

INTRODUCTION

27 April 1997

Dear Reader

As I was preparing to write this letter, I drafted several false starts which have all found themselves in the waste paper bin this morning. The reason was that I'd been trying too hard to produce a perfect introduction for you which would leave nothing to question. Unfortunately that contradicted some of the very important points that I wanted to make in this dissertation about accepting research which is not perfect and which leaves many questions unanswered.

This morning I'm trying to be as spontaneous and natural as I can be but still conscious of my tutor's advice when he wrote to me a few months ago and said, *"Why not take the trouble you would take with someone who is not a friend but you are getting to know and who is interested in understanding you. Help them along the way with more explicit explanations than would be needed with a close friend where the tacit understandings can be taken for granted."* (letter from Jack dated 26 Jan 1997)

So let me give you the background to all this. I'm a Police Officer who enrolled at the University of Bath in 1991 as a part time student in the School of Education. I completed the required six modules and now find myself writing the dissertation in order to attain the degree. The first two were action research modules which provided me with a way of thinking and acting which would stay with me throughout the course. It was therefore not surprising that I returned to Jack Whitehead, the action research tutor, when it came to working on my dissertation.

Back in 1991 I had asked myself the question *"What are my teaching/educational values?"* and I had answered *"I think that a teacher should be helpful, should guide the student and should encourage the student. I want education to be enjoyable."* Those values have remained with me although I could perhaps add that education should fit in with my life as I believe that my life and my education are closely linked. These values have meant that every time I have felt a tension between my values and my practice, I've had to stop and try to change my practice in order to live up to my values more fully.

Hence the earlier beginnings of this letter were discarded as they took on a formality that I didn't like and they failed to suggest any possible educative relationship between you and I. As I read back over the earlier drafts I saw myself talking *at* you not *to* you. It was not enjoyable. I'm keen to enable you to feel involved in my life so that you can understand it from the inside. In writing this I've had you in mind as a real person, not just an audience but a thinking and/or speaking participant if that is what you would like to be. Of course I also reserve you the right not to take that part, but instead to read my story as an interested observer.

This brings me to my extensive use of correspondence in the form of informal letters, mainly between myself and my tutor, Jack. I think that I privately knew of its importance quite early on but I struggled with my own apprehension about it so it took me a considerable time to make it public. The use of our correspondence is shown and explained in greater depth in the letter that I wrote to Jack commenced on 1 April 1997 and reproduced in full in this account.

Jack and I have agreed that our letters can be used in this dissertation although I should say that there was a time that I would not have wanted to make them public, I just wasn't ready for that. In fact there were a number of letters that I didn't even send, some of which dealt with matters that were personal and painful at the time, but the writing of them was helpful to me. I mention this because I've been toying with the use of correspondence for quite a while and in early 1995 I showed a few to a friend of mine. His reply surprised me,

"Thanks for allowing me to see your letters. I found them most interesting yet frustrating. Interesting in your approach, using letters as a method of dialogue. This was quite refreshing and soul searching. Frustrating in that I found I often struggled early on to detect just what it was you were trying to convey, not that the content lacked substance I think it was because I felt I was an outsider intruding upon your privacy. (Maybe an introduction setting the scene?)"

Bearing in mind his remarks, I want to assure you that you are not an outsider intruding upon my privacy, as I (and Jack) have decided to make the letters public.

The day after I received the above note from my friend, as usual I was listening to the radio on my way to work. There was an advertisement for wardrobes which went along the lines of a conversation between two people; the first saying words to the effect "Have you seen there's a sale on at such and such a shop?" with the second person asking where the shop was located, followed by the reply with some more detail, and finally ending with the phone number and a jingle.

It struck me that this was the method I was using to get my message across in an indirect sort of way. It's intentionally allowing third parties to overhear the conversation, as happens every day when I watch the soaps on the television. (And yes, as I become involved in the story, I do sometimes talk to the actors from the comfort of my own armchair!) It's somewhat different to the news bulletins and party political broadcasts when the speaker looks into the camera and talks directly to the audience with no questions asked.

I hope this comparison helps you to feel a little more comfortable when reading my letters and that my introduction does indeed set the scene for you. I believe it also provides the possibility of drawing third parties into the educative relationship between Jack and myself without forcing the issue. Instead there is a standing invitation.

Through correspondence I have adopted a *dialogical* methodology in this research. Two words that I have used during this enquiry have been **dialogue** and **dialectic** and I feel that I should now give you the meanings that I have attached to them.

The meaning that I have used for the word dialogue is a form of conversation:

This may take the form of verbal conversation as in face to face discussion, speaking on the telephone with another person, talking to ones self or even to imaginary others or things. It may also take the form of conversation in writing such as a personal journal or in correspondence.

For it to be a conversation as opposed to mere statements there needs to be some sense of an exchange of ideas and a balanced relationship. It is talking to not at the other. The speaker

and listener have an attitude of mind not based on power but based on wanting to communicate and learn. It is a collaborative effort.

It follows that for something to be dialogical it has a conversational form.

The meaning that I have used for the word dialectic is a way of coming to know through question and answer which is involved in a search for knowledge and understanding:

The questions and answers may not be explicitly asked but nevertheless they exist. They can be present in a situation or document that is open to question and which accommodates the possibility of multiple answers and interpretations. The point is that the search for knowledge and understanding continues through the acceptance of further question and answer, rather than any assumption that the search has ended with the acquisition of some knowledge or understanding. I can never know or understand everything and just as I think I'm beginning to know or understand something it moves out of reach.

It follows that for something to be dialectical it involves an ongoing search for knowledge and understanding.

Having now given you the meanings that I attach to the words dialogue and dialectic I should say that there may be some places in the initial stages of this account where I have used them incorrectly. This is because I was then still confused about their meanings and was in the process of coming to my current understanding of them. Despite this, I believe that from the context you should be able to grasp what I mean when you see these words used.

I now wish to make two claims in relation to my enquiry:

- 1 I claim to be able to show, through the process of writing letters, a **dialectical** approach to my own education.
- 2 In addition, I claim to have done this through a **dialogical** means by using mainly correspondence to record, interpret, analyse and evaluate my search for knowledge and understanding.

Within the correspondence is evidence of my search for knowledge and understanding as I try to make sense of my enquiry. This is done through repeated reflection upon my own ideas and writing, as well as using experiences, Jack's guidance, suggestions put forward by others, and literature to move my thinking forward.

I've assembled a sample of my correspondence with Jack, all contained in one letter dated 1 April 1997 in which I eventually managed to pull together a range of my ideas in one hit. I would ask you to read this bearing in mind that there are tacit understandings between Jack and I which have developed since 1991. The letter of 1 April 1997 shows a stage in my search for knowledge and understanding, but it cannot show the beginning, the end, or even the full story of the stage that is shown. Nevertheless, I believe it is sufficient to support my claims for this dissertation.

Throughout my enquiry, I've insisted that my claims must be presented in a way that is *authentic* to me and *reflects the life that I lead*. In order to do this I have used my dialogue in the form of letters to constitute both my research and my report.

This is perhaps the best place to introduce my *epistemology*. I should say that epistemology has been a word that I often avoid because it's not part of my normal everyday language and I have to keep reminding myself of its dictionary meaning - *Theory of the method or grounds of knowledge* (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1982). It really doesn't seem to occupy a place in my own thinking. However some time ago I did attempt to explain my position on this issue and this is what I wrote,

"In terms of epistemology, I am grateful to Moyra Evans where in a conversation with Jack Whitehead she clarifies that whilst the epistemology of certain others may be grounded in the views of previous writers in the literature, her epistemology is grounded in her practice (Evans, 1995 p.232). That in itself has allowed me to say that I believe my epistemology is grounded in dialogue based on my unfolding life. ... My epistemology is not something that is separate to me. ... Because my epistemology is grounded in my unfolding life it is naturally chaotic and confusing at times. By embracing my whole knowledge it includes the times of not knowing. Everything is thrown into the cooking pot and given a stir. ... I am coming from a point of view based in my own real life that varies from being calm, confident, and disciplined, to being chaotic and confusing." (undated paper 1996)

Now I'm not sure that I've explained this very well and as time has gone on I've wondered whether this early attempt at the "E" word is enough to enable my audience to see where I'm coming from. Would it be clearer if I said that my epistemology is grounded in a dialogical approach to a dialectic way of life. Would it be simpler if I said that my epistemology is grounded in my life. Let's hope that this has now clarified the situation enough for us to move on.

The university criteria for assessment became the *subject* of my enquiry, although I must admit that I am prone to running off in other directions when the fancy takes me. The reason I concentrated upon the criteria was that they troubled me terribly and so they were something that I had to come to terms with before I could progress. It was as if I had to deal with them rather than ignoring them knowing all along that they would continue to haunt me if I didn't address them.

Although the university criteria became the *subject* of my enquiry, I believe that there was much more actually going on and being revealed than merely an enquiry into criteria for assessment. Through the process I developed an increased understanding of my own educational development and was able to explain my *"living educational theory"* (Whitehead, 1993). Even as I write this I'm still learning and thinking through new ideas, such as, whether my epistemology can now be said to be grounded in my living educational theory, but that's perhaps a question to be addressed another day.

What I'm trying to point out here is that I may have been focussing upon the university criteria but I didn't just gain knowledge and understanding about that, for example, one major thread running through my account is my use of correspondence and how I might legitimise that as a valid form of both research and presentation, all the time insisting upon authenticity.

I've been trying to give you some indication of where my work is located in the grand order of research. Let me now take you carefully through my correspondence with Jack so that I can perhaps give it some more cohesion and explanation for you. Whilst the letters may not include "signposts" as they develop, I'm now looking back over the correspondence in order to map the territory for you as I now see it.

LETTER DATED 1 APRIL 1997 - A GUIDE:

You will see from the opening of the letter that I have adopted an informal way of writing to Jack, typical of the way that I write to friends and which enables me to maintain the personal relationship in conjunction with the professional. It also allows me to get my ideas down on paper, no matter how disjointed or irrational the thoughts may seem, in the knowledge that friends make the effort to make sense of them. Furthermore it accommodates my natural tendency to try to look at situations from a humorous or stoical point of view whenever possible, especially when I'm struggling.

The question that I ask in the letter is "*How can I enable my communication through correspondence to be seen as educational and worthy of presentation in its original form?*" This is a question that throughout the letter I endeavour to answer as I address the university criteria by using correspondence and presenting it in its original form.

Early in the letter I point out that *enquiry is not just for professional practice, it has an effect on my whole life*. In a previous letter, not reproduced here, I wrote, "*You need to see my dissertation in the context of a person who is trying to explain her theory that educational development can almost be considered synonymous with the progression of life itself and therefore to understand my educational development, you have to understand my life.*" (letter to Jack dated 19 November 1996) In his reply to that letter Jack pointed out to me "*Now this is a very powerful statement and I think it needs to come into your abstract and introduction to your dissertation.*" (letter from Jack dated 26 January 1997). There are two important themes here. They are (a) the integration of the personal and the professional and (b) the linking of educational development with the progression of my life.

The letter introduces the task which I'd set for myself, that is to address the university criteria which I had dabbled with but resisted for a long time. It suggests that there is a history of discussion between myself and Jack on the question of criteria (which is documented in previous notes/tapes of verbal conversations as well as correspondence not reproduced within this account).

Something that's alluded to but not explicitly said at the beginning of the letter is the fact that writing for a dissertation was not enjoyable for me, whereas if I could get the thought of a dissertation out of my head then I could enjoy writing. That's why I said "*Let's just forget the dissertation...*" There's something relevant there that strikes me about attitude of mind which I'll perhaps be able to develop later.

The letter deals with each of the eight university criteria in turn, albeit that the evidence for some overlaps with others. As I endeavour to address the first of the criteria - justify the appropriateness of the methodology to the nature of the enquiry - I begin to think about and describe my methodology highlighting its **dialogical nature and acknowledging its grounding in action research.**

Once I had got to grips with the first one, it seemed to me that the remaining seven criteria fell into place. I was able to draw on the knowledge and understanding that I already had whilst allowing my writing and associated reflection to reveal new questions and answers. As I recorded the criticisms of letter writing they were no longer quite so worrying for me as I balanced them against the arguments for dialogical methods and dialectic enquiry. Furthermore I found enough support for different forms of presentation to alleviate my concerns (McNiff 1992, Lomax & Parker 1995, Lomax 1994a, Rowland & Winter 1994a, Whitehead 1993, McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead 1996, Three books of CARN Critical Conversations).

Probably to Jack's relief, at last I showed how I integrate the literature into my thinking and engage with it in order to explain its relevance to me.

In my letter to Jack, when it came to the questions of whether I "*show evidence of an ability to interpret, analyse, and evaluate the data*" and whether I "*demonstrate a ... quality of argument*" I said that I would address these issues in an introduction to my dissertation, so here goes.

I had previously produced two lists. The first shows the features in the literature to which I most closely relate and the second shows the features that make me feel uncomfortable. I think that the first list can be broadly termed as *natural* and the second as *controlling*. The lists were as follows:

NATURAL

case study and self study; reflective practice; the integration of personal life with professional practice; the admission of emotion into research; forms of representation; tentative style; dialogue and dialectic enquiry; confidence in personal knowledge; contradiction; holding together diverse and multiple ideas; freedom and justice; responsibility and integrity; kindness, sensitivity, and caring; spontaneity and informality; practice before theory; learning from experience; doing the right thing in the circumstances; being involved in the research as opposed to being outside it.

CONTROLLING

rigour; action planning; judgement; criteria; rules and conditions; systems; procedures, methods, and structure.

This should give you an impression of the features that I readily accept - the natural group; and the features that I resist - the controlling group. In turn this affects the nature of my enquiry with a leaning towards natural features.

If I then consider the features of correspondence in the form of letters between friends which I have listed in my letter to Jack they too can be loosely grouped as *natural* (see list in section entitled Draw Justifiable Conclusions Acknowledging the Limitations of the Study). Correspondence between friends has a dialogical nature. Correspondence between myself and friends does not include *controlling* features because my friends just don't behave in that way towards each other.

I think that perhaps this may help to explain why I chose to use informal letters as the basis for my research. They contain the type of natural features to which I relate and omit the controlling features that make me feel uncomfortable.

However, I believe that it is possible, within informal letters between friends to incorporate rigour through the question and answer of the dialectic. This is particularly apparent to me where there is an educative and caring relationship between the parties involved. This way it doesn't present itself as *controlling*, but instead it is *supportive*. It is truly educational and not based on power.

Whether I could accept the other features that I have labelled *controlling* if they are introduced in the context of educative relationships remains to be seen.

Now I want to tell you what to expect to see so that you can get into the main body of this account.

I have given you a research report; that is not presented to you as a perfect article; that uses everyday language as opposed to what I call "academic language"; that is chaotic in that it darts about touching on issues but then leaves them with no guarantee that they'll be re-considered later; and that uses informal letter writing as the basis for both the research and the report. I have given you a *natural* enquiry in which I haven't relied upon *controlling* features.

Even though it doesn't have the formality that is often associated with research reports, I am satisfied that my account remains *authentic*, adequately portrays my thinking and priorities, and demonstrates my search for knowledge and understanding, blending with my life as it progresses.

Don't forget that in the process of writing my letters, including the current one to you and the exchanges with Jack that I've reproduced, the dialogical nature of my enquiry continues. Hence none of my letters either tell you all that I have to say or finish the story. They are part of an ongoing process. Even if they appear as a product they can only be a provisional product.

So without any more ado I invite you to read and hopefully enjoy my story.

* Note: See also pages (75-76) for further discussion on your reading my correspondence with Jack and the difficulties that it may cause for you. This comes under the heading of audience. I do not want you to feel uncomfortable at reading the letters that Jack and I exchanged, you really are supposed to be there.