

**POSTSCRIPT, OR SHOULD IT BE  
"THE START OF SOME MORE DISCUSSION"**

28 September 1997

Dear Reader

I'm assuming that by now you will have read my dissertation. Hopefully it will have struck a chord with you in some way or other which will have caused you to think. Since I compiled my dissertation or, to be more precise, perhaps I should say lived it, time has gone by and the dissertation writing stage was reaching an end, but now I've had to think and write again.

After I handed my dissertation to Jack earlier this summer and he gave his initial reaction which was very positive, things went quiet for a while on the dissertation front. You could say that I was sitting back and relaxing but anyone who knows Jack will know that it wasn't to last! He was bound to give me something else to think about and true to form he did - two weeks ago. Well, as you might imagine, I got into quite a panic as I knew that there was very little time or opportunity left for me to address his points before the dissertation had to be submitted for assessment. I'd been particularly busy at work with deadlines coming up which I had to meet so I couldn't take time off to concentrate on the points he made.

Now I was being asked to think about "validity" when the major thing on my mind was getting a discipline file put together so that the matter could be cleared up as quickly as possible for the officer involved. Validity was a new priority that somehow had to be fitted in and addressed. My reaction was to spend last weekend writing yet another letter to Jack as I thought through the issues involved. This is what I wrote in the first part of that letter:

20 September 1997

Dear Jack

*Well suddenly I find myself having to rush off another letter to you as the submission date for "that damned dissertation" looms up, and all as a result of your saying "we could strengthen it"! With limited time (I'm a very busy person you know), you've pushed me into getting my head around the question of "How can I explain that my data is valid and how should it be interpreted, analysed, and evaluated?" If only you'd mentioned this before. Do you sense just a slight degree of irritation in my voice? Oh well, that's life I suppose. I'm without my thinking time, but nevertheless, perhaps we can make a start. For the sake of the audience, perhaps I should say what's happened, - from my point of view.*

*On Sunday evening you telephoned me (14.09.97) to say that you'd been to the BERA conference and there was some very exciting work going on that you thought I'd be interested in. You also told me that you'd had some feedback on my dissertation. Both you and your colleague(s), had felt there were some areas that could be improved, namely the section that mentions evidence of "valid" data followed by the section on analysing, interpreting, and evaluating it (pages 72 - 78). I must admit that someone else also mentioned that she would like to have seen more "validation".*

*You referred me to Patti Lather's work on "ironic validity" (Lather, 1994) and suggested that my dissertation demonstrates this type of validity. You were right when you said that*

*I'd find the language difficult - when I read a few of her words I knew that I would not have noticed her point for myself because her explanation is in a completely different language to my own. Nevertheless, you were keen that I should study her words as you seemed to be able to see ironic validity in my dissertation. Furthermore, you thought that I could "strengthen" my dissertation by including this idea of ironic validity within my text.*

*Well I've thought about this and, whilst agree that this notion of ironic validity needs discussion, I don't believe that it should be inserted into the text but instead, I think that it should come here at the end. I'm conscious of your concern for the audience in wanting it to come earlier but, despite this, I still feel that it would be wrong to tinker with the text. And now for my reasons.*

*When you raised the question of validity I turned to Cohen and Manion (1989) for some ideas on what might be meant by the word "validity". However, I felt that they tended to describe validity more in terms of ongoing accuracy and consistency, rather than the opposite which I believe can be equally as valid. I did find that when considering accounts, they talked of them being "valid in the sense that it is appropriate in kind and, within that kind, sufficiently complete and faithful (p 253)". However, Cohen and Manion appeared to be coming from a different frame of reference than me.*

*I believe that my data has validity in terms of its authenticity. Jane O'Dea seems to suggest authenticity and truth as a way forward for narrative researchers*

*If narrative research is indeed to garner the authority and validity it seeks, narrative researchers cannot afford to skirt the issue of truth. Rather they need to situate their stated criteria clearly within the confines of "authenticity", connecting them thereby to that notion of truthfulness and honesty that authenticity entails. (O'Dea, 1994).*

*So let us for a moment consider the authenticity of my data. When I wrote my letter to you that now forms the main text of my dissertation, I never imagined any problem over the validity of my data. As far as I was concerned it was valid and therefore I didn't worry myself unduly about it. In my mind there was no question about it and, at that stage, I wrote all I wanted to say about it. But I was understanding valid in terms of being authentic and being presented with genuine intent.*

*In a dialectic account, which depends upon ongoing discussion and a search for knowledge, I feel that my data portrays my desire to learn, to share, and to communicate, but that is exactly what makes it valid.*

*Surely the fact that we have corresponded over a period of time is apparent by the very existence of the letters. In that sense the data is valid. The correspondence was constructed, and that in itself may perhaps cause some readers difficulty. However, I contend that it was honestly constructed with a sincere intent to communicate and thus contribute to my educational development and, in turn, educational theory. I do not intend to deceive, I would have no reason to do so.*

*Now comes the question of trust. In my opinion, trust is vitally important to an account based on communication between two or more parties where there are no absolutely correct answers. I feel that it is the trust that has maintained the relationship and enabled me to begin to reveal my educational development. We cannot always check out whether the other's point of view is correct and maybe we have no need to, because the point of view*

*provides the basis of the dialogue and the vehicle that takes it forward. All of these assertions that we make are part of a rich and varied dialogical journey that we travel. However, there is a degree of trust and mutual respect that allow us to be truthful and to "get along". To speak with honest intent and integrity. I feel that the audience must judge for themselves as to whether that is adequately represented from the holistic impression they get of my dissertation (or is the jury still out on that).*

*I cannot claim that what I say is universally true, all I can claim is that through our dialogue, I have tried to come to a better understanding and to improve my ability to explain my own educational development. The words I wrote some months ago were perhaps only true at that point in time. Since then, I've moved on and now I have a new discussion to progress with you.*

*That brings me back to my reluctance to insert the discussion on validity into the main body of the text. I believe that my text has validity because it's presented in the way that I originally wrote it. (Look at the title of the dissertation) To insert something now would falsify my original letter to you and would remove its value as genuine communication between you and I.*

*You might argue that it would be no different to my writing the dissertation again today, integrating this new information, but my thoughts, priorities, motivations, etc., are bound to have changed over time. So if I were to write to you again on the subject, the letter would now have transformed and would not be simply a copy of something that went before with just a few amendments. Things have happened in the meantime which have no doubt affected my perceptions and outlook on life. I have not been standing still or wrapped in some cocoon. I have been living my life.*

*Now I'd like to move on to the documents that you sent me this week relating to your presentation at the BERA symposium but particularly the pages that referred to me (Whitehead, 1997 pp 38-40). Immediately prior to your text relating to me came some correspondence between yourself and Pat D'Arcy. Then I appeared, closely followed by Mike Bosher. You'd accurately reproduced my title and abstract before drawing attention to the importance of criteria in legitimating claims to knowledge. You then wrote:*

*"In my judgement the draft thesis is of the appropriate level for the MA award. However, I want to help Hilary to strengthen the way she has responded to two of the criteria, related to validity and the ability to interpret, analyse and evaluate the data.*

*I want to do this by seeing if I can convince her, of the value of Patti Lather's (1994, p 40-41) view of ironic validity in understanding the dissertations contribution to educational knowledge, through the following response:"*

*You then wrote your response which was personally addressed to me - Hilary. However, by then I was already feeling as if I was being written about. It was as if "I" was lost. I'd been swallowed up somewhere between Pat D'Arcy and Mike Bosher. What was presented was an indication of a dissertation that could be "strengthened". It was no longer a communication between you and I in which we search for knowledge and understanding, but instead it had become a piece of writing to be improved and judged. It suddenly seemed as if you were writing for a different audience. You see I would rather not view my*

dissertation in terms of some thing to be strengthened, but instead I prefer to continue my search through the dialogue I have enjoyed.

It wasn't until much later that evening that I even realised that you had addressed me directly in the subsequent paragraphs. It made me wonder how I should speak of other people and their work within my own text. The funny thing about all this is that your response to me was valid in that I believe you **genuinely intended me to see your response as being to me rather than about me**. Whilst I value your genuine intent to help me, can you appreciate that subtle differences such as this have constantly given us new issues to discuss and thus the dialogue continues.

I digress, so let's now return to Patti Lather's ironic validity. She says,

Contrary to dominant validity practices where the rhetorical nature of scientific claims is masked with methodological assurances, a strategy of ironic validity proliferates forms, recognizing that they are rhetorical and without foundation, postepistemic, lacking in epistemological support. The text is resituated as a representation of its "failure to represent what it points toward but can never reach" (Hayles 1990, 261), an ironic representation of neither the thing itself nor a representation of the thing, a simulacrum. (Lather, 1994, p 41)

I would say that to some extent the decision on whether my dissertation fulfils her description of "ironic validity" depends upon what I claim the dissertation represents. If I claim, as you suggest, that it is my "best" representation to date of the "embodied knowing" I experience in what I do and how I live in relation to others, then yes I think it fulfils the criterion of "ironic validity". I do make that claim.

However, I also claim that the dissertation represents my ongoing search for knowledge and understanding. I therefore say that my data (and therefore my dissertation) has a **dialectic validity** in that it portrays an authentic search for knowledge and understanding.

I don't know if there is such a thing as dialectic validity, I can't recall seeing it mentioned before. Nevertheless, if I had to label the type of validity (and you know I don't like labels) then I'd call it **dialectic validity**.

Perhaps I should now ask how such data should and could be interpreted, analysed, and evaluated. I've looked back over page 42 and I think that maybe I can begin to make better sense of the lists that I made if I link them to these ideas about ironic validity (Lather, 1994), dialectic validity, and authenticity.

My first of two lists (see page 42) gives an indication of the features that I am happy to admit into my own correspondence (data). The list represents the way that I am able to progress. It helps me to accept and make sense of the features that crop up in my correspondence even though they may be features that are not acceptable in other forms of research. By accepting this style, I am helped in my quest to live up to my values and to know myself. When trying to interpret my letters, I do so in terms of the thoughts that they represent, my intentions behind them, the part they play in communicating with others, and their authenticity.

*When it come to analysis, I don't think that this can be reserved for one specific section of the account. I say this because I have felt inclined to analyse in the course of my conversations and correspondence with you. It is not so much about analysing some final data to reach conclusions, as analysing my progress as I go along. Neither can analysis be in terms of finding correct or permanent answers. Instead the analysis is more akin to comparing my opinion to those of yourself and others (including the literature) in order to expand and develop my explanations. There may also be occasions when that comparison and additional flow of information leads to a transforming of my own ideas.*

*Lastly, how might I evaluate my data. My immediate response is to suggest that it should be evaluated in terms of whether it makes you and the wider audience think. Furthermore, does it enable us to maintain a dialectic approach to learning. The process of engaging in dialogue has certainly done that for me, and therefore I believe it to have been an effective means of gathering data as well as the data itself being a valuable representation of our educational relationship.*

*As you know, I've written elsewhere (see pages 53-54) about the way in which correspondence can be evaluated and so I won't dwell upon it here. I've now feel as if I've tired myself on the points raised at the beginning of this latest letter, so I'll move on to the audience which you mentioned in our telephone conversation this afternoon.*

-----X-----

Reading over the letter again, I'm conscious that my "irritation" came to the fore and on reflection I would rather have kept it to myself as it wasn't Jack's problem, it was mine. Had I been in a better frame of mind perhaps I would have written the letter quite differently, but once it was sent then it was too late to change it and I could not retrieve it. I was caught between making no response to Jack's points and making a hurried unsettled response. In hindsight, maybe I would have been better to have waited but then the time for submission would have passed.

Since sending that letter, I have read Patti Lather's article several times which has caused me to think yet again (Lather, 1994). In addition, Jack has drawn my attention to a recent article by Elliot W. Eisner on the promise and perils of alternative forms of data representation (Eisner, 1997).

The problem I have with Patti Lathers article, is that it seems to be coming from a different direction to me and so I cannot be sure in my own mind as to whether we are on the same wavelength or not. I feel as if we may be heading in a similar direction but we're on different buses and going there for different reasons. I therefore feel uncomfortable in claiming "*ironic validity*". This is probably unhelpful when trying to locate my work and assess its validity but I'm afraid that I can't just make it fit. I'm wondering whether, although we're on similar lines, there is such a thing as "unique validity" which is linked to the context and therefore can never be quite the same as someone else's sense of validity. Despite my concerns, I do feel that Patti Lather's ideas can help me to explain my own thoughts on the subject.

Now I turn to Eisner's article (Eisner, 1997) based on his keynote address at the 1996 Conference on Qualitative Research in Education at the University of Georgia. He makes the point that "*..form and content cannot be disaggregated: How one writes shapes what one*

says." It greatly pleased me to see that he had retained the form in which his article was originally prepared, that of an oral delivery, firstly because that was consistent and secondly because I could easily understand it. He says,

*"There is an intimate relationship between our conception of what the products of research are to look like and the way we go about doing research. What we think it means to do research has to do with our conception of meaning, our view of cognition, and our beliefs about the forms of consciousness that we are willing to say advance human understanding - an aim, I take it, that defines the primary mission of research."* (Eisner, 1997)

He goes on to say.

*"What we are dealing with is a conception of how meaning is made, and what shall count as knowledge or, to use a more felicitous phrase, how understanding is enlarged."*

I then noticed a point which related directly to my own feelings on knowledge, (whatever that may be) in that I believe I have for some time been able to accommodate the idea of being on shifting ground. He says,

*"We prefer our knowledge solid and like our data hard. It makes for a firm foundation, a secure place on which to stand. Knowledge as process, a temporary state, is scary to many."*

He makes five points as to why we need new forms of data representation. In my opinion his explanation is worth reading in full but here I only give my summary of it. New forms can;

- 1 *Shape experience, enlarge understanding, and make empathy possible.*
- 2 *Provide a sense of particularity and dimensionality, which confer a sense that what is being portrayed is "real".*
- 3 *Provide "product ambiguity", in that the material presented is more evocative than denotative, and in its evocation, it generates insight and invites attention to complexity.*
- 4 *Promise to increase the variety of questions that we can ask about the educational situations we study.*
- 5 *Allow us to exploit individual aptitudes.*

On the other hand he talks of the perils (which I've summarised as follows). Alternative forms of representation:

- 1 *Can fail to provide the precision and reduced ambiguity required by conventional social science.*
- 2 *Can lead to a backlash from their use and need interpretation, particularly in terms of the context.*
- 3 *Are constrained by the publication system on material that does not take printed form.*

I can see why Jack wanted me to read this article, I felt as if Elliot Eisner was not only on the same bus but was also talking in a way that enables me to speak. It was as if he was suggesting that I stand on the edge and realise the possibilities that are there.

There is another article that I want to mention as I continue to consider validity. I read it a little while ago and was immediately interested in what the author, Stephen Rowland had to say (Rowland, 1997). I was fascinated by his references to videos and magazines of a sexually explicit nature which I must admit had me smiling to myself in amusement at the

realities of life. Nevertheless I realised the relevance and serious basis for using these in his discussion, especially in relation to how we might inspire a love of learning.

Rowland was stimulated by a sentence in a dissertation which read "*I want to inspire in my students a love of their subject*" Rowland said of the writer,

*".. he appeared to feel that his writing as a form of reflection upon his practice (and thus probably his practice too) did not give adequate expression to the values of love and inspiration which underlie his image of himself as a teacher. These were things of which he was unable to speak, except in this ironic post-script. While the study had sought to gain some critical purchase on processes of learning, his written reflections somehow failed to capture his fundamental value position. The erotic is special because it cannot be identified with precision in the way a rational market-place demands. It is always immutable to measurement, always open to reinterpretation, potentially subversive."* (Rowland, 1997)

He goes on to ask,

*"How then are we to develop and represent a love of learning and teaching? How are we to resist "the clichés that cause the trouble", the explicitness which reduces the erotic to the sexy and learning to educational technology?"*

He argues for a different type of language that resists positivist language and finishes his article by saying,

*"- perhaps it is this sense of "joyfulness", risk and even playfulness, rather than a narrow concern for systematic method, which needs to be reclaimed for action research and writing. We may then rediscover the heart of our professional identity and resist the dreary oppression of this technical age. Love may then find ways to speak of itself."*

I want to now return to the letter I wrote to Jack last weekend and to reproduce the rest of the letter here for you. When I wrote to Jack I didn't know that I would think yet again in time to add further to my comments and views. This is what I said to him then:

## AUDIENCE

*You asked me if I could speak more directly to the readers and we discussed the possibility of something at the beginning of the dissertation to prepare them for reading our correspondence. If you read from the bottom of page 1 to the middle of page 2, you'll see that I've already tried to do that, but obviously it wasn't enough.*

*It was some considerable time ago that I began to realise that one day our letters may be made public and available to a wider audience. Therefore, although I have written to you, I have done so in the knowledge that someone else will see what I've had to say. I want to make it clear that they are letters that are now **intended to be read by a wider audience and they are no longer private**. They are **open** letters. I must stress that they were not written for rhetorical effect, but they represent that educational relationship between you and I which I have been keen to demonstrate, and in that sense, they remain sincere and authentic.*

*I want my readers to feel comfortable and to understand that they have been invited in, that I know they are there, and that I would like them to feel involved in the construction of this account. It is perhaps unfair and inconsiderate to speak of the reader as some third party. You suggested that I should write to the reader but I have difficulty with this as I don't know who they are and I need to have someone in mind.*

*When I write to you, I take liberties and make assumptions because I have sufficient faith to know that, if I annoy you or disagree with you, we are capable of regaining the balance. That has taken time to develop and I feel it is not something that I can take for granted with the wider audience.*

*When I write directly to the reader, I almost feel as if I'm on show, presenting something. Therefore I find myself commentating to the reader on what has gone before rather than tentatively giving my emergent ideas for further dialogue. The whole nature of my conversation changes. It would be possible for me to easily alter the text, removing you as an individual, but somehow I don't think that would be right, especially as much of the discussion has revolved around correspondence and its use.*

*If I was, for example, writing to you about my experiences as a police officer, it may be acceptable to alter the text for presentation. A possibility would be to make you a third party and write directly to the audience. Nevertheless, in this particular dissertation, as far as I am concerned, you are not a third party and never can be.*

*I do hope the wider audience can understand this and can see their position in context. They have only recently been allowed in but they are most welcome. They are reading a dissertation that has already been written, but from this point forward they can become involved if they wish.*

*At the beginning of this letter, I referred to this "damned dissertation", not least because I felt under pressure to produce something more. Instead of writing being enjoyable, it had once again become a chore, aimed at achieving an award. The strange thing about this is that I have known all along that I have written in a way that should encourage you and the wider audience to look for more rather than being satisfied with what you've got. A major part of my dialectic account recognises that the dissertation is incomplete and therefore the dialogue needs to continue. Despite this, I think I was allowed a certain degree of irritation given my sense of obligation and panic at the time constraint that I faced! Suffice to say that having undertaken the task, at last I feel a lot better and somewhat more settled.*

*Its been great to speak to you again this week, but I really must finish here if I'm to get this letter in the post this weekend.*

*Take care*

*Hilary*

*P.S. - Stories can drive you mad (Okri, 1996)*

-----X-----

It is probably obvious to you that I have reconsidered my position on whether I should write directly to the audience or continue to show Jack as the person I have "in mind". It is obvious because I am now writing to you, the reader, and not Jack, something that I had said that I wasn't ready to do. By making this switch, I believe that I have changed the nature of



my letter to him (and indeed my whole dissertation) in that it has become data to be considered and talked *about*. The educational relationship between Jack and I still exists, but it is only represented as opposed to being alive and meaningful to me *within* the text.

Observers cannot see or know the respect that I feel inside. That relationship and especially its meaning and value now continues without saying. It is lived but cannot be *fully* represented in words. When I'm talking to another person, namely you the reader, for my part the communication changes because each communication is unique and the recipient is part of it. The communication moves to the audience as a whole and I find myself needing to begin a new dialogue.

You may be wondering why I decided to move on from my correspondence with Jack. Well it was soon after I had posted my letter of 20 September to him but as a result of him earlier suggesting that I might try to address the wider audience more directly. I suppose I felt like a 41 year old teenager being told by my parent that it was time to leave home. In other words I could venture out and spread my wings without being afraid of landing awkwardly. My trust, appreciation and respect for Jack was firmly established and so I could turn my attention to others without jeopardising the educative relationship that I had come to value.

This decision to speak directly to the wider audience was a natural progression and an opportunity to test out my ideas with others. For me there is something very normal about this type of progression which gives a feeling of growth. However, it is coupled with a sense of nostalgia, letting go, and acknowledgement that individuals make up the important things in life.

I've reached a stage where I must bring this to a close, if only temporarily. I'm hoping that in the future I will be able to write to the wider audience but still keep individuals "in mind" and use a style which communicates directly with you, the reader.

Hilary

## REFERENCES

Cohen L, and Manion L (1989), *Research Methods in Education*, Routledge, London

Eisner E W (1997), The Promise and Perils of Alternative Forms of Data Representation in *Educational Researcher*, Volume 26, Number 6, pp. 4-10

Lather P, (1994), Fertile Obsession: Validity after Poststructuralism in Gitlin A (Ed), *Power, Method, Political Activism and Educational Research*, pp36-60, Routledge, London

O'Dea J W (1994), Pursuing Truth in Narrative Research, in *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Volume 28, Number 2, pp. 161-171

Okri B, (1996), *Birds of Heaven*, Orion Books Ltd., London

Rowland S (1997), A Lover's Guide to University Teaching? in *Educational Action Research*, Volume 5, Number 2, pp. 243-253

Whitehead J (1997), *Action Researchers' Educational Theories and their Politics of Educational Knowledge: Reconstructing Educational Theory and Constructing Educational Knowledge*. A presentation to the 1997 BERA Symposium, University of York, UK, 13 September 1997