Appendix H

This piece shows me working with feedback on my practice from a colleague (Sally), and opening up my reflections on my practice and a project (LGA) to an astute listener well able to press and challenge me as a critical friend.
When you read it be sure to read the footnotes too, as in these I add another layer of reflection as I develop the text.

Inquiring conversations about my practice

1. Process used

This conversation was held at my house on a cold day in December 2003 with Sally. She and I had both been members of the consultant team working on the Joining Up project for the LGA which was established as an Agency R&D Project to research and develop a social policy for the engineering focused agency and undertake the work to embed it.
I had emailed the question schedule to Sally well in advance of our meeting, but since then had met with CARPP colleagues to discuss the questions and had agreed to take a slightly extended focus from the first set of conversations by also asking:

- How can one get feedback on one's practice?
- what's happening in the group one is facilitating and
- asking questions about times when things went well, and times when they didn't to try to see if there were identifiable differences in what I was doing.

I had not written down these supplementary questions but shared this focus with Sally as we started our session.

History together

Sally and I had not worked together before we joined the team for the LGA work, we worked on that project for nearly two years until she withdrew from the team at the end of phase 1. Initially we thought we had not met before December 2000 when we first planned the work with Duncan, however we discovered we had many friends in common and had been part of the same extended group of feminists in Bristol seventeen years before.

Shared interests

Work wise we both shared a keen interest in the nature of partnership and leadership, and whereas I came from an action research background Sally was studying and teaching at the Revans Institute, Salford University, with an action learning background. More generally we had a shared history of direct action including time at Greenham Common and other feminist and socialist campaigns.

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Brief summary of the session
This was the third of these Inquiring Conversations and dealt with my facilitation both within the consultant team (five people) and of workshops (of up to 60 people) as part of Joining Up. Our conversation ranged over observations on my facilitation practice and the roles I had undertaken in the project team to questions of leadership, gender and power that were enacted in the team. Material came up about seeking feedback: our shared practices and more general points; as well as some observations about dynamics within the workshops we ran – the good times and the bad; about my presence and its effect. As ever my themes of voice and inclusion/exclusion, class and power surfaced too, both as personal experiences (voicelessness) and on the level of the political/values (collaboration).
The conversation was given extra depth as we are also exploring how to work together in the future and our personal friendship has deepened over the last year.

In the terms of my learning journey the period we had worked together was broadly covered by my Pig and Deer moment, but still surfaced many things from my practice which relate to the earlier moments of Unicorn and Tiger.

What I did
Method
The method was the same as the first two Conversations with the addition of another cycle of reflection with my CARPP tutorial group to add supplementary questions in the light of the data from the first two Inquiring Conversations.

What I was doing in that session
During the session I took notes of key points as they arose. I later compared these key points with those I identified through mind mapping the transcript, allowing for the brevity of the notes there were no particular differences in emphasis between the two.

This conversation with Sally was robust and challenging: both because she would have challenged me if I had not reported things accurately or if our perceptions differed greatly, and also because I value her perception of events and in particular of my practice, so that her positive feedback was something I had to take on board. She also pushed into focus the issue of gender playing out in the team in a more explicit way than I had done myself, and posed direct questions to me e.g. on leadership within the consultant team.

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I was conscious of facilitating the conversation between Sally and I more lightly than I had done in previous Inquiring Conversations. I can hear myself framing the session and the questions on the tape; introducing the extended foci; and as the conversation went on keeping track against the inquiry questions, guiding the conversation towards them. But despite having thought I wanted more 'fine grain' detail I note I seldom encouraged Sally to give more depth and detail.

I ask myself was this a fear of appearing too self indulgent? Asking 'tell me about me' regarding an occasion on which one was consciously trying to 'erase oneself in the service of the group[339]' seems paradoxical. I was not conscious of this at the time and looking at the data gathered through the conversation I am unsure how much more detail could have been added at this distance of time from the work.

I had noted as we started the session that I was feeling more relaxed and wrote:

> I notice at the start of this session that I feel less tense about it. But also less committed to it. I ask "does this mean I'm coming to the end of these (conversations seeking feedback about my practice) and need a next-step format to take it to the next stage?"

By less committed I meant how easy it would have been to talk of other things, to let the opportunity slip by as I had done a few weeks before.

This piece has been shared with Sally as a further quality check.

2. What I learnt

A significant learning from this conversation for me has been about **the roles I take in groups**, consciously and unconsciously, and how these combined with my **personal presence** have an effect on others. This is of particular interest here because of the two very different settings in which I am observed facilitating: the small consultant team and the larger workshops for Agency staff. In the former there is a relationship which evolves over time and is quite personal and where my role is that of peacemaker moving between alliances, interpreting between them and keeping a focus on aspects of the task; in the latter my power is very different being that of convenor and director/facilitator.

I'm also observed failing to be facilitative on one occasion, and am sitting with my discomfort with my use of my power on that occasion, as well as questions about appropriateness.

What I learnt that was expected and familiar about the process

Discomfort with asking the questions

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[339] As I am doing when I am facilitating. See forming and reforming questions for more detail on this.

I have written before about my discomfort with the process of asking for feedback, both the anxiety of opening oneself up to criticism and the apparent self indulgence of it all. Yet if I am to be able to avoid self reflection becoming another instance of 'self indulgent memoiring' I need to find ways in which to take my own reflections into dialogue with others to gain a wider perspective on my practice and learning which can be useful to others. There is a paradox in the need for facilitators to seek such feedback which then exposes them to the glare of attention, which I suggest they are likely to be seeking to avoid when in practice if they subscribe to the belief that the nature of facilitation is the erasure of self in service to the group. I will write more about this in *Forming and Reforming the Questions*, a piece on the importance of feedback.

What I learnt that was expected and familiar about the content

- How Sally and I used each other to get feedback in action
- How others in the group reflected, and how being reflective helped
- Commitment to work with multiple perspectives
- How unlearning can be embedded in organisations e.g. organisational resistance to dealing with the barriers to learning, and how as consultants our voices can be silenced by the simple expedients of a client refusing our advice, rejecting critical feedback, or accepting the points made but deciding that the rest of the organisation is not yet 'ready' for the messages they contain
- How hard it is to keep the 'I' in inquiry
- Role – peacekeeper. And the sheer effort of holding it all together
- How hard it is for some people to work collaboratively
- A sense of not-knowing, and of being the outsider and without voice
- Instinctive knowing, and how that can feel insufficient when all around are knowing propositionally/intellectually
- Leadership and uses of power in the team

Getting feedback in action

The question of how do we get feedback on our work has been present in all of these conversations. However in this case Sally was able to clearly identify the sorts of questions she and I had been working with, as well as one of the pressures; the work feeling fragile which may have caused us to check-out with each other even more than usual.

> S: I recall mostly, and I'm wondering whether its because the piece of work in the LGA felt so fragile at times, I recall having several conversations with you while we were either in the meeting together or afterwards where we would say 'how was that?'. So I recall you and I, I'm not sure whether that was our team practice or whether it was our personal practice the two of us

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Me: my recollection is that we used to do that more (than the others)…..

S: So I can contrast a practice which I think we developed to a de facto practice with Duncan and Daphne where the post work conversations were about other people, whereas our post work conversations were sometimes about other people but mostly about ourselves, so I would feel I could happily say to you 'did I do that all right?' 'How did you experience that?' and I recall you choosing to say the same to me 'how did I do that?' 'Did our intentions get carried through; was I as I intended to be?'

So thinking about the south west workshop: we planned carefully, we talked through our planning and we talked through what our intentions were and we set the scene/do the work, and we talked through in the moments when they were doing work (in small groups) 'did I say too much, did I say enough, did that have its intended effect? We've gone on a bit is that ok?' A dialogue between us asking how will this unfold during the day, are we each doing and being for ourselves and for each other what we intended to be?

How others in the group reflected, and how being reflective helped

As suggested in the quote above the team practice was not to be reflective in the same ways. For Duncan it was difficult to prioritise time for reflection, and when there was time his concern was largely to do with content and how the client was engaging with the project. For Daphne and Ivor, the more traditional researchers and policy writing members of the team, content in the form of development of ideas was the focus for any reflection.

The overall Joining Up project proved to be a very demanding and uncomfortable piece of work, as Sally said 'fragile' and very difficult to make sense of, which made reflection and feedback feel essential. Within it there were some examples of the more usual (by which I mean standard 'good practice') occasions on which good reflective practice was useful: Our conversation identified an example of the usefulness of checking-out and sharing when someone came very late to a workshop and was then disrespectful to the group he was working in. It enabled me to manage my irritation and gently but firmly manage him back into the task:

Me: and actually on both occasions (South West and Wales) it allowed us to get through things that happened on the day. Do you remember when Paul arrived at the South West workshop, he came very late?... [He] was meant to be part of the [group working on] an exercise so we gradually fed him into the group and were reassuring and accepting and not judgemental and then all he wanted to do when he should have been doing the exercise with the group was to talk to Ivor

S: yes a little baby policy wonk

Me: yes, and I felt our ongoing reflections together helped me to deal with being quite so irritated with him, and keep it in proportion, so I could feel cross with him, and I could share it and let it go.

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Unlike another occasion in Wales when both Sally and I were unsettled by bad logistics and late nights and I reacted sharply to a participant[340]:

> Me: [it was] wet, cold, the tea and coffee wasn't in the room when it was meant to be, and can you remember there was somebody… she was very vehement about something
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> S: Yes and she had a direct go at you about something, oh yes 'do you realise you're running ten minutes late now?'
>
> Me: That was it. And I just thought 'oh bugger, someone who's been on a facilitation course'
>
> S: That was the first time I've ever seen you, it might be the only time I've ever seen you slap somebody down directly, just both barrels back
>
> Me: I do remember saying 'and we're going to be even later if you stop me at this point'
>
> S: Yes, without a smile, without even a smile… Yes that's today; this is the nature of today. It was a weird day. I was very bad tempered that day
>
> Me: And yes you're right, I did lose it with her
>
> S: But not in a way that anyone else would have noticed apart from her and me looking on, because it wasn't public was it.
>
> Me: No, she was right under my nose, so it wasn't an aside it was very direct. And it was very confronting on her part and I remember thinking 'I can either roll with this or I can draw a line', and we were working our socks off to keep to time, and we'd only lost time because they were so late. Can you remember they arrived in dribs and drabs? They were a very tatty bunch in that way. I just thought 'the line is here'
>
> S: She did say it in a way that was not meant to be helpful it was 'I've caught you out on something that I know you've definitely done wrong'
>
> Me: Yes, not 'would you like us to finish 10 minutes later or earlier with this task because you're running a bit late? ...

Commitment to work with multiple perspectives.

This relates to us needing to recognise the validity of the perspectives of clients, and being able to work respectfully with them. Its accepted good practice to start from where the client is at, but its also recognising that contexts change and organisations are dealing with complex new demands on them. And accepting that they (one's clients) may see the world quite legitimately from very different perspectives based on our (theirs and my) very different experiences and perspective.
In some instances over this three year project it's been possible to work with those differences, at other times it has required a respectful letting go:

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[340] Rereading this (in 2004) I still feel a degree of shame for my action, an initial feeling that I was being unfacilitative, and then questioning whether there was a place for my action or not? I still don't know, am I allowed to be, and be seen to be, irritated? Must I always be 'perfect'?

'Me: It's not enough just to vent, to say the Agency has to stop doing this because…

S: 'J L hasn't got a bloody clue'   that was Duncan's phrase

Me: It's not enough. In some ways it's similar to the problems that Daphne and I had with the BT work; we could get completely aligned with Robert, who of course knew the Joining Up work very well, and we could have this shared agenda written into the specification for the piece of work which we were then in the process of delivering, and then they appointed three new layers of staff who just didn't have the same agenda. Well you can either say those people are demonic or you can say these people come from a different place where they don't see those connections. The joining up has not been done, and in some cases I think they are not wanting to see it or would strongly argue its not there. What I write-off in that case is the opportunity, its no longer opportune to do this work, I think that's what Daphne and I were saying, not these people are horned but that the culture within that context has changed. The values have changed, what we were offering is no longer acceptable, because of where we are we are not prepared to give them what they are asking for so lets part company

S: And I think that's completely fine

Me: It's a sort of I'm ok, you're ok thing really. They are doing what they think to be appropriate to survive and thrive in that organisation at that time, with the messages that they are getting down the line. We might think that they could hear other messages but they can't or they're not

S: Or something else makes more sense to them at that time'.

How unlearning can be embedded in organisations and how as consultants our voices can be silenced

Can you use AR in an organisation which is resistant to dealing with the institutionalised barriers to learning together? Our experience is that as a an inquiring approach AR works in isolated pockets in such circumstances but cannot have an effect on the wider organisation without people taking leadership to enable it. I described to Sally part of a recent consultant team meeting where we identified some core messages for our report writing:

'Me: We spent a morning talking about how we perceived the Agency and what we thought the messages were that we've learnt over the past nearly three years.

We started off talking about the methods that we'd used, and then of course once you've started to talk about AR and AL you're asking is this organisation at the right point to be using these methodologies? At which point we were finding ourselves concluding that no, it wasn't yet a good point to be using these methodologies because there are some parts of the organisation that can and other aspects of the organisation that militate against it. So I don't think you could set up an AR or AL project inside the LGA really, not at the moment, and certainly not one which would be peer run because the culture is (one of) no risk taking,

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no admission of not knowing. People do those things but in isolation, they find little pockets in which they can safely do that work but then are very untrusting of the organisation around them allowing any recognition of that, it's not 'valid'.

I suppose I was talking about the methodology, and where that had and hadn't been useful, and where we'd adapted it. And we got to some basic principles about what we thought was going on in the organisation and what could and couldn't be heard, and that's what's forming, potentially forming, a spine for the report writing.'

The recent refusal of very senior managers to publish, let alone to commit to acting on our recommendations (Project Board meeting), brings up yet another aspect of voicelessness and powerlessness. That of the consultant whose advice is spurned because its unacceptable – in this case described by a project board member as 'wholesome' but not what the senior team want to hear[341]. At the same time I reviewed the project last week with middle managers who had been members of the project development group and they were immensely positive as to how the action research aspects of the project particularly had enabled them to make changes on a personal professional and wider professional levels e.g. one member quoted having the confidence to take on a university visiting professorship and to develop learning materials for engineers who he now teaches sustainability at higher education level.

How hard it is to keep the 'I' in inquiry

In our conversation we talked of the struggle to sustain self reflection at a team and organisational level:

S: My question in that group is how can I… support this process? So I think we are all in that group….. managing to conflate the two 'we' and 'I' questions….. So I'm wondering if there was a sense that we could have done that, *both how do we support this project forward and how do I play my part in that?* We did try those questions didn't we?

Me: We did and to my memory the 'I's just never got picked up

S: And the 'we's were typically picked up as in 'how can you?'[342]

Me: Yes, there's not been a lot of preparedness to self-reflect and in that way I think that's true in the consultant team and its true throughout the organisation as well. I see, even where there's pockets of what we might

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[341] It seems that 'wholesome' is just another way of saying 'motherhood and apple pie' – another disparaging phrase I have often heard used to argue against the morally correct but tactically unacceptable action.

[342] Meaning that when we asked questions of a wider group either of the consultant team or the internal Project Development Group (the 'we') the response tended to be to ask how 'you' (meaning the individual questioner or the consultant team) were going to provide the support. Basically there was a lack of a real and enacted belief in team working (the 'we') however much such as approach was espoused as good practice. This combined with a reluctance to take individual responsibility was paralysing.

recognise as enlightened practice, as in there's full integration of the social perspectives and some interesting practice, I think if you start to push it there's not a lot of 'I' individual responsibility taking.

This is understandable in a risk averse organisation and makes the pockets of self reflection we identified and fostered quite heroic considering the culture.

Role – peacekeeper. And the sheer effort of holding it all together

During phase 1 of the project on which we were working together the consultant team could be likened to a dysfunctional family. I found myself in a familiar role of peacekeeper and interpreter:

> Me: so it felt quite often to me that you and I, and latterly Daphne, were thrown into a peacekeeping and interpreting role
>
> S: and we did that with each other didn't we. I remember us having conversations where I would need to say to you 'am I mad?'
>
> Me: yes
>
> S: is this happening? Is this how things are supposed to be?

There an echo here of my family role and also of a sense of not having 'the correct language' which was an aspect of my own silencing in the past. The reassuring evidence from this conversation is that I was voicing my confusion. However I also notice that I felt (and feel) less powerful and active than I actually was in Sally's description of me:

> Me: That felt very frustrating, so I think I know what's going on but its almost like not knowing the language for it, and not knowing how to justify saying that when it appears what we're talking about is something different, "you can't talk about this we're talking about something else". But I kept thinking "yes, but that is this" but no permission, so much 'not permission' to say things. And it felt very hard at times to be facilitative as a member of the team, almost like there wasn't space for being facilitative there was only space for asserting.
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> S: Well I recall you being very facilitative on a number of very difficult occasions: I'm thinking of the Bristol meeting where we met to do the writing. That was an event where we set up to do one thing and people clearly had very different relationships with that task, and Jack was withdrawn and angry
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> Me: Yes, and particularly angry with Ivor and the rest of us didn't understand why
>
> S: Yes, Ivor was pretty withdrawn. The more angry Jack got the more withdrawn Ivor got
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> Me: It was monstrous to work in that situation. I remember straining to hold people in the same space. It felt like if you weren't 100% holding it together it would just go bang and we would disappear. It felt very explosive potentially.

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Our conversation identified me holding things together in the team, and feeling responsible for doing this. Looking at it now nearly two years after the event I wonder whether my pig-self might put some more responsibility back to some team members:

> S: So that particular meeting where it just, the layout of the room (long and narrow and full of table), the task we set ourselves, the importance that we ended up placing on that task and the symbolism that that task had for all of us. It was incredibly fraught and I do remember you as being the person in the room that held that together. Because Duncan had a bit of a flippy didn't he?

> Me: Yes, and literally he was having one of his rather flippant things, he was going to be quite juvenile about it in some ways (saying repeatedly and obstructively) 'I don't understand this', it was something that would knock the legs from under it. And I do remember feeling, I can feel it now, feeling hugely, individually, personally responsible for making it work

> S: Yes, the writing up, the writing down, the writing our account of, that sat with you more than anyone else. Or rather I think there was a point at which how we accounted for that whole episode had the potential to be quite schizophrenic: there was the account that Daphne and Ivor would write, and there was the other account

> M: And that's the way the team divided, always. There's the process view and there's the content view. I suppose if I think about that day its one of those occasions, and maybe its not such a bad thing, where I don't remember very much about what I actually did. What I can remember most is how it felt, so I would find it quite hard to describe what that looked like in working with the group.

How hard it is for some people to work collaboratively

It was one hell of a day the collaborative writing day: I'd taken responsibility for designing and facilitating the day and so felt very responsible for making it work. No-one else seemed to have much enthusiasm for contributing to any sort of collaborative writing at all. Daphne and Ivor wanted to just go off and write, Duncan was asking difficult 'idiot' questions, Jack was angry and moody.

I notice that despite wanting to make peace I was unprepared to let go of my desire to see if it was possible to write collaboratively together. On several occasions during the day I remember asking myself how much I still wanted this, how I was with the struggles going on around and within me? I was being stubborn and demanding in order to satisfy my passion for collaboration. I have to ask again now, was I taxing this system too far? A distressed group working inside a competitive and not very collaborative organisation? Yet surely our work/task was about social processes too? Participation is at the heart of a social policy for the Agency, as is transparency and inclusion. Collaboration is a practical expression in process terms of these values. For this I was prepared to be seen as exasperating in my pursuit of congruence.

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As I write (March 2004) the final reports of the project are being written, and while I would not describe any of them as really collaborative pieces of writing, the consultant team did come together to scope the core and meta messages that would run through all eleven reports – which is considerably more than we might have done had we not had some experience, however imperfect, of trying to write collaboratively.

A sense of not-knowing, and of being the outsider and without voice

Being 'the outsider' is an issue for me personally. And writing into this I wonder how much did I bring this issue here into this project? I believe it was something inherent in the dynamics of the team and situation which brought out these feelings and that as the 'child of warring parents' I was made inarticulate by it, lost a sense of myself in the conflict[343]. In this way I felt voiceless, although the evidence from my conversation with Sally is that I was not without some voice and influence.

Writing this now (March 2004) I wonder whether I am happier/better in situations of *distress* rather than situations of *conflict*? I mean a better facilitator and less personally distressed i.e. the feelings of being ignorant that also occurred to me.

> S: So what did you make of it, what did you make of how leadership got played? And what part you played in it.[344]
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> Me: I suppose I most often felt like I was sitting in the middle of something, that I wasn't sure, part of me thought I understood and part of me thought I didn't understand what was happening, so I was really stuck between a place of almost instinctive knowing; thinking how much mirroring was going on. I'd have a sense of what was happening. But also at the same time feeling immensely unskilled and without a place in that, so that there was no permission to feel secure in those observations, and no position to articulate those observations from. That felt very frustrating, so I think I know what's going on but it's almost like not knowing the language for it, not knowing how to justify saying that when it appears that what we're talking about is something different, "you can't talk about this we're talking about something else". But I kept thinking "yes, but that is this" but no permission, so much 'not permission' to say things. And it felt very hard at times to be facilitative as a member of the team, almost like there wasn't space for being facilitative there was only space for asserting.

And I talk of not knowing the language -- a common and recurring theme for me[345]:

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[343] When I originally wrote this passage I now realise I talked of myself in the third person: I wrote *"that the child of warring parents was made inarticulate by it, lost a sense of herself"* thereby making myself an outsider again in the text this time.
[344] This conversation transcended simple feedback and opened my reflection to an astute listener who would have contradicted me if she thought my perceptions or sense making were wrong.

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S: An image just pops up in my mind, thinking about the LGA experience, thinking about being able to test the boundaries of what was discussable or not discussable, or what behaviour was permissible or not permissible and of wanting to test more and push more and talk more and push that boundary. I was using this metaphor at work the other day: "I'm happy to be at the end of the pier and everyone saying we're behind you, providing you've not all got a saw in your hand and you're sawing away and I'm the wrong side of that saw" and I thinking why did that pop into my mind, wondering whether it was holding that balance, of being able to talk and speak the unspeakable but also thinking "colleagues are you with me or am I the only person who wants to talk about this, and if I do will you all be going 'oh! no we didn't think that'...."

Me: And my sense of what we were both doing in that group is that we were often speaking the unspeakable, or trying to do so, or trying just to open up the space for the unspeakable to be spoken into. And that that was a fearful process because there were all these little alliances going on, and I suppose to anyone outside the team they'd see alliances between us as well; the Daphne and Ivor pair would get tighter, you never quite knew where Duncan would jump – with you, me or Jack, and where would Jack go?

S: there was also something in that whole setting that made me feel very gauche and unsophisticated, and not knowing and just very stupid really most of the time

Me: Absolutely, and I think that was what I was meaning when I said earlier on that I felt like I didn't have the language, I didn't have somehow the frameworks for making sense or understanding it. I'd missed out on a whole load of theory somehow and therefore couldn't make sense of what was going on around me, rather than now when I look back and sometimes I can think "no, that was just bad behaviour".

I was aware of instinctive knowing, and both Sally and I are describing how that can feel insufficient when all around are knowing propositionally/intellectually, when any other sort of knowing has to fight to be heard.

Leadership and uses of power in the team

Leadership within the consultant team was an ongoing issue in phase 1 of the project: between the client and the nominated project leader (Ivor) and within the team itself; alliances were rife within the team and

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[345] The issue of being an outsider, without the language in use in a group seems to me to be a much larger political point, as well as a personal one. The exclusion of those without a shared language is one aspect, but maybe a more significant simile is the self exclusion of the unconfident – I am reminded of the number of times I've heard those I'm working with on inner city estates and in rural villages express the belief that the current opportunity on offer is 'not for people like us' despite the fact that the consultation process, learning programme or job creation scheme has been specifically aimed at them! It's an important challenge to all of us working with excluded groups to get to understand how they see themselves, what 'people like us' means before charging in to do our work.

between some members of the team and the client (Jack); and there were strong pre-existing alliances within the team (Sally and Duncan, Ivor and Daphne, and to a lesser degree myself and Duncan).

> S: Yes, so I didn't really understand where leadership sat

> Me: And then there's the question weren't we all just a substitute for Jack's team, for him having a team inside the Agency. We were just his team until that internal team took over

> S: Yes.

> Me: And that closeness has never been there again, as the project has gone on and on he's got more and more people working for him

> S: He's got himself a team

> Me: Yes, so he's leading the project less and less. There's more 'you' and 'us' going on, which is healthy. Yes leadership was a real issue wasn't it.

There were also issues of gender which related to the team dynamics. The rivalry that existed was between the male members of the team, provoking 'alpha male' behaviours at times and at others an almost father and favourite son relationship between Duncan and the client Jack:

> Me: yes it sort of feels gendered and something else.

> S: What do you think the something else was?

> Me: Maybe in some ways it's still about it being gendered but the mentoring thing between Duncan and Jack was a factor in that, and is that a gender thing, was it just about that mentoring role and that created a hierarchy there?

> S: I was thinking about hierarchy and power about the constructions of power in that group, which also feel a bit gendered really, it's a bit difficult to unpack that isn't it'.

Class also had a part to play in the relationships:

> S: Was it at that meeting, I have a vivid picture in my head of Ivor the grammar school boy, was it Slough grammar school? It was one of those grammar schools in the south east corner, and of course Jack with his public school background, and just think of those two relationships with power and authority, place and position. And the more Jack demanded some sort of attention the more Ivor just withdrew, and withdrew and withdrew

> Me: He almost couldn't bring himself to do anything that he was asked to do in some ways could he

> S: No, real sullen disengagement. 'You can't make me'.

Thinking about power in the team the questions that arise for me are:
- who has it
- what type(s)
- to do what
- what breaks down the power? For example the personal storytelling and sharing of our passions at a retreat at Runnings Park led to a temporary change in the team's relationships, and to the commitment to write about working with our passions in the

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context of the Joining Up project – and yet only the women ever wrote!

What I learnt that was unexpected about the process

- Feeling more relaxed about asking the questions
- How evoking an occasion can unearth well buried feelings and memories

Feeling more relaxed about asking the questions

At the time of the conversation I wrote: *'I notice at the start of this session that I feel less tense about it but also less committed to it. I ask does this mean I'm coming to the end of these and need a next-step format to take it to the next stage?'*
I was surprised that I suddenly felt more relaxed about this meeting, particularly as I had deliberately let another opportunity slip and had toyed with the idea of doing so again[346]. So getting started was hard, as was the prospect of feedback from someone whose work I respect and admire.
On reflection I think there are several reasons why this Inquiring Conversation felt less tense than previous ones: I am becoming familiar with the form of the questions (even if they change a little each time); some of my own reactions are becoming more familiar to me, so that I can notice them and be choiceful about how much I engage in the feelings; the relationship that exists between Sally and myself which has developed largely after the time we spent working together on this project, in fact the process of developing the proposal for phase 2 of the project drew us together in a shared distaste for the process but 'we have come to know each other in the shared participation in experiential space' [Heron]; the work under scrutiny is recent and I have always viewed it as an opportunity to reflect on my practice.

How evoking an occasion can unearth well buried feelings and memories

One of my concerns about data gathered from previous Inquiring Conversations was that there was little 'fine grained' information. By which I mean the noticing of tiny, moment to moment actions, specific instances of interventions or deliberate withholdings. I have since gone on to work with a colleague to capture an aspect of this moment to moment information through photography.
One strategy for evoking more detailed information from others has been to evoke the situations in which we have worked together through

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[346] We had arranged to record this session earlier in the year but had been delayed and distracted by other, less serious, things. I distinctly remember as Sally and I had lunch and talked of social things the thought crossing my mind that I could easily let the opportunity for this conversation slip away again.

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describing the physical surroundings, the people we were working with, the task which we were undertaking etc. I deliberately used this strategy in this conversation and found that it evoked memories for Sally and myself – both positive feelings about the groups we were working with and, for me the buried shame of 'losing it' in the Welsh workshop.

What I learnt that was unexpected about the content

- Purpose and facilitation – my anxiety about transparency and the potential for manipulation
- More about my presence
- Being calm and focused
- How I had forgotten the appearance of the 'dragon queen' until the occasion was evoked
- How gender had somehow slipped out of view
- How I had lost a heart connection.

Purpose and facilitation – my anxiety about transparency and the potential for manipulation

Being described as purposeful should perhaps not have surprised me, and I don't think it would have done in the context of other work. But I think it was such a contrast to the feeling of unknowing that has been so present for me in this project.

I notice as well that Sally's description of me acting with purpose and intent sparked off an anxiety that I might be (seen as) manipulative or controlling.

> S: Purposeful would be another word I'd use for you. Acting with purpose and intent. So thinking about what your intentions are, explicitly thinking about your intentions and then acting with that intention. Reasonably transparent
>
> Me: Yes, because I was thinking when you were saying that 'how does that feel on the other side? Because there's a potential for that to feel manipulative or controlling
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> S: Yes, I hadn't thought of that. I was thinking of a line where you start off saying fairly explicitly (to oneself) 'this is my intention, do I act with that intention, and do I get that effect?' and for that to be fairly open and transparent (to the group). So in a way it feels the opposite of manipulative really, thinking of manipulative as being when your intentions are hidden from everyone but you'.

Sally's response is reassuring; it suggests I have my control-freak nature well under control! Paradoxically facilitating challenges both the chaotic and the controlling aspects of my personality – the former takes care of the fine detail planning and design, the timekeeping; the latter lets me sit back into the natural rhythm of a group which can expand into the safe container of the design and a holding facilitation.

More about my presence

My ambivalence towards the term presence comes over again on the tape and is picked up by Sally who links presence and effect:

> S: I think presence is a good question, I don't think it's a cheesy question. And **effect**, because I guess that's all we need to know isn't it. Given that we do what we are really, that's what we do and what we are

> Me: I think so because otherwise are we not just following a model, like being out there doing 'a future search conference' at which point you think did you adequately deliver this tool or not?

> S: Yes, or you just say 'buy the book it's cheaper'

She goes on to describe how she experienced my presence in the turmoil of the project:

> S: So my experience of your presence in the team was often of a *calm, centre with sort of spinnings going off like centripetal force.* There were lots of occasions where people wanted to go, wanted to leave. Daphne didn't want to stay did she and felt obliged to stay, Ivor stayed but didn't really – his presence took him away. So there was this sense of spinning and I think you had a capacity to demonstrate a sort of calm, *a calm equilibrium in the midst of all of that* and also, and that's not just a sort of Buddhist type presence, I think the way you do that is with a *capacity to make sense of, to articulate some sense in a place, in an articulate and vocal way*

> Me: And that's certainly how it felt, one was often trying to say 'is it like this?' 'is this what's happening?' So its almost like offering a sort of diagram or a picture, I suppose it is just a model for understanding what might be happening. As much as anything because I wasn't sure, you know I was really struggling to try to get the rest of the team to engage on 'yes this is a shared picture'.

I didn't feel calm, but I know distress (mine and others) tends to make me act calm or act up. Staying calm; not provoking the situation, trying to unravel the mystery of what's expected of me, staying quiet and hidden. Alternatively at one time it might have ended in explosive stuff, angry Tigers provoking a response. More recently there is the calm with a persistent questioning at the heart of it – the quiet deer and the persistent and articulate pig selves.

Being calm and focused

This calm and focus was noticed again:

> S: Well, I can't remember a very detailed account but I can tell you about my memory of it. Which was not untypical of how I see you working in lots of settings, all the settings that we've worked together. Which is a fairly calm, precise, but focused intention that sort of puts a shape around something and says so 'if this then how about this next?' So I think on that day (the collaborative writing session) as much as any other where there were people acting up and acting into their roles all over the place, and some disengagement.

And the determination about task, a stubbornness which I do remember from the times I felt I clearly had something to champion in the project:

> S: Duncan, I don't know Duncan was being flippant, flippy and you were being a calm, serene pool of focus really that kept us to task. 'This is our task, this is what we have to, this is what we said we'd do'. And interestingly the fact that it was important to you meant that it clearly was important to everyone else too.
>
> Me: that's interesting, and I have a question now of would it, might it have been as valid to just let it roll as it was going, and to stop trying to get it back to what we'd agreed the task would be, what happens if you just facilitate those extremes getting more and more extreme?
>
> I remember it didn't feel like an option at the time, it felt like it could get into self destruct, then that always was a group that felt like it could get into self destruct'.

And I was keen in our exchange to understand whether there were options I had ignored, what if I'd stopped influencing and instead gone with the acting up? We agreed that would have been explosive and there certainly would not have been a phase 2.

How I had forgotten the appearance of the dragon queen[347] until the occasion was evoked

Oh god, how embarrassing! I'll never know whether it was the 'right' thing to do
All I do know is that I sprang before I considered the options – and that feels dangerous. And I'd hidden the memory from myself until evoked by setting the scene for the Wales workshop.

Rereading this I still feel a degree of shame for my action, an initial feeling that I was being unfacilitative, and then questioning whether there was a place for my action or not? I still don't know, am I allowed to be, and be seen to be, irritated? Must I always be 'perfect'?

Later in the interview:

Me: I wonder what it was about that woman with her 'ten minutes late' that so got under my skin, because I can feel it again now! You know every so often you find that you've snapped and you think 'oh god did I say that?' You know that you made a choice but you made it so fast, you think should I just have done the turn round once before you reply

S: Yes, 'thank you for that information'. Oh I know, I know. Do you remember a woman at SAUS who used to do a lot of work around John Heron's sub personalities, she used to do a few workshops around living with your sub personalities and I remember her describing one which really echoed with me which was the dragon queen who in times like that just leaps up – scorched earth. And then you think oh dear oh dear.

Me: because you can feel yourself pushing her back in

S: yes, yes down girl. But sometimes you think 'no, you can have this flame because you deserve it, you can have the full force of this flame singeing your eyebrows'

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[347] See Box for an explanation of the Dragon Queen.

> Me: I think the more basic difficulty for me is because of a construct from my childhood of me being 'difficult', being labelled. So if I disagreed with my mother then I was being difficult. If you have a heated discussion for my mother that's an argument and frightening. (She is) very nervous in that way and very unable to manage any sort of challenge, and therefore a child that doesn't accept 'because I told you so' and all that goes with that is seen as having a 'difficult child' persona. And I suppose that for me makes it very difficult to ever feel secure in that dragon queen type behaviour, I always feel like I'm at that moment over the precipice hanging out there thinking 'oh fuck there's nothing under my feet how do I get myself back in there and pretend I never did it'. And all that stuff about being isolated and inappropriate. For me one of the biggest challenges is to use that (anger) appropriately and constructively (!) and to survive using it.
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> Use of anger is a legitimate strategy as a social worker and I used to find that quite difficult as well. It's the same thing, acting into a particular sort of authority at that point, but you do need to feel fairly secure in that and once I'm beyond the initial whoosh I'm not secure in it'.

Should I be giving my dragon queen more room, more respect? At least making a better space for her in my memory and not flinching at the recall.

How gender had somehow slipped out of view

Gender arose several times during our conversation. We both agreed it had been present as an issue in the team, and we saw evidence of gendered issues in the Agency. I ended up asking myself did we fail to exercise our leadership in the midst of all this gender stuff in the team. And I hear Sally asking it on the tape:

> S: I suspect the women, this is what I think, I think it was gender, whether it was us three women or whether it was fundamentally gendered or what, but I suspect that we three, had we found a way of turning our collective focus onto that relationship 'ok, we require you to attend to this with our help and support and our focus' I wonder. I think possibly...

So the gender stuff was still there in the room with us during this conversation – we were taking responsibility for peacemaking, for stopping the cock fighting in the team around us, and we were berating ourselves for not having acted, calling that not taking leadership.

How I had lost a heart connection

A greater sadness for me than the thought we had failed to take leadership was discovering a heart connection to Ivor which I had not properly experienced when we were both working on the project. By which I mean a sympathy and caring for him, a warmth and compassion I had not often felt while we were both within the dynamics of the group. I suppose because he was so remote from some of us, so hidden behind his laptop and his formidable intellect, his infuriating inefficiencies causing us all to get paid months late. And he was so very different from me and most of the team.

Recalling the bad behaviour around the formal leadership of the project I realise how much he must have cared about it, I heard it twice expressed as anger and threats and it hadn't connected with me in the way our telling of sad stories in this Inquiring Conversation did. My sadness was that I had been unable to fully develop and then sustain a heart connection with Ivor during the time we worked alongside each other.