

NATURE of the ENQUIRY

It is Personally Based

My enquiry relates to problems faced *by* me as opposed to problems posed *for* me by someone else - It could be said that by addressing the criteria in this letter I'm dealing with a problem posed for me by you. After all I get the impression that it is you that keeps raising the issue of the criteria for judgement, but the reality is that it is also of concern to me. In fact it's probably me that is more inclined to raise it now. I don't feel as if I can rest until I've fully explored and exhausted the issue with you. It's now my choice to discuss the university criteria because I want to get the better of those criteria, I want to be able to put them aside and say they're sorted. I think I'd also like us to be able to shut-up about them!

It seems to me that because your enquiries are based in the professional but mine are now more inclined to the personal or the personal as part of, or the same as, the professional, then we have a different outlook, a gulf between us as I try to understand enquiry from your point of view and you try to understand it from mine. I know that you're trying to understand my thinking as you referred me to Ardra Cole's paper (Trapedo-Dworsky and Cole, 1996). They make connections between the personal and professional. They used an autobiographical self-study approach saying,

"In this focused personal history-based account of Ardra's teaching practice, we reconstructed some of the elements of her personal history that find expression in her pedagogy - the beliefs, values, and perspectives firmly rooted in Ardra's early experiences which give shape and meaning to her adult self and her teaching practice. As we followed the narrative threads that emerged through our analysis, we became increasingly aware of the entangled nature of the personal and professional realms of our lives, and the importance of making those connections known to ourselves." (p.19)

In her own commentary, Ardra addresses the question of legitimacy and tells how she feels about it,

"My unease relates to the broad context within which the research is situated and the relationship between the individual/personal value derived from self-study and its perceived value as a contribution to the enhancement of knowledge about teacher educators and their work; in short, its legitimacy as a form of research. ... Products of self-study work in general are various characterized by non-sympathetic academics as "narcissistic", "solipsistic", or some similar term that renders the work "unacceptable". Those who hold such views are, it seems, part of the preserving force that maintains the status quo of the academy." (p.21)

My enquiry acknowledges the presence of emotion - In documents that I present in the course of my work as a police officer, there is no place for emotion. Courts want to hear the "evidence relating to the offence", not the feelings that go with it. Emotions don't usually come into the definitions of criminal offences. However, you'll see that I'm relating my enquiry to something that is personally based rather than just practitioner based. That's not to say that it can't be both, for example, when I'm addressing a question directly to do with my work in the police force it can be practical, personal or both. One of the best books I read which dealt with emotion was that by Dadds (1995a). In commenting upon her reading about action research she says,

"Affective dimensions of the action research process were missing from the neat models but not from the teachers' untidy lived realities." (p.3)

She argues that:

"There has to be scope for speaking of head and heart; for acknowledging past and present; for representing pain and pleasure, individuality and community. We need a language that allows us to view professionalism as part of the complexity of life; a vocabulary that speaks of our work as part of our being; a discourse that treasures human caring in the challenging task of education. This is the place for a language which renders strange and special that which is taken-for-ordinary; a canvas and colour to paint the many varied validities of committed professional growth that pass by unnoticed on the treadmill of life. We need an infinitely flexible research medium. We cannot dispense with story." (p.166)

My enquiry recognises vulnerability of self - When standing on the outside of something, looking in, it's sometimes easy to criticise, it doesn't hurt the critic and I must confess it comes almost naturally to me. But when I'm the one on the inside being looked at, then I realise the pain that can come from such a common exercise. That's why I build up my means of protection, either in the form of barriers, or by ensuring that I can control the criticism by influencing the relationship between myself and the critic. I have to enable the other parties to understand my boundaries when it comes to being challenged just as I have to understand their boundaries. And there's no way that we can get it right all of the time. Consequently my enquiry has to have its own protectors that enable me to get out of difficult situations, that allow a relatively equal balance of power, and that prevent me from totally losing control of my own situation. I do that by giving you hints and sometimes even being blunt about the way I want my ideas to be treated.

Again Trapedo-Dworsky and Cole (1996) seem to understand my difficulty when they point out,

"Self-study, by its very nature, renders individuals and institutions vulnerable and accountable. Research that is both personal and practical in its orientation not only endangers the reputation of the academy but also is part of a political agenda to challenge traditional conceptions of what counts as knowledge and research. Thus, it is argued, it is not in the best interests of the academy (and those who align themselves with the academy) to support such an agenda." (p.22)

Well I can't claim to be politically motivated but it does make me feel more important to be put into that particular box as if I'm part of some battle that's being fought. On the other hand, I wouldn't want to feel that my contribution is going to be used to support a political argument that doesn't matter to me, I am not a pawn in a game. My motivation comes from simply wanting to take part, to be allowed to speak in order to improve the understanding of both myself and others who may wish to enter my arguments.

I was recently reading Newby's attack in the Journal of Philosophy of Education (Newby, 1994) on Jean McNiff's book (McNiff, 1993) which reinforced how vulnerable I am. He said of her work *"I am opposed to founding such work on the admittedly embryonic philosophy expressed here."* (p.119) It was some time ago that I first read McNiff's book - Teaching as Learning - but I don't recall it being as antagonistic towards the experts as Newby seems to view it, but perhaps that's because I'm not an academic. The sad part about

Newby's review was that I didn't find it to be particularly educational except that it clearly revealed the gap between their thinking.

It did make me wonder though about this antagonism towards academics. A little while ago I was thinking that maybe I talk about academics in an unfair way and I'm afraid that might be because you've led me down that path. Its been a path that made me believe that the academics won't listen to me, whereas in my heart I want to believe that they will. I sometimes feel as if I've be brought into a situation that I would like to stop, so perhaps I should begin that process by refraining from talking about academics as if they're some kind of object.

I noticed that your reply to Newby (Whitehead, 1996) was more restrained than I might have expected in the circumstances, but then you referred directly to this when you mentioned your tone which I believe aimed towards "*the art of a dialectician in embracing opposites and working with contrary views*" (p.460). I must admit that I would have found it hard to be so careful and yet at the same time I wanted to write to him myself although goodness knows what I would have said and it probably wouldn't have made sense to him at all!

2. It is Context Bound

My enquiry must fit with the context - I would argue that the most important part of the nature of my enquiry is the context in which it takes place. The context is that of my whole life as well as various parts of it. In order to understand the context you have to understand my life. The context is one in which I try to integrate my writing with my life and actions. At this moment in time I'm writing to you about the university criteria for judging dissertations. I find myself on holiday, at home worrying about when I'm going to find time to cut my grass in the garden or to sort out which type of new front door I'm going to buy, not able to forget the difficulties I have at work when trying to influence my mainly male colleagues. Those other issues are on my mind, but instead I choose to write to you about criteria. The context is not one of being able to detach myself from all the other considerations in my life, so my letter has to somehow get round those, or fit with them, in order to concentrate on the task in hand.

The context is one in which my mind doesn't have a single focus. So I write to you about a subject that I believe will be of interest to you as well as me, I don't suppose you want to know too much about my need for a new front door or where I'm going to get my lawn mower serviced. The context is one in which a large part of me says that I don't really want to talk about criteria but somehow I know that I must if I am to get the better of it. The context includes an attitude of mind. When I'm at work it involves my life as a police officer, when I'm at home it tries to forget my life as a police officer even though I can't.

I don't know whether I've explained the context very well. I get the feeling that you see context as being linked to a description of the environment in which I work, but I believe that my context is much broader than that; it's my whole environment and motivation that gives me my context.

My context involves others, whom I cannot control, and who are liable to divert my attention. In enquiring into my own practice I have to take into account that part of my environment that I cannot change and which may even cause me to change.

My enquiry must be flexible - If you accept my view of context, then hopefully you will accept that the nature of my enquiry must be flexible because my context is constantly changing. Therefore the nature of any enquiry that I adopt must be able to accommodate a shifting perspective. It must have sufficient flexibility to be able to twist and turn, stop and start, do the unexpected.

My enquiry must be part of both my personal and professional life and not outside it - Earlier I mentioned this, but I come back to it because it's so important to me and ties in with this idea of being context bound. What I am trying to say is that I would like the enquiry itself to be part of my personal and professional life and not something that is outside of it. Accounts and dissertations do not feature as part of my (normal) life, but letters do. I therefore want to show the value of those letters in terms of my own educational development. I have been enabled through the course of our correspondence (and conversations) to speak up for myself, at least to you, and to play with contradiction as a means of appreciating my own situation.

My enquiry must accommodate chaos - Building on the argument that my enquiry is context bound then it must accommodate chaos. I have no doubt that my life is filled with chaotic episodes that prevent it from being utterly boring. That chaos has presented itself in many ways, for example, there's been the chaos when I haven't really known the focus of my enquiry, there's been the chaos when my partner left me for a floozie, there's been the chaos when my mother died suddenly and unexpectedly, but despite all that my enquiry has continued through my willingness to communicate with you and vice versa.

Looking at your book there too is a feeling of chaos, (or is that an under-statement!), when you were told that your employment as a University academic would be terminated and then later when your doctoral theses were rejected. Like me, you also included that chaos into your writing but unlike me, you presented it in an organised fashion (Whitehead, 1993).

3. Open-Ended

My enquiry incorporates continuing dialogue - I said that context was the most important but having now reached the point of continuing dialogue, I would say that continuing dialogue is probably just as important a feature of my approach as the context. It is fundamental to the nature of my enquiry. Once we consider that the dialogue has ended, then the enquiry loses its reliability. If I were to suggest that I have reached some final solution or conclusion then my words would be merely historical. They would lose their life and revert to simply being words on a page. The ongoing dialogical nature of my enquiry means that everything I write is prone to change, it can only be accepted for what it is at this moment, later it will have changed. Collingwood (1939) explained this well when he wrote about his *"first principle of a philosophy of history"* relating history to processes:

"that the past which an historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present. ...history is concerned not with "events" but with "processes"; that "processes" are things which do not begin and end but turn into one another; and that if a process P1 turns into a process P2, there is no dividing line at which P1 stops and P2 begins; P1 never stops, it goes on in the changed form P2, and P2 never begins, it has previously been going on in the earlier form P1. There are in history no beginnings and no endings. History books begin and end, but the events they describe do not." (p.97)

Similarly with an enquiry that has a dialectic nature. It is constantly moving forward but that which has been said and how it has been said has an effect on what is being said, which in turn will affect what is to be said. What is being said is an indication of what is being thought, although they may not always be the same.

You may see in my letter, points that I've made to you before, but I'm not simply repeating them, they've now become part of a new context, there is a new purpose in my saying them again. The correspondence becomes part of my story. *"When we started telling stories we gave our lives a new dimension: the dimension of meaning - apprehension - comprehension"* (Okri, 1996 p.23). This tends to suggest that there is more to what is being said than the mere words. Having now probably totally confused you by my thoughts on continuing dialogue, I'll continue the letter.

It is the continuing dialogue that allows for an uncertain style of language. Almost a questioning style but with no question marks. I believe this is what Lomax (1994a) would call the *tentative* characteristic of educational research;

"Its findings are "true for us" at the time but subject to change. This is because of the nature of education, which by definition is a continuing process by which we come to know but never achieve the final completed state." Lomax (1994a p.12)

My enquiry accepts changes and the transformation of ideas - For some reason whilst I was writing this letter I stopped to look at one of the BERA dialogues (1990). I don't know what made me want to read it but it fell open at a page on the writing and the creation of educational knowledge (McNiff, 1990). In this article McNiff says,

"I would always regard as intrinsically educational those processes which transform the workings of mind so as to generate ever-renewable self-generating forms of thought." (p.53) McNiff referred to the writing up of her PhD thesis and said,

"The thesis itself became an instrument to access my own forms of knowledge. I transformed my thinking from propositional to dialectical." (p.57) She went on to say,

"The task of writing the thesis brought home to me the enormous power of writing as a reflection of mind, and as part of the educative process." (p.57)

I want my enquiry to be able to allow my thinking to change or transform and without it having to be too painful. In my opinion, our conversations and correspondence has allowed that to happen.

4. Educational

My enquiry develops and uses ideas - By insisting that my enquiry must be part of my personal and professional life, any ideas that I have I am able to develop and use without having to rely upon passing them on to someone else to develop and/or use. In other words there is a feedback loop to myself and I will be at least one of the main benefactors of my own enquiry.

In respect of our correspondences, it's taken me a long time to develop my ideas and I'm still in the process of developing them. I've dabbled with correspondence, practiced it, never abandoned it, correspondence has been part of my life, a way to communicate.

In my enquiry the process is educational - Well for it to satisfy me, the nature of enquiry has an educational process. Although I am aware that there are those, such as Lomax (1994a p.12) who highlight the difference between Research into Education and Educational Research, I don't particularly want to enter into an argument over what is best or valid, except to say that I personally prefer to think that I am involved in educational research.

I needed a process that made me get to deeper levels of my own understanding. I don't see myself as displaying technical ability to you, but I would like to be able to claim that through my letters I have shown you the human and thinking sides to me.

I can speak for myself when I say that the process has been educational for me in that I have increasingly gained confidence when speaking up on matters that I know little about (especially when it comes to the university criteria). I've realised that my strength comes from accepting that I have much to learn but no need for the power that may be associated with knowledge, although I suppose Newby (1994) would call me naive.

You must speak for yourself, but I must admit that I'd be terribly hurt if I thought you'd learnt nothing through your correspondence and conversation with me.

My enquiry tends towards extending understanding - To extend understanding from this form of enquiry I believe there must be a high degree of sensitivity and patience. It's no good just taking things at face value, there is a need to look deeper in order to find that understanding

I'm not sure if this is the nature of the enquiry or a condition that I attach to it. It is with this intention to extend understanding that the enquiry brings in some of the features of educational research as listed by Lomax (1994a p.12), such as - *It has an ethical dimension, It is self-developing, It is authentic, It is democratic.*

My enquiry admits contradiction - Admitting contradiction is one of the means by which the enquiry moves forward. I would suggest that it could be the feature that, together with continuing dialogue, gives the enquiry rigour. The dialogue, coupled with contradiction, means that I am never going to be considered absolutely right about anything. The rigour in an enquiry of this nature prevents me from being able to sit back and say, "There, I've finished it." Instead, the rigour stops me from resting, it makes me carry on the enquiry even though future stages of my enquiry may not necessarily be made public.

5. Improves Practice

My enquiry refines skills through greater understanding and reflective practice - Improvement of practice does of course identify me with action research as this tends to be the stated intention of action researchers. And when we talk about criteria for judging action research Lomax (1994b) argues for *intention* to be included saying that,

"Teacher action research is a systematic and intentional inquiry by teachers in order to make sense of their practices and improve them. This suggests a criterion to do with the intention of the research that is not usually applied in other types of research." (p.115)

Whilst Lomax emphasises the practical basis for teacher action research and questions how a dissertation may be judged to merit a masters award, unfortunately for me she replaces one set of criteria for another.

When I started out on the action research trail, I was drawn along by the over-riding emphasis on the improvement of practice and I remain committed to that as an aim to my enquiry. However, I now feel that the improvement could materialise in an indirect sort of way, that is to say that it could be that through an increased understanding of an issue it leads indirectly to the improvement of practice. When I look at my series of letters to you Jack, I have difficulty in seeing my practice because I seem to have gone off at a tangent in order to address the issues that trouble me, such as my compliance or otherwise with the university criteria. By trying to address those issues, I can endeavour to move towards my goal which is to speak up, be heard, and be respected, even though I am new to the game.

Recently I've had to re-think my position on whether my enquiry is really concerned with the improvement of practice or whether it has become more of a personal account that highlights my futile attempts to have my views legitimated. Suddenly I find myself becoming quite depressed as I imagine the choice between changing tack in order to gain admittance or continuing to knock on the door of a community that seems determined to keep me out.