feel like a container, I feel much more part of something, swept along by something. So all sorts of images of water came to mind.



wasn't huge or dramatic at the time but its influence rippled out, and out, and out. Again, Dawn, your feedback on my paper was something that has stayed with me...



primarily... this picture of a waterfall. What was in my mind here was that water follows its own course. No matter how you try to channel water, it finds the places it wants to go and the wise person works with that not against it. You can stick a mountain in the way but, eventually, if the water wants to go that way it will cut through. Part of my learning as an educator (which is how I increasingly see myself) is about recognising and respecting where the energy (of that water) wants to go, and going with that. I would rather swim in a river than a canal because the river is where it wants to be, it has not been put there. That is what I feel about this group too.

### Commentary

In this commentary on *Reshaping my Professional Identity*, I focus on the last three of the twelve distinctive standards of judgement and criteria of validity described in *Chapter One: Living Inquiry*, exemplifying their embodiment in, and emergence from, my practice of *living inquiry*. I have chosen Duration, Passion and Reason, and Critical Judgement as particularly, though not exclusively, relevant to this chapter and I invite you to bear them in mind throughout your reading of the thesis.

**Duration:** If *living inquiry* is a lifelong practice, then it follows that worthwhile inquiries take time. Of course, individual elements can be quite brief, but substantial questions such as those posed in *Interlude IV: The point of no return* – How can I live well as a man in the world? How can I enter more fully into loving relationships? How can I find healing for body and soul? How can I exercise my (educative) influence for good? – have demanded my energy and attention for many years. Indeed, even after fifteen years or so of conscious inquiry, these questions are still significant issues for me.

I have located this commentary here because *Reshaping my Professional Identity* clearly shows how my practice as an educator has developed since 1986. In this chapter I explore the purposes, means and outcomes of three innovative educational programmes that I designed and delivered in the police service, in relation to my core beliefs about people, educational processes and the educative relationship. Gradually, during this time, the centre of gravity of my professional identity has shifted from police office to educator. I think you will agree that, by “living the question” over many years, I have improved my practice in the sense that it is now more congruent with my educational values.

**Passion and Reason:** In *Chapter One: Living Inquiry* I made the simple point that my *living inquiry* flourishes when open both to the zest of my passion and the guiding hand of reason and I shared a favourite quotation from Khalil Gibran<sup>28</sup>:

Your reason and your passion are the rudder and sails of your seafaring soul. If either your sails or rudder be broken, you can but drift, or else be held at standstill in mid-seas

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<sup>28</sup> Gibran, K. (1926). *The Prophet*. New York, Alfred A Knopf.

This text is fuelled by passion, for inquiry, for writing, for masculinity, for loving relationships, for healing and for education but it is also guided by reason and careful consideration of form and content. In this chapter, in the section entitled *A passion for police education*, I explore my practice as an educator over a decade. I think you will recognise the passion that drove me to create and institute three major educational programmes: the Accelerated Promotion Course (APC), the Management Development Programme (MDP), and the Action Inquiry Group (AIG). I think you will also see, in the narrative, the careful thought that went into their design and delivery.

The balance between passion and reason is also apparent in *Healing Journeys*, for example in my reflections on the storytelling workshop in the section entitled *Inquiring into my practice*. It is perhaps less obvious in *The Men's Room* and *Postcards from the Edge* where the inquiries follow a more intuitive course.

**Critical Judgement:** This series of commentaries began by looking at Experiential Grounding as the basis of all that followed and it seems fitting to conclude this aesthetic appreciation of my life of inquiry with Critical Judgement. In *Chapter One: Living Inquiry* I point out that the application of critical judgement is implicit in the “conscious structuring” of the text and embodied in the choices I have made in the course of my inquiries. However, as I focus on how best to communicate my learning, I realise that it is important to draw attention to the explicit use of my critical judgement too. Let me point to three particular examples.

First, in this chapter, in the section entitled *A path with heart*, I think you will see how I have used my critical judgement to review the three educational programmes I designed and delivered for the police service in terms of my educational values (i.e. my core beliefs about people, education and the educative relationship). This enables me to recognise a gradual shift towards the greater embodiment of my educational values in my practice, which I typify as moving from *student-centred learning* (still essentially hierarchical) to a *community of inquiry* (with genuine mutuality of learning amongst peers).

Second, in this chapter in the section entitled *A passion for police education: Action Inquiry Group*, I use my critical judgement to enhance the rigour of my scholarship of inquiry by critically re-examining a published paper (Mead 2001) and adducing



documentary evidence in support of particular claims about the outcomes of the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* action inquiry project.

Third, this series of commentaries itself is a conscious and explicit application of my critical judgement. As I point to the text to clarify the meanings of my distinctive standards of judgement and criteria of validity as they are embodied in, and emerge from my practice, I am offering both an aesthetic appreciation of my life of inquiry and a critical assessment of my own thesis.