4 Fields of practice (2)

4.1 Framing

As stated in the introduction to the previous chapter, alongside my collaboration with the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, I also became involved in three additional fields of practice, to which I now turn.

In the first part of this chapter, I describe my engagement with the *Ecological Thinking and Action in Management* and *MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice* programmes.

In the latter part of this chapter, I describe my engagement with the Luhimba Project.

4.2 Management education for sustainability

Shortly after beginning my collaboration with the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, I decided to pursue some kind of formal engagement with the Ecological Thinking and the MSc programmes. To reiterate, in both of these spaces I sought to attend to the changing attitudes and perspectives of course participants as they engaged with the complex and difficult issues raised by the programmes, and to the tensions experienced as they considered how they might appropriately respond to such challenges within their personal and/or professional contexts (that is, how they might bridge their learning within the educational context with the realities they experienced in their everyday and/or professional lives).

As part of my engagement with these educational programmes, I sought to attend to the choices that we as educators might appropriately make in talking about the ecological crisis within universities. This is, I believe, a particularly significant area for inquiry because of the ways in which 'education' and 'educators' are perceived in current times. For example, Thomas Berry (1999:73) suggests that contemporary university education 'prepares students for their role in extending human dominion over the natural world, not for intimate presence to the natural

world', and in a paper entitled *Education for Ecology*, Peter Reason (forthcoming) suggests, following environmental educator David Orr (1994), that current educational forms 'tend to divide the world by academic discipline, to advocate domination over nature, to promote individualism and rights rather than citizenship and responsibility and to separate rationality from feeling and valuing'. Therefore, as educators seeking to initiate conversations around the role of management and organisations in relation to the ecological crisis, pedagogical choices become key. Through my engagement with both the Ecological Thinking and the MSc programmes, I reflected on the extent to which particular forms of management education may enable participants to develop capacities for self-awareness, critical thinking and effective action in relation to ecological challenges.

In what follows, I describe the ways in which I sought to engage with both of these programmes, and on how I attempted to bring an attitude of inquiry to these spaces.

4.3   Inquiry with the Ecological Thinking groups

4.3.1   Context

The *Ecological Thinking and Action in Management* course is offered by the School of Management to eligible undergraduates and postgraduates at the University of Bath. The course is taught by Judi Marshall, and is related to (although distinct from) Peter Reason's course *Emerging Patterns in Thought, Belief and Action*. Both of these courses offer opportunities to explore key challenges facing Western (and increasingly non-Western) societies, organisations and individuals, revolving around such issues as ecological degradation, sustainability, social justice and ethical business. As stated in an introductory document to the related courses: 'Both courses start from the view that the current paradigm or world view of Western civilization is reaching the end of its useful life…And so we are in a time of major change in which a fundamental requirement is that we learn to think and act in new ways' (Reason and Marshall, 2001:1).

The Ecological Thinking course is offered in the second semester of each academic year and so can be taking as a sequel to the Emerging Patterns course offered in the first semester. It can also be taken as a stand-alone programme. While Emerging

Patterns focuses primarily on the shifts in thinking and experiencing that may be necessary as new worldviews develop, the emphasis of Ecological Thinking is on the issues that this raises for the practice of management. The Ecological Thinking course is particularly popular: in 2004/05 it had 105 students registered on it. The majority of course participants tend to be final year undergraduate students on the BSc in Business Administration and the BSc in International Management and Modern Languages programmes. Other course participants are Masters students on the MSc in Business and Community, the MSc in Management and the MSc in Applied Psychology, as well as final year undergraduates on chemistry and engineering programmes and exchange students.

The course rationale distributed to all course participants in the first lecture of the semester states that *two threads* run through the programme:

> The *first thread introduces selected key issues and topics* to explore as illustrations of the wider field. For example we shall review and critique emerging organizational and cross-sectorial practices which are currently being offered as steps towards responsible, sustainable business. We shall seek some depth of appreciation/critique of their potentials and of their degenerative possibilities, and some understanding of what is required to do such work well. The *second thread looks at, and puzzles about, how we can address these issues*, and so is a necessary companion to the more topic-based material. It advocates the need for new ways of thinking and acting in changing times, and introduces some possibilities – those of systemic (or 'ecological') thinking, action inquiry and ways to approach change (including the strategies of people who see themselves as social or organizational change agents). This second thread is also about capacities for critical analysis, and being aware of issues of power, which pervade this 'field'. (Marshall, 2005:2)

Both the Ecological Thinking and Emerging Patterns courses are framed by the course leaders as 'explorations in which we all learn', with a major aim being that 'those who participate are able to study some material of their own choice which they might not otherwise see' (Reason and Marshall, 2001:1). The assessment requirements for both courses allow course participants to follow their own learning paths within broad boundaries.

In the Ecological Thinking programme, assessment is by two separate pieces of coursework. The first is an individual essay (responding to the student's choice of 3-4 set essay titles) of 1500-1800 words, worth 40% of the final mark. Essays are due half-way through the semester, and students receive their marks and comprehensive feedback approximately three weeks after the hand-in date. Part of the advice given to students for completing their essay is to 'frame your answers, make choices, show your understanding of what you have done'.

The second piece of coursework is an individual portfolio of learning, of 2300-2500 words, worth 60% of the final mark. The portfolio is usually due a couple of weeks after the last session of the semester, and is framed as a collection of pieces of varying lengths and types evidencing the student's learning through the course. As Judi explains at the beginning of the course, she is 'interested not just in how well [students] have understood the material of the course, but in [their] engagement with it: intellectual, emotional, spiritual, practical' (Marshall, 2005:4). Course participants are encouraged to keep a diary of learning during the course, with a view to this contributing to the portfolio. The following are the criteria used in marking the portfolio (these are of course shared and discussed with participants early in the semester):

- critical reflectiveness
- thoroughness and creativity in engaging with academic material
- development of own thinking
- quality of self-reflection
- appreciations of critical subjectivity (perspective)
- use of observational skills
- appreciation of potential implications of the issues covered
- having engaged with the issues, whatever the conclusions

4.3.2   Patterns of engagement

In this section, I describe the ways in which I engaged with the two intakes of the Ecological Thinking course, firstly in 2003 and then in 2004. I begin by explaining

how I contracted to work with these groups, and how I framed my intended engagement.

In January 2003, Judi asked whether I would be interested in speaking to course participants as part of my PhD research. I was immediately interested and went to speak to her about doing so. In our conversation, we agreed that it might be interesting for me to track the experiences of participants as they went through the course. I felt that this had the potential to contribute to my inquiry in several ways.

In the first place, I felt a closeness to and empathy with this group. Most course participants were final year management undergraduates, just as I (and my friends and peers) had been two years previously. For me (and many of my contemporaries) participation in the Emerging Patterns course in the first semester, and in the Ecological Thinking course in the second, were significant experiences. While participating in these courses, I was aware that I and other participants grappled with what the issues raised meant for us as individuals, as part of organisations and larger systems, and as students and aspiring practitioners of management. My sense was that there would be value in tracking these kinds of questions, especially since by this point (fifteen months after joining the PhD programme and three months after the beginning of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative) I had identified that one of my core inquiry questions was as follows: What are the kinds of questions, challenges and experiences that individuals are faced with as they consider how they might respond to current ecological challenges?

Secondly, I was particularly interested in exploring the above question within the context of management education. Since the beginning of my doctorate studies, I had been fulfilling the role of Research Teaching Associate within the School of Management. Increasingly, I identified myself as an educator and as someone who wished to build a career in academia. I therefore saw academia and higher education as the context in which my professional practice was situated. Furthermore, I increasingly understood that one of the ways in which I could engage with ecological challenges was through education for sustainability and corporate responsibility. Thus I felt that engagement with this programme would give me the opportunity to reflect on the role of management education in enabling individuals to engage with ecological challenges. At the same time, it was apparent that Judi would welcome any feedback and/or data I might gather

regarding participants' experience of the course. Thus I saw that tracking the group's experience had the potential to actually influence the kind of education for sustainability being offered to students within the School of Management.

Having negotiated access with Judi, I joined course participants for the first lecture of the semester and gave a short presentation. I introduced myself and my background, and explained that my PhD studies revolved around exploring more ecological and sustainable ways of living and acting in the world. I explained that the questions on which I would like to focus with them were to do with their experience of engaging in the course, and more generally to do with education around issues of sustainability and ecological thinking, including:

- How might we engage with the sorts of issues raised by the Ecological Thinking course; what might we be able to take away from such an engagement, and how might this help us to effect change in our own life?

- How might we speak about these things in a way that challenges and stretches boundaries, but also supports and enables others in exploring these issues?

- How might we make sense of these issues together, so that we are each able to move on in a way that is appropriate and helpful to us?

I explained that my role amongst them could be understood as that of a 'roving reporter'. The patterns of engagement I proposed (and eventually fulfilled) included attending all lectures throughout the semester and, wherever possible, intermingling with course participants and talking to them about how they were making sense of the course; what was being raised for them; and what responses they had to the material with which they were being asked to engage. For example, during break-out or small group activities, I would move around from group to group, listening in and participating in various discussions. I also explained to course participants that I would like to help capture their thoughts and feelings at the beginning of the course, as the course developed, and at the end of the course. I suggested that they too may find it of value (in making sense of the course and also in completing their coursework) to notice and track what was going on for them as they explored these issues over time. I proposed that at the end of the course, I

could make space to feed-back to the group on what I have noticed, drawing attention to particular points that might have been raised and asking how we might together make sense of these. I also explained that the feedback cycle would extend to Judi also, and that thus they may also like to see this as an opportunity to influence the future development of the course.

Having made this presentation to the group, I asked them whether they felt that my intended engagement was something to which they could agree and/or whether there were any questions or concerns about what I had proposed. As far as I could tell, there were nods and smiles all around, and no questions/concerns at that point.

At the end of that first lecture, I asked the group to participate in the first data-gathering exercise. I distributed slips of paper with the following questions and asked them to write down a few sentences in response.

- *Why are you choosing to do this course?*

- *What are your hopes and fears as you embark on this course?*

The response rate was very good, with only a couple of people leaving without taking the time to respond to the questions. Most responses were anonymous (and remained so throughout the semester) although some students included their names and email addresses.

Halfway through the course, I again distributed slips of paper with the following questions:

- *What are your impressions of and reactions to the course at this stage?*

- *Is the course challenging, exciting, disconcerting, etc.? If so, in what ways? What aspects of the course are having these effects?*

And as the final data-gathering exercise at the end of the course, I asked the following questions:

- *What about the course helps you to engage with these issues in a way that is appropriate for you?*

- *What about the course hinders you from engaging with these issues in a way that is appropriate? What is unhelpful?*

In the feedback session I facilitated, also towards the end of the course, I fed-back to the group the main themes that I had noticed, and also sought to facilitate a group discussion around the following questions:

- *Do you feel that the course is structured in a way that is sufficiently safe and well-contained, so that you are able to explore difficult and challenging issues in a safe and helpful way? In which ways is it or is it not?*

- *How might you be supported in learning to live with what has been raised for you during the course, and how might you be enabled in moving on in a way that is appropriate for you?*

- *How can we give students sufficient resource to work through these issues/areas, without this becoming too overwhelming?*

Alongside engaging with the group in relatively structured ways in the lectures, I also found myself making connections with course participants in more informal ways. A number of participants contacted me outside of class-time and arranged to meet up for coffee and for further conversation around the issues raised on the course. Many of those who got in touch with me seemed to be considering alternative career paths to those usually pursued by management graduates and seemed to feel that, having gone through a similar experience myself, I may be able to relate to and advice them. Indeed, I remember several students referring to me as a 'kindred spirit' and other words to that effect.

As I show in Chapter Five, the data-gathering exercises I describe above were of great value in capturing some of the challenges and questions experienced by participants. In Chapter Five, I explore these themes in some detail, and I consider

what these might mean in relation to appropriate action in response to the ecological crisis.

4.3.2a Participant observation and action research: boundaries and tensions

I wish to take a moment here to reflect on the manner in which the methods described above fit into an action research model.

It is possible to argue that my engagement with the Ecological Thinking intakes (and also with the MSc group and the Luhimba Project, as described later in this chapter) could correspond to models of participant observation in social science. As I positioned myself as a 'roving reporter' in the Ecological Thinking programme, and as a 'fellow traveller' with the MSc group, part of what I found myself doing as a researcher was 'observing'. Indeed, Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2000) suggest that observation may be understood as the mainstay of social science research, and point out that:

> Even studies based on direct interviews employ observational techniques to note body language and other gestural cues that lend meaning to the words of the persons being interviewed. Social scientists are observers both of human activities and of the physical settings in which such activities take place. (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2000:673)

The assumptions made around the nature of 'observation', and specifically around objectivity and subjectivity (Ladkin, 2005), could be understood to significantly differentiate particular methods and approaches in social science research from one another. For example, Angrosino and Mays de Perez suggest that even though most social scientists have

> …long recognized the possibility of the observer's affecting what he or she observes…careful researchers are nonetheless supposed to adhere to rigorous standards of objective reporting designed to overcome that potential bias...[and to] maintain their scientific objectivity. (Angrosino and Mays de Perez, 2000:674)

As was made clear in Chapter Two, the action research paradigm with which I identify problematises the notions of objectivity and value-free social science, and instead advocates the development of 'critical subjectivity', or a mode of inquiry that is 'both deeply engaged and rigorously self-critical' (Reason, 1994:11). Indeed, postmodernist critiques (including those related to action research thought and practice) have questioned the very existence of objective truths and have emphasised the importance of understanding the researcher's situation and positioning as part of interpreting the research product (Angrosino and Mays de Perez, 2000).

As I engaged in the various field of practice I describe in this chapter, my intention was that any 'observations' which I might make would be grounded in, and furthermore contribute, to my developing capacity for critical subjectivity. Hence, many of the themes and observations which were raised for me as I engaged with these groups revolved around my own participation in, contribution and responses to what was unfolding in each of these spaces (and in the following sub-section, for example, I explain how my participation in the Ecological Thinking programme contributed to my developing practice as educator in the at the interface of management and ecology).

Clearly, the research methods and modes of engagement I describe in this chapter do *not* meet some of the key quality criteria of action research, including the suggestion that research design and execution are participative and democratic processes, ideally involving all stakeholders (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Nevertheless, I feel that I *was* able to bring qualities of inquiry to these different spaces, of the kind that more closely resemble the principles and practices of action research, rather than those of conventional perspectives on participant observation and social science approaches which aspire towards objectivity and the identification of a detached, value-free 'truth'. In clarifying the nature of my engagement with each of these spaces, I find it helpful to again draw on Marshall and Reason's (2006) suggestion that an attitude of inquiry means engagement in a number of practices. The following most closely represent the qualities I sought to bring to my various fields of practice, while posing questions, gathering data, feeding-back emergent themes, and observing (as well as actively participating in) the group's journey:

- Efforts to increase awareness of the frames that are being employed by oneself and by others and an understanding of their origins and impacts on what is going on.

- Close attention to the process of engagement with the issues and with others as well as to the content.

- Increased awareness of the choices that are being made—about frames, about positions taken, about evidence employed and so on.

- Willingness to start from where one without necessarily knowing where one is going.

Throughout the thesis, I seek to evidence how it is that I am developing the capacity to engage in these kinds of practices in systematic and rigorous ways.

4.3.2b Developing my practice as educator

I wish to end this section by explaining how my engagement with the Ecological Thinking groups became an important part of my first-person inquiry. Following my work with the first intake in 2003, I was in a position to give feedback to Judi regarding participants' experience of the course. As previously mentioned, when I initially negotiated access with Judi, she explained that learning more about the student experience would be of value to her. Thus I found that one of the skills I had to develop within this context was that of making sense of data and giving feedback in appropriate ways (this, of course, is something I also had to when I held the feedback session for course participants at the end of the semester). I was aware that sharing my findings and sense-making with Judi offered me the possibility to influence how the course evolved and to suggest any changes I felt were necessary. Thus I had to carefully consider what practical changes I was advocating and what evidence I provided in support of my claims.

Significantly, I had to consider what the data I had gathered (and the way I had made sense of it) meant not only for Judi and for the students' learning experience, but for my own practice as a budding educator in the field. Increasingly, I found myself contributing to education for sustainability within the School of Management. For example, from 2003 onwards I gave lectures on deep ecology and eco-psychology to the Emerging Patterns group, and on ecology for business

and corporate social responsibility to the first-year undergraduates on the Organisational Behaviour course. Furthermore, in 2004 and 2005 I shared the coursework marking on the Ecological Thinking course with Judi, and I acted as guest lecturer a couple of times each semester. The lectures I presented centred upon such subjects as 'people acting for change' and 'building the capacity to respond to ecological challenges', both areas which we felt needed further attention, based on the data I had gathered from the groups. Thus, while lecturing and facilitating group discussions, and in my engagement with students' written work, I found myself continually seeking to work with and respond to the various issues and questions which were evidently raised for many participants as they engaged with the material in its complexity and subtlety.

In Chapter Five I draw on the responses of Ecological Thinking course participants and I present my own emerging understanding of what these suggest about the challenges encountered when seeking to engage with the ecological crisis. In Chapter Ten, I return to my experience of working with the Ecological Thinking intakes, and I reflect on my developing practice as an educator at the interface of management practice and ecological challenges. I consider my practical engagement and experimentation with regards to the following kinds of questions: How might I learn to engage with ecological challenges in a sustained and committed way, and how might I facilitate others in doing so, particularly in the context of management education? How do I/we create the kinds of spaces where people feel able to continue to engage with the material raised by the course, despite the discomfort and complexity to which this may give rise?

4.4   Inquiry with the MSc group

4.4.1   Context

The *MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice* is framed as an innovative management degree addressing social, environmental and ethical issues. Initiated in 1997, the course is offered by CARPP in partnership with the New Academy of Business, an independent educational organization established in 1995 by Anita Roddick, Founder of the Body Shop International. The course website describes the programme in the following way:

This course addresses the challenges currently facing society as we seek to integrate successful business practice with a concern for social, environmental and ethical issues. It looks at the complex relationship between business decisions and their impact on local and world communities and economies, on the environment and on the workplace itself. Participants will develop management practices which are responsive to pressures for greater awareness in these areas. The course offers a wide range of alternative perspectives on business, all of which challenge ideas about where 'responsibility' begins and ends. Participants will learn about management techniques and approaches being developed in leading-edge organizations, and will test the relevance of these ideas and practices in their own workplaces. (http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/msc.htm, Accessed 10 February 2006)

The course is taken on a part-time basis over two years and involves attendance at four intensive residential workshops per year, each of which lasts five days. The course welcomes participation from a wide range of people, including managers, consultants and other practitioners in commercial, public, not-for-profit and intergovernmental organisations. According to the course website, '[the course] will be especially suitable for people working in companies already thinking about issues of corporate responsibility, those who are seeking to take the role of change agents with organizations or communities, or those who wish to undertake postgraduate education as a form of personal and professional development' (http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/msc.htm#for, Accessed 10 February 2006). The programme is increasingly renowned and well-regarded, and receives many more applications than there are places on offer. The seventh cohort (with which I worked) had 26 participants on it.

The course is not only considered innovative in terms of its content and the questions it raises; it is also considered innovative in its approach to learning. As the course website explains, 'The course is designed as a process of disciplined inquiry into the issues, questions and practices involved in a values-focused view of managing international business, drawing on the expertise in this form of learning established in [CARPP]. There is therefore an emphasis throughout the programme on inquiry processes and skills'

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(http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/msc.htm#innovative, Accessed 10 February 2006).
The course assessment is such that participants are encouraged to develop and
practise inquiry skills alongside exploring the issues and ideas raised through the
workshops in their own personal/professional contexts. In the first year of the
programme, participants are asked to complete a short written assignment as part of
each cycle of learning (the time in between any two workshops). At the end of the
first year, they are asked to submit a review of their learning to date. In the second
year of the programme, participants negotiate formal learning projects involving
both academic and action components. Through the workshops design and the
assessment requirements, participants are encouraged to engage in active reflection
and experimentation, and to 'become explorers and potentially pioneers in relation
to responsibility and business practice'
(http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/msc.htm#appproach, Accessed 10 February 2006).

4.4.2   Patterns of engagement

In this section, I briefly describe the ways in which I engaged with the seventh
intake of the MSc, beginning early in 2003 and ending in 2005. I describe my
intentions and aspirations as I contracted to work with this group, and I outline the
ways in which I sought to engage with the group throughout the duration of the
programme.

My central motivation in seeking to work with the MSc group was that doing so
would give me the opportunity to explore the ecological challenges facing
organisations and individuals with people who were open to these issues and who
had chosen to be there. My feeling was that the established framework of the
course, and the self-selection of its participants, would help to provide both a
practical structure and a frame of support for the second-person inquiry I sought to
initiate. I felt that being contained within a relatively safe space would be
particularly beneficial to me as a budding inquirer, particularly since I was seeking
to develop my capacity to hold space within groups in ways that were
simultaneously challenging and enabling.

My sense was that, essentially, participants on the MSc course were people who
had made a serious commitment to explore these issues in their own lives. At the

same time, I of course realised that there would be a diversity of perspectives and frameworks represented within the group and that people would be coming to this from different places and with different agendas. This is where I saw the stretch for any potential second-person inquiry within this group. The kinds of questions I posed to myself at this point (and which I felt might be of interest to others) included:

- How can we engage with others, across a variety of perspectives, and make sense of these issues together, so that we are each able to move on in a way that is appropriate and helpful to us?

- How do we engage in genuine dialogue and inquiry around issues as complex, difficult and contentious as these?

The year before contracting to work with the MSc 7 group, I had accompanied the MSc 6 cohort to Schumacher College for their 'Ecology and Sustainable Development' workshop, and had become aware that responses to the experience differed widely across the group, and that participants engaged with the subject area and the exercises on different levels and in a variety of ways. Thus it became apparent to me that as (co-)inquirers, we needed to develop awareness of how difference is played out and handled in an inquiry group, particularly when we are exploring issues and ideas which challenge deeply-held notions and behaviour patterns, to do with our place in the world and relationship with the wider earth system, for example. How do we choose to make sense of difference, and how do we co-exist across these tensions in learning-full ways? How do we manage such differences, and how might we approach these in inquiring manners? At the end of the MSc 6 workshop, there was a short debriefing session during which a number of process questions were raised, and yet there was limited time available to enter into such a discussion.

I therefore felt that it may be useful and appropriate to purposefully notice and track the process that an MSc group goes through whilst inquiring into questions of sustainability, making space to reflect on the following kinds of questions:

- What helps (and, alternatively, hinders) engagement with, and inquiry into, these issues?

- What supports and enables people to think about how they might make sense of these challenges? What scares and alienates? What raises barriers and why?

- What is it about what I am (we are) doing in relationship which is (is not) allowing us to engage with these ideas in an inquiring or useful way?

- What is it about the material / the way it is presented (or whatever else is happening here, e.g. group dynamics) which is facilitating / stopping us from entering into dialogue around these issues?

Following an extended negotiation process with the course facilitators of the commencing MSc 7, we agreed that an appropriate role for me to take would be that of an action researcher there to notice and track the process the group went through whilst inquiring into sustainability, and the development of the group's capacity to hold these questions in an inquiring way. It seemed important to me and to the course facilitators that participants were clear that I was neither a fellow participant nor a member of staff. Thus we felt that my role and positioning needed to be distinguishable from either of these. We agreed that in those moments when I was present in the group (by prior agreement with the facilitators and participants), I would position myself as explicitly there to monitor the group process itself, to seek to notice and track whether/how we were developing the capacity to act in accordance to the values we espoused and to acknowledge and pay attention to what was happening within the group space.

My hope was that in the role of action researcher working alongside the group, I would develop my own capacity, and help the group develop a capacity for

- Making meta-comment interventions around group/inquiry processes; and

- Making space for reflection and sense-making around our observations and experiences as part of the group.

When I contracted to work with the MSc group, I suggested that there were a number of specific functions I could fulfil that may be of service to the group. These included not only tracking the learning/inquiry process of the group over

time, but keeping a record of this, and feeding this back to the group, both in the moment and over time. For example, I suggested that during the course of our time together, I would seek to notice and attend to critical issues and interesting moments as they arise. I could then transcribe examples of such instances, and identify themes, patterns and questions which may be of interest to the group. I might then present this orally or in a written form, with the intention that this be seen as a stimulus for reflecting, both individually and collectively, upon the particular experience. What I wished to do was to facilitate spaces through which we might attend to how we were engaging in inquiry and/or action around issues of responsibility and business practice.

4.4.2a Discovering my learning edges within this group space

Throughout the duration of the MSc programme, I was present at each of the eight workshops. In some of these, I was present at a limited number of sessions, but in most I was present in the majority of the week's sessions, including any informal events and/or gatherings. On a number of occasions, I facilitated feedback and reflection sessions with the group in manners similar to those described above. Nevertheless, despite attempts to do so, I was unable to initiate a formal, systematic process of second-person inquiry with course participants. Indeed, by and large, the experiences and encounters I considered most meaningful and significant were those that I had with individual group members informally, outside of the formal workshop space.

I want to be clear that my engagement with this group raised many challenges and difficulties for me. The process of joining this group as a not-quite insider, not-quite outsider was in many ways uncomfortable, as were my attempts to find and occupy an appropriate place and positioning within it. I also experienced the group dynamics as thorny and difficult, and realised (with some discomfort) that the questions I had posed myself regarding how we as (co-)inquirers might make sense of and deal with difference were particularly relevant to my own inquiry practice within this context. Indeed, one of the core questions with which I was left as I engaged with this group was that of how participants representing multiple perspectives might come together to reflect on and learn from significant experiences and difficult interactions as part of an inquiry group.

The realisation that this had not turned out to be the safe and contained space I had envisaged was particularly difficult for me to make sense of. At various points during the two years, I considered ending my engagement with this group. With hindsight, I am glad that I did not do so, not only because of the rich and rewarding relationships I was able to form with some individuals, but because I feel that in sustaining my engagement with this group over a significant period of time I was able to identify and begin to work on some of my learning edges. These included the following:

- Dealing with the issues that arise while contracting and negotiating roles and boundaries for working with a group.

- Dealing with difference, conflict and tension within a group inquiry space.

- Holding the various tensions raised by the issues, and finding ways to move forward from these.

- Holding the process of engagement moment to moment, despite the difficulties, challenges and discomfort felt.

As already mentioned, my experience is that the questions and challenges which emerge as people seek to engage with sustainability issues are often related to those experienced while seeking to develop a practice of inquiry. The learning edges I identified above are, I believe, relevant both to ecological action and to the development of inquiry skills and competencies, and also became apparent during my engagement with other fields of practice. In Chapters Five through Ten, I seek to show how engaging with the above learning edges in various spaces is helping me to develop my capacities for critical inquiry and effective action in relation to ecological challenges.

4.5   An unexpected invitation…Inquiry with the Luhimba Project

In this section, I wish to briefly outline the nature of my involvement with the Luhimba Project, an aid/development partnership between Luhimba, a village in

Tanzania, and a small UK-based charity, which has been ongoing for the last twenty-two years.

As the title of this section suggests, my engagement with this group began through an unexpected invitation. An acquaintance, Richard, approached me and asked me whether I would to pursue some kind of collaboration with the Luhimba Project group. Richard is a trustee of the Luhimba Project, and his feeling was that the project had 'reached a point where it's highly desirable to view its future in a wider context of development projects in general, and small-scale, locally-supported projects in particular' (personal communication, August 2003). Richard suggested that I may be able to work with the project in such a way that it would both progress their work and be relevant to my PhD studies. Thus he invited me to meet with the group of trustees, 'to talk through possibilities with you as a first step in defining whatever collaborative role you would play, in order to ensure it enhanced your own work as well as, undoubtedly, being of benefit to the longer-term Luhimba Project' (personal communication, August 2003).

4.5.1 Context

The Luhimba Project could be described as a non-governmental community development project revolving around a remote village, Luhimba, in rural south-eastern Tanzania.

The project was initiated in 1984 under the sponsorship of the UK Institute of Mechanical Engineers, with the explicit purpose of achieving ongoing, sustainable improvements in the quality of villagers' lives through education, health, clean water, agriculture and engineering. Luhimba, which at the time had a population of 1660 and currently has a population of 3500, was selected for the project by the British Tanzania Society on the basis of the quality of the local leadership and the fact that the village is located in the fertile Ruvuma region, which was only then being opened up to the rest of Tanzania via the (then new) Songea - Dar es Salaam road.

The working arrangement which was originally negotiated and agreed upon by the project leaders from the UK and the village government of Luhimba was that

villagers and UK fundraisers would work together to set up each project, with subsequent responsibility for the running, maintenance, development and strategising for the project being taken by the local project owners, sometimes with the aid of government advisors (as was the case with the medical dispensary and the primary school, for example) and if possible and necessary, with further intermittent support from the Luhimba Project charity (such as fund-raising for the medical officer at the village dispensary to undertake training so that he is able to perform minor eye surgery locally). This pattern has been largely maintained over the last twenty-two years. In this way, most projects have been planned so that they could be sustained in the long-term by local residents. Most recently, a small-business loans pilot scheme has been launched in the village, and the hope is that this too will become a self-sustaining enterprise.

The project is currently run by a small group of volunteers in the UK and in Tanzania, a number of whom have been involved in the project since its early days, and is jointly led and coordinated by Paul Temple in the UK and by Dr Paul Mosha in Dar es Salaam.

4.5.2 Patterns of engagement

I first met with the group of trustees in September 2003. They explained to me that for some time, they had wanted to explore in some depth and detail the nature of the relationship which they felt had evolved between themselves and local project owners in Luhimba, and to consider how this might unfold into the future. Thus, we agreed that one way that I might usefully collaborate with the group was by helping them to notice and attend to these kinds of questions in a systematic way.

To this end, I was invited to take part in all of the Luhimba Project forthcoming meetings and activities, and over a period of ten months, I participated in many conversations with the five or six people who make up the voluntary work-force of the charity in the UK, and who are responsible for the entirety of the fund-raising and for the administration and organisation of the project on the UK side.

Early in my engagement, I organised and facilitated a brainstorming session with the UK project leaders/partners so that we might collectively identify what the

focus of our collaboration and of my contribution might be. We identified that the following questions were of interest to the group:

- What are the kinds of challenges and/or opportunities that we have experienced over the years we have been collaborating with the people of Luhimba?

- What is the nature and/or quality of the relationships that have been established here?

- What is the nature of the 'mutual learning' that unfolds through this relationship, and how does this inform the ways in which we approach issues of power, equality, participation and so on?

- Over time, how do we maintain the high levels of energy and commitment called for by this project?

- What learning can be taken from these experiences and how might this shape the future of the project?

In the conversations which followed this early brainstorming session, we sought to reflect on the above questions and to build a shared awareness of the kinds of dynamics (both generative and degenerative) which could be played out within the context of aid and development. In particular, we focused on the ways in which certain power relations and power differentials might be established within the context in which the project was located. In particular, I found that Paul, the co-chairperson of the charity and the person who seemed to be most intensely and passionately involved with the project, seemed to hold questions regarding the power dynamics and the quality of mutuality evident in the relationship(s) amongst the project partners in Luhimba and in the UK. He expressed a wish to carefully consider the various dimensions and subtleties of these relationships/dynamics, and invited me to accompany him on his annual trip to Luhimba, so that I might see for myself the quality/qualities of the relationship(s) they had developed, and so that I might facilitate the holding of attention around these.

I made the trip to Luhimba in August of 2004. In Chapter Nine, I reflect on my visit to Luhimba, and I seek to demonstrate in some detail how I sought to bring an attitude of inquiry and qualities of care and attentiveness to my interactions there.

Throughout my engagement with the UK and Tanzanian project partners, I participated in many collective conversations, meetings and activities, and I also participated in many one-to-one conversations around the key issues and questions identified above. As part of my role in this field of practice, I took responsibility for pulling together a commentary from the stories that emerged, and I fed this back in various ways to both the people of Luhimba and the project leaders on the UK side.

In ending this section, I wish to make the point that despite my collaboration with this group having emerged out of an unexpected invitation, I feel that it is one of the spaces in which I was most assertively and effectively able to demonstrate the qualities of inquiry towards which I aspired throughout my research process. I believe that this is partly to do with the timing of this engagement, and with the fact that I became involved in this project around the time when I was most seriously reflecting on, and I would argue, most actively learning from the difficulties that I had encountered in some of my other (earlier) fields of practice, specifically as part of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative and in my collaboration with the MSc group.

I hope to evidence how the nature and quality of my inquiry practice shifted through the remainder of this thesis. For the time being, I wish to end this section by sharing the below feedback I received from Paul following our visit to Luhimba. The following is an extract from the report he distributed to trustees and partners in the UK and in Tanzania following our visit:

> Patricia and I travelled from Dar es Salaam to Luhimba on Sunday
> and Monday 1st and 2nd of August and stayed in the village until the
> following Sunday. From my point of view it was one of the most
> successful and beneficial visits to date. I felt that being involved in
> Patricia's research made me much more aware of the feelings,
> thoughts, worries, hopes and aspirations of so many of the villagers.
> It enabled me to take stock of the whole project, to understand the
> villagers' perceptions of the impact the project has had on their lives

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and the roles we all play within the project. It also enabled me to focus on certain areas and to see more clearly the way forward. What I also found very interesting from Patricia's work were the different attitudes held by different members of the community. Many now have the motivation, energy and desire to do things for themselves and see our input as an added bonus to help them achieve their goals, while a minority still show signs of donor-dependency, which we might also understand ourselves as contributing towards. These attitudes and observations gave rise to some interesting conversations and discussions. (Extract from Paul's report on visit to Luhimba, September 2004)

I believe that the above suggests that, through my emerging inquiry practice, I am becoming better able to contribute something of value to the spaces and fields of practice with which I choose to engage.

4.6   Conclusions

In the last two chapters, I have sought to make explicit what my initial intentions and assumptions were as I contracted to work within my various fields of practice, and to outline how I sought to bring an inquiring perspective to the *process of engagement* with ecological challenges.

In the remainder of the thesis, I aim to demonstrate how the questions and issues raised in these different fields of practice have encouraged me to carefully consider, challenge and shift my understanding of what it means to be an inquirer and agent of change in relation to ecological challenges.

In the following chapter, I draw on the experiences of participants of the Ecological Thinking course and the MSc programme, and I present my own emerging understanding of what these experiences suggest about the challenges encountered when seeking to engage with the ecological crisis. In Chapter Six, I introduce the concept of repose, and I argue that developing repose in ourselves may enable us to hold the tensions and complexities associated with ecological challenges, and to continue to engage with these in sustained and life-affirming ways.