

Interlude III

Writing an Abstract

Sunday 26th November 2000

I sent *Postcards from the Edge* to Jack Whitehead a couple of weeks ago asking for his “critical appreciation” but, this time, without any specific questions for him to address. A few days later he e-mailed the following reply:

Just downloaded and read *Postcards from the Edge*: very powerful piece of writing. It feels to me that you have done what you wanted in “deftly integrating” living enquiry and telling. Could you try to write an Abstract of your Thesis for me – some 400 words should do it – which will help me to see how you have met the following standards of judgement:

‘examiners should take into account the extent and merit of the work as well as its manner of presentation... the candidate shall have presented a thesis on the candidate’s advanced study and research which satisfies the examiners as giving evidence of originality of mind and critical judgement in a particular subject; the thesis in all or in part should contain material worthy of publication.’

His request comes both as an encouragement to go deeper and as a challenge to my understanding. Can I articulate the nature of my thesis clearly and concisely? Can I show how it meets the examiner’s criteria for judging a prospective PhD? “Well,” I say to myself. “400 words cannot be that difficult.” Until I sit down to think about it and realise some of the difficulties and paradoxes involved in such a task.

First, the text of the thesis is nowhere near complete. Since I am committed to the writing as a form of inquiry in its own right, how can I possibly provide a comprehensive explanation of its emerging thesis? Surely this will change over time as I follow the different strands of my

inquiries and explore the connections, contradictions and tensions between them.

Second, the nature of the knowledge claims I am making – largely embodied in stories of my practice as a man, in loving relationships, in search of healing and as an educator – mitigates against the very notion of abstraction. It is the particularity and concreteness of this “living knowledge” that lend it power. Its meanings are best communicated through harmonic resonance with the reader’s own struggles and dilemmas. Such meanings are quickly diluted by generalisation into abstract propositional forms.

Third, I see myself as consciously challenging the boundaries of conventionally acceptable academic forms of representation. I decide that it is insulting to my creative self to be required to produce an abstract. Let my thesis speak for itself – why should I have to explain it in this way! Was Michaelangelo obliged to *explain* his statue of David? Oops! I seem to be getting a bit carried away here. After all, having seen examples of his sculpture on a recent trip to Florence, the fact that Michaelangelo knew what he was doing is pretty self-evident. Whether I can legitimately make a similar claim is actually rather more open to dispute.

Despite these arguments, qualifications and resistances, it would seem that writing an abstract might be an excellent way of deepening and testing my own understanding as well as inviting you, the reader, to approach the text with an openness to what I am seeking to explore and the ways in which I am going about it. What then can I say, at this point, about the nature of my thesis and how it might satisfy the twin criteria of originality of mind and critical judgement?

Abstract - First Draft

In writing this thesis, I address the “new scholarships” identified by Ernest Boyer (1990) and Donald Schon (1995). In particular, I seek to make a contribution to an emerging “scholarship of inquiry” in which – in the spirit of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1934) - the focus is on living the questions rather than seeking answers. I do so through the self-study of four strands of my practice: as a man, in loving relationships, in search of healing and as an educator.

The thesis is both an account of my learning in these areas and an action research inquiry in its own right as, over the course of two years, I sustain a cyclical process of writing and reflection, searching for connections, contradictions and tensions between the various strands.

In its manner of presentation, the thesis responds to the “crisis of representation” identified by Denzin and Lincoln (1994) by using what Eisner (1997) calls “alternative forms of data representation”. The stories of living inquiry are self-reflective narratives of lived experience including “artistically rendered forms” such as poetry, creative writing, paintings, sculpture and audio recordings, where these help to convey something of the emotional, aesthetic and spiritual qualities inherent in the inquiries.

Throughout the thesis I develop the idea of *living inquiry* – a holistic approach in which all aspects of life are potentially available as sources of learning. *Living inquiry* is a form of action research embracing first, second and third person inquiry. It consciously avoids adopting any single method, preferring Feyerabend’s (1975) argument that there are no general solutions and that the best chance of advancing knowledge comes from the intuitive use of a pluralistic methodology

As I consider my own inquiry practices, I discover that my version of Living Inquiry is characterised by several features:

- The juxtaposition and synthesis of *mythos* (with its language of personified images and narratives) and *logos* (with its analytical and propositional forms) as described by Labouvie-Vief (Labouvie-Vief 1994). This is central to my inquiry process and, incidentally, mirrors the requirement to demonstrate originality of mind and critical judgement.

- A concern with the inner life of the psyche and the outer life of working for good in the world as equally important. As with the ancient Chinese Yin/Yang symbol, these aspects both interpenetrate and contain each other. The thesis arcs deep into personal territory in the early chapters in order to emerge later into the more public domain of educational practice.
- A willingness to enter the void of unknowing and uncertainty without which significant personal learning and change cannot occur. I draw on Gestalt theory to describe this process and offer the Greek myth of Persephone and Demeter as an essentially feminine metaphor for this non-linear, kairatic approach. From this I develop the notion of “transformational space” for healing and learning, relating this to the Habermasian concept of “communicative space” and to Stein’s idea of “liminal space” (Stein 1983).
- It embraces many different ways of knowing – physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, practical – including some unconventional routes to knowledge (e.g. ritual, divination, dance, artistic expression). Whilst not limited to Heron’s (Heron 1992) fourfold epistemological hierarchy, my inquiries provide evidence of an openness to profound and novel experiences, creative and imaginative forms of representation, appropriate and well-grounded theory and a genuine commitment to improve my personal and professional practice.
- A preparedness to inquire into important and sometimes painful aspects of personal and professional practice. In this thesis I spotlight the exploration of my masculine identity, the breakdown of my marriage and my conduct in loving relationships, a long search for self-healing, and the nature of my educative influence upon others as a facilitator, consultant and senior police officer.

Whilst temperamentally wishing to avoid identification with any particular methodological or philosophical school, these features do broadly position my approach as *post-modern* in abandoning the grand-narratives of progressive social science (Lyotard 1984) *post-positivist* in its embrace of personal knowledge (Polanyi 1958) and multiple epistemologies (Heron 1992; Reason 1994) and *post-heroic* (Chinen 1993) in its acknowledgement that lives get interesting and

inquiries come alive when we enter unknown territory not knowing in advance what we are seeking – when, in the words of the Russian folktale we “*go I know not whither [to] bring back I know not what*”.

Well, there it is. It proved very difficult to write such a succinct account – previous drafts kept running away with me and I found myself either rewriting earlier chapters or anticipating future ones in an effort to explain and contextualise what I wanted to say in the abstract. Even now, I am not sure whether I have been sufficiently explicit in my claims to originality of mind and critical judgement. I wonder whether I should have stated bluntly that evidence of my originality of mind is to be found in the quality of my writing and the “creative intuition” I bring to my inquiry practice. Equally, that my critical judgement is apparent in my “conscious structuring”¹ of the material, in the quality and depth of my reflection and engagement with the ideas of others.

Finally I have to acknowledge that the abstract, like the thesis itself, is still a work in progress and that I will no doubt return to it as I complete each major stage of the writing to ask if it still reflects the key issues. In light of this, I want to express my gratitude to Peter Mellett (Mellet 2000) for introducing me to Heidegger’s question - *Was ist das - die Philosophie?* - which he uses to help frame his review of Educational Action Research. Perhaps I could frame my thesis in similar terms. Then, following Peter’s argument:

With my review/research question posed in this form, I [too] am obliged as the questioner to remain an integral part of the questioning. I must tread a path with others *inside* the subject of the enquiry and give an account of how it is for us as we undertake that journey. It is not sufficient to stand *outside* the subject, to analyse it, and then to look for the construction of a definition. (Mellet 2000)

¹ I am very attracted to these ideas of “creative intuition” and “conscious structuring” which Seamus Heaney, in his introduction to *Beowulf*, attributes to JRR Tolkien - Heaney, S. (1999). *Beowulf*. London, Faber and Faber.

I think I may have stumbled upon the question that the text is seeking to answer: **What is it to ask, what this thing –“Living Inquiry” – is?** and I feel enormously excited about writing the remainder of the thesis with this new insight firmly in mind.

I took this version of the abstract to a CARPP workshop on 1st December 2000. It quickly became clear in conversation with colleagues that it needed more work in order to convey the essence of my thesis. Further drafts followed over the next fifteen months or so, culminating in a radically different form of words. Ironically, at the *viva voce* on 22nd March 2002, my examiners Donna Ladkin and Helen Simons preferred the original formulation and asked me to reinstate it (with some additions and amendments) at the head of the thesis.

I have done so gladly and without regret, despite the effort of producing so many intervening drafts for each one cast the developing thesis in a slightly different light, challenging my own understanding and shifting the emphasis as I wrote subsequent chapters: for example, in *Healing Journeys* to consider how I am using what I am learning from my own healing journey to help others and, in *Reshaping my Professional Identity* to think much more widely about the effect of my educative influence on others.