

INTERLUDE

Back Garden, 4 June 1997

At the end of April this year I presented the introduction to my dissertation to a group of friends at the University of Bath, School of Education (Action Research in Educational Theory Research Group). My introduction took the form of a letter to them dated 27 April 1997 (see ante) and I was convinced that through this they would be sufficiently briefed on my enquiry that our subsequent discussion would take the form of my just reiterating a few points and summarising the main body of my research.

Wrong!

Gradually their doubts became clear as one by one they said things like;

"I can't see the practice in it. I was looking for the police."

"I can't see what it's all about."

"Is it about yourself, is it navel gazing?"

"You're in the personal, where's the practice? Practice is the research."

"How did you get to the point you're at? Did it start with practice? How did you get to the subject as criteria? Is this something to do research on?"

Although I wasn't going to admit it at the time because I was trying desperately hard to think and speak positively, I went away somewhat troubled and not knowing what to do next. So I did nothing, except read a few more books and articles. I put the dissertation out of my mind until today when I read my introduction again. I still thought it was pretty good actually, but obviously not good enough to enable my audience to understand what it's all about.

So let's have another go.

There is an extremely important point that I must emphasise if you are to grasp what this account is about. That point is that I cannot separate my personal and professional practice. When you see something about this account that you think is personal, it is likely that I see the same thing as practical. Therefore to understand my practice, you must understand my life, my way of looking at the world.

You might see my letters to Jack as personal and they are, but they have also become part of my professional practice as I try to realise their importance to my own educational development.

The second point the I want to emphasise is that I wanted to show how a dialogical account could be constructed and how a dialectical approach might appear in practice. I didn't just want to write about it, but I found that process difficult to represent. I wanted to do it and to demonstrate it. My correspondence with Jack does show both the dialogue and dialectic. I didn't want to be saying, "I've done this," I wanted you to see it in action as it developed.

I recognise that reading someone else's letters can be a problem, but I've now come to realise that the presentation of the letters was perhaps not the nub of the exercise, but it was the quality and authenticity of the communication. Something that caused me to realise this

was an open letter by Martyn Hammersley to Pat D'Arcy (Hammersley, 1995 p.117). I saw that his communication was quite different to mine. He was defensive, aggressive and deriding, albeit I don't know the tone of Pat's remarks that originally gave rise to his reply and it may well be that her comments were just as confrontational.

What I am trying to explain is that even though Martyn Hammersley used the format of a letter, commencing "Dear Pat", and appeared to be writing directly to her, it was more of a "put down" than any real expression of support. So although much of my work to date has taken the form of letters, it has been the sense of having the recipient in mind in a co-operative sort of way that has assisted the communication. It was a certain attitude of mind. A genuine desire to learn and progress on my part and a genuine desire to help on Jack's part. There have been disagreements along the way, but always a mutual respect, there were different ideas to be argued but with no need for a win or lose result.

The letters that I wrote became the means by which I could express my thoughts with the minimum of distortion. It was suggested to me when I presented my introduction that I use correspondence as a form of representation, not presentation. The correspondence represents my research. I was referred to Lomax and Parker (1995) who say

"The dialogue, which is a written representation or record of conversation, is a new way in which action researchers try to represent the living aspect of their theories about practice." (p.303)

And now I suppose I should again try to address the questions of "What is it all about?" and "How did I get to make the University criteria the subject of my enquiry?"

I'll deal with the latter question first. I started by writing private diary entries, letters to myself, letters to Jack (often not sent), and transcribing taped monologues and conversations. All of these were ways of expressing my thoughts and evidencing them in writing. Whilst I did write a little that was directly about my work as a police officer, a lot of my thoughts were more about my life in general, and particularly about my own educational development. I didn't seem to make any great distinctions between my life as a police officer, my life as a daughter, my life as a teacher, my life as a shopper, my life as a holiday-maker, and all the other roles that I undertake. My practice was wrapped up in my life and whole outlook.

Over a period of time I realised that I was reflecting upon my earlier thoughts and reconsidering them over and over again as if to clarify them to myself and to make sense of my experiences but at the same time allowing them to remain in a state of flux and open to change.

It dawned on me that my educational practice had included the dialogue contained in my various writing, and particularly in my correspondence with Jack. And so my correspondence became my practice. In turn it became increasingly clear to me that communication was my practice. Dialogue was my practice.

I also realised through looking back over my writing and because I couldn't get it off my mind, that I was obsessed with issues to do with criteria and judgement, in that I felt that the criteria for judgement would push me and my enquiry into boxes and constrict me whereas the dialogue I had enjoyed was doing the opposite. I felt that I had to find a way of satisfying both. Hence I developed my dialogue around the university criteria.

Now to answer the former question - "What is it all about?" I think that here I can only repeat that its about my search for knowledge and understanding. I am concerned that some action researchers in my audience may be expecting some sort of linear account that clearly explains how I have been improving my practice as a police officer but unfortunately you will be disappointed. I started out with the intention of improving my practice and I believe that I have done so, but I'm afraid that I have not demonstrated it to you in terms of my police work.

Instead I have explained my own educational development and it is through that educational development that I am enabled to improve my practice as I come to better understand and know my own practice. My contribution has not been yet another police story - you can see those nearly every day on the television - but it has been an account which shows the dialogue and dialectic that I value so highly. I hope that it also enables you to see the value of that dialogue and dialectic and helps you to improve your practice in this respect. One of the books that I recently read was *Thought as a System* (Bohm, 1994). Near the end of the book, he talks about dialogue and says;

"What I'm trying to present is the meaning of dialogue - a "vision of dialogue". By seeing the meaning we will then begin to feel the value of it and begin to establish purposes, which may help bring us towards it." (p.207)

In this section, I have again tried to explain myself and no doubt that necessity will continue. If the group had reacted as I had wished for at the end of April, then there would have been something wrong, because the search for understanding and the dialogue involved in that would have come to an end. In fact I believe that an educational enquiry should provide the basis for continued dialogue and dialectic.

And now let us go back to the beginning of April 1997.