8. Questions of Learning History: Wittgenstein's Ladder or Trojan horse?

The last chapter showed, that by opening up the story of Merton and inviting in new perspectives, I started to value the pluralistic dimension of learning history as much as I valued the story it told. I noticed how the value and potential for learning was different for each participant and depended on when and where they engaged with the process. The further this opening process went, the more it contributed to the validity of the original history by layering it with the voices and questions of others – so democratising it – but also taking it further from one agreed rendition of what had happened. The idea of the history conveying a single 'truthful' account was just not compatible with this pluralistic view. Yet Roth and Kleiner write of developing organisational memory through learning history and the singular tense suggests coherence and agreement. So what is the purpose of learning history in terms of charting history? Is it a means of hearing many histories or a way of collectively agreeing one? Overall there was a persistent question that recurred throughout my research: *just what is learning history?* In this chapter I will explore different ways of answering it. First a theoretical backdrop to this discussion will be set out.

Pluralism vs. Unity: Introducing Rhodes

In Summer 2008 I was nearing the end of my field research and I was struggling to articulate what it was I had been doing in terms of 'learning'. I had departed from the creation of a single history to the creation of many and the gathering of stories around them. The histories had been written; perspectives on these had been gathered and the workshop had taken place in which everyone had told their own stories. I was involved in

my final activities – the creation of the website and the small group work with my local council B&NES. Learning did seem to be occurring. All kinds of narratives were being created or retold. And I was involved with several organisations. How did this relate any more to learning history? In a wild moment I typed in *narrative*, *organisational*, and *learning* into Google scholar. To my surprise not many relevant looking papers popped up. I felt like I had landed in an in-between place. There was one near the top of the list by an Australian scholar of organisational studies called Carl Rhodes who has written widely on issues related to knowledge, language, culture and learning in organisations. In this paper he was proposing a narrative approach to organisational change and learning based on the gathering and reporting of stories. It was on reading this that I immediately recognised what it was I had been doing. I will set out a brief précis of Rhodes' argument before continuing.

Rhodes argued that there is a paradox between the organisational ideals of learning and diversity. Organisational learning, as popularised by writers like Peter Senge and Argyris & Schon suggest that, like individuals, an organisation is an entity that can be transformed through processes of learning (Argyris and Schon 1976; Senge 2006). The processes for learning draw on action science. Learning occurs when individuals and groups reflect on the relationship between what it is they do (the embodied theory) and what it is they or the organisation says they do (the espoused theory) (Argyris and Schon 1976). Within this set of ideas, Rhodes says, and this is crucial, learning is framed as an occurrence of culture change. The practices of individuals and groups who have learnt permeate to others in the organisation. In this way learning is conceptualised as a unifying process where something overall is 'learnt'.

Rhodes then poses a paradox for organisational learning when he looks at it through the lens of diversity and difference:

> How can members of an organisation be considered diverse and individual while at the same time they are encouraged towards socialisation by the manufactured consensus of organisational culture?
>
> (Rhodes 1996 p.2)

By alerting us to the homogenising effects of organisational learning and the paradox it poses for diversity, he points out that indeed any meta-ideal that evokes culture change

suffers the same tension. And this includes the ideal of diversity itself! Rhodes goes on to draw on the work of Aaltio-Marjosola to suggest the only way past this is to abandon meta-cultural ideals:

> The postmodern alternative is to abandon "diversity" as a meta-cultural ideal and replace it with research into organisations which take into account their unique multicultural nature and tries to understand the multiplicity of organisational realities (Aaltio-Marjosola 1994)

(Rhodes 1996 p.2)

Rhodes went on to propose a "pluralistic approach to the use of storytelling" was a research approach to learning that would affirm a multiplicity of organisational realities. This rejection of one single reality is in touch with Hazen's description of an organisation as multi-voiced and polyphonic (Hazen 1993). She writes that when organisations are conceived in this way we:

> begin to hear differences and possibilities. We discover that each voice, each person is his or her centre of any organisation. And it is from these dynamic centres that change occurs.

(Hazen 1993 p.16)

When I read Rhodes' description of narrative learning and Hazen's term polyphony I recognised it as what I was doing. I could see how I had departed somewhat from the roots of learning history and I had gone further into narrative and into wider participation. Whereas Roth and Kleiner might describe learning history as the development of organisational memory, perhaps even the creation of a new memory, I was working more to create multiple histories and memories and allow them to be tolerant of each other. Rhodes was naming that for me as postmodern.

The postmodern frame brings legitimacy and validity into conflict with each other. Rhodes draws on the influential postmodernist philosopher Lyotard (Lyotard 1984) to suggest that if "truths" are "legitimated" within a discourse then ideals such as organisational learning and diversity are merely communicating a sense of change and progress whilst actually retaining the modernist status quo. So such truths will be invalid. He suggests that:

> To research a postmodern organisational learning I am not seeking to develop a consensus about the criteria for legitimation or to represent the whole, but rather to expose part of the multiplicity of perspectives available in the organisational setting.….To avoid further legitimisation on the part of the "author", stories are presented as first person narratives with the implicit recognition that this "author" is in possession of only one voice"
>
> (Rhodes 1996 p.5)

So he actively resists overly legitimising stories. This resonates with the conclusions I reached in the last chapter. There I found that the most appropriate practice to redress the inevitable imbalances of power that arise when a story is told, is to be very clear about the limits of its legitimacy and to affirm this by opening the story up for other equally valid perspectives. But the last chapter also highlighted some of the problems implicit in this position of Rhodes. For instance I found that processes of legitimation are generally outside the control of the researcher. Once told, a story's legitimacy is in the hands of its reader/listenership.

Though not without its challenges then, this framing helped me place and name what I was doing: it was narrative-based, postmodern organisational/institutional learning. The narrative element strengthened my pursuit of the mythic that in Chapter 4 I described can prove elusive with forms of learning history. And the postmodern element helped me conceptualise learning as an active, participative process of colouring, or texturing the organisational field with stories so as to acknowledge multiple memories and to create multiple possible futures.

This introductory piece illustrates how my experiences led me into a tangle as to what exactly it was I was doing and where the value in this work lay. It also shows how I tried to find a way to make sense of the tangle, to name it in some way.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will broaden out to trace this persistent question as to the nature of the learning history as it recurred through the research. I will describe the various ways I engaged with this question using placebos, horses and ladders.

Placebos, Horses, Ladders

The persistent question: *just what is learning history?* Or *just what am I doing here?* arose already during the early stages of the research and in this section I show it as it was at those times. In Chapter 4 I describe how in December 2006 I met up with Rupesh Shah. At that time I was writing up the Merton history, still in its single-voiced form, and I was grappling with all the micro-decisions that were arising from the writing and validation of it.

December 1st, 2006: The Persistent Question

A Placebo: would a picture have done just as well?

It was fascinating to speak to Rupesh yesterday – about the mechanics of doing the learning history…[later] A question we talked about was the rigour [by which we meant the structured effort] of the learning history process and we started to wonder about all that rigour. So maybe learning history is like a placebo, or a bridge between old- and new- paradigm thinking: a safe way to bring 'softer' thinking into our rationalistic reduced world. We agreed that as much as the people feeding into the learning history have their own perspectives, so too is the manner in which they draw from it. So taking this to its natural conclusion, perhaps if you didn't do that heavy, rigorous process but if you just showed all the learners a picture, they'd each reach whatever edge or learning they needed to be at. So is learning history merely a meek sheep in elaborate wolves clothing, a device for getting people to pause and have the space to see what they wish to see? So why not use co-operative inquiry instead? On the surface of it the difference is the role of the facilitator. I think there's a niggly deeper question here though: "does all the rigour and structure of learning history belong really in the new paradigm?" It has this old-paradigm, striving feel to it. To be honest, and yes maybe this is my engineering background, but I think, "yes it does!" Being explicit about the process of coming up with an interpretation frames that interpretation in a particularly gentle way and, the clearer this is done, surely the easier is the route is to learning?

Within that journal entry I can see the start of a set of questions that I carried throughout my research. The shorthand question became: "well would a picture have done just as well?" or in more weary moments "do I really need to be doing all this hard work just to start a conversation?" Or in terms of action research: "just how much does the researcher need to mediate"? I described in Chapter 4 that I was drawn to learning history because it distinguished insider and outsider researchers and played to their

respective strengths. Research that brought the savvy, time-pressured insider and the distant, reflective outsider together as co-researchers would be powerful. Unlike other forms of action research, the researcher had a different voice and brought something into the process. The question was how much to bring in and what purpose did it serve?

Later I started to distinguish much more clearly the "device" – the learning history document - from the "process" of it but I still asked the same kind of question.

March 30th, 2007: The Persistent Question

A Trojan horse with the cunning researcher in its belly?

When I started with the learning history, Rupesh and I had wondered was it a placebo – an apparency where a blank canvas would do. In other words people will learn what they are ready to learn. But the placebo is necessary as it comforts and looks familiar so it is a learning conductor. I then moved on from this 'placebo' notion to the notion of 'Trojan horse' an analogy I find helpful when thinking about action research in general but I think it particularly applies to the learning history. I likened it to the Trojan horse because of its apparent normality in relation to how business is done – the incumbent regime. The learning history is a document, it has analysis, and it has robust and well-respected words in its title: 'Learning' and 'History'. An organisation could easily be lured into looking at its label and thinking 'mmm – that sounds nice, I'll have one of those'. Reified like that, the action research process that goes with it comes in via the back door. Though the Trojan horse is a good analogy its suggestion of stealth makes me uncomfortable. The metaphor implies there will be disconnect between what I say I'm doing and what I actually do. I find myself thinking again about a way of describing learning history that catches the wholeness of the process as well as the object itself…

The Trojan horse metaphor I carried along with me too though I as you can see I didn't like the manipulation it suggested. And as I reflect now it was, well, a bit wooden and unyielding! Was I really suggesting the learning history document was the horse and then within its belly lay the action research process that went with it? This was setting the 'thing' and the 'process' too distinctly apart. However what the Trojan horse idea does convey is this notion again of mediation through the familiar. Of using what is familiar in the incumbent regime to engage it and lead it safely, and its own time, to some new understanding that is of value. Some kind of bridging between the two worlds is needed and it was when I tried to put this into words for Geoff, in a supervision

session in mid-2008 that he mentioned Wittgenstein's Ladder. This led me then to my most recent response to the persistent question.

In his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, the 20th century philosopher Wittgenstein described a quandary that arises when trying to reach what lies beyond the bounds of what can be described in language and logic (Wittgenstein 1921). The realm of nonsense or the senseless is the mystical world of a silent reality: "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" [25]. So that which is described in words is itself limited and not of the world. To resolve the quandary, Wittgenstein offers his ladder metaphor. He proposes that language and logic such as that put forth in his Tractatus is like a ladder that can be climbed in order "to see the world rightly". However once the ladder has been climbed it must be seen for the nonsense it is and thrown away. Wittgenstein's ladder is a logical one and assumes that at the top of it the world is seen 'rightly'. This positivist and linear view of how knowledge of the world might be gained is very different to my more action researchy view that conceives knowledge as the result of an iterative process of interwoven experience, presentation, proposition and practice. Yet I felt the metaphor still worked with my broader definition of knowledge and with a less fixed view of the ladder's destination.

The ladder suggests learning to me as a continuous deepening (or rising?) process of moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar. There are, no doubt, many possible ladders. Drawing a picture and facilitating processes of conversation around it as Rupesh and I had discussed might well be one of them. But I think there is something about the learning history in its form - as a document and a process - that creates a robust ladder and that encourages a safe movement from rung to rung. So on hearing me try to answer my persistent question Geoff had reflected back to me a perfect metaphor that caught the elegance of the learning history process that I was trying to articulate. The rest of this chapter develops this metaphor in the light of the theoretical re-situation at the start of the chapter that posed learning history as a postmodern way of working. It takes us onto the ladder and explores learning history as a progression along its rungs.

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[25] The source for this paragraph's explanation is: Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: Downloaded from http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/ on (21/11/2008)

Learning History: as Wittgenstein's Ladder

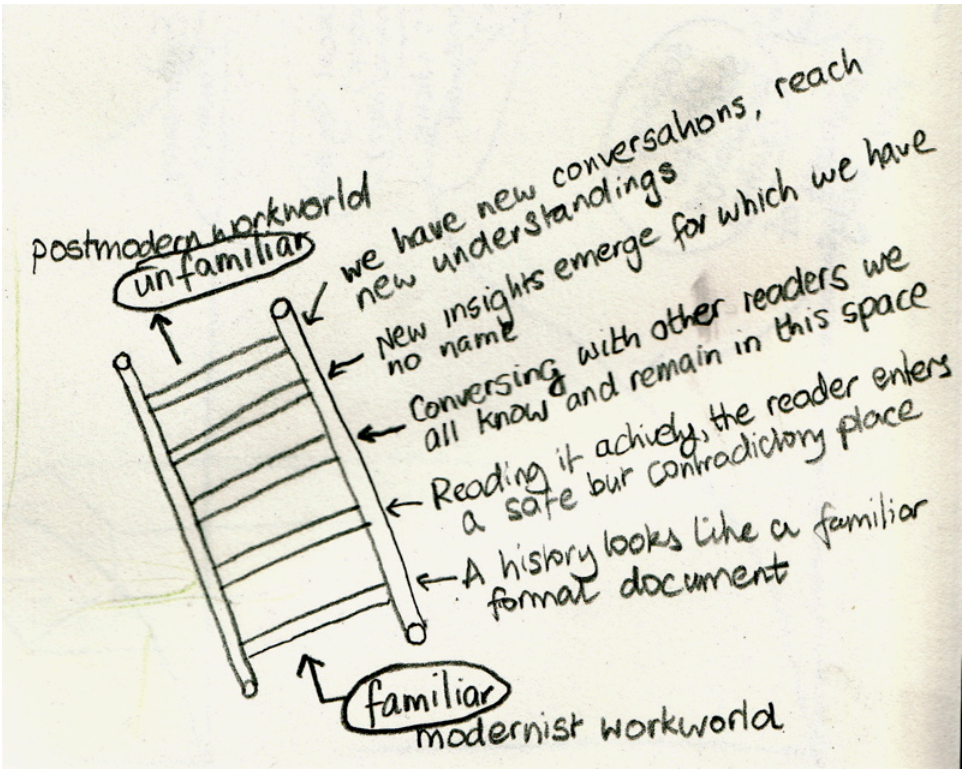

Figure 32 Suggestion of a progression up Wittgenstein's ladder

Starting with the history document itself that is close enough to the familiar modernist ideas on which our workworld is built, a learning history engagement follows a gentle progression into a less familiar, more postmodern space of contradiction and multiplicity. I am suggesting that learning takes place ever more deeply along this progression from the familiar to the unfamiliar. In the figure above I have sketched a possible, top-of-the-head ladder. Now, drawing on examples from across the research I will describe each rung in an attempt to tease out a deeper understanding of the value of this kind of research and how it facilitates learning.

Early rungs: the familiar

My early engagement with participants about the research was straightforward and had an emphasis on the tangibles. I described the research simply and inevitably the description I used in those early days emphasised the output – the "history" - that would

result or was resulting from the research. I had an A4 sheet that covered the highlights of the research (see Appendix D). This offering used familiar language and was received very well. And my short description of action research – as a process that sought to have value for participants - was welcomed with open arms. I thought at first that focussing just on the history 'object' might be misleading. However I came to realise over time that the contracting process moved from the transactional to the relational and that what was necessary was a practice of explaining enough at the right time and guiding the process forward to the next stage whilst giving the participant options along the way.

Once histories were written, the process still always started with the familiar and centred on the 'object' – the history document. In the flyer for the workshop (see Appendix E) participants were invited to hear about and read some of the five learning histories. The difference to case study was explained but that explanation was familiar too. It wasn't a case study, but close enough to one to need to be distinguished from it.

Similarly with the small group work at B&NES the histories were also the familiar and interesting means of enticing participants onto the ladder. By the time I contracted with my insider contact there, Jane, and we invited people to the seminars, we were able to offer something familiar and interesting: the histories of five well-known local authority carbon reduction projects.

Next rungs: unfamiliar aesthetic appeal

The idea then of a history sounded familiar enough for participants to get going or to get interested at least in the research. Then there was the history itself. In an earlier story in Chapter 4 I described how, in my first meeting with Thurstan his interest had suddenly picked up when I showed him the Merton history I had written. I will write about choices of form in Chapter 9, but here I want to say that the choice of form as something unfamiliar and engaging was very significant. Once I had written Merton I could show new participants what the output of our work together might look like and the reaction was invariably one of increased anticipation or appreciation along the lines of: "that looks a lot more interesting than the kind of documents we usually write". For the workshop I agonised over the form of the histories and finally settled on an A5 booklet format that required endless reformatting.

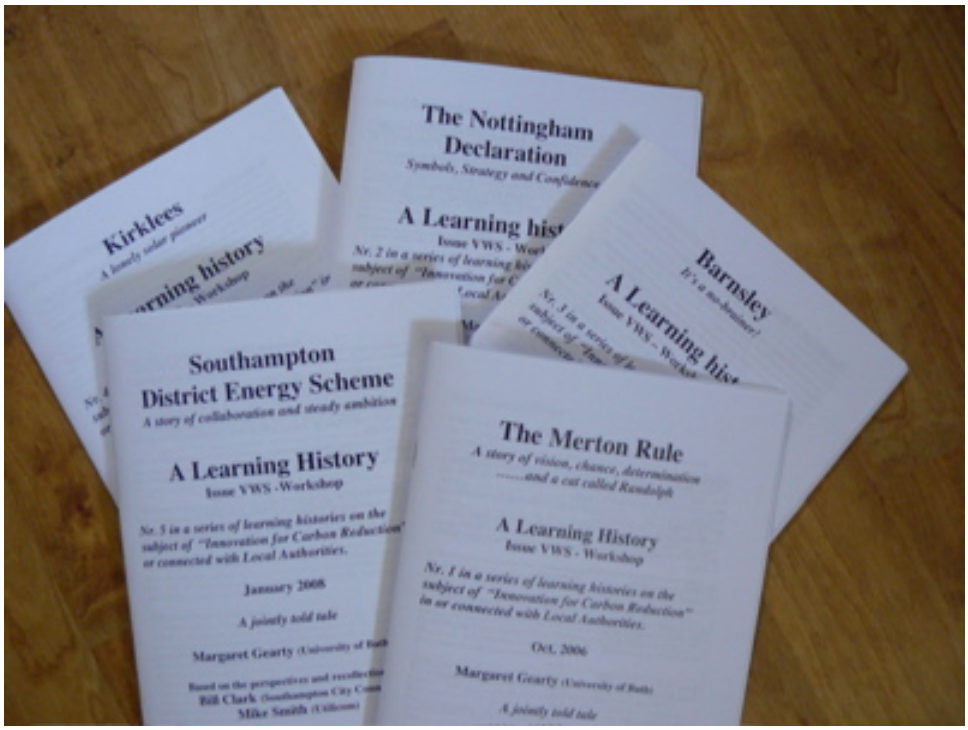

Figure 33 The learning history booklets

But in the end it was worth it. At our workshop briefing meeting my colleagues and I couldn't help ourselves "oohing" over the little colour booklets, flicking through them, touching them. They were aesthetically very pleasing. So it was their very unfamiliarity that this time appealed against the familiarity of what they purported to be.

I will describe later in Chapter 12 how, when I was preparing the final group session for B&NES, I wrote a short learning history of our work together and circulated it. The next week the final workshop was fully attended and I wondered again what role the unfamiliar, but attractive form of this history had played in drawing everyone back into the room.

Aesthetic appeal and readability are important elements to keep the process of learning history alive. I wonder is this the rung that has sometimes been missing from other forms of learning history when researchers like Rupesh and colleagues on the Lowcarbonworks project reported difficulty re-convening participants to read or engage with a written history?

Another rung: relaxed contradiction

This rung has been described in a few places already. In the 1:1 work, when Thurstan read Merton first he described the simultaneous feelings of annoyance and respect it evoked. During perspective gathering I described how I found myself in a place of being able to hold contradictory frames – a dispassion together with a passion – in almost the same moment. And during the workshop when participants heard summaries of the learning history stories they expressed a melee of feelings in relation to these stories as follows:

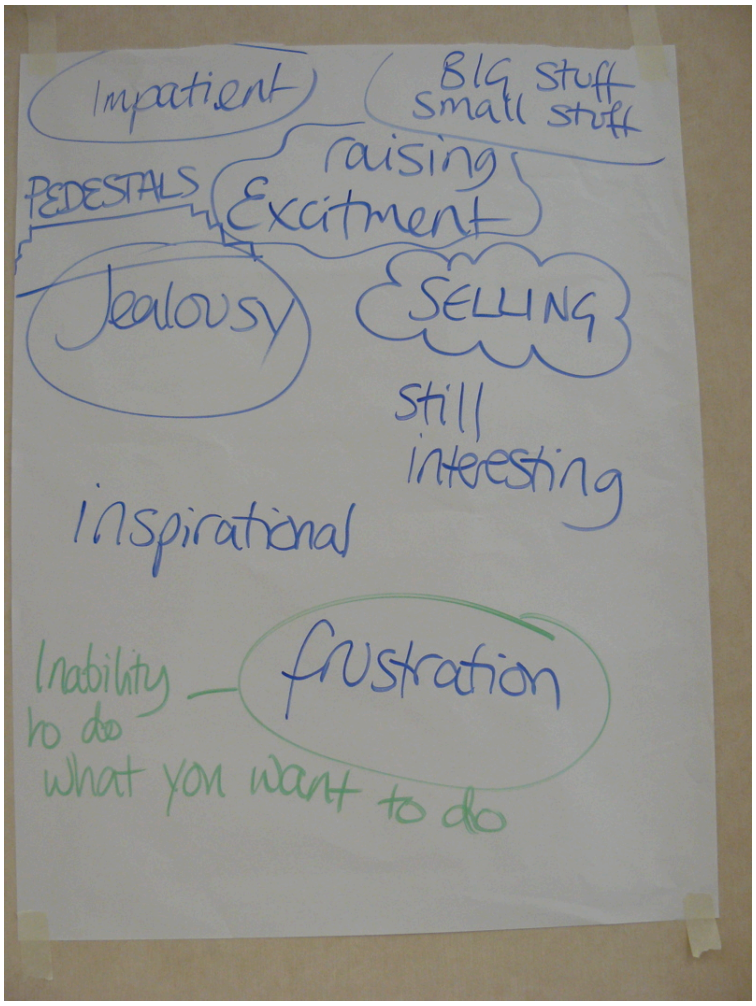

Figure 34 Relaxed contradictory feelings about learning history stories

This melee was reflected in the workbooks that were always filled out by participants (at the workshop and in the small group work) shortly after they completed reading a learning history. The workbooks revealed readers grappling with complex ideas, questions and feelings simultaneously. Sometimes they would comment too on their

experience of being in this space. As one reader of Merton wrote:

> **Workshop participant:** I liked the sense of story direction and drama - I liked reading it, but somehow didn't quite feel satisfied. I suppose because it's a real-life piecemeal messy kind of story.

Commenting on reading Merton (from workbook), Feb 2008

At the workshop, when some 25 people settled down to read the learning histories the atmosphere in the room was intense and different and the sudden experience of this as unfamiliar took my breath away. Whispering to my friend and colleague Paul I said, "goodness, I hadn't anticipated this, it is scary". Paul, whose background is in psychology, countered with the observation that the intensity of the experience was due in part to individuals being helped, psychologically into a different space where contradictions, stories, incompleteness can happily reside. I found the observation very helpful at the time and even more so now as I see the reading as a further experience of the "familiar" (experience of the messy complexities of life) placed within the "unfamiliar" setting (the world of solutions, targets and results). And there was sometimes resistance

Figure 35 Individual reading: entering a familiar space in an unfamiliar way?

to the unfamiliar request to read. At the end of the workshop big read one participant was clearly frustrated with his read and shouted out: "complete rubbish" or words to that

effect. My stomach did its now familiar flip. Later I reflected that this man had come late to the workshop and had missed the framing session the night before. But I wondered too if his frustration had been to do with the unfamiliar request to sit down and read something intently for forty minutes as opposed to getting on with more familiar conference business of presentations and discussions. His harsh reaction was echoed by gentler moments of resistance at B&NES when participants either failed to read or only settled down to it when coaxed. I came to see my request to *really read* and engage with a long document as inherently counter-cultural in a world of executive summary and skim reading.

So reaching this place of "relaxed contradiction" via the read is challenging. As much as its engaging form might draw some readers comfortably in, its length and unfamiliarity might alienate others. And as the perspective gathering of the last chapter illustrated, a place of contradiction might be reached – but it may be one that is far from relaxed. Some 'participating readers' of the last chapter were ushered into a place of shocked contradiction when they opened a "history" about something of which they were part but which was not containing their voices. It seems then that a quality read – by which I mean one that is open, engaged and not skewed by a strong reaction – necessitates some careful facilitation and explanation. Engagement was best when readers had been properly briefed about the research and why they were being asked to read the history.

Rhodes points out that with postmodern organisational learning oppositional accounts should be actively sought because it is this that will allow the "*organisation to see the inherent differences in how organisational members make sense of their organisational experience*" (Rhodes 1996 p.3). With learning history of the type I am describing, I am suggesting that opposition is not an end in itself but an indicator of reaching that important place of contradiction. And I am suggesting that how a participant experiences that place requires some work and care on the part of the facilitating historian. With learning history in this research the key point would seem that the document, with its unusual form and its mythic quality has the potential to open up a space of relaxed contradiction. However realising this potential is an important rung of the ladder. And it is not a self-evident step but one that depends not only on the form and content of the history but also on the way in which it is read.

Next rungs: conversing in this space

The next rung of the ladder brings participants together in a new encounter. Participants enter this space and meet each other with some shared though perhaps highly individual experience of the previous rung on which they have engaged with a learning history. It is from this shared experience of the unfamiliar that new conversations are sprung and if the space remains relaxed and open to contradiction and multiple perspectives then such conversations might remain polyphonic and somehow be 'new'.

Figure 36: Conversations in a new space - sharing experiences and responses

With the perspective gathering of the last chapter new conversations were eventually sprung as the highly individual experiences of the read were slowly brought together until they no longer repelled each other. At the learning history workshop, the space was opened more gently by "the big read" and afterwards remained open and complex. Through graphical facilitation, multiple responses to the histories were invited that could be laid side by side on large colourful pre-prepared posters. Polyphony was further legitimised through group work and story circles where everyone's story was invited. Similarly in the small group work with B&NES exercises were used to encourage the opening up of a wider and different conversation around the histories.

Outputs can be generated from the conversations in this new space – but they are messy, unresolved and contingent.

Figure 37 Outputs from conversations on this rung are messy and complex (Workshop outputs (left), and B&NES session 2 output (right))

When collectively a group can reside in this world of relaxed contradiction then to some extent a normalisation of an unfamiliar experience occurs. This may be fleeting, but for a time at least a group occupies a space in which the complex and the contradictory are on the table and can inconclusively but productively be discussed. With the perspective gathering about Merton we almost fell off the ladder but ultimately did reach this space of collective relaxed contradiction. At the workshop and with B&NES, participants were guided through structure more safely into this space. Several workshop participants commented on how helpful it was to share their learning experience with others. At the workshop Thurstan, who had done 1:1 work with the histories, was in a position to contrast the experience of this rung with the earlier rungs. Both were of value he felt, but the collaborative experience seems to have been more deeply rewarding:

> **Thurstan:** Above all else it's given me permission to reflect in an incredibly busy job ….and here [at the workshop] it's reflecting with other people – many of whom have come from the same sort of situation – and that's fantastic! The individual reading is very much noises in your own

> head – this [the workshop] is noises in yours and other peoples heads and slightly more purposeful through structure …[26]
>
> From recorded voxpops at workshop (Feb 2008)

On this rung of the ladder then is a collective experience of learning that resonates across the literature. From critical participatory action research it is like what Stephen Kemmis has described as the opening of a "*communicative space*" where groups "*encounter each other in a slightly unusual and slightly formal way*" that speaks to the "*inclusive, collective, transformative nature*" of the aims of this kind of action research (Kemmis 2001 p.127). These aims resonate well with the joined-up learning agenda at the heart of this research. From the organisational learning literature come similar suggestions that it is through conversation and collaborative encounter that learning takes place. An extensive survey of the organisational change literature that was commissioned by the government to explore the relevance of that literature to the very context of this research – local government – concluded with some recommendations for knowledge transfer and learning within local government. Noting that organisational learning is a social process the report stressed:

> The importance of developing forums for interaction where practitioners can engage with each other and develop learning relationships across traditional organisational boundaries.
>
> (Rashman, Withers et al. 2008 p.102)

Asking what kinds of conversations might create these learning relationships helps to enliven this dry recommendation. In her exploration of innovation in the context of local authorities, MSc student Helen Goulden drew on work of complexity scientist Patricia Shaw and the innovation theorist Jose Fonseca's work to liken innovation to a vortex that is at once sustained and transformed through conversation and indeed misunderstanding:

> Conversations are absorbed into the 'structure' continually creating and perpetuating yet transforming the structure.

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[26] You can hear the full audio clip on the learning history website on http://academicmum.typepad.com/lcw_learning_history_inno/2008/04/thurstan-reflec.html

(Goulden 2006 p.44)

And so the notion of conversations in a new and different space as a means to learning and transformation is widespread. And it is, in many ways, an action research ideal. It was probably our familiarity with this ideal that led Rupesh and I to talk about such space as 'the goal' of learning history and to then question the long-winded process learning history seemed to be taking to get there. "Would a picture have done as well?" The idea of the ladder responds well to this early questioning. A picture may have done as well but it leaves hanging those questions of how. The way we enter the space is as important as the space itself. How do we enter it? How do we encounter each other in new ways? How do we avoid old conversations masquerading as new? How do we know we are there? The learning history under discussion here is putting the magnifying glass up to these questions of 'how' and suggesting some answers.

Later rungs: new conversations, new understandings

The later rungs of the ladder are where shared understandings are emerging from new conversations for which new language must be found. This then is the point at the top of Wittgenstein's ladder when the previous rungs cease to be as relevant. The learning history itself and the language within it like 'innovation' or 'carbon reduction' are left behind as new understandings are sought that are pertinent to the current set of learners and what they are trying to achieve. At this point the whole subject of the conversation might be called into question. This is like Wittgenstein's observation that what has been used to reach our current understanding is no longer necessary or even sensible. This is essentially a poststructuralist problem where the meanings implied in the signifiers we have been using start to take on new meaning in advance of having words to convey that meaning:

> Poststructuralism is difficult to the extent that its practitioners use old words in unfamiliar ways, or coin terms to say what cannot be said otherwise. This new vocabulary still elicits some resistance, but the issue we confront is how far we should let the existing language impose limits on what it is possible to think.

(Belsey 2002 p.5)

My discussion of this later rung of the ladder is informed by work with the group at B&NES where, unlike other events, there was a sustained and rhythmic cycle of collaborative inquiry. This work will be detailed in Chapter 12. Here the aspect of language at these seminars is used to illustrate the point. Over six months, in a series of seminars and informal meetings the substantive topic of "innovation for carbon reduction" was discussed. However as time proceeded, meta-questions of "what does that actually mean? What are we doing here?" started to surface alongside the main storyline of the seminars.

In seminar 3 one participant commented[27]:

> **Participant 1:** When you say innovation what do you actually mean by that?

Oct 2008, B&NES session 3

A discussion ensued and we agreed that as a group it was not the narrow technology definition but in this context it was "addressing sustainability by doing something different to how we have normally done things". So we distinguished 'innovating' from 'inventing'. Innovating might involve new technology, but it might as well include using old technology in a new way or using new business processes, procurement procedures, ways of working, financing and so on. The question reared up again in seminar 4.

> **Participants:** Just what are we talking about here? What is this work we have been doing?

Nov 2008, B&NES session 4

As a group we discussed what we were doing. Describing the seminars as capacity building to increase the organisation's potential to innovate in appropriate ways to address climate change was helpful; but by now it seemed that innovation was

[27] these snippets of dialogue are not verbatim from tape but summarised to carry the thrust of the discussion

becoming an unhelpful word:

> **Participant:** It's all very well in here but to those out there, if I say the word innovation it means something else, it means a shiny new building with this and that technology
>
> **MG:** So we have reached an understanding in this room about what we are doing here and there is then the separate challenge of trying to explain that to others outside the room….

Nov 2008, B&NES session 4 (from memory)

I went on to comment that innovation is a word that is overlaid with policy implications and the suggestion of technology and invention. But I didn't know if we needed to find a new word or agree a new meaning. The conversation progressed as we became entangled with what it was we might understand by what we were doing and what innovation meant to us.

Here then is a micro-example of Fonseca's description of innovation as occurring through conversation and indeed misunderstanding. By discussing just one word new cultural meanings for the group were being renegotiated in a new space. The hope is that this will in turn influence the organisational landscape by adding a new possibility for how a term is understood. This depth of conversation was only possible because it built on the shared understandings and legitimisation of the space that had occurred over time.

Throughout the last meeting at B&NES it felt as though the familiar culture of the organisation ("we are risk-averse", "we run meetings but they only have value if there is an action plan") was increasingly being put outside the door. This was despite the fact that four directors were present. Inside the space was a new and sometimes unfamiliar culture. For example in a group exercise looking more deeply at how the organisation is with risk, I heard one group-member starting to express the usual received norms about being "risk averse". Intervening I asked – "but in what parts of the organisation is this culture not the case – where are you handling risk well?" The director, to whom I asked the question, stopped short, took off his glasses and rubbed his face vigorously until it

was bright red. He repeated the question slowly as if not comprehending it but thinking about it at the same time. He did not answer, returned his glasses to his nose and the conversation moved on. I can't say what that represented but it struck me as an unusual slowing down thoughtful moment. A pause perhaps within the unfamiliar before moving on.

As we came to the closing round, I asked participants to mention what had surprised them particularly about the seminars. The responses were varied but two participants mentioned the histories themselves as a great source of inspiration and knowledge.

> **Participant:** My point is, rather than surprise, more a pleasure really. Reading these examples [the histories] you think "wow that is a really big jump that they made", but actually if you look at what we are doing in [our department], we are doing it and I am really pleased to be part of this move[ment], this change and also it's great to have a discussion with the people who want to change
>
> Participant, Nov 2008, Closing round B&NES seminars.

I was surprised and delighted when I heard this comment as it reached right back to the original goals of the research of inspiration, participation and celebration. I was so absorbed by the experience of the meeting as a postmodern, poststructuralist event I had forgotten the importance of the histories in getting us there.

Horse or Ladder?

This chapter has visited the persistent question about learning history that has recurred in different ways throughout the research: what exactly is it and how might it work? The Trojan horse metaphor was found to only go so far descriptively. Wittgenstein's ladder analogy has been proposed as a more generative analogy and one that is truer to the experiences of this research. It describes learning history as a progression from the familiar to the unfamiliar for participants *and* the researcher alike. The outsider coaxes herself and others forward to a place of contradiction and multiplicity from which new knowledge might be created. In so doing, previously held meanings can momentarily

become obsolete.

By diving microscopically into how this progression has occurred for this research, the learning in 'learning history' has been unpacked and shown to have multiple layers: one layer connects to participants' individual learning journeys; another stimulates new shared meanings to be collectively created and new stories to be shared. In all cases learning is occurring within a complex, sometimes contradictory space where there are multiple meanings and diverse voices. For most organisations rooted in modernity this view of learning is counter-cultural. The ladder analogy has suggested how learning history might help to facilitate an uneasy embrace of this postmodern, complex and rich learning space.

The ladder analogy could also help introduce interesting new questions of quality to learning history research. A learning history might be considered afresh in terms of where on the ladder it has been operating. Roth and Kleiner have talked of how important it is that

> The document is not ….stored in a desk drawer, like a report from a consulting group

(Roth and Kleiner 1998 p.58)

But this does happen. As the outsider researcher retreats, a learning history document, like all documents, ends up gathering dust. But the conversations, experiences and insights it has stimulated on its way to that desk drawer are where questions of quality might best be posed.

Drawing on Rhodes, what has been presented here is a postmodern interpretation of learning. Central to this view is polyphony and the use of narrative as a means to embrace the multiple voices in any organisation. The voices in this polyphonic space are authoring their own stories rather than negotiating a singly authorial 'truth'. In this way, as the next chapter will discuss, the sense of the mythic can be well and truly reclaimed.

Writing Now: 5th March 2009

A dream about the ladder

In supervision Peter says he doesn't really like the ladder. He says it's so linear and it's incompatible with the extended epistemology and the iterative nature of action research. I revisit the chapter and think about this a little. He's right of course, but ultimately I brush the critique away a little impatiently. This device is good enough – it makes an interesting point. And I quite like being inclusive of this bad old world of reason and logic that I still feel an affinity to. The ladder could be endless; there could be lots of ladders. I don't think too hard about it. I finish updating the chapter and go off to bed. But then that night (last night) I have a dream. We are in a school/university hall. The children are there, my husband, teachers and Peter. It is some kind of parent's evening. There is a ladder against the wall. And suddenly I have climbed to the top of it and am standing illogically firm on the top rung – my back to the wall and looking down at the room. I feel distant and strange. "I don't know how you can be so balanced there!" a passerby comments. He's right. I start to sway and teeter. I shout out. "Help!" Peter comes over and is at the bottom of the ladder – I want him to catch me but he is too far down. The ladder is falling now so I have to jump and so I do and land with extraordinary and delightful stability back on the ground.