3 Fields of practice (1)

3.1 Framing

In order to contextualise the way that my inquiry has evolved, I dedicate this chapter and the next to describing the main spaces in which I engaged as part of my research. I refer to these different spaces as my *fields of practice* because these are the primary spaces where a) I developed my practice as an action researcher/inquirer and b) because it is through these that I examined (alongside other participants) how I/we might appropriately respond to the ecological crisis.

The groups with whom I engaged were situated within two particular spheres. The first is that of local community action in relation to ecological challenges and sustainable development. The Sustainable Farmshire initiative (in which I became involved) spanned a period of eighteen months and over that time sought to provide a forum for local residents and organisations to collaboratively explore, discuss and find ways of responding to calls for sustainability within the parish. In the later stages of my PhD inquiry, I also became involved in the Luhimba Project, an aid/development partnership between a village in Tanzania and a small UK-based charity. My collaboration with this group revolved around facilitating critical attention to the nature of the relationship(s) which had evolved between UK and Tanzanian project partners.

The second strand which formed part of my research revolved around management education and 'education for ecology' (Reason, forthcoming). I tracked the learning experiences of course participants over two intakes of the *Ecological Thinking and Action in Management* undergraduate programme and of participants in the part-time professional postgraduate programme, the *MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice*. I particularly sought to attend to the changing attitudes and perspectives of course participants as they engaged with complex issues raised by the programmes, and to the tensions participants experienced as they considered how they might appropriately respond to such challenges within their professional contexts.

In this chapter and the one that follows, I seek to make explicit what my initial intentions and assumptions were as I contracted to work with each of these groups, and I outline how I sought to bring an inquiring perspective to the *process of engagement* with ecological challenges.

I dedicate this chapter to describing my collaboration with the Sustainable Farmshire initiative; I turn to my work with the Luhimba Project and the Ecological Thinking and MSc programmes in the following chapter. I therefore give the greater part of my attention to the Sustainable Farmshire initiative. I believe that this is appropriate because a) I was responsible for co-creating and co-facilitating this space from its very beginning—something which was not the case in the other group spaces I became involved—and b) perhaps because of this, this is field of practice with which I was most intensely involved.

I must be clear that the fields of practice presented in these two chapters were *not* the only spaces in which I understood myself as engaging in inquiry. Although I have chosen to focus on these particular spaces for the purposes of this thesis, I draw on my experiences of attempting to bring an attitude of inquiry to other spaces as is fitting throughout.

In the next section, I offer a brief conceptual discussion of some of the thinking which underlies my participation in these various fields of practice, looking specifically at the notions of redressing the balance of power and of developing the individual and community's capacity to act as change agents. In the following section (3.3), I begin to describe in detail my experiences with the people of Farmshire.

3.2 Individual and collective action for sustainability

In thinking about how humanity can face current ecological crises and the challenges of sustainability, one of the issues I have found most fascinating is that of participation and empowerment of individuals and communities in making a difference that is genuine and meaningful.

I have already stated that I see learned incapacity and helplessness as one of the major challenges currently facing humanity. I understand this as the perceived inability of ordinary people to get their voices heard and to influence decision-making on a broader scale and at different levels in local and global arenas. With alarming if not surprising frequency, I hear people bemoaning that they are unable to make a difference with regards to these complex ecological problems. As Comstock and Fox (1993:107) suggest, '… the weight of ideology has systematically distorted the people's view of their world and their own capabilities. The result for most is passivity and a resignation to the status quo as an unchangeable and natural experience'.

Early on in my inquiry, I became interested in exploring possibilities for redressing the balance of power and in considering how individuals and community groups alike could come to experience themselves as relevant and powerful agents of change. This focus emerged out of my own experience in the years prior to beginning this inquiry and was reinforced by the experiences of participants across my various fields of practice, as I show in later chapters.

This is an important link that I can see between my various fields of practice: in each of these, my sense is that the intention of many of those involved is/was to create and participate in the kinds of spaces and processes whereby people can *develop their capacities* to make sense of complex challenges and act upon them in useful and appropriate ways. As I show hereafter, this sense of purpose is core to the MSc and Ecological Thinking courses and has also emerged in the Sustainable Farmshire group and in my collaboration with the Luhimba Project. My wish to become involved in each of these communities of practice was also due to my desire to inquire into the links between such feelings of incapacity and alienation and another trend identified by Harman and Hurley (1996), that of destruction of community. Could strengthening community ties and forming links between local actors go some way towards reversing the trend of learned incapacity and helplessness?

Through this thesis, then, I seek to present a grounded understanding of what happens when people attempt to form learning spaces and enter into dialogue and/or participatory relationship with one another, in an attempt to more effectively approach the challenges of sustainability. I also consider what it might mean to shift current ways of thinking which seem to suggest that the process of

knowledge-creation and decision-making is more aptly undertaken by a privileged few, who have the power and resources to make decisions and reinforce certain models. Indeed, how might we understand the power and resources held by ordinary people and how can these help us to face the challenges of sustainability?

These were some of the questions to which I attended as I became immersed in my collaboration with community members in Farmshire.

3.3   The Sustainable Farmshire initiative

3.3.1   Initiating a collaborative process

In October 2002, I became involved in an initiative designed to instigate dialogue around the challenges of sustainability and ecological living within a local parish. Alongside a small group of local environmental consultants, I fulfilled the role of co-founder, co-facilitator and co-participant of this project.

Throughout the time I engaged with this initiative, I sought to attend to the choices I made in trying to shape this into an inquiring, participative space, and to the extent to which we were able to develop a capacity for self-awareness and effective action in relation to sustainability challenges.

The initiative was located in a medium-sized parish in the South West of England. Farmshire (a fictitious name) could be described as a thriving and vibrant parish of circa 2,500 people. Many residents commute daily to larger towns and cities. Even so, with many local businesses and amenities, a rich diversity of social clubs, a primary school and two active churches, the parish boasts an active community life and has won a number of regional and national awards in recent years.

I first made contact with local residents at Farmshire through Conservation (again, a fictitious name), a small, locally-based sustainable energy consultancy. Approximately half the staff lived and worked in Farmshire whilst others commuted there daily. RF, an acquaintance who had recently begun work in Conservation, informed me that the company was keen to set up some kind of community forum, where residents could meet to discuss how they might

collaborate towards more sustainable lifestyle patterns. The team at Conservation appeared keen to support such an initiative and envisaged this being an inclusive, participatory project, involving the wider community. Hence they felt that they might benefit from having on board someone with some kind of understanding as to how participatory problem-solving and action in community might develop and be enabled.

Having made contact with RF in October 2002 I was invited to write a draft proposal letter for the rest of the team at Conservation. I remember labouring over this for some time and becoming acutely aware of how important it felt to get this 'right'. The importance I gave to the process of making contact could be understood as evidence of a shift towards a heightened awareness of (my)-self-in-process or (my)-self-in-relationship-with-others. Through this perspective, the choices we make when interacting with others are of primary importance in shaping our realities. As Hilary Bradbury suggests,

> …developing interpersonal competencies of dialogue would be an important leverage point for the re-patterning of action among key stakeholders in the shift towards sustainable development; in other words, emergent change at the micro-level could shift the macro-dynamics of a system towards more sustainable practices.
> (Bradbury, 2001:307)

For this reason, throughout my inquiry I have consciously endeavoured to develop the effectiveness of my communications with others and have borrowed from reflective disciplines to help me do this. Indeed, developing the capacity to reflect on the effectiveness of my actions is a key process that I have chosen to engage in as an action researcher. Following Torbert (2001) and Reason (2003), I agree that:

> Learning to work toward a congruence between our intentions, frames, behaviour and 'what actually happens' is an important developmental processes to which action research practices can contribute (Torbert, 2001). Certain attentional exercises in the individual, and information collection and feedback processes in a community can help us to see what we were previously blind to.
> (Reason, 2003:8-9)

Throughout this thesis, then, I attempt to be explicit about the attentional exercises and disciplines upon which I draw in my quest to develop critical awareness in my first- and second-person research/practice. For example, having recognised the amount of care I gave to writing the proposal letter, I decided to develop the quality of that attention. I found that being mindful of Fisher and Torbert's (1995) *four parts of speech* model was useful in that it helped me to assess the congruence between my behaviour and the desired effect, that is, to open up creative possibilities for inquiry with this group. Furthermore, it gave my communication form. The figure below shows how I explicitly attempted to balance *framing*, *advocating*, *illustrating* and *inquiring* as I wrote the letter, with the second-hand column showing the four sets of questions which I used to structure the letter, and to introduce and frame each particular section.

Learning to balance the parts of speech when making contact with potential fellow inquirers	
Frame	Introductions: Who am I? What am I doing? What is the purpose of this letter?
Advocate	Introduction to my research: What am I interested in researching? What do I propose might be an appropriate, relevant and interesting area for us research together?
Illustrate	How could we work together? Introduction to some of the principles of Action Research.
Inquire	Invitation to share any thoughts and feedback.

Soon after I submitted my proposal, I was invited to meet the team at Conservation, in order to discuss how we might be able to work together. Members of the team at Conservation explained their enthusiasm to initiate this community forum as originating from a desire to give something back to the community, all the more substantiated by their own professional interest in the area of sustainability. Some had also participated in conversations around sustainability with other residents and felt that a collective open forum could usefully be formed. The Conservation team seemed excited about the proposal I had shared with them and were evidently keen to kick-start the initiative.

The Conservation team and I then drafted an invitation letter for those community members who had demonstrated interest in local sustainability. This is where Conservation's local knowledge was highly relevant, and I appreciate how different it might have been for me to single-handedly initiate and lead such an enterprise, as an outsider to the parish with little experience of life there. Later in this chapter, I consider some of the issues that arose from my positioning as both outsider/insider, and how it is that I attempted to create an appropriate role and positioning for myself within this group.

3.3.2   Patterns of engagement

In this section, I outline the practices in which we engaged and the patterns which took shape as this initiative developed. Furthermore, I aim to show how particular qualities and dimensions of inquiry came to be enacted, identified as important and/or in need of development.

3.3.2a An attitude of inquiry?

I want to be clear that the Sustainable Farmshire initiative was *not* named as action research by those involved, nor did it draw from more formal action research practices, such as co-operative inquiry, for example. That this was not the case is, I believe, partly due to the choices I made as a budding action researcher at the early stages of the initiative, and later in this chapter, I consider what these choices meant for our practice and collaboration as a group.

Although the initiative was *not* named as action research, it *was* explicitly identified as a space for conversation, reflection and collaborative action for social change by those involved. As such, I feel able to claim that as a group we aspired towards an attitude of inquiry in a number of ways. Marshall and Reason (2006) suggest that taking an attitude of inquiry (or an inquiring perspective) involves engaging in a number of practices. Of these, the ones that I feel are most closely aligned to what we sought to do in this space are the following:

- Attempts to increase the amount of 'evidence'—empirical, emotional, behavioural etc.—brought to bear on what is going on.

- Active engagement of all those who might be seen as stakeholders in the matters to hand.
- Active attempts to create mutuality, 'power with'.
- An increasing willingness to actively engage with the perspectives of others.

As appropriate in this chapter, and again in Chapters Seven and Eight, I seek to demonstrate how we sought to engage with the above qualities and practices, and I critically reflect on the extent to which we were able to evidence and appropriately enact these. Throughout this chapter, I place such reflective commentaries alongside the 'patterns of engagement' which I describe. In order to signify this shift in focus, the commentaries referring to the development of an attitude of inquiry are shown in violet font and are placed within brackets, as follows: [violet font].

3.3.2b Open meetings and other interactions

The invitation letter we sent out elicited a positive response, with most people confirming that they would be attending the first meeting we had planned. As well as four members of Conservation and me, participants at this stage included the rector of one of the local churches, a teacher from the local primary school, a Parish Councillor, a professional organic gardener, the environmental officer from a local business, and an Agenda 21 Officer from the county-level council. It was in this first meeting that those present agreed to continue to hold open meetings on a monthly basis. These meetings were understood as 'open' in that anyone would be welcome and participation would be encouraged from the wider community. Furthermore, each meeting would be called with an 'open', flexible agenda, with the intention that any movement towards a Sustainable Farmshire would come to be shaped by those attending the meetings. Thus we understood these monthly meetings as the cornerstone of the community forum space which we wished to create.

[Thus, from the initial invitation letters sent out, to the way that we framed each of the meetings as open, the choices we made seemed to be underpinned by a desire to form a forum space which would be inclusive of different perspectives and led by those involved in a collaborative way. Indeed, I would argue that the underpinning

intent of this initiative was to achieve community-wide engagement. In the concluding part of Chapter Seven, I evidence the ways in which those at the core of the initiative eventually made sense of what this expectation meant for our practice and development as a group.]

It was agreed that Conservation would take on the coordinating role for these meetings and that these would be held in their offices in the afternoon of a set day each month. This pattern was maintained for a period of one year, during which time we held eleven such open meetings. Throughout this period, numbers of people attending each meeting ranged from six to twelve. Participation was both flexible and variable, with some people attending some meetings and not others, joining the initiative at later stages, and/or becoming involved in the initiative in various other ways, as I explain later.

The open meetings were designed with a minimum of structure at the start, aiming to allow the conversation to develop from there. Each meeting began with an invitation to check in. In the first meeting, for example, we introduced ourselves and said a few words about why we were there, as a method of capturing themes, ideas and stories which could serve to get us started. Thereafter, we discussed where we would like to focus our attentions during the meeting. [I believe that the ways in which we structured and organised our meetings are, in part, evidence of our desire to create mutuality, or 'power with'. We seemed to agree that agendas should be allowed to emerge in the moment, and that any decisions (regarding focus, direction, etc.) should be made collectively. In Chapters Seven and Eight, I reflect on the extent to which the choices we made were conducive to achieving such mutuality.]

Thus, early on, we established a pattern whereby an unfolding agenda developed for each meeting, generally loosely structured around reflecting on past cycles of action ('what we've done since we last met') and looking forward to how future action may be shaped. In this sense, an inherently cyclical pattern could be said to have been established, and I found myself attending to how these patterns could be understood as moments of action and reflection informing one another other. Part of what I sought to do in developing my research practice was to experiment with different ways in which I might initiate conversations around this process with the wider group. I was aware that most of those present were there as practitioners, and could be understood as ordinary people trying to do things better in their own

lives; therefore a key question raised for me was that of how I could raise such research process questions in ways that were useful to us all and congruent with what each person might be trying to achieve by being there. [I see this also as relating to my own attempts to create mutuality or 'power with' other participants in the process of inquiry. Again in Chapter Eight, I critically reflect on my initial and developing understanding of how mutuality might be established in inquiry and in action].

In parallel to participating in the open meetings, participants in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative came to engage in a number of activities and processes with the explicit objective of making space for the wider community to become involved in moving towards a sustainable parish. In the open meetings, we identified a variety of means through which we could engage the wider community in conversation and action for sustainability. At the same time, we were conscious that establishing and sustaining such wider levels of involvement may prove challenging, and so we sought to attend to our attempts to develop these. Indeed, throughout the lifetime of the initiative we became increasingly aware of the kinds of difficulties which can arise in seeking to make such links. As already mentioned, I provide an account of our attempts to actively engage all stakeholders in Chapter Seven.

[The various activities in which we sought to engage could be understood as 'attempts to increase the amount of "evidence"—empirical, emotional, behavioural etc.—brought to bear on what is going on'. In seeking to develop appropriate responses to the challenges of sustainability, we were explicit that we wished to value and draw upon different territories of experience. For example, in our first contribution to the Village Magazine, we explicitly set out to make space for different perspectives and areas of experiences to feed into the initiative by encouraging people to contribute in whichever way they felt appropriate. As examples, we mentioned that people might wish to discuss/engage with practical projects and potential technological solutions, and that they may also wish to consider aesthetic, artistic and spiritual engagement with the issues. Again in Chapters Seven and Eight, I reflect on the extent to which we succeeded in making space for this quality of inquiry.]

3.3.2c My facilitative role

In this sub-section, I reflect on the facilitative role(s) which I felt able to fulfil within this field of practice and on some of the ways in which I sought to experiment with and systematically develop particular qualities of inquiry.

In the initial open meeting, I introduced myself as a postgraduate researcher interested in participatory research and in community efforts around sustainability. I also explained my links with Conservation, and was introduced as a champion of participatory approaches to community action; I see now that the initial working agreement which I had previously formed with Conservation was vital in providing a platform from which my role could be introduced and my involvement accepted. I was keen to demonstrate that I was interested in a different kind of research to that usually associated with the expert, detached social researcher. Thus I sought to integrate myself within the group and to dispel the idea that I would be standing on the side-lines or observing as an outsider.

One of the ways in which I sought to provide structure and facilitative support was by offering to fulfil such tasks as organising meetings, contacting people and record-keeping.   To this latter end, I tape-recorded our meetings and then used these recordings to write detailed notes or minutes of each meeting which were then distributed to all participants. Over time, a pattern emerged in our written communications whereby I volunteered to take on the task of writing not only the notes of meetings, but also initial drafts for invitation letters and communications to be posted in community-wide forums, whilst sharing the responsibility for re-drafting and finalising these with the team at Conservation and increasingly with other participants.

My sense is that there were mutual and significant gains to the iterative and public writing process which developed. In the first place, it gave me a tangible role within the group. As the only new-comer and outsider to the village, neither living nor working there, I was conscious of the role I was seen to be taking. Peter Park (1993:9) suggests that a fundamental stage in setting up participatory research is for the researcher 'to be introduced and become accepted as a participatory researcher' particularly since 'typically, the researcher is not an established member of the community or even known in the community'.

As I wrote these accounts, which were of course grounded in my own interpretations, reflections and critical analysis of what had happened, I was keenly aware of what this meant for my power standing and for the voices of other participants. Thus I was eager to ensure that the accounts I prepared were explicitly framed as flexible accounts which were open for discussion and alteration. Furthermore, by actively seeking feed-back I sought to communicate an open-ness to conversations around 'what it is we are really trying to say and do here'. I also frequently enquired into the usefulness of these meeting notes, as it was important to me that this process was deemed of value by those involved. Throughout the eighteen months we worked together, I received numerous appreciative comments regarding the usefulness and thoroughness of the minutes I prepared, especially to the extent that they allowed others outside of our core group to plug into what we were doing.

All minutes were made public in a number of ways. Firstly, minutes were sent via email and/or post to all participants, including those who had not been able to attend a certain meeting. Minutes and other relevant information we collected (regarding opportunities for funding, for example) were also kept in a file in the Conservation office and were made available to any community members who approached Conservation wishing to find out more about the Sustainable Farmshire initiative (which we actively encouraged people to do, through our communications in the Village Magazine, for example). Furthermore, the minutes were regularly shared with other community members and parties who may not have been actively participating in our conversations but who were interested in exploring possibilities for collaborating with us somehow. These included members from the Parish Council and the county-level Council. [This is another way in which I understand us as having wanted to create mutuality, or 'power with' others across the community. My sense is that we equated such qualities as participation and collaboration with opening ourselves to others, which included making records of our conversations public in a variety of ways. Later in the thesis I reflect on how helpful or appropriate such understandings of mutuality and collaboration were.]

In one sense, then, the minutes I prepared seemed to be validated as sufficiently appropriate representations of our joint discussions: they had quite evidently been prepared with the aid of tape-recordings and participants apparently appreciated the

detailed records these notes provided, and were content to share these with others as representations of what was going on in our discussions.

Of course, I remain conscious that it was *I* who wrote these notes and who shaped their form and to a certain extent their content. When drawing on these notes throughout this thesis, I therefore want to consider how my choice of form and content might be understood and how it might help me to make further sense of my own positioning within this work and of my own emerging practice. Of course these notes will suggest something of where other participants were also, and where appropriate, I draw on participants' reflections and sense-making, quoting these verbatim. I also draw on notes and documents which we jointly prepared as communications with the wider community and which were published in the Village Magazine, on the village website, and/or exhibited at the Parish Plan Exhibition in which we participated.

In my contracting meeting with Conservation, I had suggested that another role that I could initially fulfil is that of giving feedback and drawing attention to any themes and issues that may be arising. This was a further reason for my having volunteered to write up notes of meetings. From the beginning, I made certain choices about how these notes would be written. Rather than the concise, bullet-point structure usually associated with minutes, I strove to write full and detailed accounts. This included paying attention to any themes that were emerging, how we were choosing to work together, and any discussions on what appropriate action for sustainability might entail, as well as any reflections on action. I saw myself as giving shape to a process of reflection and sense-making which could then be drawn upon as a spring-board for further discussion among participants. This became a key aspect of how I (and others) came to understand my emerging role in this space.

One of the key challenges I experienced in my positioning within the Sustainable Farmshire initiative was that of striking an appropriate balance between giving sufficient containment and structure so that the process felt sufficiently safe and purposeful, whilst maintaining sufficient flexibility and openness to whatever may arise. I expand on this challenge in the following sub-section, and in Chapter Eight, I show how I am working with the dual challenge of both developing my capacity to be open to and comfortable with emergence, uncertainty and

complexity *and* developing my capacity to act with intention and to establish, support and contain processes and structures in appropriate ways.

3.3.2d Enacting appropriate assertiveness and authority

As I have already stated, the Sustainable Farmshire initiative was *not* named as action research by those involved. I believe that this was partly due to the choices I made in the early stages of the initiative, and in this section, I consider what these choices meant for our practice and collaboration as a group. Specifically, I wish to focus on the extent to which I missed early opportunities to put forward particular action research and inquiry practices which may have been of value to the group, and the extent to which this then affected what seemingly became possible and/or not possible as the initiative developed.

For example, in my initial proposal letter to Conservation I wrote about my aspirations for this collaboration to be shaped as a process of inquiry. I wished to be clear about the values and perspectives which were leading my work and so I made the following claim:

> As I see it, the value of us working together is that we may be able to initiate a process of dialogue, in which we develop inquiring and reflective attitudes to our own and each other's actions. This is about enabling us as ordinary people to collectively investigate problems and issues that we believe are important, and decide on and undertake actions that would help us improve the quality of our own lives. For me, citizen participation and the development of strong local communities are at the heart of the quest for sustainability and democratic societies. (Extract from letter, October 2002)

Having finished the letter, I reflected on what I had written using a two-column analysis format. This is one of the attentional exercises with which I regularly engage as an action researcher seeking to learn from my experience. Having pasted the letter into the left-hand column of the two-column table, I sought to critically reflect on the choices made in writing this piece, and to capture these thoughts on the right-hand column.   I find that the two-column exercise is an effective framework allowing me to engage in what is arguably the primary 'rule'

in action research practice: 'to be aware of the choices one is making and their consequences' (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:xxvii). The following is from my reflective right-hand column notes, and appears alongside the above paragraph from the letter:

> One important quality criteria for me is that of intentionality, which I understand as approaching the inquiry with the intention to convey through the work the principles of participation and action committed to human and ecological flourishing, and to generate the kinds of questions and conversations that matter to those present. Thus, to my mind, legitimacy and quality are linked to authenticity; to being able to embody and live the values we believe are important whilst inquiring with others. Therefore, an important consideration for me is: How do I translate my beliefs about participation, democracy and justice into authentic, effective practice when conducting research? (Reflective notes on letter, October 2002)

Even though in my reflective notes I claim that is important to me is to explore how I might translate these values into practice, I notice that I do not make this intention clear in my proposal letter. Indeed, despite my alleged wish to be careful about how I use these words, I find that I did not bring that quality of attentiveness to the letter. Instead, it would seem that I am using these words as if their meaning was clear and/or straightforward. While the letter is peppered with such words as *inquiry*, *dialogue*, *democracy* and *participation*, there is little in the way of exploration and/or questioning around these. With hindsight I believe that I could usefully have sought to unpack and raise questions about these. So for example, I could have asked (and given some suggestions about) what an inquiring and reflective attitude might look like, or what a process of dialogue might entail.

I believe that my lack of clarity around how these words might be defined and/or understood, and around how these qualities might become apparent in practice, meant that I felt less willing and able to speak about these to the wider group when we met for our first open meeting. Thus, although I introduced myself as an action researcher interested in participatory approaches to sustainability, I missed the opportunity to say much about action research or to explore in some depth what participatory approaches to sustainability might look like. I feel that, in part, this was due to my relative lack of confidence about my ability to raise these issues in

ways which would be relevant and interesting to others, particularly others outside academia. I felt privileged enough to be welcomed into a community and to be able to join into these discussions with others, and less able to be assertive about what we might seek to do and about what kinds of questions may be worth asking. Thus, particularly in the early stages of the initiative, and even as I took responsibility for co-founding it, I was aware that I experienced a tension between wanting to be assertive and appreciative of what it is that I could offer and bring to our interactions, while seeking to allow processes, agendas and intentions to emerge according to what the group felt was important.

Reason (2002b) suggests that, in facilitating co-operative inquiries, it is the responsibility of the initiator of the inquiry to exercise authentic authority early on, so that inquiry which is truly transformational may become possible:

> It is here that the initiators of inquiry need to exercise authentic authority in setting out as clearly as they can the principles and practices of cooperative inquiry, and responding to questions and comments from the group. It is important that at this stage potential inquiry-group members understand the logic of the inquiry method and also the personal and emotional investment that needs to be made if the inquiry is to be truly transformational. (Reason, 2002b:216)

My sense is that, particularly in the early stages of this initiative, I was unable to exercise appropriate, authentic authority, for a variety of reasons, and that this limited the extent to which I was able to make space for second-person inquiry in this context.

Ospina et al.'s (2004) account of the false tension between authority and democracy, and the resulting risk of self-censorship, is one which resonates deeply with me. Reflecting on their experience of initiating and facilitating action research processes with award recipients of a leadership programme in the United States, Ospina et al. (2004:64) speak of the potential for action researchers to 'fall under the spell of a "false" tension between authority and democracy', and describe how, having succumbed to this spell, they found themselves devaluing their own expertise and silencing their own voices in a paradoxical effort to make space for

the voices of others. Instead, they argue that 'owning and taking up one's authority is *necessary* to create a truly democratic space to engage in co-production' and that

> …a mutual inquiry space requires a very honest conversation about roles, tasks, boundaries, authority and power in the context of each particular project and as relationships are being built. (Ospina et al., 2004:66)

I do not feel able to claim that we made the necessary space and time to engage in an honest conversation about the above choice points and issues identified by Ospina et al. (2004). Even in our earliest meetings, we did not seem to give much attention to how we might work as a group or what kinds of boundaries, ground-rules and/or remits would help to guide how we collaborated. Indeed, particularly early on, the emphasis seemed to be external (focusing on how we might foster community-wide involvement) rather than on internal group process. With hindsight, I feel that a) it would have been helpful to take some time to explicitly discuss and make decisions about group process, boundaries, ground-rules, and even about what qualities we would like to see evidenced and enacted in our group space and b) we could have sought to understand what the consequences may have been of the choices we did make; that is, we could have considered in which ways it was helpful/unhelpful (not) to have specific remits, structures, leaders, boundaries, and so on.

For example, as I explain in Chapter Five, the concept/metaphor of holding is one which became increasingly important to me. In the face of the anxiety, distress and helplessness which is seemingly experienced by many people as they seek to engage with the complexities and uncertainties raised by ecological challenges, I have become particularly interested in how we might *hold* these experiences, in such a way that we are able to continue to engage with the questions and challenges raised. I believe that it is possible to think about inquiry spaces as holding containers, where the many tensions, uncertainties and challenges which emerge are *contained* in ways that are simultaneously challenging *and* supportive. Thought of in this manner, the ways in which an inquiry space is bounded and structured become important, especially to the extent that these are able to provide a relatively safe, non-threatening space in which to grapple with and make sense of tensions and questions. This, of course, is what would arguably happen in the

nurturing phase of Randall and Southgate's (1980) model of the creative group experience, as Reason (2002b) explains:

> The nurturing phase draws people together and helps them feel emotionally safe and bonded. At the same time, early, preparatory aspects of the group task and the organizational issues which allow the group to continue its life and work are attended to. The nurturing phase is about creating a safe and effective container for the work of the group, and leadership is primarily focused on those concerns. (Reason, 2002b:212)

I suggest that this relative inattention to issues around safety and containment eventually resulted in us feeling a significant degree of vulnerability and insecurity, as I demonstrate in Chapter Seven. In Chapter Eight, I argue that one of the key challenges we faced within the Sustainable Farmshire initiative was that of learning how to organise ourselves and our times together in ways which would allow us to appropriately engage with the concept and practice of sustainability.

In the chapter that follows, Chapter Four, I detail the nature of my collaboration with various other fields of practice.