4. Questions of Method

The Merton learning history that opened the main body of the thesis is an illustration of method. The introductory pages directly explain some of that method: learning history is distinguished from case analysis; the process of crafting the history from interview is outlined; the relationship of one history to the overall series is explained. On the other hand a reader might cast it down and say ‘this is one person’s story, with a bit of commentary and analysis alongside, so what!’ The Merton history is as light as the story it tells and yet it is heavy with the decisions that the telling of that story implies.

This chapter aims to unpack the many decisions that tether the Merton learning history to a method and explains where that method sits and why. This chapter will address questions of method like: Why learning history firstly? How does this approach link to the purposes of ‘accelerating learning about carbon reduction in an era of ferment’? What kind of learning history is this? How does it relate to other incarnations? What new proposals are there here with respect to method? And, if there is a new proposal on method, how might I know it is a good one?

This thesis does propose that by intertwining action research processes of inquiry and participation with learning history, new methodological ground has been covered that is timely with respect to the ‘era of ferment’ we are in. The approach of “learning history in an open system” is proposed to be a methodological development and it is explored in relation to the literature on learning history and action research and in relation to the narrative ideas it draws in.

First I will introduce the overall orientation within which this research sits: action research.

Research Orientation: Action Research

In this section I introduce action research and I will highlight the areas that are particularly relevant for this research. This section is mainly one of laying ground and priming it for later discussions.

First the ground. Action research is primarily concerned with addressing issues of practical concern and its emphasis is the field of experience. Its purpose is to carry through a change of practice that is:

> seeking to address issues of significance concerning the flourishing of human persons, their communities and the wider ecology in which we participate

(Reason and Bradbury 2008b p.4)

Unlike more traditional forms of social research there are no research subjects. Rather the action researcher embeds herself in a field of inquiry and engages with those there on an equal footing. Research participants are co-researchers. The creation of new learning and practical knowledge that remains in the field with the co-researchers is for the goal of the research. This is valued equally if not above the extraction of data from which later academic theorisation might occur.

The practice of action research is concerned with tackling the disconnection between the world of ideas and the world of practice and experience. It is not to be mistaken however for a box of tools and methods. It is an '*orientation to inquiry'* (Reason 2006 p.xxi). Because of its practical orientation, its emphasis on participation and its unashamed value driven agenda to make the world a better place, it

> challenges much received wisdom in academia [and among social change and development practitioners] '

(Reason and Bradbury 2008b p.1)

The challenge is both an ideological and a practical one. Some of its fundamental principles mean that the practice of action research can seem counter-cultural when compared with other forms of social research.

One such principle is the extended epistemology introduced briefly in Chapter 1. In action research the way of knowing that is normally associated with academia - knowing through thinking and ideas (propositional knowing) is no more important than other kinds of knowing (presentational, experiential and practical knowing). That many ways of knowing are valued on an equal footing in action research is consistent with its practical and experiential orientation. What a commitment to this in practice means is that research evidence and research reports alike will dwell on forms of knowing traditionally not seen or valued in academia.

A second counter-cultural principle of action research is emergence. In other words the practice of action research is understood to be an ongoing, unfolding process that cannot be controlled in the manner of a traditional field experiment. One might argue with the suggestion that any field experiment can be controlled and some qualitative research approaches do just this. The point here though is not to describe the argument but to point out that when conducting action research, there is not even an attempt or an aspiration to control. So it is research that is oriented at working with change rather than avoiding it. The researcher's participative position within the field puts her at the mercy of its vagaries. This understanding of research as something that

> Changes and develops as those engaged deepen their understanding of the issues to be addressed and develop their capacity as co-inquirers both individually and collectively
>
> (Reason and Bradbury 2008b p.4)

is completely counter to the notion of research as a process of finding something out. The researcher works rhythmically and iteratively rather than in a straight line toward a destination. Research moves forward in cycles of action and reflection (Reason 1999) deepening and shifting questions as it goes. This has, as I will describe later, implications for the practice of the research as well as how its quality might be assessed.

'Emergence' and 'many ways of knowing' are two of a number of principles that guide the practice of action research that by definition is a varied, personal and context-dependent process. The embedded nature of the research in the system implies a

layering of the various practices of action research that range from the individual researcher to her co-researchers and on to the wider field in which she is engaged. Distinguishing first-, second- and third- person practices of action research is one helpful way to organise a description of these different layers and one I draw on a lot to describe what I have been doing.

At the level of first-person the researcher is concerned with cultivating an inquiring approach to her own life where this implies an ability:

> to act choicefully and with awareness and to assess effects in the outside world while acting

(Reason and Bradbury 2008b p.6)

It is the foundational discipline for the researcher (Mead and Marshall 2005) and it is personal. The inquirer cultivates a practice that supports her own rhythm of deepening and developing questions through cycles of action and reflection. There are lots of approaches and practices that support the development of this personal discipline. For example the 'Ladder of Inference' aids offline reflection and analysis of practice (Rudolph, Taylor et al. 2001); Torbert's four parts of speech help with good communication that the inquirer can practice and reflect on. Likewise his four territories of experience helps the inquirer notice how actions are congruent (or not) with intention (Torbert 2001). More practically even, day-to-day disciplines like journaling, freefall writing, woodland walks and even brushing one's teeth with the wrong hand all make up a set of practices oriented at helping the researcher to see beyond her everyday patterns and assumptions of how the world is. In this way she might reach those important edges of her practice, indeed her whole being, where learning and development can occur. The foundational discipline of inquiry that I brought into this work was cultivated during my MSc. At that time I observed in detail how I moved from questions, to actions, to reflections and on to sometimes nothing at all. In this way I teased out the rhythms of my personal way of doing inquiry. This I took into and evolved over the course of this PhD. I will not explicitly describe it here hoping instead to show it in action through the dissertation.

These reflective practices, termed first-person inquiry (Torbert 2001), are encouraged,

not solely as an end in themselves, but as a foundation for second-person inquiries where groups come together to '*inquire into issues of mutual concern'* (Reason and Bradbury 2006 p.xxv). Such second-person inquiries range from informal face-to-face conversations to the more formal approaches where an inquiry group is explicitly convened and follows a particular format of inquiry of which co-operative Inquiry (Heron and Reason 2001) is perhaps the best known example. A common aspiration in these second-person encounters is the opening of a '*formation of a communicative space'* (Kemmis 2001 p.100) where dialogue and mutual learning can flourish. Several sites of second-person inquiry are described in this thesis. These range from informal conversations, to semi-structured interviews through to workshop events. Alongside the general methodological exploration of how second-person action research approaches can strengthen learning history has run a question for me of the role of the researcher in these second-person encounters. On my MSc I had run a co-operative inquiry into a subject that was important to me – meaningful work. I had struggled then with resolving my multiple roles of facilitator and co-researcher. I had concluded that cycle of research with a desire to explore second person approaches where researchers and participants were equal but took explicitly different roles. I think this led me to embrace the insider/outsider nature of learning history research.

Finally there is third-person inquiry. As already mentioned, action research is unapologetically values driven, seeking to create '*world worthy of human aspiration'* (Reason and Bradbury 2001 p.1). Levels of inquiry are as Reason & Marshall put it '*for me, for us and for them*' (Marshall and Reason 1987). Third-person inquiry concerns itself with the '*for them'*, asking how the scope of second person inquiries can have an impact on unknown others in the wider system, in the service of '*the flourishing of individual persons and their communities*' (Reason and Bradbury 2001 p.1). It is the open end of second-person action research. It includes ongoing conversations, encounters and action that connect to that research but are impersonal and unknown because they are in the wider system and do not occur face-to-face with the research.

The question of how third-person research might build on second-person research to effect change is very relevant to the discussion here. I have been concerned with learning occurring within a field of organisations rather than at a local level. And in Chapter 1 I set out an aspiration to find some way to address 'the big issue' of climate

change. This aspiration fits well with the third-person realm of inquiry which seeks to build from a scientific happening a 'political event' (Toulmin and Gustavsen 1996).

Here I have laid out the ground of action research. Before moving into learning history, I want to prime it by picking out three areas of action research where this work has been actively inquiring rather than simply drawing in lessons. These areas are: first, the relationships between first-, second- and third- person practice in addressing big issues – and in particular the direction in which those links are made; second, the question of achieving scope in action research; and third the role of modernity in action research which is a field that is largely built on ideas of postmodernism and a socially constructed view of knowledge.

Inquiry area 1: the direction of inquiry

I have been exercised the whole way through this PhD on the relationship between first-, second- and third-person inquiry and how much attention to give to first-person issues. By attention I mean two things here: there is the actual energy I devote to first-person inquiries and then there is the time I spend discussing them in the second-person realm: for example with others or even in this thesis. So there are questions of practice and of privatisation.

On the one hand I agree that first-person inquiry is the foundational practice. Every decision I make, every question I form relies on it. And many of the challenges I've faced over the duration of the research have had at their source personal edges – for example fear or ego – with which I have had to work. On the other hand, from the outset, I felt impelled not to start with my first-person practice for fear I might never leave that realm and so fail to reach the question of how my practices might link to the 'big issue' at the heart of this research. So from quite early on I had questions around the direction of my inquiry, its centre of gravity and the way the different levels of inquiry might be tuned into each other.

Regarding this tuning, the previously mentioned levels of inquiry of 'for me', 'for us' and 'for them' are sometimes drawn as a series of concentric circles in order to suggest a necessary congruence of purpose (Marshall and Reason 1987; Mead 2001).

Figure 18 Nested levels of inquiry

To explain the implications of this with respect to how I address inquiry in this thesis, now imagine taking the traditional picture of inquiry in the figure above and opening it up like a telescope and turning it to the side as I show below.

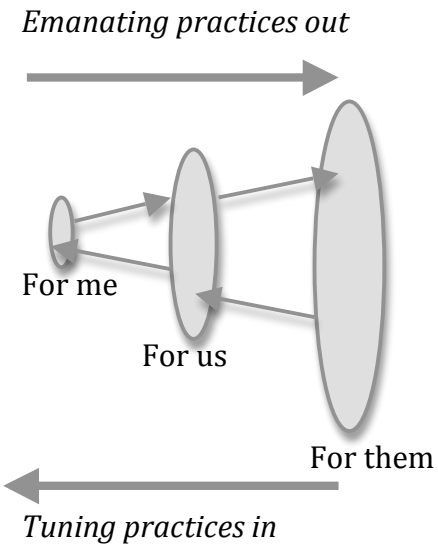


Figure 19 Telescopic view of inquiry

The telescopic view helps me to look more closely at the linkage of purpose between the different levels of inquiry. It also suggests different orientations and possibilities for positioning a piece of action research. At CARPP the centre of gravity of inquiry often lies in the first-person. Many researchers at CARPP are professional practitioners in education, health and the public service. As such they start with the necessary question of who they are in their field and this moves to questions of how they might develop their

way of being in the world. See for example the work of Kathleen King, Sue Porter and Chris Seely (King 2004; Porter 2004; Seely 2007). Links to the second- and third- person realms are often made but the point to note is that the flow of inquiry is emanating outwards from the foundational questions of the first-person rather than the other way around. Not all action research is done this way, but this CARPP context is important to explain that I felt a little controversial at first when I said I wanted to work into the first-person rather than out from it.

With my interpretation inquiries are no longer flowing in one direction but are balanced in both directions. Inquiries do still emanate outwards, but they also are tuning into the needs, questions of first the 'world' of which we are a part and second of the 'communities' to which we belong.

In this work I am locating my start point at the 'outward' face of the third person and working back to the first person from there. The question is not so much about scaling up new practices but rather how to tune my practices in. To draw on my old field of electronics, it is resonance rather than amplification I have sought. I judged first-person inquiries worthy of attention when they influenced my broader inquiry in some way. An example would be that my fear of public speaking stood to impede the goals of the research so I worked with this fear. This is a little different to working out from the first-person. I have tried to bump into rather than start with my first-person questions. This approach is in evidence in how I present the research back to you. I am present in this account, many of my reflections in this thesis on how to be a learning historian are personally toned - but I aim to show you the 'relevant' rather than the 'whole' me. And in terms of what I choose to describe, the 'outward' facing inquiry might get more airtime than the details of my personal struggles and learning. Some will be privatised. There have naturally been some new challenges to working in this way. Later, in Chapter 14 I will reflect on some of old chasms between the political and the personal that started to open up for me. But I sense that it is here there is much practical action research work to be done if we quite purposefully face into the big issues of our times and see what implications that has for our practice. This approach is intended to complement rather than to undermine the first-person focus of other CARPP accounts.

Inquiry area 2: the question of scope

The second area of inquiry in the field of action research relates directly to the first. It is looking at the question of widening the scope of action research. This question plays into a recent self-critical debate among leading action researchers who have been asking how action research might achieve wider influence in policy and in effecting large scale changes that are more in keeping with its ambitions and moral position (Reason and Bradbury 2008a). Davydd Greenwood started this debate and observed that one reason for action research's lack of practical clout is in fact its pre-occupation with proving its own moral and epistemological superiority (Greenwood 2002). Bjorn Gustavsen likens this to a survey researcher endlessly justifying the basis for his survey but who in the end never gets around to actually conduct it (Gustavsen 2003). His remark amounts to a call to action researchers for '*more action, less talk'*. But in the same paper his main reasoning as to why action researchers achieve marginal influence is not down to inaction but rather the confinement of that action to a localised level. This is a strong argument. Much of action research shuns the traditional path from research to policy which involves data collection, interpretation, generalisation, theorisation and ultimately policy guidance. As a result, the route to influence is seen to lie in the field within which action research has been located.

Influence can be reclaimed in a number of ways. Firstly by taking a systemic view it can be argued that if change in the field is the primary purpose of the research then this change is carried forwards and outwards by participants. Second it can be argued that generalisation does occur from action research work. It just occurs differently. Though often particular to one situation, the argument goes, the 'surface detail' of an action research account will work at the level of 'structure' and so allows others to make links to different situations (Winter 2002). In other words generalisation occurs not at the point of writing but at the point of reading. However this refers largely to achieving influence on other action researchers rather than on impacting those policymakers or change agents in the field who expect outcomes and guidance from research rather than stories. Neither argument can escape the challenge that much of action research is limited to a bounded set of actors involved in a localised single case of circumstance.
Gustavsen finds himself wondering how to '*transcend the single case without losing the action element along the road*' (Gustavsen 2003 p.95) and concludes that the answer

lies not in creating a set of several distinct cases but rather in the creation of a series of inter-related happenings. He calls this a social movement where such a movement:

> is a series of events that are linked to each other and where the meaning and construction of each event is part of a broader stream of events and not a self-sufficient element in an aggregate.

(Gustavsen 2003 p.96-97)

Gustavsen's own work with action research groups on a national scale in Norway and run over decades is one articulation of this building of a social movement. In this work he paid particular attention to working in a distributive way and noted that when doing action research this way:

> it becomes more important to create many events of low intensity and diffuse boundaries than fewer events that correspond to the classical notion of a "case"...

(Gustavsen 2003 p.96-97).

In this research I have been exploring work at the systems level that is very much in the spirit of movement building. The resource and longevity of my research project is on a much smaller scale than the projects described by Gustavsen: I cannot hope to build a social movement. However the way I have been linking events with a certain coherence and a third-person focus has relevance. It is akin to creating a systemic happening that might connect to and lend energy to an existing forward-going sustaining movement. A flutter perhaps? My position does differ slightly from Gustavsen's view of achieving scale not purely on the basis of practicality. His social movement building research bases itself on the evolutionary notion that from several events will eventually come new practices and movements for change. As such the many events are sprinkled like seeds in the hope that some will grow and the researcher is distant from the events themselves. In my work there are of course many fewer events, but also my attention as a researcher is very concerned with cultivating something new within these events. The next chapter in particular will describe one such event – the learning history workshop – where I tried to cultivate something new. Similarly in my small group work with B&NES I also was attempting to cultivate something new. This work then is somewhere between the detail

of the single case and the sprinkling approach of the social movement and this has implications for the practice that is described.

Finally, this thesis also explores the possibility of my research achieving a broader scope through the kind of theorisation and analysis that is more typical of conventional research. This neatly leads to the final area of inquiry within action research that is being touched upon here: namely finding a place for some more modernist ideas and methods that might be useful but that have hitherto been shunned by many action researchers.

Inquiry area 3: including elements of modernity

As a former engineer my entrée into action research at the far end of qualitative social science research presented me with some surprises. Having embraced logic and reason for much of my life, I found that many of the societal problems we face today seemed to have originated with Descartes. Put simplistically: from his rationalism had come science, and from science had come the industrial revolution and our modern world. In order to re-imagine a new world, positivism with its rational thought and reductionist ways needed to be put aside. To put it gently, modernity had '*outlived its usefulness'* or more strongly, had a cost of '*ecological devastation… social fragmentation and spiritual impoverishment'* (Reason and Bradbury 2001 p.4). I had no argument with this view. The postmodern way of thinking with its rejection of grand narrative and its celebration of multiplicity felt quite natural to me. I had always held a very ambivalent, uncategoric view of reality. And countering the commonly held view that all scientists must be relentless positivists, I felt that my scientific background seemed to play perfectly with postmodernism. I knew from my microprocessor design days that none of the many models I used were reality. They were forever destined to be just one of many incomplete representations of it.

Neither did I struggle with the socially constructed view of knowledge that has a strong 'kinship' with action research (Gergen and Gergen 2008). Social constructionism proposes that our knowledge of the world is mediated through constructed meanings that are created through cultural and social process. What appears to be fixed in reality is in fact mediated construct. And nowhere more so than in science where the very building blocks of matter - sub-atomic particles – can convincingly be shown to be themselves social constructions (Pickering 1995). The socially constructed view is essential, as the theory chapter showed, for a nuanced discussion of technology.

The socially constructed view has implications too for action which are relevant to later discussions of human agency in the face of 'big issues' such as climate change. A collectively constructed view of reality plays well with the structuralist view that a human's action and beliefs will be shaped by the constructions of the system to which he/she belongs. This naturally raises a question over how much free will a person actually has. Indeed Foucault would answer very little. He proposed that human agents

are mere enactors of the constructed power systems and structures to which they belong (Foucault, Faubion et al. 2000). Structuration theory as put forward by Giddens redresses this powerlessness to a degree by suggesting that the individual and society are mutually co-constructing and this allows some room for individual agency (Giddens 1984). The ideas around human action within this research are not built on such a limited view. Questions about what it is to 'make a difference' are centred more around engaging in an evolutionary process. Though it does not play directly into this discussion about modernity, structuration is introduced here to support the related discussions on human agency that are taken up particularly in part III of this thesis.

Taking a socially constructed view of the low carbon technologies helps to bring technology into a social context and it brings technology onto an epistemological turf that is compatible with action research. In order to do this, some aspects of modernity might be lost. By casting away definiteness, materialism and any hard facts that might be associated with is not something being lost? Overall the strong, and probably necessary, reaction to positivism had resulted in material things, scientific facts and, I hesitate even to say it, *functionality* having no real place in the postpositivist world. I had spent much of my life experimenting and trying to get things to work and I valued this aspiration whilst noting it was a distinctly modernist one. And to summarise: though I found the epistemological underpinnings of action research expansive and exciting, I struggled at times to place my logical, engineering tendencies within them.

My more personal concerns to reconcile different worldviews have been echoed more broadly in the field of action research. In the final chapter of the recent Handbook on Action Research, contributors consider the direction of future action research. From this chapter comes a strong sense that action research must start to contribute to the 'big issues' of our time and that in order to do so it must be more inclusive. The tone is conciliatory. Action research has now ploughed its epistemological furrow and can, indeed must, come out of its trench (Reason and Bradbury 2008a). It must build bridges and '*platforms of co-operation'* (Gustavsen in ibid. p697) with other researchers and practitioners who do similar things under different names. And these bridges, Victor Friedman suggests, might need to find ways of including elements from a view of the world that has been so at odds with much of what action research stands for:

> The implication of this is that positivism is no longer the 'enemy' – To the contrary the time may have come to look for new allies among our old enemies and to create new coalitions in order to face the big challenges"
>
> – Friedman in (Reason and Bradbury 2008a p.698)

So there is a general and a personal mandate to look at what remnants of modernity might be helpful in this research. The inclusion of modernity will be taken up in later discussions about quality and the practice of this sociologically-oriented action research that has, at its heart technologies that are so representative of modernist progress. The principle of inclusivity has more generally informed my research. The approach of learning history relates to this principle too, as the next section will explain.

Coming to Learning History

In Chapter 3 on Theory and Purpose, I set out a central inquiry question of the research as asking how sparse sites of innovation and breakthrough in addressing climate change might in some way be joined up so as to accelerate a more appropriate response across the institutional field in which they occurred. From the discussion in this chapter I have shown that this question might be reframed in action research terms as trying to understand how second- and third-person processes might be successfully linked to bring about systemic change. Several existing action research methods do seem appropriate. Second person processes might help inquire into how breakthrough projects have occurred. Appreciative inquiry, where the processes that have worked well are drawn out, appreciated and fed forward into new plans might build a wider learning from such projects (Ludema, Cooperrider et al. 2001). And third-person processes – for example dialogue conferences as suggested by Gustavsen (Gustavsen 1992) – might then support the propagation of that learning in the system. However in the last section I have described areas of action research itself where I have been inquiring and challenging. These together with my overall research purpose and my practical engineering propensity to 'get things to work' led me to look very critically at any method I might adopt in my research. Learning history, as the next section will outline, was a method that blended well with general action research approaches whilst also affording

the possibility to inquire further into the areas I have outlined above.

Following this logical argument, the next section will describe the learning history method I ‘got to work’ for the purpose of this inquiry. But first, a short digression, into a story that portrays a more weaving and winding path to method. On the surface of it, it might seem to contradict my logical flow. Though, in my view, it is no more or less true.

Coming to method

I was sitting in a Lowcarbonworks meeting in March 2006. I had just started my doctorate. I had a printout of the draft Bradbury/Roth chapter for the second edition Handbook on Action Research on my desk and mentioned it in passing during the meeting. Peter mailed me later and asked me to comment on it if I was reading it. I replied that I had no comment: I'd just been looking to see if it was applicable. But I had concluded it was not. I had read the descriptions and had been put off by the amount of effort involved. Teams of researchers at MIT had worked on just one project team's learning history. I wouldn't be able to do that. Later on, in October 2008, after I had my Merton interview data, I didn't even look back on learning history. Instead I spent days looking through the standard qualitative literature on doing case analysis. Yin wrote portentously:

> too many times, investigators start case studies without having the foggiest notion about how the evidence is to be analysed..the author has known colleagues who have simply ignored their case study data for month after month not knowing what to do with the evidence

(Yin 2003 p.109)

On I went but found that I couldn't pick an approach off the shelf. Most of the approaches from outside of action research brought with them a whole set of interpretive frames I'd have to handle, justify or integrate. Being practical then I pushed the mounting literature to the side. Telling myself it was just a draft, I flexed my fingers and wrote up Merton. I drew in ideas I remembered from learning history but I didn't re-read the paper at that time. I called it a case and Peter said: "that's not a case, it's just someone's story". So I called it a learning history but I knew that it wasn't really that either. It was weeks before I dared go back to the literature and try to understand what I'd done in relation to it. Later when we were presenting our work at a conference, a colleague from the centre wondered if doing learning history had really been my own idea. "We'd been meaning to work on bringing learning history into our action research here for years", she said. I wracked my brains but couldn't remember Peter planting the idea in my head, but perhaps he had subconsciously done so. After all I'm good at picking up what needs to be done. Maybe I picked it up from the ether - the field which was lining itself up to go there. Learning history occupies this great big empty space betwixt action research and standard case-based research. With narrative inquiry on the horizon it is a fascinating territory and one that is crying out to be explored. It's attractive name represents that space and conveys an inherently appealing idea. I think that's what motivated this researcher to get it to work.

Learning History

Learning history is a relatively new action research method that was developed to deepen the learning from innovative groups and to support the diffusion of learning to other groups and organisations (Roth and Bradbury 2008). The approach was first pioneered through '*informed trial and error'* at MIT by Roth and Kleiner who conducted an extensive process of learning history with a large car manufacturer. Their aim was to explore how the learning from a highly performing team within that organisation might be assessed and used in the training of other teams (Roth and Kleiner 1998). They sought to somehow embed in the organisation's memory an experience of the transformational learning that had taken place within this team, '*without destroying the learning value of those efforts'* (ibid p.45). A learning history preserves that environment by taking a storied approach that retains the often more haphazard, context-sensitive, *human* aspects of a tangible event, happening or project. It is a form of insider/outsider research (Van Maanen 1998): the insiders tell their stories. The outsiders listen, write and analyse. Together the insiders and outsiders reflect and learn together. The approach was further explored by Hilary Bradbury's in her doctoral work at the Swedish environmental NGO, The Natural Step (Bradbury 2001). There she wondered how she might best introduce the space for reflection into the values and assumptions that were guiding participants' actions – in other words how might opportunities for double-loop learning be promoted (Torbert 1991). Other researchers have since worked on learning histories in a number of different educational, non-profit and organisational settings. A recent survey of the different learning histories that have been conducted suggests it as an emerging genre that merits *'serious consideration in the field'* of organisational writing and research (Amidon 2007 p.31).

Points of departure

The description of learning history as a genre rather than as a fixed method is helpful in situating my approach to it. The MIT description of the six stages of the learning history process[13] implies a team of researchers, a single project focus and an emphasis on the

[13] In their recent 2008 paper Roth and Bradbury compressed these six stages into four

core team of insiders together with those organisationally close by them (Roth and Kleiner 1998).

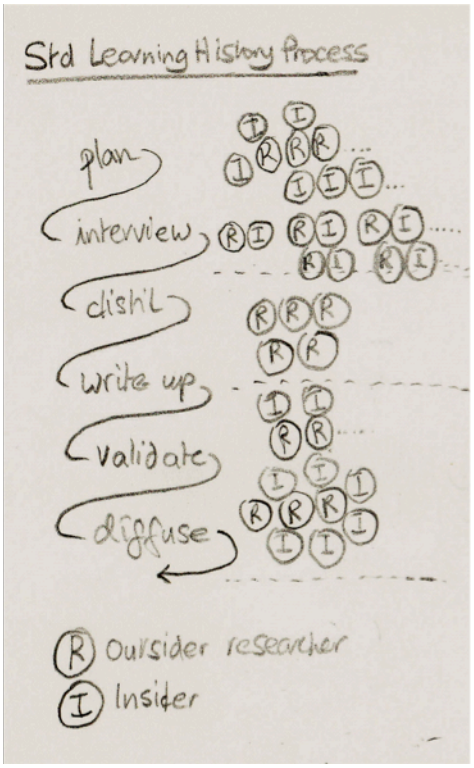


Figure 19: An organisationally focussed Learning History
The original 6-stage MIT Learning History process
Initial Planning: Convening a multi-stakeholder team and negotiation of outcomes. Co-design of the process.
Reflective Interviews: Insider/Outsider team meet in an interview setting in an inquiry process that aims to capture the organisation's learning through the lens of some of the key provocateurs
Distillation: Thematic analysis of the interview material using standard qualitative methods.
Writing Up: Alongside the analysis, a narrative is developed drawing on key sections of the interview to articulate the themes "in a compelling way".
Validation: Checking transcripts with original participants.
Diffusion: Sharing the learning history with original participants and others, clarifying what is valuable and seeking to make the learning history 'actionable'.
Adapted from: (Roth and Kleiner 1998) and (Roth and Bradbury 2008)

Figure 20: The original MIT learning history process

The diagram shows a multitude of researchers involved in a learning history of this kind. In my work I was a lone researcher. I planned to work with a set of different projects from different organisations and then with various actors from across the institutional field. But as I said earlier I became committed to getting a form of learning history to work. So I viewed the differences in my situation as quite simply necessitating some points of departure from the standard approach as I will now describe.

Inter-organisationally situated

A key point of departure was the context of my research. Learning history had, to my knowledge, not been used in the public sector in the UK and never directly on issues of carbon reduction. This offered an exciting opportunity to develop the genre and it gave me some important leverage too. Participants were pleased and supportive to be part of

something new. Not only was the institutional setting of the research new, so too was the way I proposed to work with multiple organisations.

Other learning history researchers have worked across multiple organisations before. Rupesh Shah used learning history to explore collaborative relationship between the corporate giant Shell Oil and the environmental NGO Living Earth (Shah 2001). And Kruschwitz and Roth conducted a learning history across three organisations looking at the collaborative relationships involved in the production of knowledge (Kruschwitz, Roth et al. 1999). However the focus of study was, in these cases, the inter-organisational relationship itself. Such examples I term 'organisationally situated' even though they involved more than one organisation. With that term I mean that the research was primarily interested in and of interest to the organisations involved. By contrast I termed my research 'inter-organisationally situated'. It started with single learning histories of five organisations and then looked at these not purely in relation to each other but in relation to the wider field of organisations – the institutional field - of which they were a part. I depict the difference in a sketch shown in the figure below:

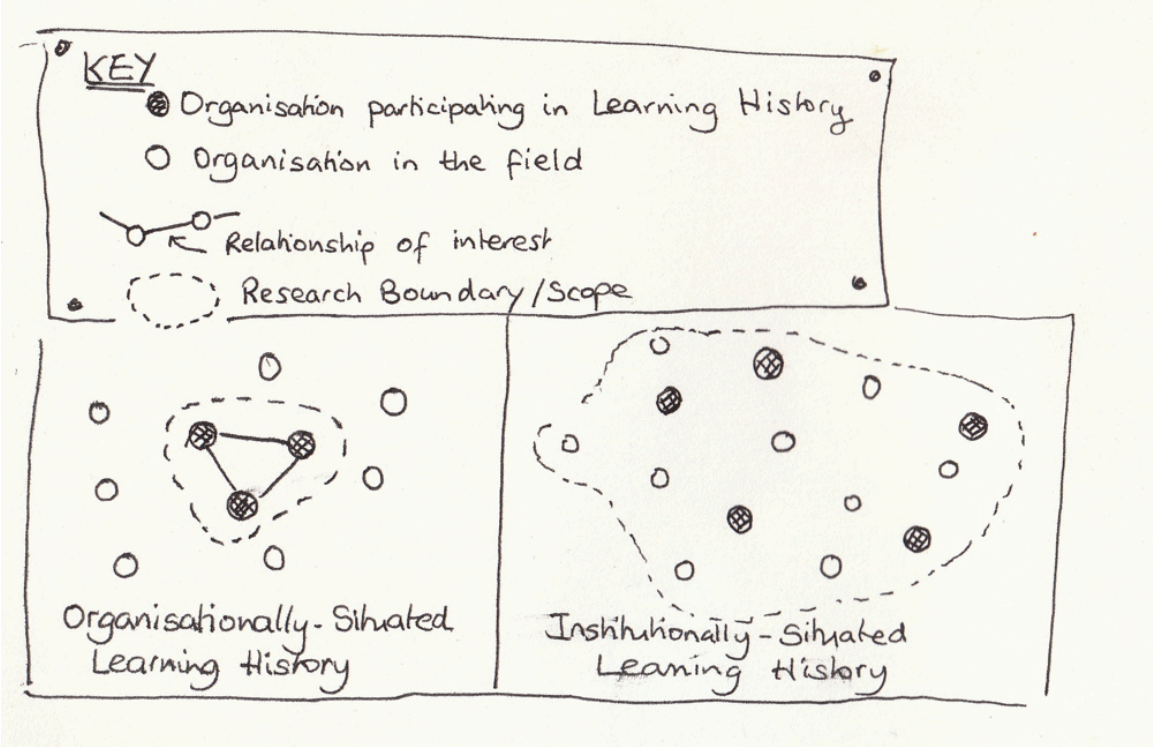


Figure 21: Distinguishing 'organisationally' and 'inter-organisationally' situated learning histories

With the inter-organisationally (or institutionally) situated learning history the boundary of

the research is mobile and it includes other organisations as well as those participating in the creation of a learning history.

Outward-facing, participatively oriented

This inter-organisational emphasis had other implications for the approach I took. The single learning histories I wrote were less comprehensive than a typical organisational learning history. This was a practical necessity – I was only one researcher – but it also made sense strategically. Working at the level of the institutional field, my approach needed to be more outward facing from the start. Diffusion and validation in the system and with third parties started as early as it could in the process. Descriptions of learning history to date typically tend to focus on the earlier stages of the process where insiders and outsiders collaborate. Engagement with the wider organisational context is the last stage of the process and is termed quite passively as "diffusion". Though the importance of diffusion is acknowledged, the description of it can be sketchy and can revert to being prescriptive or even aspirational:

> The document is not to be read by a few key senior managers and then stored in a desk drawer, like a report from a consulting group…. It is chewed over in discussions and workshops, and used as an "actionable check" – a way to spark new experiments and innovations – that may, in turn, lead to new learning histories
>
> (Roth and Kleiner 1998 p.58)

I did not find much in the literature on the actual experience of this final step. There were descriptions of validation and feedback workshops but not much beyond. My wry commentary might be that everyone is too exhausted (financially or emotionally) by that stage to invest sufficient effort in it. Learning history is a time-consuming process and time, inevitably, runs out. Anecdotally I had heard it was hard to sustain energy after the writing of the history for the researcher and the participants. This was borne out by a colleague's description of a learning history he had conducted as part of his MSc. He referred to his sense that the process ended prematurely at the feedback workshop, that it could have gone for another cycle but he had run out of time. And in some cases getting people 'back in the room' at all was a challenge. This was illustrated by Rupesh Shah's account where convening the diffusion workshop proved very difficult indeed

(Shah 2001).

I detected then a challenge in the approach around maintaining the energy to diffuse and sustain the learning history process after the initial writing. At the least it was under-described. With a primary aim of impacting at the institutional level, my approach had to address that by drawing on second- and third- person action research processes to engage more broadly with the field.

Keeping the narrative spirit alive

The spirit of learning history is a narrative one. It draws on the age-old tradition of Oral History (Roth and Senge 1996) where the wisdom and history of a community is passed through the generations via stories that are told, retold and reconstituted afresh with each telling. My Irish roots meant oral history was a loved and familiar tradition to me. Following in this tradition, Roth and Kleiner advise the learning historian to follow the three imperatives of 'staying true to the data', 'true to the story' and 'true to the audience'. Of the story they advise that the histories themselves should have a "*compelling, mythic quality that capture's people's attention*" (Roth and Kleiner 1998 p.44). A popular description of learning history is that it is a **'***contextualized jointly told tale'* (Van Maanen 1998; Bradbury 2001). There are clear links here to that aspect of narrative inquiry that sees narrative as a *'way of knowing'* the goal of which is to:

> Illuminate tacit knowledge or to share theories in use that are implied in the stories and embedded in the accounts of practice. The ultimate goal is to draw lessons that enhance practice.

(Dodge, Ospina et al. 2005 p.292)

However there are challenges for learning history to realise this narrative spirit. It is necessarily a boundary spanning approach that includes, alongside story, analytical themes distilled from the data that can be built into theoretical insights. It draws in more formal methods of qualitative research. Whereas narrative inquirers experience tensions at the boundary where their stories meet the more formalistic/reductionist world that might undervalue or over-interpret them (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) such tensions exist right within the learning history process itself. In its combining of the narrative and the analytical it recalls the psychologist's Bruner's description of there being two distinct

modes of thinking. He called these the narrative mode and the paradigmatic mode that, "(*though complementary) are irreducible to one another*" (Bruner 1986 p.11). He went on to propose that the narrative mode comes naturally to children as young as five who can already recognise a storied structure. Narrative is detailed driven, with a tendency toward '*gripping drama'* that leads to "*believable (though not necessarily "true") historical accounts*" (Bruner 1986 p.13). And significantly it pays attention to wavering human desires what Bruner calls '*the vicissitudes of intention'* (Bruner 1986 p.16). By including the messiness of human endeavour, the potential for learning from others' experiences and contexts is retained. In the theory chapter I described how 'change' in this work is conceptualised as being engaged in and part of an evolutionary process rather than distant from it. The logic of 'visionary' change with all the complexity of chance, swerving intentions and particularity is ideally suited to an exploration through narrative. However the narrative mode is all but absent from most formal organisational settings. Roth and Kleiner call this phenomenon "*mythic deprivation*".

> Most organisations are mythically deprived. Official documents and presentations are bereft of stories; managers talk in terms of highly rationalized, abstract explanations that do not typically tell how their numbers of policies really got evolved…..
>
> People in organisations get their myths the old-fashioned way - at the water cooler, in the rest room, over early morning coffee before everyone get's in, in late nights "watering holes"…..
>
> (Roth and Kleiner 1998 p.55)

Simplistically then one might say that learning history manages to integrate both modes of thought. But does it? In reality I think there are tensions and challenges in doing this that still need to be addressed. By placing narrative and analysis side by side and presenting them back to an organisation as a formal document the researcher is likely to stumble over some difficult choices and confusing moments. Some of this erodes the narrative spirit of the learning history. Learning history documents, in their form, are sometimes less than compelling with little narrative structure. Interviews, and this was

my own experience of being on both sides of a learning history[14], had a tendency to move from point to point rather than along any storied line. I will explore questions of form and myth in later chapters. For now I want to summarise that the final point of departure in my method arose from a personal commitment to narrative and was about exploring how to keep that spirit alive in the learning history. But this personal impetus was very consistent with where my theoretical explorations of change had led me.

Finding the storyline for the research….(Logged as a story to the BLOG[15] in April 2008)

I read some of Rupesh's PhD quite early on. The librarian had grinned at me, I thought a tad malevolently, as she handed me the gigantic tome from behind the desk. But as I sat down and started to read, I became enthralled. I must have made for a strange sight in the library that day - grinning, clucking and shaking my head as I read a very dry looking hardbacked PhD. Rupesh's account of his trip to Nigeria conveyed what it was really like to try to conduct a learning history between two closely related organisations (in his case Shell and the NGO Living Earth). It was fascinating and showed up really interesting issues around power that required attention. I mailed Rupesh to thank him and not long after that we arranged to meet and we went for a long walk along the canal near Bath. I told him I hoped to do a learning history, not of one organisation but of a handful of organisations across local authorities. "What's your common storyline?", he asked, "you need something that binds them together in some way". Together we talked about how it could be "The story of how local authorities innovate for low carbon".

---

[14] I was interviewed for a learning history of the CARPP conducted by Liz Schell from Monash University as part of her doctoral work (in preparation).

[15] Full story logged under "How I got started with the research" on the learning history website http://academicmum.typepad.com/lcw_learning_history_inno/2008/03/a-story-about-t.html

Learning history in an open system

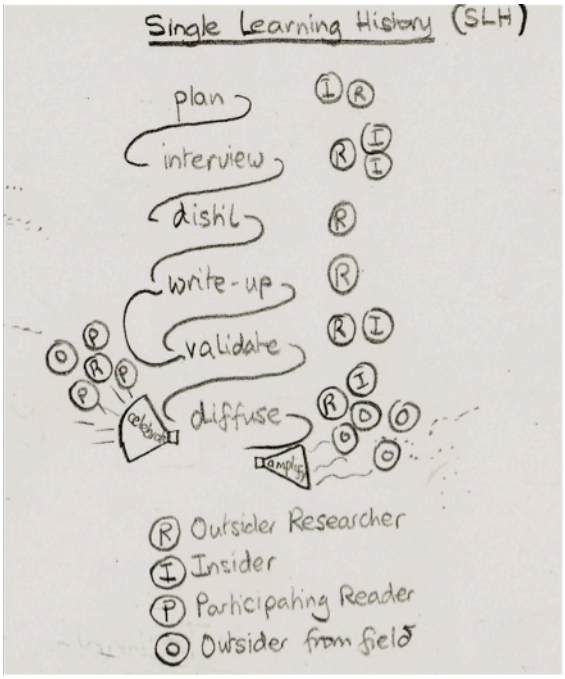
Responding to challenges.

I have reviewed above some of the areas of learning history that I felt merited attention. These points were surfaced by my trying to fit the approach to my research purposes and context but they relate to challenges that apply more generally to learning history. To summarise these points of challenge include: the high investment of time and effort it requires; the difficulties in sustaining engaged participation; the potential for a greater amplification of the learning into the wider system and to other stakeholders and finally, the challenges of restoring a sense of myth using a vehicle normally devoid of any colour or excitement: the organisational document.

I will describe now in more detail the approach of 'learning history in an open system' that resulted from my practical attempt to 'get this genre to work' for my research. In so doing I am suggesting it as an approach for inter-organisational learning and as a response to some of the more general challenges with learning history. I will set the approach out as a proposal with quite a confident and definitional tone. This tone belies the struggles and challenges there are with the proposition. These will unfold as I reflect on my experiences in the field in this and later chapters.

Unlike an organisationally situated learning history, an inter-organisationally situated learning history involves at least two nested levels of engagement, as I will now describe. Firstly single, lighter learning histories are conducted at the organisational level. These are then stitched together to become part of a wider engagement in the institutional field.

Level 1: The single learning history



The single learning history process

Features

Plan: Planning is light involving initial engagement and explaining the process.

Interview: Interviewing is conducted with a view to getting a few perspectives rather than an exhaustive rounded story.

Distil: As with the MIT approach data is processed systematically, themes are distilled.

Write-up: The history is written up in a more mixed and engaging form with a view to narrative unity.

Validate: The written history is checked back

Diffuse: Several levels of diffusion take place – back into the organisation, to others mentioned in the history and out to the wider system.

Figure 22: My suggested single learning history process

The single learning history flow is shown above. It is like the MIT six -stage process but it is lighter and less exhaustive. The process starts with the initial contracting which is done with an individual rather than an organisation. This initial engagement is transactional. The research process is explained in a digestible form; the storyline is discussed and dates and times for interview are set. Just a few interviews are conducted. There can be no pretence that the full story is represented: the aim instead is to *really listen to* and value the stories that are told and, to be *as open and inclusive as possible* in the onward telling of them. During distillation a timeline is created, key events and phases are identified and the transcripts are annotated with reflections and themes that arise from the data. At this stage, sometimes a further interview might be negotiated if an important part of the history is missing. The writing step – and more will be said of the actual form of the history in a later chapter - then pays particular attention to the crafting of an engaging narrative that honours the story(ies) that has been told, whilst simultaneously pointing to the possibility for it to be enriched. The diffusion step builds on this by being proactively participative. Those impacted by the story – I term them 'participating readers' – are not sealed out from the history but welcomed into it. They

are actively invited to engage with the history, to comment and to add their perspectives. This first definition of the single learning history was motivated initially by the necessity to economise effort. Later I came to value the way it supported and celebrated a single narrative. The invitation to participating readers had not been part of my original plan, but it became clear as the research started I needed to explore how others who had been involved might be brought into and included in the process. In this way the boundary of the single learning history is not as fixed as that of other versions of learning history where participants are either involved in the process or they are not. Here the single learning history represents a narrative of a few that, for a time at least, is open and alive to whomever might wish to join in with it. Though the purposes underlying the method described here are *celebration* and *inclusion* this approach is in fact replete with issues of power that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

The diffusion step is already departing from the standard MIT approach by focusing as much on the wider field as it is on the single organisation or champion of origin. For those directly or closely involved, there is the explicit learning agenda as set out in previous writing on learning history. To this agenda, I have added, at the point of diffusion, an explicit agenda of celebration and recognition for what has been achieved. This is with a deliberate view to *inspire* and *amplify* this kind of practice into the wider field. This is a more hot-blooded interpretation of the term diffusion that implies seamless, uncontentious transfer of ideas and practices. And as the later description of the learning history workshop will show, particular care needs to be taken that the celebration is not of the superhuman powers of the protagonists but rather of their glorious but maybe flawed human qualities. Tenacity, self-doubt, ego, pride are all qualities that help to make the celebration real. Similarly inspiration cannot be foisted on the wider field but offered to it in the form of a story that individuals can recognise. Inspiration comes from a connection of one's own experience into the story rather than from the distant admiration of it. The diffusion step then is vital in this interpretation of learning history and is carried out with clear purposes of celebration, participation, inspiration and amplification.

The original reasons for having less exhaustive single learning histories at the organisational level were purely practical. If I was to have time to link the histories at the institutional level then I could not dwell too much on each one. However this practical impetus pushed the methodological direction in an interesting way. I had to find ways to develop and justify being less comprehensive. With that came an interesting tension between being inclusive of everyone and at the same time valuing individual narratives. It also pushed me quite naturally toward the more distributed working at the institutional level as advised by Gustavsen:

> Instead of using much resources in a single spot, resources are spread over a much larger terrain to intervene in as many places in the overall movement as possible.
>
> (Gustavsen 2003 p.96-97).

Level 2: learning history at the institutional level

Single learning histories are then stitched together and intertwined with second- and third- person processes of inquiry to form the institutional learning history. The figure below depicts the sequential process of gathering the five single learning histories and highlights how processes of amplification into the field are to the fore throughout this process.

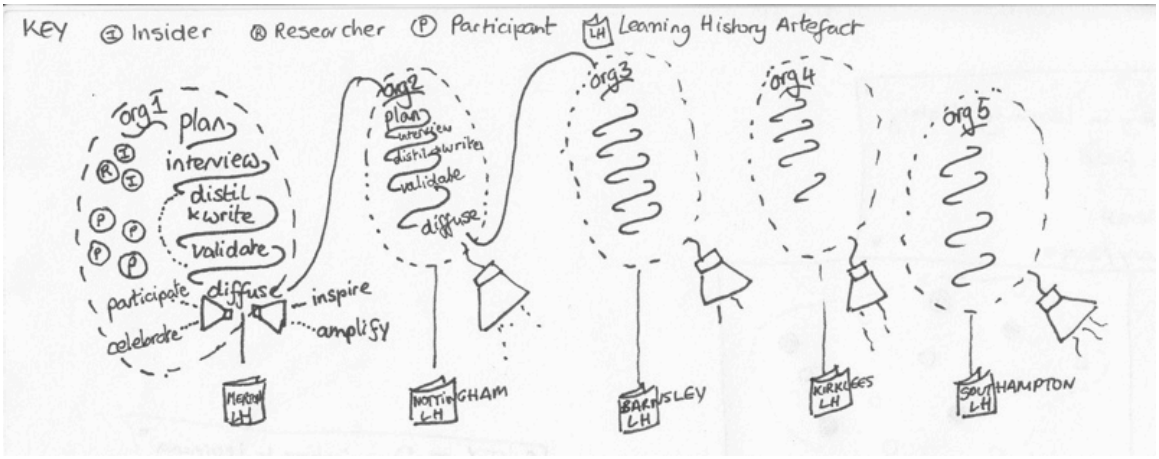


Figure 23: Stitching single learning histories together.

The figure shows the five single learning histories being conducted sequentially though in reality the stages do overlap. At the end of each individual history, the learning is reflected back into the organisation from which it came with the purposes of inviting further participation and celebration around that history. At the same time the history is taken out to the institutional level and beyond with the purposes of inspiring others and amplifying and broadcasting what has happened. Feedback returns from both the inward and outward reflection of the history and this can be folded into the next engagement. The process is open and messy with the outcomes of one engagement informing and shaping the next. Though the individual learning histories describe very different initiatives they share a common thread of process and offer varying perspectives on the common institutional storyline which is: 'how technology-related innovation for carbon reduction comes about in local authorities'. Mirroring the principles outlined at organisational level, this institutional level learning history is not presented as a fait accompli but is offered as something that is *open* and *inclusive*. It is a live process organised around a set of artefacts (histories, stories, pictures) and so on. As it is offered, participation and engagement with the institutional learning history is sought with a view to expanding and enriching it rather than merely disseminating or critiquing it.

This will be evidenced in Chapter 5 when I will describe how I experimented with interactive blogging as a way to open up the institutional learning history and make it inviting. In this way particular attention is paid to keeping the learning history alive through participation and there is a strong suggestion that this needs to be done quite deliberately through a form of mediated action research.

Several experiments with mediating the institutional learning history are described in this thesis. One illustration, of which more shall be said later, is the learning history workshop which expresses several of the characteristics described above. Protagonists from the single learning histories are brought together with interested stakeholders from across the field. There is a sense of celebration and discussion around the single learning histories but these are situated only alongside the stories of the outsiders present which are valued equally. The stories of the moment are those belonging to the participants in the room. However the new insights emerge when participants discuss and create an interaction between the new stories and those of the crafted histories. In this way the storyline is *expanded* through the participative process.

Figure 24 The learning history workshop – expanding into the institutional space

Expanding and including, forever incomplete

There is a recurrent theme of expanding narrative in this method. The storyline flexes and changes rolling forward to include new storylines that are laid alongside the old. Both the written history and the process around it are open. They claim incompleteness and are always inviting of new perspectives and comment.

To summarise then a method for conducting a learning history in an open system is proposed as a way of working at different levels of organisation, with different degrees of participation but with some common principles.

From proposition to experience

The above section proposes a method and starts to draw out some of the distinguishing characteristics of this interpretation of learning history and resituates it in relation to the literature to move it toward. There will be a change of tone in the next section as I move into the experience of the field. The purpose of this is to give an insight into how some of the facets of the method – like those mentioned above - became apparent and deepened as the research proceeded. I have chosen two qualities of method on which to expand.

Tales from the field

Really listening

Theme of 'really listening'

A recurrent theme in the research is the importance of 'really listening' to the story of an individual or organisation.

My first learning history interview was in Merton though I didn't know it at the time. It was only when we were underway that I realised Adrian was telling me a self-contained story that would be fascinating for the research. I had approached our conversation thinking we might inquire together into low carbon innovation and specifically into the story behind Woking. So I did not see our meeting as an interview, but rather as a conversation I hoped would be mutually interesting. Later when I listened to the tape I noticed how hit-and-miss this was. We sometimes hit a conversational riff that was exciting and seemed genuinely inquiring. At other moments however it seemed that my interruptions only knocked Adrian off track from the story he had to tell. When I wrote the learning history – and this was the experience of all of them – the result was very close to the story he had told. So when the time came to sending this simple account back to him I balked.

November 27th, 2006

Sending the Merton learning history back for validation

The buoyancy I felt at the end of last week has been replaced now by a kind of distracted nervousness. On Friday Adrian asked me for what I had written, so I sent it through to him. And immediately started to worry. Would he be shocked by it's simplistic tone? Would he feel I'd just regurgitated his story and added nothing of value? I opened the document again and again to convince myself it was ok. But then I'd close it quickly and be plagued with an image of Adrian shaking his head as he read it.

I need not have worried. In our debrief phonecall Adrian commented that he liked how the history reflected what he said. He went on to say that many researchers came to see

him but they often went off and wrote something different or often never returned. Perhaps then there was value in just listening properly and telling it back in a way that was new, but that was true to the original story. This pattern was to be repeated with all the learning histories. Histories, when returned to the original interviewee, were received with surprise, momentary excitement even.

July, 2007, Quotes from field notes on a debrief call with a learning history participant

I phoned X today to brief him on the learning history I've sent him for validation. When I call however he is already half way through reading….here's some of what he said:

> **X:** Hello Margaret – I'm reading all this stuff you're writing about me! It's great – I'm really enjoying it.
>
> **My thoughts:** (Blimey - he is already on page 24! And he hasn't read any of my briefing notes…he wanted to dive straight into the nitty gritty)
>
> **X**: What's really struck me [reading it] is.. here is someone who's looking at how I think, who is commenting on my thought processes. That is something I don't often do …you're helping me to see what I'm doing …..I'm too close to it you see.

As interviews proceeded I found myself intervening less and listening more. When I went back over the tapes and transcripts I marvelled at how much was in the data when I really engaged with it. The act of 'really listening' in the moment and after with the transcripts seemed a valuable, if unusual thing to do. Though creating the space for the interviews was often difficult, once they had been scheduled, participants seemed to relax into that space, escape into it even. There was never a rush to end the meeting; interviews often over-ran and some participants commented on how good it was to just take the time to sit back and think things over and talk about what had happened. One participant mumbled apologetically at the end of the interview: "Gosh that was like a therapy session". Another, when sent the transcript asked for reassurance: "I hope I didn't ramble on too much".

> It is evident that managers struggle with the concept of reflection – both in supporting it for others and taking the time to do it themselves. Reflection is unnatural in a business culture that predominantly recognizes and rewards action.
>
> (Roth and Kleiner 1998 p.58-59)

Participants were invited into a reflective space during interview. Learning history, like other forms of action research, validates that reflection by lending a listening ear to it. What is unusual about it is that the listening ear is unconditionally pressed to the words of the interviewee and kept there for a long time. The high investment stage of processing transcripts and writing weights those words far more than is usual. Little wonder then that being on the receiving end of this listening is surprising or even unsettling.

The theme would continue beyond the interview process. As I brought the histories to those who might learn from them, I introduced the idea of "active reading" as an exhortation to participants to slow down, notice and value any reactions they had, and to really engage with what was written. I wanted to connect participants into a reflective and different space. I see this now also as an attempt to reproduce the practice of 'really listening' through the research. It had varied success. The first active reader, Thurstan from Brighton & Hove, agreed to read and respond to the histories I was writing. In my 1:1 work with him, he found the 'active reading guidelines' very helpful. They

Figure 25: Active readers 'really listening' to a history?

encouraged him, he said, to get into a good state of mind and to let rip with his comments and feelings which he scribbled over the document. In the later work with B&NES and at the workshop active readers marked up worksheets that I then copied and analysed. Here the responses showed an engaged reading experience but there was an inevitable skimming over detail and nuance. Readers often read hastily and missed a lot of what was described. Over time I came to conclude that one read, however active it might be, was still not enough to get all there was to be had from a history. Here in lay a question then – a deep question on method. Would the culture of busy action that learning history is trying to slow down by creating reflective space ultimately find a way to undermine that space anyway? Learning history necessitates not only the telling of stories but also a capacity to really listen to them? Does learning history hold the attention of our skim-reading, non-listening culture open long enough for something meaningful to happen?

The theme of 'really listening' I first articulated in a co-supervision session in January 2008, when Geoff had been probing me as to what I hoped the research might achieve.

January 2008: Responding to Geoff, Nick and Dave in a supervision session

MG: Just listening to people. That's a thread that has come out of my work that has surprised me...the value there is in really, really listening to one transcript and really valuing what that person who has done a lot of work has to say.

Really listening to my own tapes….

Whilst writing I hastily return to the audiofile of that supervision session. I want to grab a quote from that session to illustrate a point I am going to make about 'gifting'. I open the file. It is an hour and a half long. Damn! I'll never find the quote. I start listening and there is my voice articulating what the research is about, interjected with gleaming insights and probing questions from my co-supervisees. These past three years, I've told and re-told the story of my research, turning it over and again. And if I 'really listen' to just

this session I feel sure there is a richness here that will deepen each time I reflect on it. I start transcribing and resolve to draw some of these excerpts into later chapters[16]. It feels so alive.

Figure 26 'Really listening' to stories at the learning history workshop – a gift?

The theme of 'really listening' is deepening as I write. In that same supervision session my colleagues picked up on the sacrificial nature of this act of listening. Together we discussed how the return of a history to the interviewee was like giving an unexpected gift. This analogy fitted well with the quizzical excitement I'd detected in participants and it fitted too with one of the purposes of the diffusion step, celebration.

So the space for 'really listening' that was opened in interview led to further acts of careful listening in the research that were inherently appreciative. The act of 'really listening' served my hopes for celebration and unexpectedly it also moved me in relation with the participants. What started out as a transactional engagement deepened through the process of appreciation that occurred through the simple act of listening.

From push to pull

Working with 'push-pull' energy was a second practice that emerged from my working in the field with open system learning history. With this research there was a constant

[16] These will appear in chapter 14, "Questions about the Postheroine"

forward-going movement of participants being drawn into the research. And over time I noticed different, switching energies between these participants and found myself developing ways of working with it.

From the outset I wanted to inquire into the value there might be for different kinds of participants in the learning history research and to help me do that I developed a terminology to distinguish them. There were protagonists whose stories were featured in the histories; there were participating readers who were involved in those stories; finally there were 'learners' – I called them active readers - from organisations and sectors near and far, who had something to learn from engaging with the histories.

As I have already described in this chapter, my engagement with the literature on learning history meant that I was already anticipating a difficulty with sustaining protagonists' energy through the process and long enough for them to get value. I worked hard to address this. After writing a history there was a process of signing it off. As we went through this process I punctuated it with checks, both verbal and using feedback forms, as to how the protagonist was experiencing the process and where the value for him or her lay. These checks I called reflection points. Though the primary purpose of the reflection point was evaluative they also represented my more hot-blooded hope that they might continue to aid learning. By pausing and asking participants to reflect I hoped I might be able to keep them engaged for longer and help them to squeeze even more value and inquiry from the process. My starting question as to where there was 'value' became more strategic:

Might reflection points not only assess value but also add value to the process?

Hot-blooded Hope….

My hope that the feedback requests would create space for reflection and learning was logical too. The scientist in me knew this was an experiment that was interesting irrespective of the actual outcome in terms of learning and reflection. The action researcher in me knew that I might never really be able to judge that anyway on the basis of a form. And the human in me just hoped hot-bloodedly that there would be value in this and in a way I could see. Wouldn't it be great if a participant filled in the reflection point form at length showing deepening thoughts emerging from the process? In the course of my research I sometimes caught myself longing for 'good' results – some indication of 'success' in the good old-fashioned

terms of making a great, big, discernible difference. My shorthand for this was 'ego' – though I wonder if it wasn't something a little subtler. Holding a systemic view of change felt wearing at times. Especially for an achiever like me.

This hope proved somewhat idealistic. Sustaining quality engagement with participants beyond the interview and especially after the history had been sent back to them was difficult. Participants did fill out the forms and returned them to me with interesting insights but there was little time or will for follow-up discussion. And with the exception of Southampton it seemed to land more as a job I'd asked participants to do rather than as a potentially valuable aid to their reflection. So, probably like many a learning historian before me, I noticed an overall trend of disengagement from participants after the history had been finalised and discussed with them. Though I had expected this intellectually the felt experience of it was akin to a sense of impending failure. My shiny inquiry question about value was sometimes flipping into a panicky frustrated:

How the bloody hell can people be kept engaged when their day-to-day work is so demanding?

And when I mentally scrolled to the horizons of the research plan there loomed a multi-stakeholder workshop where the protagonists would gather and share learning. No matter how I tried I couldn't quite visualise a situation where these participants might, as Adrian put it, '*get out from their metaphorical desks*'[17] and attend such a workshop. It felt exhausting to think of pushing to get them 'back in the room'. It was in the midst of this gloomy mindset that I had an experience of the liberating switch from 'push' to 'pull' energy.

Journal Entry, May 14th, 2007

Push and pull with participants – from protagonists to learners

It is such a slog getting the [current] history signed off. I'm getting no replies to my mails. Gosh I really noticed a difference in energy when I showed Thurstan the Merton learning history at our meeting in

[17] I often found myself using quotes or phrases from the learning histories – particularly the Merton History but others as well. I wondered if in the end, it was not I who was deriving most value and learning from the whole process due to my immersion in the material.

Brighton last week. When I casually proffered the Merton history across the table by way of illustration, he grasped it and, became involved in it immediately, not letting me turn the page. I felt him being drawn 'pulled to' the research rather than me having 'pushing him along' into it. I think it'd do me, as a researcher, as well as the research, a world of good to be dealing in some 'pull' situations for a change.

The passage below describes a moment when my own energy that had been depleted by trying to keep the research going with some participants was considerably boosted by a newcomer's interest in it. This caused me to question afresh where the value in the process lay for participants and highlighted the 'pull' energy as a distinctive and important feature of open system learning history.

Noticing Thurstan's receptivity to the research and his genuine curiosity when I showed him the Merton learning history I remember thinking fast in the meeting. How best might he become involved? The Merton history felt like an offering, a discussion point that 'pulled' him into the research in a mutually useful way. He didn't have a readymade case to feature. He seemed to represent instead the next wave of innovators. By the end of the meeting we had agreed to work together. Thurstan would be the first 'active reader' of the learning histories as I developed them. Though there were still four more histories to be written there was a shift in the inquiry that night from protagonists to third party learners ('active readers') and the start of a real appreciation of the role learners and readers would play in bringing the histories to life. I realised that if I worked with the 'pull' energy of the research, then participants could self-select into and out of the process according to where the value for them lay. When I worked with 'push' energy I was determining where the value *should* be and trying to impose that. There would be a tension throughout the research between the two. Sometimes I needed to push with my procedures, follow-up calls and careful conversations to keep participants engaged in what was ultimately a rewarding experience. However balancing that with periods of letting go of 'push' and working with 'pull' sustained and nourished the research and kept it alive. It was this conscious switching from 'push' to 'pull' that energised the learning history workshop event that is the subject of the next chapter.

Learning point: work with 'push' and 'pull'

If I can create the opportunities those who have most value to get from the research may well be drawn to it at the appropriate time. Working with 'pull' feels different to working with

'push' practically and emotionally for the research. It creates a different set of questions and challenges that have to do with creating opportunities and thinking fast when they do come along. Working with 'push' has to do with tenacity, robustness and clear-sighted purpose.

Closing this Chapter

The arrival at a method I have called "learning history in an open system" has been explained in the context of personal life experience, project aspirations and the existing literature on action research and learning history. The method has been placed as an interpretation of the learning history genre and some of its qualities as distinct from other interpretations have been discussed. By drawing on my experiences in the field, I have expanded upon two practices associated with the method. Further detailed micro-practices of method will be similarly introduced in later chapters. The next chapter brings some of the key elements of method to life with a discussion of the learning history workshop and its relationship to questions of scope.