

15 B) WORKING WITH MOIRA LAIDLAW

To have the form without the content, the mind without the heart, the way without the spirit. To adopt the language without the fully shared meanings generated from a mutual value-base is, in a sense, to have lost the values themselves which gave rise to the whole process. In other words the method of an action enquiry process can come to represent the values behind it, and as such the outcome in terms of learning and development are fundamentally distorted from genesis to completion. (Moira Laidlaw January 1993)

Moira Laidlaw is a part-time lecturer in the School of Education. She asked me to supervise her M.Phil. research in 1991 and successfully transferred to a Ph.D. research programme in November 1992. The following extracts are from a paper in which Moira explores the value of educational literary criticism in making sense of educative conversations. In making the selections below I am aware that I am using them in a way not intended by Moira in her original work. I am using them to show the nature of my educative work as a teacher/ tutor through the student's own voice.

As in the work of Peggy Kok which follows, I feel in Moira's work a powerful and sustained insistence on the value of educative relationships as they are experienced in practice and revealed in educative correspondences and conversations and expressed in the art of an educational inquirer.

Since reading Martin Buber's I and Thou I have tried to be sensitive to 'we' as a word which can be used to incorporate another individual into my own thoughts and commitments without having checked that 'we' do share these thoughts and commitments. Of all the words I use, I am most careful not to violate the others' sense of integrity, your 'you', through transforming 'you' into 'we'.

I want to find a way of sharing insights into the nature of an educative relationship without violating the insights and feelings of the other. The way I have chosen to do this is to present the following text in which Moira is speaking for herself yet is ascribing to me, as a tutor, intentions, skills and understanding. Her words carry to me the authentic meaning of my educative relationship. I think she is communicating what I understand as the practical wisdom of an educator.

(1) SOME REFLECTIONS BY MOIRA LAIDLAW ON JACK AS A TUTOR February 1993

Socrates: 'The excellence of a thing depends upon its having a certain ordered beauty which is the result of arrangement.' (Plato - Georgias)

From here, then, I will now start to involve you in my practice by illuminating it as it unfolds.....

On the 14.1.93. I had a conversation with Jack Whitehead (my Ph.D. supervisor) and Chris Cloke (Director of Studies for the PGCE course here at Bath). I present here an edited version of the conversation and attempt to highlight its inner meanings for my work using the technique I have described to you. (I am aware as I write this that it would be easy for a reader to receive the impression that by editing this conversation I am already changing the meanings which it is possible to elicit from the conversation. I realise this, and of course through changing the text I do alter its inner

coherence. The editing was done in order to make more concise this section of the thesis. As the aim of the conversation was to discuss the programme for the PGCE students regarding the writing of the Special Study, I have included all those parts of the transcript. I have cut out some of the vagaries and the blind alleys of dialogue relating to other issues.)

C.C. What I would quite like to do would be to encourage as many students as possible to have some kind of action enquiry for their Special Study, because I feel that it would fit within the scope of what we're doing, their professional development. There are all kinds of reasons...Jack wishes to say something?

J.W. It's just when you said, 'for all sorts of reasons'.

C.C. I think that we had decided that the second one should emanate from them, whereas the S.B.E., the School-Based Enquiry, which was focussed much more on what derives from a school, and that would be ideal.

Clearly here, the vital difference between the kind of research which is generated by others and one which is self-generated, like an action enquiry, has become a point of focus in a way which has never in my hearing been expressed by someone who has responsibility for the whole of the PGCE course here. Jack had alerted me to the fact that Chris had mentioned to him about the possibility of encouraging all the students to undertake an action enquiry arising out of their second teaching practice.

M.L. Their concern was given, rather than actually being their own concern.

C.C. An action enquiry... is actually something which they decide on. It would give them an opportunity to focus on an aspect of their practice which would be a strength. I think that also from a practical point of view it's the kind of enquiry and study that we would want to engage in about the practice itself. Because once they come off T.P. there is a practical problem and... it arises from the fact that they have to hand it in straight away...That's going to be maybe a constraint in the way that you want to function.

One of the strengths of an action enquiry is its self-determining nature, and the way in which it encourages personal responsibility and the making of meanings within educational settings. In my transfer paper (Laidlaw 1991) for this Ph.D. I wrote the following:

'Whitehead (1985) places emphasis on the individual's right to determine the nature and course of her/his enquiry, given the necessary parameters of collaboration and the growth towards consensus at the points of change, evaluation and accountability. Greater individual autonomy and responsibility both for action and claims to knowledge are exemplified by Whitehead's work.' (p.7)

I believe that such personally oriented enquiries are supremely educationally valid, in their ability to highlight the significance and potential of an individual's actions and intentions to the person conducting educational research. As long as of course, it is understood that to comprehend one's own educational reality more fully, an individual collaborates with others at pertinent moments.....

I needed to state my misgivings about the possible consequences of taking on the supervision of so many students in an activity which I have experienced as requiring a great deal of intervention and face-to-face contact with individual students.

...M.L. My misgiving that came out of that is what I said before. I know how much the face to face bit, what difference that makes in terms of the quality of what they write. Which is really what my whole research is about....It might actually defeat its own purpose if we're not going to engage with them in that kind of individual way. I don't know personally foresee how we can do that. ...My experience of helping students to do that, is exactly on that individual basis. So out of two years' work, I have got about fifteen to twenty case-studies.

J.W. It may be that you continue to work in the way that you're used to.

M.L. Yes.

...J.W. It may be that you could get two or three sessions during the teaching practice where you continue to work in the way you do, but we might be able to run some sessions which provide the necessary support for more students who wish to undertake that sort of enquiry.

M.L. What do you mean, Jack, what sort of support? This is where I'm having some problems.

J.W. Where I think we differ is in the way in fact we would use groups. We could do some of the reading and the group work on each others' drafts. So where I think I would set them up in literally groups of about three or four students and provide the guidance which will enable them to ask the directed question to their work...The very high quality work which you get is largely due to those conversations that you are having in the face to face contacts...So I think there is a way in which you might continue to work with students who freely choose to come to you in that way, but that we could also do something of great value with the other students, some of whom might wish to meet two or three times...

...C.C. There are two...Actually in a sense with the Course Tutorial and the lecture you're going to give, there is a session there which is actually going to put them on the road... The other possibility is that provided that we clarify what it is we want staff to do, other staff might be willing and interested to hold meetings with small groups of students...

Again I am impressed with the quality of the listening that we are according each other in a search for ways forward. The advice is both practical and expressed in ways which show the value of that listening to the listener. Let me be more explicit. At one point Jack says:

J.W. It may be that you continue to work in the way that you're used to.

This ensures that I do not feel undervalued or that my past work is being criticised, simply that in the present circumstances my way of working may not be appropriate for the kind of extension that we are looking towards. Jack goes on to say, in a way which emphasises his belief in the value of my way of working but within a practical present context:

J.W. The very high quality work which you get is largely due to those conversations that you are having in the face to face contacts...but that we could also do something of great value with the other students, some of whom might wish to meet two or three times...

I also find particularly significant here Jack's ability to demonstrate in his supervisory role a talent which Yamamoto (1990) writes about:

'in mentoring...this need to see on one's own has to be carefully, if subtly preserved and enhanced so as not to deprive the individual, who is momentarily under guidance, of motivation and dignity. There must be in both the guide and the guided, a delicate interweaving of a sense of seeing and being seen. One complements the other, and the two together help each person retain and develop his or her own idea of self as a unique, competent, and worthy person.' (p.184/5)

Look how he starts speaking by affirming the value of my work:

'the very high quality work which you get'...

before proceeding to develop the practical action by talking about the fact that:

*'we could **also** do something of value.'*

Jack has exhibited this ability before in this conversation, and this was at the beginning when he said:

'It may be that you continue to work in the way you're used to,'

which has now resolved itself into a certainty, showing how carefully Jack has listened and helped to create and respond to, the dynamics both of the personalities and the context. He has even used some of my own language, mirroring it back to me to enable me to feel even more secure in the fact that my parameters are being taken seriously and will help to create the parameters of the others. Before the above quotation, I had said the following:

'M.L. I know how much the face-to-face bit, what difference it makes in terms of the quality of what they write. Which is really what my whole role is about. So I do have misgivings what it might defeat its own purpose if we're not going to engage with them in that kind of individual way...My experience of helping students...is exactly on that individual basis. So out of two years' work I have got about fifteen to twenty case-studies.'

Note how insistent I am on **my** experience, **my** knowledge and **my** research. I am not necessarily inferring anything negative in the way I argued here, for I believe in the value of what I am doing, but a sensitive listener would be alerted to the importance which I place upon that experience and developing understanding. Jack immediately responds with:

'J.W. It may be that you continue to work in the way you are used to.'

This is not yet definite, as the conversation is still new, but it affirms me, yet still leaving room for a development which might occur later in the conversation. Only then is he able to say with greater authority:

'J.W. It may be that you could get two or three sessions during the teaching practice where you continue to work in the way that you do, but we might be able to run some sessions which provide the necessary support for more students who wish to undertake some sort of enquiry.'

This opens the door for me to ask questions which carry my own enquiry further, still secure in the knowledge that my own way of working is perceived as having merit, although not necessarily free of all tensions.

'M.L. What do you mean, Jack? What sort of support? This is where I'm having some problems.'

Jack then replies in a way which not only answers my voiced concerns but allays my unspoken needs. If you look closely at the syntax of my above concerns, you see the mainly monosyllabic, stilted sentences, and the repetition of the word 'what'. These combined elements suggest a slight anxiety, and such I was experiencing at the time. The questions are spoken rapidly on the tape, suggesting tension. The more flowing metre of the final sentence hints at a greater self-control. In a way, the admission of ignorance is a step forward here for me, and such is Jack's sensitivity to the tenor of this conversation (by which I mean not simply the words, but how they are spoken and the way the sentences are constructed) that his reply can serve both functions of practical advice and the abatement of tension:

J.W. Where I think we differ is in the way...we would use groups . We could do some of the reading and the group work on each other's drafts...I would set them up in literally groups of about three or four students and provide the guidance which will enable them to ask the directed question to their work.'

His opening comment is to make a comparison which leaves no sting in the tail. There is a great deal of nuance between a comparison which makes me (in this case) the odd one out, the one who is deviant (from the norm), and a simple concession to the truth of the variety of our ways of acting in which there is no normalised way of being. He also qualifies this 'differing' by saying the tentatively respectful, 'I think.' In addition I am struck by how much meaning is revealed by a analysis of the metre of the words Jack speaks. There is a self-assuredness in the flowing nature of the sentences, particularly the final one, in which he uses the 'I' and states very clearly a plan of action for the good of the students, a point we allude to as of the greatest importance in this conversation, and in our work here. He places his own action firmly in the future action of the students, a tenet adhered to by many emancipatory and educational action researchers (McNiff 1988) . One of my own explicit aims since beginning this research, and one that I was dimly aware of in my practice beforehand, is the desire to enable students to speak for themselves, taking responsibility, therefore, for their own development and meanings, and that the value of my work could in fact be judged in part by how much I was successful in this aspiration. In my Transfer Paper I quoted (Laidlaw 1991) the following:

'This year I wanted to facilitate one student in speaking with her own voice and I believed that action research could become the path along which students could read in order to find their way through their own educative landscapes and as a result explain it to others.'

Jack has shown something of this desire in his tying in of the value of his work with those of his students, and of locating his practice with those of his students. These abilities which are here manifested by Jack seem to me crucial aspects of an educative conversation, in which there is mutual respect, a valuing of the other and an educative intention to future action.....

Many Action Researchers based here at Bath, either students or staff, have adopted Whitehead's (1989b) notion that living educational theories will be constituted by the descriptions and explanations of individuals' own practice. Indeed we are struggling so to do, and thus to find within a conversation that process beginning, is a powerfully emotive one.....

In Literary Criticism there are many schools of thought about the applicability of explaining the artist through his or her art. I have never subscribed to that

philosophy, and my reasons are quite clear. First, I believe that there is a reductionism operating when we apply Freud's notion of pathography in such a way. If we simply ascribe cause and effect to the art we witness, then we take away from it all the numinous, which contains the experience of the aesthetic: the aesthetic partly resides in that very area of human experience which defies typography. Secondly a work of art can, I believe, be judged partly on its inner coherence. Has it an inner consistency? Does its form mirror the content? Here of course, I come up against a problem, for what I am looking at here is not yet finished, this particular work of art, it is ongoing. There will be consequences of it. It will continue to act upon us. In that sense, then, I cannot draw final conclusions, but I can posit possibilities at this stage which I can then test out on others.

It is at this point, then, if I am to find evidence from the text itself, that I turn to our constant uses of the words 'we' and 'I' in this conversation, a habit which Jack alerted me to. The use of the word 'we' has three possible connotations. First these pronouns could be a profound affirmation of our collaborative or individual responsibility and intentionality here in this project; secondly they could be a sense of a fear or embracing of personal responsibility, perhaps due to a developing recognition of the enormity of Chris' original design; thirdly they could be an attempt to show each other a willingness to share the ideas with others who have differing degrees of experience in this kind of facilitation. As I have said before, it will not be possible for me at this stage to tender certainties for the motives behind the words, but I can even with this abstracted analysis, show the difference in the ways in which pronouns are used. In addition, the use of 'I' or 'we' is an intentional and ontological one in action research. Whitehead's notion of the centrality of the 'I' as the manifestation of a living contradiction in our reactions to the dialectical reality which renders significant context, self and values, is relevant here. He and I have explicitly discussed this issue, and therefore the connotations which it has for us cannot be assumed for others.....

In my work with Jack and also with Jean McNiff (1988, 1992, 1993) I have been struck over the years how sometimes we start to talk and write using similar syntax, metre, and even vocabulary. For example it is almost endemic now that we use the type of phraseology: **'how we enable practitioners to understand what is happening as they attempt to improve their practice.'** This kind of subordinate clause has never been one of my own speech or writing patterns as far as I am aware, until recently, and yet I have been with both Jack and Jean and heard it being used. An extract from my diary:

13.12.92. ...I am wondering now how I can understand this process of the evolving educative relationship as I try to help the students understand their own educative values. For to be true to the process of education as a living art form, I must facilitate the process by facilitating my own. I believe that therein lies the artistry, the beauty and the inner coherence of the process.'

What has become clear is that the use of the word 'as' here, is actually a very pertinent and crucial one to the whole nature of what happens when we conduct action enquiries. It is a concurrent process, this attempt to understand and the facilitation of others, whether an action enquiry is conducted by a Higher Education academic with her students, or a student teacher in the classroom who is investigating her/his own practice whilst trying to improve the quality of learning for the pupils.

This process of the adoption of linguistic patterns means on one level that we are simply responding to the influences we encounter. I believe that the weight of influence is heavier from Jack to the rest of us, for he is the dominant force behind the ethos of the action enquiries that we engage in here, (and I was just about to write, 'as we go about the process of improving our practice!'). I think that there is more than a simple influence occurring here. I believe that we begin to take on each other's meanings as we take on the language or we show our concurrence by the adoption of the language. This takes time and careful listening. We have ways, Jack, Jean and I, also the other action researchers based here in Bath of communicating using our language at times as almost a code, an elaborate code, but a code nevertheless. We are, I believe, careful not to become careless, but whereas our understandings about certain ways of relating to the meanings we wish to convey, are shared through our extensive conversations, this can, (if this principle of shared meaning operates at times when the meanings and significances have not been negotiated) I would imagine engender a hiatus between ourselves and others.

..... I am aware as I write this that I have now a tentative understanding of why a process such as action research can be technologised. I have heard Jack talk about this before but now I am realising how the language we use has the potential to become a genuine method of sharing meanings, of keeping others from the reality behind the words, or even taking over the meanings. Either of the latter alternatives have the potential to corrupt, change or amend meanings. I also realise as well why I care so much about using words from one context to cover meanings in another context, such instances as applying managerial terms to processes of leadership in school for example, or competence applied to processes which can transcend skills and methods, when talent, insight, intuition and values operate, as in teaching. The corruptive power of words is, I believe, being enacted upon us in education all the time (Kleinstück 1966). To extend this idea, I am saying that processes which are inaugurated through language that has not been fully explored, understood, integrated within the ways of being of the person adopting the language, will inevitably render the process vulnerable to corruption. **To have the form without the content, the mind without the heart, the way without the spirit. To adopt the language without the fully shared meanings generated from a mutual value-base is, in a sense, to have lost the values themselves which gave rise to the whole process. In other words the method of an action enquiry process can come to represent the values behind it, and as such the outcome in terms of learning and development are fundamentally distorted from genesis to completion.** (My emphasis J.W.)

I think of values as human goals which are used to explain an individual's form of life. As I said in my introduction I will be pointing to my values, as they are embodied in my form of life, through the use of value-words and value-judgements. The meaning of these values, as explanatory principles in the explanation of my educational development, has I hope been revealed in the course of their emergence in practice through time and interaction with others in my social context. One of the values which I have sustained throughout my life in the University is the importance of enquiry. I have tried to support the engagement of teacher researchers and student teachers in questions of the kind, 'How do I help my pupils to improve the quality of their learning?'. In the following extract from a second paper, Moira explains how

she helped one of her students, Sarah Darlington to feel engaged and to answer a similar question. I have included the abstract so that you can understand the context of the whole paper.

(2) THE DEMOCRATISING POTENTIAL OF DIALOGICAL FOCUS IN AN ACTION ENQUIRY JUNE 1993

Abstract

This paper is concerned with showing how I as a University tutor have held onto my democratic principles in working with one student in an action enquiry as she has tried to answer the question, 'How can I improve the quality of learning for the benefit of my own professional development and the pupils in my care?' Through a conversation with the student Sarah, I show how I facilitate in the formulation of her action research question. Her concern is on improving her understanding and action with her pupils for the benefit of their learning. My emphasis is in setting a democratic framework within which she can realise her deepest educational values. This paper also seeks to make the point that it is in focussing on what constitutes an improvement in the quality of learning, and to what end, that educational knowledge is formed and developed. This paper makes a claim that it is the dialectical nature of attempting to act on democratic ideals in the search for educational improvement that can create an epistemology for educational practice.

Introducing Sarah.

'When I started my second teaching practice, I had already decided I wanted to do an action enquiry...I felt then as I do now, that I tend to be naturally introspective and that evaluation, in one sense, comes easily to me...Whenever student teachers get together, we always end up discussing how we did it, how we could do better, how someone else did it. The case study provides a much more detailed and analytical one than most conversations could offer... (Darlington 1993 p.1)

This comment from the beginning of her write-up shows the level of her self-insights, and rationale for adopting an action research approach to professional development. We had already talked about data collection, and the importance of the emergence through the accounts and in practice of the learners' own voices. By this I mean a form of expression which reveals an autonomous commitment to a line of learner-initiated enquiry, which may indeed take the form of questioning the teacher/tutor or suggesting lines which the teaching might follow in order to enhance the learning-experience. Sarah wrote to me with a focus for our first one-to-one meeting, and said:

I want to talk to you about data collection which is worrying me. I've already thought about my own diary, pupils' learning logs, questionnaires, and National Curriculum levels...I'm not sure if video and tape-recorders in the classroom are appropriate. (14.3.93)

I was concerned that in her letter to me her question, 'How can I make the National Curriculum more accessible, enjoyable and challenging to my Year Eight class?' was unmanageable in scope for a ten week teaching practice.

How can I enable Sarah to focus educationally in order to improve the quality of learning?

This was the question which I asked myself at the beginning of our conversation on 18.3.93. It was clear to me that she had already begun the process of reflection linked to some form of practicable action. For the sake of length I have edited some of the conversation, but have attempted to keep the central meanings intact.

This is how our conversation started:

SD When I wrote to you at the 'imagining the solution' stage... a question I had in my mind, was, what does differentiation mean in English as opposed to any other subject? How do you implement differentiation in English? And it seemed to me from my limited experience that the area where it really comes into play is when the kids start writing.

ML What makes you say that?

SD I say that because everyone can respond to literature at some level...

ML. That's very clear. I don't necessarily have to agree or disagree. It's your enquiry. But I wouldn't say that I had noticed that it necessarily manifests itself in the writing more than in other areas... I think there are subtleties which manifest themselves just as meaningfully in the way they say things. The way they listen... My question would be, what is it in the processes that you are engaged in, Sarah, that have actually moved a child from point a) to point b)?

Sarah's comments reveal how much she has reflected upon her need to understand the way in which her pupils learn. She takes control of the conversation right from the beginning, and my opening comment is designed to enable her to expand on what she understands as a way of coming to understand better. I also stress her ownership of what she's doing, but am prepared to challenge her from an English-teaching point of view. From this point she goes on to give examples of why it is the writing that she wants to focus on, and about her question (see above letter) she says:

SD It's too huge. I cannot do that in four weeks.

She is quite adamant about that so I am able to seize the initiative, because it appears that she is ready to start formulating her question, something which in my own Guide (Laidlaw 1992) I stress as being of paramount importance in terms of both setting out and having a benchmark from which the enquirer can measure subsequent insights.

ML So how can you phrase a question that shows that your own educational development has helped in the learning of at least one pupil in your care?

SD In connection with writing, do you think?

ML What do you think? That's the point. That's what you've come up with, so I suggest we look at that.

My initial question is clear and focused. Sarah's response shows some insecurity ('do you think?') and my reply indicates my belief in both her responsibility and my respect for her. I think at this stage there is a real sense of enquiry beginning. I go on to say, again the educational motive clear:

ML And maybe now we need to phrase that into an action enquiry question.

The 'maybe' is gentle and Sarah from here goes onto talk about something she has done with her 'target' group. She is clearly not quite ready yet to begin to phrase the

question. She talks about her concern to give the children worksheets as a single way of differentiating, and about her concern to give children tasks at which they can succeed in order to fuel their motivation and self-esteem. Our conversation then continues:

ML I think for this study you are going to have to concentrate on a very few children.

SD I think you're right. I've written down here, 'target just one?' There's this lad, Hugh, and he's very low ability. I could work with him, but there's a child at the other end of the spectrum, the brightest, very lazy. It would be a real challenge trying to support one end and at the same time stretch the other end...One or the other?

ML If you're moved to make a choice, then I suggest you make a choice.

It seems to me that in this part of the conversation, Sarah is showing again her capacity to understand the educational and administrative implications deeply (*target just one?*) yet at the same time wondering how this can be put into practice. My reply confirms her ownership of what she does (and her responsibility for making decisions), acknowledges her right to come to her own conclusions, and yet offers a way forward. She then responds:

SD...And now I think I do have to concentrate on just one pupil, a weak learner. I see. Yes.

So again I come back to my agenda in this conversation which is about how I can enable Sarah to focus educationally. The formulation of an action research question is part of a generative process (see McNiff 1988, 1992) and thus needs to be handled with real care, for the wording, the coming to understand what the question entails, seems to me in my experience as a facilitator of action enquiry, to gain epistemological and ontological significance. By this I mean a significance which reaches further than mere semantics and delves into not only what can be understood through the processes which are inaugurated in its name, but also the nature and validity of the conclusions drawn from such a process. I have also found that the questions I pose my practice determine what values I am able to live out and that they reveal much about my view of the world. Therefore forming the question is not simply a pathway to practice, but to knowledge, living out one's values and coming to understand what is valid and significant about that knowledge.

ML So let's talk about your question, then. I think now the time is better...With words that are going to release your creativity rather than restrict it...How can you form this question that is going to take into account all the elements that you are concerned about?

By phrasing my question in this way, Sarah can focus on any aspects that seem to her to be important. And this she does:

SD We've got writing. We've got one end or the other and I'm moved to Hugh...I think I need to go away and think about that...It's going to be either supporting or stretching, don't you think? Does that seem right? I think there's something about making the curriculum available.

ML Making the curriculum available, that's an important point. After all you are an English teacher. And your report will be required to show evidence of learning about English.

Sarah lists what she thinks are the key points at this stage in her developmental thinking. My repetition of her point about the curriculum is crucial, and as I say to her later, *in our case-study collection (1991-93) we have none which reveal evidence of both*

curricular and personal learning. As a student teacher and future full-time teacher, Sarah is going to be accountable for the quality of her English pedagogical skills. She is on a teacher education course as well as conducting an action enquiry: indeed the two processes share a great degree of confluence. I go on to stress:

ML It's not just about a pupil taking responsibility for her or his learning, it's also learning about what? And that's why I think that your emphasis on the NC attainment targets is very relevant here. It's one way you can measure success.

SD...So are you saying that I should have a question of the kind, 'how can I help so and so', or 'how can I help a person's learning in this Green issues module?'

ML...The way you phrase and focus that will determine not only the data you can collect, but also your own educational development and the way you can take this forward, this knowledge and understanding, into your future career.

SD So I think I have to make a decision now about which child.

ML Yes.

Sarah shows a high level of sophistication in her response to my comments. She recognises that the validity and meaningfulness of what can be developed, begins to become apparent from this early stage if it is seen as significant on many levels. Indeed she confirms this insight in her final write-up:

'Action Research is a bit like throwing a stone into a pool, even a small stone can produce wide-reaching ripples. For me, the small stone of my question has developed my thinking about the way I see myself in the classroom and about how I relate to the many individuals in my classroom.' (p.13)

And in the conversation:

SD Depending on the child I choose, will also determine the kinds of statements and knowledge I can have. Supporting. I keep saying supporting. This is about getting them to the next stage. They are learning. You could perhaps have a question like, 'how can I help so and so develop his learning in this module, or this aspect of work?' I suppose that would do. It's quite tight, isn't it?

ML Yes, except 'learning' is huge.

There is a sense here in which Sarah is thinking out loud. On the tape her voice seems slightly excited for she certainly appears to be finding her own learning direction. If she has the confidence to think out loud, then her earlier seeming insecurity (*don't you think? What do you think?*) is being overcome. My own experience (Laidlaw 1991, 1992) and some of my reading: Brown (1993), Claxton (1991), Hick (1993), Hocking (1992), Holden (1993), Neill (1937), Norwood (1992), McNiff (1993), Rogers (1984) and Watkins (1991) suggest that consequential learning which helps teachers to improve the quality of learning for the pupils in their educational institutions often occurs within a challenging but supportive framework. Sarah takes my point about the hugeness of the 'learning' notion and laughs for the first time in the discussion. We go on then to talk about whether she should concentrate on writing in her question. In her final report she writes:

'I am glad that the action research question I finally chose did not restrict me to looking at writing only.' (p.12)

A few moments later she says (taking control by summing up so far):

SD We have been talking about the behaviour viewpoint, and with the writing, in one piece he might be able to achieve level three, but in the next level four. Although that looks like an improvement, I don't think that's necessarily so...It's not enough...Yes, and I think that perhaps I am tending to think not about the evidence of what they are learning...[but] how I am differentiating. Do you see what I mean?

ML Yes I do.

I now want to move on to my educative relationship with Peggy Kok and Chapter Six from her MEd dissertation, *The art of an education enquirer*. In the following extract Peggy shows the nature of our educative conversations as she struggles to reconcile different educational values. She also reflects back to me a value I try to hold on to which is to subordinate my own view of the world to the particular educational needs of my student.

SD That's why some of the things I am thinking about might not be appropriate. It's about me not the pupils.

*ML But it's about both. Action Research is about professional development **and** pupil learning.*

Her astuteness that apparent improvement may not be so easily articulated enables me then to reassure her categorically, that what she is about is twofold. She writes about the importance to her of this reassurance:

'It was quite a surprise when it dawned on me that my development was relevant to the research too. Moira talked about [this].' (p.13)

I could then challenge her further:

ML This is something that I am going to bring up in the Validation meeting, but I think I will say it here. Don't worry about when you hear it. It's quite a question. 'In an account of your professional development, what evidence do you have that your pupils are learning anything of value and that they are taking some responsibility for their learning?'

This was something that Jack Whitehead (my Ph.D. supervisor) and I had formed the day before. Our discussion had shown me potently how crucial it is to evolve a generative question with my students, but that their own response to a wide-reaching formulation could also help them to focus within carefully constructed parameters. I think the above question is an opening up to the students of the perceived values of democracy in action, to the assumption that ownership of learning promotes an improvement in that learning, and that their professional development is framed by their response to those factors. Sarah's reply is prompt.

SD Read it again!

ML (Reads it again)...I am going to challenge you...with it, because I think that's where our professional development should be tending. Towards a greater understanding of pupil learning...Therefore the quality of your pupils' learning is probably going to be heightened if they are taking some responsibility for it. Does that make sense?

She is now able to say the following:

SD I think it is one of the jobs of an educator: to try and develop more autonomy amongst children. If you give them that, this responsibility, then...it will carry on into adult life and you're teaching them so much more than just English. Also you're teaching them something about the value of the curriculum, the value they're getting out of it.

Sarah writes in her final report:

'I feel that I have demonstrated fully in the preceding pages that Hugh did take responsibility for his own learning. But did he learn anything of value? First I needed to ask, 'whose value?' (p.33)

Hugh had written (which Sarah cites):

'I have done my research very well when they was not enough information but I wrote a letter to esso house asking them for some info on cars and pollution and they sent me some.' (11.4.93)

I am not suggesting that the reason Sarah saw the value of understanding personal responsibility in learning was just because of our conversation, or that Hugh could thus write such an evaluation, but I am claiming that Sarah was given the space as well the direction to develop her notions of educative 'value' and 'responsibility' in our conversation. I would claim this therefore as an educative process.

She goes onto say at this point:

SD So, back to the question. We can either have, 'how can I help so and so to develop an understanding'...and then I've written down, 'and thereby moderating his behaviour?'

Again she is taking control in her learning process. She emphasises that we are trying to find a question. We talk a little about whether she is trying to enable a child to learn and thereby improve his behaviour, or whether his behaviour can be modified thus improving his learning. Then she says this:

SD How can I help so and so engage with the Green Module, thereby moderating his behaviour?

ML Isn't it 'how can I moderate his behaviour in order to enable him to engage with the Green Module?'

SD You see, I think the interest comes before the behaviour.

ML Right, I see. I understand. Do it from that, then.

SD Should I include that bit about behaviour?

ML Try it without.

SD 'How can I help X become engaged with this Module?'

ML Now, that will stand on its own, and possibly free you rather than restrict you.

SD The thing is, if he doesn't improve his behaviour, then I haven't got anywhere.

I recognise the degree to which at this point I am pushing Sarah. My sentences are controlled and relatively short, my language directive and succinct. This stage of a dialogue is always difficult for me. It is the point at which the dialectic I experience between living out my respect for the ideas and the selfhood of others against foreseeing possibilities which might be at variance with the other person's intentions and insights, becomes problematic. It is, for me, a precarious balance. My experience tells me that an educator must try hard to tread this narrow path successfully for the

sake of the learning experience and the well-being of the student: I do not wish to disempower. I realise that as Sarah's tutor I have greater institutional authority. She has come expecting to be guided by my experience to a certain extent. I am conscious that a question which is formed with the onus on improving behaviour rather than on **learning something of value** will not be able to get at the kind of knowledge which Sarah is seeking. It will become in the long-run, a psychological rather than an educational study. However, Sarah is an education student, and **I see the process of education as constituting the promotion of learning something of value.**

At the end of her study, she reveals her standards of judgement which she wishes to take forward into her career. The last one of these runs thus:

'I recognise that first and foremost I am an educator; it is my responsibility to develop the learning of individuals. I am not a counsellor or a child-minder! Moira said (12.3.93) 'I know you are trying to encourage, but you also have to educate them. The question is, how can you encourage pupils lacking in self-confidence whilst at the same time challenging them educationally?'' (p.37)

We talk about this shift from care to education for a while and then Sarah says:

SD It's interesting, isn't it, how we've moved from the National Curriculum question to this one. It's so complex.

ML But it shows the interrelatedness of everything in teaching, from motivation to achievement, process, outcome, expectations, everything...So look how far you've come in terms of your own understanding of what you're doing and what you know.

SD I think it's slow.

ML It's not slow at all.

SD I write things down and it takes time, but I suppose I am learning what I know and what I need to know...I feel sort of reassured because I thought I wasn't getting anywhere with this thing.

This part of the conversation seems to be the lull after the potential storm. That I have been quite directive turns here into Sarah again taking stock. This habit of hers to stop and think in order to consolidate is a powerful mechanism by which she communicates her learning and enables me to respond in a most positive and supportive manner. She then goes on to say:

SD I think they [the students] should have the right to challenge. It's about responsibility for their own learning...We've established a question, now it's about getting the appropriate data. Things like learning logs, National Curriculum levels, other teachers' observations... Can you think of any other data that I should be getting at this stage?

And now she is coming back to her original concern which she highlighted in her letter to me. This seems to me to be someone who understands and who feels confidence. Because Sarah has taken the lead again, I can then reply to her question thus:

ML The only other one, which might not be practical, would be, in some way to have a conversation with Hugh going, which actually, if you can do it in the right way, might give him enormous encouragement about how important he is, about how much you value his opinion.

SD Yes, I had put that down: 'how about a discussion with the 'target' one?'

ML That's part of the differentiation process as well, isn't it?

SD Yes, because whilst I am sorting out who to target, I am learning as well about who learns what and how. And if we have a discussion about this, this should help him develop his learning.

I interweave her opening remarks about differentiation into the present concerns and in her last utterance, Sarah consolidates that in her own way. I think my question is the right one both pedagogically and in terms of the value of democratic practice underpinning it. Sarah's anticipation of this idea reveals her own understanding, her own values as well, and a sense of how it will turn out in practice.

SD ...Yes, it's getting a lot of shape now. This morning...I thought it was too huge. Yes and now it seems manageable. I can see my way forward now. Great! Good! The other thing is, how do we see success?

Again she takes stock. Again she takes initiative, yet includes both of us in the process (*we*). Several times in their conversation she has said 'we' and 'you' rather than 'I', and now the time has come to enable her to see the significance of taking full ownership over what she is doing. After all, an Action Research question depends upon the centrality of the 'I' as a causal agent for change. Therefore I use her form of wording and reflect it back to her as an educational challenge. I then say:

*ML How do **you** see success?*

And then even more pertinently:

*ML How would Hugh see success?..That's a vital point. It's just come to me. I've never asked that question before. I have always said to a student, 'how will **you** measure success? But of course, if we're talking here about how is your account of your professional development going to reflect the learning of your pupils, then in some guise or other, in some way that's right for you both, you are going to have to square that with Hugh's ideas.*

SD Yes! And that's about him having responsibility for his own learning. Wow! That's really neat. That puts him in that strong position...It's not being imposed, it's his choice. It's the key, isn't it? Choice. So that's honestly it.

For the rest of the conversation (a few minutes) we discuss the ethics of concentrating on one child for a research enquiry, and how she can approach Hugh in ways which will develop his learning and simultaneously through her research, aid her understanding of his learning.

Conclusion

Reflective practice seems all the rage at the moment. In our School of Education we talk to our students about reflective practice. It is written in to our course and tutorial handbooks for example, but nowhere within the main stream of the course is the vital nature of focusing on coming to understand the complexity of the educational practice through dialogue, sufficiently emphasised to my mind. However, the work of Jack Whitehead has formed a network through which much research, Higher Degrees, in-service training are conducted; and in which dialogue is seen as the

cornerstone of good practice, good, being characterised partly through its ability to promote democratic learning processes. Writers like Donald Schön (1984,1987) describe and propose many ways in which educators reflect and formulate their rationale for practice. He does not specifically advocate a dialogical approach. Indeed he writes almost entirely using conceptual models and nowhere do we see how his concepts achieve a practicable reality. In enabling such spaces with my students I believe I help to realise democratic processes within the learning, and thus enhance the learning itself.

In my conversation with Sarah I am claiming not only that she was given the space to discover and develop those aspects of her educational values which would lead to improving the learning of herself and Hugh but there is within this the scope to leading a better life for them both: through her new understanding she is beginning by the end of the dialogue to realise that her encouragement of Hugh, her valuing of him as an individual learner, is more than simply a functional procedure, and perceives instead its potential to shape the epistemology of her practice within which he is empowered to give voice to his own concerns in his own way. To evolve such a democratic epistemology enables (in my terms and I believe Sarah's too) all those actively and positively associated with it to lead better lives. Through negotiating our meanings we come closer to realising what is of generalisable value in human existence, and how, by extension we might realise that practically. In Dewey's terms, we:

'make the ties which bind persons together more perceptible.' (p.316)

Nigel a Physics PGCE student this year, also undertook an action enquiry. He set his final write-up as a court case in which he was being tried by the state for wasting valuable pupil-time! When I showed him a draft of this paper, he said:

*NB. I've been thinking about metaphor again. Stories, fiction, fables with a moral, someone tells you those. The moral is someone else's. Dialogue, well that's a way of moving forward. It's about negotiation. **You can't tell** it like it is, **we** have to make it up together. It's a step in the right direction anyway. 11.6.93.*