

12. Questions about Theory in Practice

Learning for Us

A Key Event

The B&NES learning history work is the subject of this chapter. This work, which took the form of four seminars spread over six months from June – October 2008, has been mentioned several times already and was very significant for this research in a number of ways. First it was an important site of inquiry into the central question of how this learning history process might accelerate learning at the institutional level. As the work was sustained over time with a group who shared the same organisational context, it offered a real opportunity to engage with how learning history work might bridge from the past experiences of one set of local authority organisations to the present experiences and decision-making of another.

However, because it happened late in the day it also represented a site of inquiry where I could fold in some of the learning and deepening questions that were coming out of the research so far. I had the opportunity to test afresh some of the conclusions of the research. For example the analytical work described in the last chapter suggested a bottom-up theory of change. The seminars at B&NES then offered the opportunity to test these back in a different part of the field from which they had come. But I found this work also led me to road test my own commitment to the ideas and learning that had been developing for me in the course of my research. So if ideas like polyphony, innovation journeys and ‘insider/outsider’ research were important to me now from my work so far then how did that play out for me in practice? I didn’t go into the B&NES work with this well-structured question, but I found the question of my commitment to my own ideas playing out there over and again.

Here then was a fresh set of people engaging with material largely co-created by

colleagues elsewhere in the same institutional field. Here too was a researcher bursting with a rich experience of her research journey so far. This chapter discusses and reflects on what the learning for us was.

I will do this in three parts. Each part will describe quite factually what happened. Some parts will draw on extracts from a learning history I wrote about this engagement. Then after each part I will reflect on this drawing out some of the main learning points.

Pre-work at B&NES

Though the B&NES work centred on four seminars that started off in June 2008 my first contact with the council started much further back than that, in April 2007.

In Chapter 3, I described how after a walk in the woods I had written in my journal:



March 27th 2007

I realise for example it'd be most interesting to run the case of Merton by people perhaps in our local council B&NES or in Bristol and see what they make of them.

A few weeks later I heard that people from Woking would be in Bath to give a lecture and I planned to go along. And just before going along a friend dropped me an e-mail:



E-mail from Michelle, April 2007

Hope the Greenlight lecture is good tomorrow. If you get the chance, try and ferret out a lady called Jane Wildblood, who should be there - she is the one and only person working on sustainability issues for Bath council and used to work at Greenpeace. A really good lady - might have a few good 'stories' for you!

Jane was indeed at the Greenlight Lecture, valiantly fielding questions as to why her council had not done the same as Woking. At the end I introduced myself to her and we arranged to meet. When we did a few months later it was clear that the goals of the research I was doing in general fitted very well with the context of the challenge that was facing B&NES. A new administration had been elected in May and it was one that had

pledged to lead on green issues. Jane and others at the council were now actively putting together a set of initiatives so that the organisation could start delivering on the pre-election pledge to reduce carbon emissions by 2% per year over ten years. What was important was to underpin these initiatives with an increasing organisational awareness and ability to act when it came to the strategy. From our conversation it felt we were 'of a similar mind' that achieving these targets would necessitate culture change and a capacity to act that learning history work might support. The question was how to build in the research in the best possible way for all involved. Follow-up meetings took place in the autumn with Jane and on one occasion her boss David Tretheway. In these conversations we discussed the organisation, the different projects underway and the different groupings that might benefit from working with the learning histories. I then set out a proposal with different options for how we might work together. In December 2007 Jane responded confirming that B&NES would be interested in working with Lowcarbonworks by first attending the learning history workshop in February and by taking the option of running a series of small group learning history seminars subsequent to that.



In Feb 2008, Jane and David attended the learning history workshop and were particularly enthusiastic about the event. Subsequent conversations between Jane and I took on a new urgency as we sensed a golden opportunity for the broader change agenda within B&NES which was rapidly gaining momentum.

Figure 49: David Tretheway at the Feb workshop

After the workshop we met again at the local coffee shop to further tease out the objectives of this piece of work and to find the best level for our ambitions. Jane was particularly keen for action – and to find some way to link this work to the strategy the Council was now trying to deliver. I wanted action too but was concerned that if we linked the group too much to an outcome this might curtail the opportunity for frank conversation and collective reflection. So we agreed that the work would be seen as a phase of capacity building that would support and flow later into more target-oriented programs. We agreed too that participation would be optional. The

group would self-select but Jane would set about inviting and encouraging people to come.

Reflecting on the Pre-work

I include this build-up because it is normally so easy to leave something like this out and because it shows some important things about relational work as well as the possibilities for deeper 'insider'/'outsider' work that can be opened up by learning history work. It was only as time went on that I started to realise that the meetings to shape the seminars were every bit as important as the seminars themselves. This is reflected in the time we took for them. Returning to my field notes I see to my surprise that over a period of nineteen months from June 2007 to a final debrief in March 2009 Jane and I had eight different meetings – two of which included other council officers. So more time was spent in those meetings than at the actual seminars. Their scope too was broader than the mere running of seminars. We were strategising on how best to serve a shared agenda of building capacity to tackle climate change. Once the seminars got going we reflected each time as to how they had gone and discussed what we might do next time. So the meetings were providing an opportunity for time out, for collaborative reflection and therefore for learning. They took place mainly in a coffee shop outside the council offices and indeed this felt apt as our discussions often felt to me to connect more to a joint change agenda rather than to the specific research and organisational agendas that we each represented. This then was the piece of work that most reflected 'insider/outsider' research for me. However it was only made possible by my first cycle with the learning histories which had made me 'insider enough' to approach Jane and have a useful conversation in the first place. It also started to strike me that in its nature this work resonated with some of the innovation journeys I had been charting in the learning histories: the sense of shared endeavour, the moments of opportunity, the converging agendas, even the coffee shop venue all echoed with the stories I had written and reminded me to value and notice these parts of the work and give them some importance.



'Insider/Outsider' work

Work with learning history can itself open the door for quality 'insider/outsider' work where shared agendas and re-appeared relational work lead to a new, rich site of learning.

The Seminar Work

Jane made the Lowcarbonworks research work overtly part of the sustainability strategy within the council. She and her support team then worked tirelessly to arrange diaries, convene attendees and to raise the profile of the work within the council. As a result of this effort, four divisional directors from the council and a further three officers were present at the first meeting. Further attendees joined as the seminars went on. Unlike the workshop, the energy in convening lay with the 'insiders' rather than with me. My 'outsider' work focussed on the seminars. I planned each session carefully and reflected in detail on each one, individually and with Jane. Sessions were taped and I listened back and made notes after each session. There was a positive energy to this work. I saw this as a golden opportunity to be creative with others without putting anyone at risk. The framing of the work as a piece of research gave us this freedom.

The four seminars stepped through from an introductory overview to a series of experiments centred on the learning histories (we chose Barnsley and Southampton) and, in the later sessions, on the thematic analysis. With each experiment I tried a different way of working and a different blend of structure, group work, presentation and so on. For example in one session we worked in small groups responding to Southampton and then as a group went into detail on the meta-theme 'Risk' and the learning questions associated with it. The experiments and mixing of activity mostly worked well. The sessions were lively, rich and unpredictable.

At the end of session 3, we had jointly agreed that the final session should be a 'drawing it together' session going over what we had covered and addressing questions of 'what next'. For a variety of reasons it had been poorly attended. Planning the final session I wanted to maximise the value of the sessions so far. There was always a sense of too

little time. I listened back to the taped conversation of session 3 and was suddenly struck by how the meta-themes that I had presented as being important to innovation were being demonstrated in the words of the participants, for example:

Coalitions: “We have a strong local service partnership”

Champions: “I’m here because Jane twisted my arm into coming”

Risk Transfer: “we’ve got people doing the drilling [to explore thermal potential] and they’re paying for the privilege”

Converging agendas: “Can we exploit the credit crunch to find the right time to start talking about reducing costs...?”

Working with chance: “project xxx is delayed now so that opens up a window”

And so on. This group was already demonstrating innovative talk and capability and it seemed important to reflect this back to them and challenge the view that change lay sometime in the future. It was at this point that I thought that if I really believed in learning history then the only way to reflect this back was to summarise the learning we had done together as a history. I quickly wrote the learning history, shared it with Jane and then with a slight shudder I sent it back to all participants in advance of the final session.

On the next few pages I include an excerpt from that history that shows: firstly the style and level of reflection I shared back to participants; second, it shows an important aspect of the work which was to do with trying to create a space where different kinds of conversations – technological and otherwise – might take place.

Learning history excerpt: sessions 1 and 2

The Storyline of this History

The story of bringing learning history to B&NES who were part of the new wave of councils acting on climate change. This authority were currently building capacity quickly and starting to take a proactive and leadership stance with regard to climate change....

The Seminars

June – October 2008

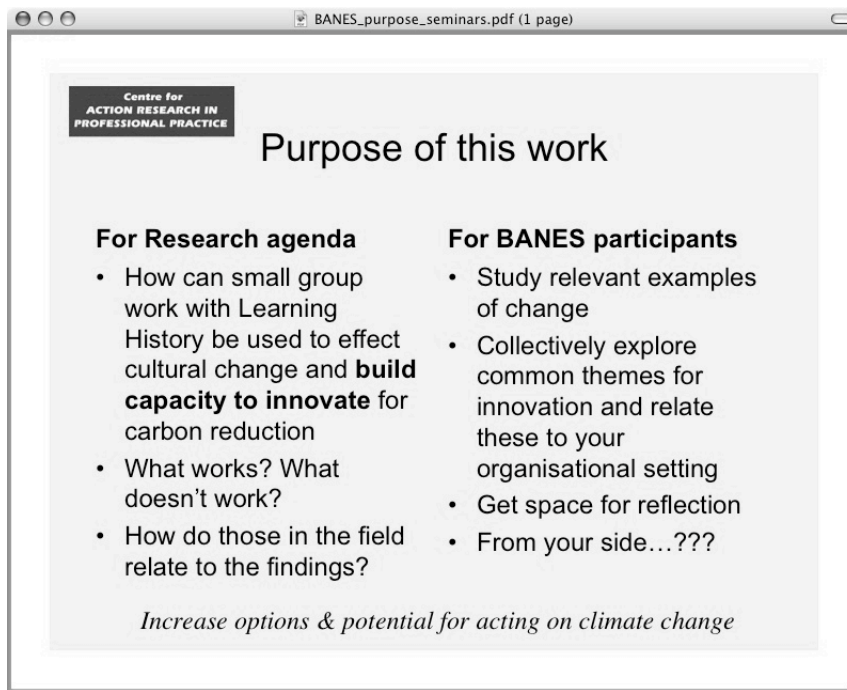
Seminar 1

When: June 2008

Where: Bath & NE Somerset Council Offices

Who: A group of 7 officers drawn from across departments and including four divisional directors.

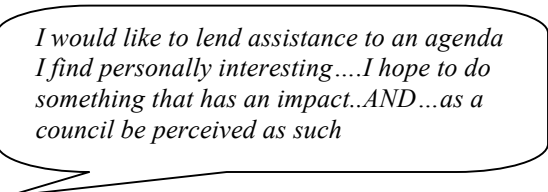
The purpose of the work was set out at the first seminar as follows.



This was the official statement of why we had come together. When we introduced ourselves there was a more informal set of reasons why people had come to the meeting that ranged from having had their arms twisted by Jane, through to personal passion, the desire to act on existing ideas and the desire to take a lead on sustainability and, as a council,be seen to take a lead.

Theme: Personal & Organisational views used interchangeably

Previously I'd worked mainly with sustainability champions in local authority organisations. Now I was working with managers and directors higher up in the organisation. I had wondered how the conversation might differ as a result. Would it be more stilted and formal?

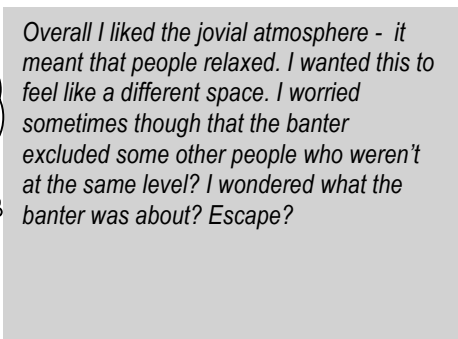


I would like to lend assistance to an agenda I find personally interesting....I hope to do something that has an impact...AND...as a council be perceived as such

The language was sometimes reflective of the high-level responsibilities some people held but the atmosphere was not formal. There was a friendly, sometimes jovial atmosphere in the room and this continued throughout the seminars. There was a mood of escape and chatter. Banter sometimes over what had gone on that morning or in other meetings to come. Sometimes it took a while to settle – but it always did.



RR



Overall I liked the jovial atmosphere - it meant that people relaxed. I wanted this to feel like a different space. I worried sometimes though that the banter excluded some other people who weren't at the same level? I wondered what the banter was about? Escape?

Q: To participants: Any comment on this?

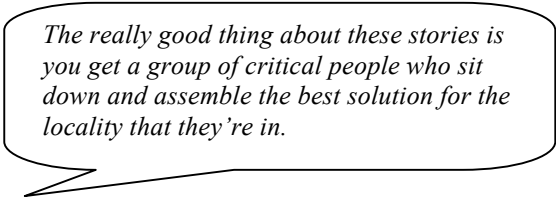
I gave an overview of the five learning histories featured by the research (Merton, Nottingham, Kirklees, Barnsley, Southampton). Like at the Workshop there was a feeling of awe and frustration at these examples. One participant exclaimed:

"We've missed so many opportunities!"

And as a group we went on to discuss the need to

"Start with the missed opportunities and then start to see the new ones"

I stressed too that the learning histories were brought in not as a set of icons to live-up to but rather as an offering into the mix of that Council's challenges. They were a resource to be drawn on rather than a stick with which to beat themselves.



The really good thing about these stories is you get a group of critical people who sit down and assemble the best solution for the locality that they're in.

At the first seminar what quickly became obvious was that there were different levels of technical knowledge in the room. One or two people were very well versed in the technology, whereas others were clearly daunted by it one person admitting that they were '*technically illiterate*' I went away with the question of how to keep this valuable technical expertise in the room without it dominating or excluding others. And Jane acted on it by organising a "Low carbon technologies for beginners" in advance of our next session.

Theme: Knowledge spanning is needed to enable informed conversations

The second seminar was designed then with questions of participation in mind as well as an intention to start experimenting with the learning histories that had been written.

Q: To participants

Any comment on this first session in general?

Seminar 2: Biomass at B&NES – It IS a brainer

When: July 2008

Where: Bath & NE Somerset Council Offices

Who: A group of 8 officers (2 additional participants from planning; 1 from waste)

The second session featured the Barnsley learning history. Participants had agreed to read the history in their own time and I was heartened – surprised even - by the fact that most people had managed to do this by the next session. Though some participants had found an hour not long enough.

Barnsley
It's a no-brainer!

A Learning history
Issue VWS – Workshop Version

Nr. 3 in a series of learning histories on the subject of "Innovation for Carbon Reduction" in or connected with Local Authorities.

July 2007

A jointly told tale

Margaret Gearty (University of Bath)

Based on the perspectives and recollections of
Dick Bradford
(Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council)

with added perspectives from:
Robin Ridley (South Yorkshire Forest Partnership)

Well it seemed to imply 'it just happened' I didn't get a feel for the complexities involved

J. said what a lot of people say when they first find out about Biomass. It's too easy ...if you can manage to put those organisational bits in place

The bit that is a brainer is getting all that [the organisational support] in place

It actually started in the 80s. Looking at the result now that is great but it's a long time

Then using an approach called De Bono's 6-hats thinking we considered the provocative statement "**Biomass at B&NES – It's a no-brainer!**" from different kinds of viewpoints. The purpose of this was twofold. At this session I wanted to explore how we might take the lessons – technological and all - from one context to another using the learning history. So it was a question of exploring what we might directly learn from Barnsley about using Biomass. This was the primary aim. What resulted were a series of posters looking at the question of Biomass @ B&NES. Ideas, questions and emotions were raised and together this formed a snapshot – like a pre-feasibility – of the opportunities, pitfalls, fact and information that might be needed to start to take on wood-fuelled Biomass projects within B&NES.

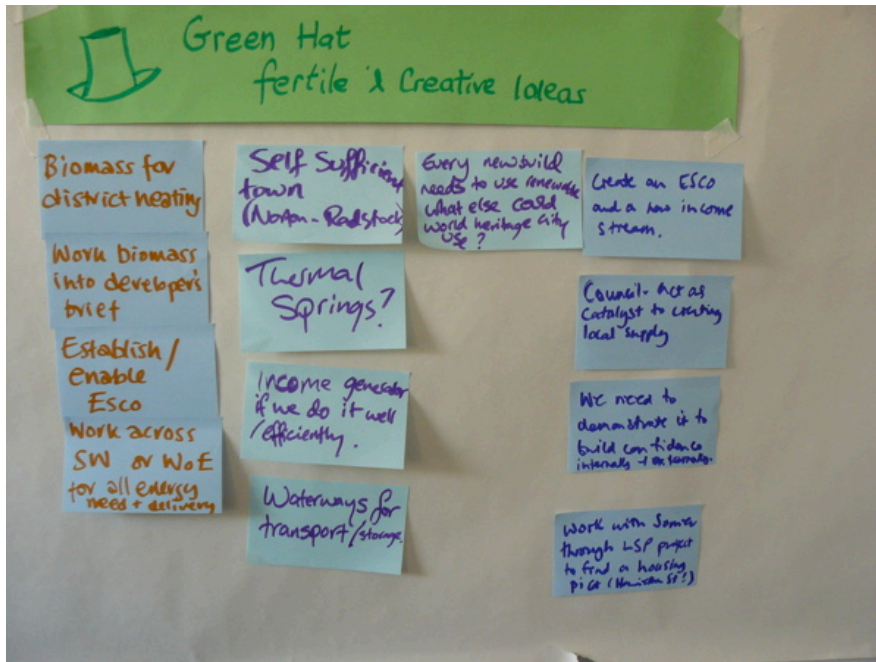


Figure 50 An example of Green Hat thinking on BIOMASS

The second reason I wanted to use De Bono was to illustrate the different ways of discussing and moving forward on an issue. I hoped to show that, by thinking together from different perspectives we might approach a problem in a different way with a more rounded conversation – for example one that would include the technical, the organisational and the emotional. By naming and valuing the different perspectives, I explained in session, we might have a more constructive conversation and avoid the common pitfall of talking past each other, or of emotion or caution masquerading as fact.

Theme: Having a rounded conversation



Nice idea - But did any of this leak out into the organisation? It is so hard to assess impact with something like this.....



Figure 51: Is biomass a 'brainer' at Bath?

End of Excerpt

The final session

The final session was important. With time running out Jane and I shared a strong desire for this work to be sustained in some way after the seminars had finished. This fitted with my search for scale and enduring consequences in the work as discussed in Chapter 5. And I had one final research experiment in mind: I planned to work more deeply with the inductive themes, to test out the learning questions with participants and to see if by working appreciatively with them this might raise awareness of where in the organisation they already had the capacity to innovate. Also I needed to get feedback from them on the seminars overall. When I write all this down now I am a little embarrassed. I was far too ambitious. And, to cut a long story short, we ran out of time.

Perhaps it was a coincidence, but all ten participants did turn up to that final session and I wondered if it was because I'd sent out the learning history to draw them in. Most of them had read it and I felt it contributed to the mood of what was a rich session. I have described in detail in Chapter 8 some examples from the conversation where I felt that we were as a group moving to new understandings as to what was possible, what was of value and how this work might continue. Another example of this was that, in this final session, there was increased recognition for the relational work Jane was doing in the organisation, pretty much single-handedly, to push the sustainability agenda. The language moved tentatively from 'you' (pointing at Jane) to 'we' at a few points during that meeting. The work with the learning questions stimulated these conversations though I was frustrated to find myself hurrying through them. Time ran out and I didn't manage to get the feedback I wanted on the overall experience or to return to the question of learning history as a means for change. One director who had attended all four sessions hurried out and said: "thanks – these were really first-class" and I walked away with a small glow but no real evidence of how they had helped him. Though there were many threads left dangling at the end of the final session, there were glimpses in this work of many interesting possibilities. But in the end my ambitions and the time I had just did not match. Like many a learning historian before me I had just run out of steam.

Reflecting on the seminars

The seminars shed considerable light on the substantive point of how learning history might support learning from one site to another. Feedback from participants, my field notes and joint reflections with Jane helped to build a picture of the kind of value this work was providing. Participant's feedback forms all mentioned that they valued the conversations they had at the seminars and the relationships formed there. As one participant wrote:

We established a good internal network to drive these challenging agendas forward

From participant feedback, early 2009

Some also liked taking 'time-out' to think and converse with others with whom they would not normally speak. The cross-hierarchical nature of the seminars, the presence of the directors and their willingness to speak openly was very much appreciated. So far then, it might seem that, like any good action research, it was the opening of a communicative space that was what mattered. However several participants commented directly on knowledge they gained from attending: about schemes elsewhere, about low-carbon technologies and about the climate change agenda itself. This had been supported through the learning histories themselves as well as by Jane's additional work to bring participants up to speed on technology outside the sessions.

Gained a good understanding of the technical issues around retrofitting biomass and the length of time it took to implement changes

Learned from the experiences of others (in the histories)

I realized how this corporate priority (tackling climate change) is different to the others as it is new and more rewarding

From various participant feedback, early 2009

So participants' knowledge had been enhanced also quite conventionally. They knew

more stuff afterwards. Though the 'learning' in learning history is conceptualised as a dynamic process occurring in the company of others, my feeling is that it is powerful because of how it brings different kinds of knowledge and process together. And in this work there has been a strong theme about the practice of 'expanding conversations' to achieve this. In session I noticed for example how hard it was to have technology on the table without it dominating and blinding out organisational issues. And vice-versa. So I worked to redress this. The B&NES learning history extract recounts how, in session two, I used de-Bono's 6-hats thinking in order to expand the conversation so that hard facts, ideas, emotions and so on might all have equal place. Similarly it describes how Jane organised a catch-up "Lowcarbon technology for beginners" session so that less technical people might adequately be able to participate. So we were not only expanding conversations in terms of technology, but also in terms of everyone participating, and in terms of being inclusive of different kinds of thinking.



Expanding conversations

The learning history process can aid learning and innovative possibility by expanding the conversation so that the technical, psychological and social aspects can be on the table simultaneously. In narrative this will happen naturally, but there are practices too that support expanded conversations.

Enduring consequences?

Five months after the seminars ended, in March 2009, Jane and I met at a local restaurant to go through the feedback forms and reflect on the overall cycle.

The forms were encouraging. All respondents reported taking actions outside the seminars that ranged from having conversations about biomass to lobbying to get carbon reduction targets put into strategic plans. Most striking of all was Jane's feedback. She reported that some attendees were now showing an increased confidence to speak up for the climate change agenda. For example three of the four directors who had attended the seminars had subsequently attended a workshop relating to Jane's other carbon initiatives and all of them had been crucially supportive.

It was an excellent workshop, with clear actions agreed to tackle barriers to change, largely because of their participation. They really challenged some of the 'status quo' issues that get in the way of progress.

Jane reflecting on seminars, via E-mail, 11 Mar 2009

This top-level support has every chance of being formalised in the future into a group who will oversee the budgeting of carbon management projects. Finally Jane herself, reported that the work had helped her feel more confident and emboldened:

Gave me more confidence I think - I felt braver about saying some challenging things to more senior colleagues than I think I might have done outside this space. I definitely remember thinking that I was being much blunter and making more radical suggestions and requests than I normally would in work situations. And now that I've done it inside [the seminars], I now feel more confident doing it outside. Also, attending these sessions has helped me to develop closer working relationships with a couple of key people in the group, which is really bearing fruit.

Jane reflecting on seminars, via E-mail, 11 Mar 2009

This echoes closely with Thurstan's (from Brighton & Hove) comments on the 1:1 work. He had reported how his work with the Merton history helped him feel more 'emboldened' to act in meetings. Though he still had to take the step of being bold alone. In this case Jane could practice being bold with colleagues inside the room and could then continue being bold outside of it.

Final Reflections

The work with B&NES opened up a rich site of inquiry into the different possibilities for working with learning histories and the nature of the new conversations that might be opened up as a result.

I experimented with structuring discussions around the histories and working with the thematic data from the research. Both approaches stimulated lively and engaged

discussion. What I found was not conclusive as to there being a 'right way' to work with histories. I worked instead to knit the histories into the group's learning as appropriate. I see the space now less as one where participants could test out ways of working with learning history and more as one where they could start to negotiate and create new narratives for themselves and their organisation. What was crucial was having a series of meetings rather than just one in order to do that. In Chapter 8 I described how the rich conversation in the final meeting seemed to result from a move along Wittgenstein's ladder from the familiar to the unfamiliar. By the last session the iconic histories were left behind and we were now talking about the challenges of this organisation. My attempt to open up possible new narratives for this organisation did, for moments at least, work. I repeat the earlier quote from this session that I shared in Chapter 8:

My point is, rather than surprise, more a pleasure really. Reading these examples you think "wow that is a really big jump that they made", but actually if you look at what we are doing in dept xxx, we are doing it and I am really pleased to be part of this move, this change and also it's great to have a discussion with the people who want to change

Session 4, B&NES Participant, from audio of closing round

Here the participant is speaking a new narrative of achievement in front of a group of directors who had earlier said that this organisation wanted to be 'behind the curve' on climate change. She is describing too a sense of belonging to a wider movement of change that goes beyond her council. This was exactly the kind of participation, inspiration and celebration I had sought with the open-system learning history. For a fleeting moment at least the vision and the evidence lined up.



Accepting the victory narrative

And yes, yes, I know this is a victory narrative. I'm tiring now of my postheroic quality criterion. There was lots wrong with this work: I ran out of time, I didn't always do what I set out to do, I lost hold of the conversation more than once and those conversations weren't always multi-vocal. But there was something really great about this work too. And I've decided for once to celebrate it!

Finally the small group work described here has implications for the theme of expanding scope within action research that has been discussed throughout. Whereas in Chapter 4 I described how I would seek increased scope through the creation of multiple

distributed events, here I am arguing that I also quite actively sought an expanded scope (of conversation and action) with those events. This chapter has been all about trying to broaden the learning for 'us' in all directions. The next chapter takes us down a very different avenue for increasing the scope of the work that has to do with learning for 'them'. It will discuss how the learning from the research might now be fed back into the academy and the field of theory.

