ADULT LEARNING IN COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH:

reflections on the supervision process

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Since the early 1980s we have been engaged with graduate students working with some version of an experiential and collaborative approach to inquiry (Reason and Rowan, 1981; Reason, 1988). Our students adopt a range of methodologies and perspectives. They may set up a co-operative inquiry group (Reason and Heron, 1986) engaging with a group of people fully as co-researchers. They may draw on the perspectives of action science (Argyris et al, 1985) and action inquiry (Torbert, 1991) to explore their own personal practice in detail. They may initiate cycles of inquiry using methods appropriate to each phase of their research questioning. They may incorporate an appreciation of gender and related power issues in their work (Marshall, 1984, 1993).

Whichever approach they take, their work will be rooted in their own and others' experience, be based on attempts to establish collaborative relationships with the other persons involved in the inquiry, and be action-oriented (Reason, 1988). Our students are typically competent, mature people -- consultants, managers, nurses, doctors, social workers, teachers -- who wish to examine and develop some aspect of their professional lives.

As we wrote in an earlier paper, research in this mode is a personal process (Reason and Marshall, 1987):

> All good research is *for me, for us*, and *for them*: it speaks to three audiences.... It is *for them* to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable ideas and outcomes which elicit the response "That's interesting!" from those who are concerned to understand a similar field (Davis, 1971). It is *for us* to the extent that it responds to concerns for our praxis, is relevant and timely, and so produces the response "That works!" from those who are struggling with problems in their field of action. It is *for me* to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher's being-in-the-world, and so elicit the response, "That's exciting" -- taking exciting back to its root meaning, to set in action. (pp. 112-3)

Research is also a political process (Torbert, 1991), especially as many of our students set out hoping to influence some aspect of the organizational or professional world in which they are involved. And research is a social process, negotiated and pursued in relationships with others.

Thus in our work with students we have developed a *process oriented approach to supervision*. Rather than concentrate on providing 'expert' advice on the content and methodology, our primary attention is on the student's life energy as they engage with their research. We seek to facilitate the personal learning in research, and so help people realise *their* potential project which has relevance to their lives. In our view, good research is an expression of a need to learn and change, to shift some aspect of oneself. Of course this learning takes place in interaction with the organization or community with which the student is engaged, but since we are working in an educational relationship with the researcher (rather than as change agents to an organization or community) it is on the student's process that we focus.

We believe that the quality of this personal process is the foundation for quality in all aspects of the research, including its intellectual creativity. While we do all the things that are usually expected of a research supervisor -- we teach methodology, make suggestions as to what students might read, debate ideas, become excited and involved in the content of the research -- we hold that they are always secondary to the underlying process of nurturing the student's developing competence in both understanding and effective action. Of course, research supervision as we practice it is a personal and political process also: while we comment on this where it feels appropriate in this paper, our primary concern is with the student's process.

This paper was conceived and written entirely by ourselves as one outcome of our joint action inquiry (Torbert, 1991). We have written short illustrations from our work with students, all of which have been checked and validated by them, with one or two amendments; one illustration was withdrawn on request because it was felt to be too personal. We have also asked our students if this paper seems to be an adequate description of our practice; the general response has been affirmative, and the paper has raised issues that we will continue to debate.

Key themes

Given our view that research is not an impersonal, external and solely intellectual endeavour, but rather a complex personal and social process, we approach supervision intending to pay attention to a wide range of themes or "strands of concern". We see our role as helping bring into the foreground, to make *figural* in a gestalt sense (Perls et al, 1973), those themes which currently require attention and to help the student work with them. In order to achieve this we are always scanning internally and externally for clues about issues behind those being discussed, incongruities, aspects of the research which are currently being neglected, and so on. We generally surface our ideas and intuitions as suggestions or possibilities, for the student and us to consider.

We think it helps that the two of us usually work together in this form of supervision. We bring different life experiences and perspectives and so may notice different things; we are able to challenge each other more directly than students may initially feel able; and we can take complementary roles - one pursuing an issue, the other facilitating, for example - as this seems appropriate. Working together feels more relaxing than working alone, and seems to encourage greater awareness. Although we find this demanding work which can be difficult and painful at times, it is also enjoyable, engrossing, often fun. Sometimes the two of us work with one student. Alternatively, and increasingly, we may supervise in a small group, with fellow students participating.

In this section we describe some of the key themes students engage with in doing research. We portray them partly as developmental tensions or dilemmas in the unfolding life of the researcher. Our role is to help focus these, affirm them as significant and aid the student in working with them. It is seldom our intention to help them gloss

over the issue or resolve it by adopting a solution from outside themselves, although this can occasionally be a choice we all explicitly, and usually temporarily, make. We may therefore at times be experienced as unhelpful. But we see it as vital that the student stays in charge of their own research, for only then can they tap and benefit from the personal, life process it expresses. For each theme we also suggest what purposes we generally have as supervisors, and how our interventions could become inappropriate.

Mirroring. One important consequence of recognising that research is a personal, political and social process is that the research supervision becomes part of the field of inquiry. Our relationships with students, and with each other as (usually) joint supervisors, require as much attention as other aspects of the research. In particular, what is going on in the project the student is undertaking may be mirrored in the supervision sessions.

> Maureen was seeking to establish a collaborative approach to the evaluation of projects in a Christian social work agency. Early on our supervision sessions became bogged down, with guarded behaviour on all our parts and poor communication. After several difficult sessions Maureen suggested we identify what was going wrong. As we explored our collective behaviour we realized that Maureen's interest in effective and humanistic evaluation came partly from wanting to contradict her own rather distressing experiences of judging and being judged. Moreover, she brought this history to our relationship and so experienced our attempts to be helpful as judgements of her progress. Thus the topic of evaluation was not only related to Maureen's personal concerns, but permeated the supervision sessions. Addressing these issues explicitly helped us move beyond them, and notice if they seemed likely to recur at later stages of the project.

The key tension here is to learn to benefit from these resonances rather than become entrapped by patterns which are imported into the supervision relationship.

Engaging with the project: What is this research about in the student's life? Students come to work with us wanting to address some issue in their lives. As mature professionals they are engaged in action inquiry in their world to some extent already. Often they know intuitively or tacitly what it is they want to research, but their definition of the project is typically too loose, too formal, too presented for outside consumption to really take off. The project needs to touch their heart in some way if it is to sustain them over the several years required.

> Carlis moved through several formulations before she found the project she had to do. At first she wanted to explore the effectiveness of equal opportunity programmes. As we discussed this, and became more comfortable and trusting in our relationship together, she redefined her topic in sequence to equal opportunities for black women in organizations that are dominated by white men; to how black women can thrive rather than simply survive in such organizations, and finally to issues of identity for black

> women like herself as they attempt to work effectively as consultants and change agents in this organizational setting.

There are many ways in which research can be part of a student's life process. The topic may be a central concern and opportunity for personal growth; they may want recognition from an academic system which has previously disparaged them; they may want to honour and express their own understandings of the world which have been suppressed by received knowledge. Engagement may come in stages, with a progressive deepening of appreciation that the research has life relevance. It may occur early on in the process, or arrive much later. The feeling of lack of engagement may haunt the project for a while, lurking in the background but somehow difficult to address. There may be a sudden "Aha!" experience as the student realizes what their research is really about for them. Sometimes full engagement never happens, so the student is left with a competent yet unexciting (for them) project.

The key tension here is between research which is centrally meaningful in the student's life versus research that remains peripheral.

Our purpose is to invite the student to explore how the research is significant for them, to notice when it is alive and when it loses touch with their core life processes. We often find ourselves asking 'What is your research about at the moment?' This may sound forgetful or naive, but we are asking the student to express the current formulation of the research for them and how it is held in their life. This may involve intellectual, experiential, methodological, political and other aspects.

Our interventions may become inappropriate if poorly timed or too persistent, probing this issue when the student is not open to exploration or wants to make more direct progress, to "get on with the research" for a while and leave issues of purpose to one side.

Engaging with the personal process of inquiry. As we have argued earlier, engagement with a research topic draws attention to issues of personal process, which can be seen from three perspectives:

> Firstly, from an existential perspective as the here-and-now struggle with one's being-in-the-world; secondly, from a psychodynamic perspective which views current patterns of experience and behaviour as rooted in unresolved distress from earlier (often childhood) experiences; and thirdly, from a transpersonal perspective which views individual experience as a reflection of archetypal patterns of the collective unconscious. (Reason and Marshall, 1987, p. 114)

We think it is particularly important to note that

> researchers often choose (consciously or unconsciously) research topics that will restimulate old patterns of distress (Reason and Marshall, 1987, p. 115).

Engaging in a collaborative experiential research process often disturbs the habitual pattern of response to these issues or reawakens old pain.

> Suzie produced two highly elaborate research schemes involving collaboration first with a national charity and secondly with a leading weekly journal. The requirements of these other organizations appeared to us to lead her away from her interest in co-operative inquiry into more orthodox methods. Eventually the tension between these external demands and her own interests became intolerable, so that after strong challenge from us she withdrew from the projects. As we reflected on the difficulties and inquired, maybe more gently now, about what had been in it for her, she explained how important it was for her to be heard. It seemed that in her life, as a child and adult, she experienced her contributions as not being properly acknowledged. The prospect of being able to speak on a national stage was therefore highly attractive - even if it meant that she might again lose her own voice in someone else's demands. Following these difficult experiences she started to pay more attention to her own internal promptings in designing her research work, which she found to be more satisfying.
>
> When we checked this example with Suzie she wanted us to make clear that while strongly challenged at no time did she feel disconfirmed as a person.

From time to time most pieces of research hit a more major crisis -- a life issue arises which will not go away, cannot be resolved in the relatively short term. At these times it is important to acknowledge the significance of what is happening, to affirm it as a longer-term process, and to attempt to allow space for the issue to find its own resolution.

> For a long time at the beginning of her research Jill was unable to be clear about her work. She wanted to explore the role of emotions in training groups, but beyond that was often not capable of expressing her ideas. Interactions in the postgraduate research group often brought on tears, and she became curious that she was nearly always menstruating at the times of the group sessions. At first we were concerned and frustrated with her lack of clarity, but as we worked together, with the help of the rest of the group, she realized the tension that had always existed between her emotional, intuitive ways of knowing and the rational forms of knowledge that had always been demanded of her at School and at College. Together we realized that an important part of her work was to produce a "watery" thesis full of "fluid knowledge". Tears and menstrual flow became positive signs of knowing flowing. Sometime following this realization Jill started to become immensely productive, writing at length with flow and creativity.

We suspect that all our students confront one fairly major life crisis in the process of writing a successful PhD. If they do not we are concerned that they are not achieving the depth of learning they at least unconsciously sought when they joined us. One of our criteria of validity is, in fact, whether there has been an engagement with seeming chaos.

Sometimes the personal processes and associated distress stimulated by the inquiry will temporarily overwhelm the rest of the student's life. The person will find it hard to have

a world outside their research. This lack of protective boundaries is particularly difficult when the student is researching their own work situation. At the same time, this identification can also be a major source of insights.

The key tension here is between free-flowing creative intelligence versus *intelligence that is occluded by restimulated archaic fear, anger, or grief.*

We have several purposes in relation to this theme. We try to help the student recognise the connections between different forms of knowing, especially as previous academic work will probably have devalued their experiential, intuitive, and emotional intelligences. We affirm the value of the personal process and its evolution as a significant aspect of the research. We may encourage the student to find other sources of support, perhaps through therapy, to help with its more deep-rooted aspects.

One danger is that researching will prompt personal exploration that the student is unable to engage with or cannot contain at that time or in their current family or work context. We all then have to work together to set appropriate limits. As supervisors we have to judge how much to persist and when to desist in advocating personal engagement; we obviously cannot force development even when we think it is something the student tacitly wants. Sometimes the life issues the student encounters cannot be worked through sufficiently within the time allowed for a research degree. The person may have to abandon the research and address their development in other ways.

Engaging in the learning community. We are committed to the development of communities of inquiry. Good research cannot be done alone: we each need to be included, to be with others who can support and challenge our work, to be affirmed as inquiring persons and to know where we stand in relation to others. We have in the past emphasised the importance of other people acting as "Devil's advocates" (Heron, 1988) and as "friends willing to act as enemies" (Torbert, 1976). Maybe in this we have not emphasised enough the need for "friends willing to act as friends": inquiry can be a difficult and lonely path, and we need all the support we can get.

To serve these several purposes, we have established postgraduate research groups for teaching, supervision, support and appropriate critique. Working in this way requires attention to group dynamics. There are several repercussions for the developing life of the student researcher which we would like to outline here.

First, we find it often helpful to see the development of these groups beginning with a concern for issues of *inclusion*, which shifts toward an *influence* process as group members feel secure enough with each other to deal with their differences; finally, a mature group moves beyond the conflicts of the influence stage and begins to deal with issues of *intimacy*. Earlier issues must be adequately resolved before the group can move to later issues. These themes are fundamental to most developing groups and can be observed in most social interactions (Srivastva et al, 1977).

When issues of inclusion are salient, we find that students are often initially hesitant about whether they are good enough to belong in an academic environment and become silenced by their fantasies of intellectual incompetence. We can become frustrated as students we admire and believe to have exciting ideas become guarded and defensive in group discussions. When issues of influence move to the foreground there are further potential tensions: sometimes there is a tussle between those comfortable with head-knowledge and those more attuned to heart-knowledge; many students feel unable to challenge the perceived authority of academic literature. It is delightful to work in a group which has moved beyond these earlier phases toward intimacy, in which there is a sense of equality among members, each of whom bring their distinct individuality.

Our role in relation to these issues is to try to notice and raise for question what is going on, inviting the group to learn consciously about the group development theme to improve our functioning and to consider its implications for research. We also may at times forge ahead (wittingly or unwittingly), forcing everyone to engage at the edge of their comfort, and need later to pause and take stock.

A second feature of operating as a group is that it provides another arena where mirroring of the research process may take place. For example, the way individuals handle the phases of group life may reflect their engagement with their research project.

> In early research group meetings Richard would often ask direct, potentially uncomfortable, questions of other members. His approach appeared simultaneously naive, courageous and vulnerable as he addressed issues around which there seemed to be silence. In style he appeared to be mirroring the approach he was taking in his workplace research group. There he was trying to eschew the privileges and power of his role as a consultant surgeon and engage co-operatively with other members of his team. His openness to change and confidence based on social rank were both mirrored in the research group.

A third aspect of group development concerns the student's relationship with authority. Our experience is that as University Lecturers we are seen as *standing for* the authority of the scientific establishment and are thus often invested with unrealistic power and insight; in this role we are also a potential authoritarian threat. There is at times a distressing and difficult process: students initially express undue reverence for us or rebel; they then decide that we too are far from perfect and not particularly threatening; this is hopefully followed by a realistic assessment of our position as rather more experienced but certainly not infallible co-inquirers.

> One day one of us casually asked Pauline 'What are you reading?' Pauline was deeply engaged exploring issues in practical ways and had wanted to leave the academic literature until later. She took the question as meaning that she should be reading something, but did not challenge it. We only learnt about this mis-communication later, when Pauline criticised us jokingly for disturbing her chosen research strategy.

We are not comfortable with being ascribed this kind of power, unless we are clearly declaring a view we want a student to take seriously, which we sometimes do. More often, as we said earlier, our intent is to help the student stay in charge of their own research process.

Even when students seem to have taken on personal responsibility for their inquiry and to have recognised their previous attribution of authority externally, it is interesting how easily the pattern of de-authorisation can recur. Any mention of examiners, for example, can swiftly trigger it. It then helps to have other students around who can notice and challenge this. We shall return to how we work with issues of authority in a later section of the paper.

The key tensions here concern whether the student can bond with the research community as a powerful member, or whether they maintain any initial feelings of being marginal or powerless.

Our purpose is to foster a community which has space for difference and is sufficiently supportive to contain people in the emotionally risky business of inquiry. We try both to be co-operative and to take authority appropriately, for example in relation to the wider University system. We are open about our own agendas, concerns, interests, disappointments and so on, inviting reciprocal relationships. We feel limited if we cannot help someone find a suitable space in our community, especially if we feel they are under-estimating their talents or over-estimating the orthodoxy of current science.

<u>Developing an appropriate methodology.</u> Closely related to the last point, it is our experience that even though our students join us because of our reputation for non-traditional -- post-positivist, experiential and co-operative -- methodologies, they often still seem to have absorbed a "received" view of science. That is, maybe unconsciously, they believe that there is some "true" or "correct" methodology for the problem that they are studying, and that there is some authority who holds the key to this.

The methodologies we teach are best seen as sets of general principles and heuristic devices which can be adapted creatively to different research issues. They raise questions rather than offer answers, and we see ourselves as working to help students create and frame strategies for themselves, always seeking the appropriate method and form to the circumstances

However, sometimes students think that they have to adopt one of the methodologies that we teach; they may, for example, feel inadequate as researchers until they have done a "proper" co-operative inquiry. Sometimes insecurity about 'getting it right' is more covertly expressed, and we have to explore whether this is an issue. Judi is particularly likely to raise this question, as she has seen over the years how tempted people are to take Peter's writing about co-operative inquiry as a new orthodoxy, and violently disapproves. Peter then sometimes worries whether she is advocating sufficient rigour in inquiry - a debate to be had openly with the student.

> David wants to understand how he and his colleagues manage patients who they experience as "difficult" in their mental health unit. For two years he worried about how to establish a "co-operative inquiry group", feeling that until he did so he was not researching properly. Then he realized that the processes he was adopting -- continually paying attention to his own action and experience; finding ways to raise issues so they could be explored reflectively; setting up small meetings to review critical incidents with colleagues -- drew on aspects of both co-operative inquiry and action inquiry in a way that was uniquely appropriate to his situation. He chose to move forward by being more systematic with what he was doing: by openly labelling this as "research" with his colleagues, and by being more direct about asking for their co-operation.

The key tension here is choosing between the safety of a received view of research versus inventing an approach which is uniquely suitable for the inquiry to hand.

Moving from internal to external engagement.

Co-operative inquiry has been called "research *with* people", and a "process of learning through risk-taking in living". To conduct this kind of inquiry the initiating researcher must establish quite long term collaborative relationships with a group of people. This form of research engagement is usually far more demanding than interviewing or using a questionnaire. Similarly, methods such as action inquiry require that the student engage critically and authentically with their own experience in relation to others.

The step of moving from conception to active engagement is often quite difficult. The student needs to be bold enough to take this step and clear enough about their own purposes to express these to possible collaborators, and yet to be open enough to other people's interests to enter into dialogue. Entering this engagement phase raises all kinds of practical questions about the amount of time and commitment required, whether others are as interested in the inquiry questions as the student, and whether the latter feels sufficiently skilled and self-valuing to proceed. If the researcher also thinks that they should do the project perfectly they feel even more inhibited.

> Barbara wanted to explore the stress experienced by clinical psychologists that may lead them to experience professional "burn-out". She discovered that very few of her colleagues were interested in addressing these issues overtly, and that words such as "stress" and "burn-out" were taboo. It was therefore initially difficult to establish collaborative research relationships. These rebuffs gave her new information about her topic, which she was later able to value, but also meant her path of research engagement felt blocked and she began to doubt her skills as a novice collaborative researcher.

One of the consequences of inviting people to reflect on their personal patterns through inquiry is that they become intensely absorbed in these internal processes. Whilst this form of reflection and exploration may be immensely worthwhile, it may mean they find

it difficult to engage with the "outside world" and establish an inquiry dialogue with others.

> Allen wanted to explore the theory and practice of self-directed learning. He was also interested in his own learning and development, and so chose to work with a psychotherapist at the same time as engaging on his research. His early attempts to link his own interests with those of others were not particularly fruitful, and he therefore submitted a PhD which related a theory of self-directed learning to his own life story.

Thus a key tension is between the safety and challenge of exploring one's own internal worlds of action and reflection <u>*versus*</u> *engaging in dialogue with a wider group of people.*

As supervisors, we have to judge whether a student's reluctance to engage with others is well-founded or primarily defensive. If we push for engagement we may undermine their own process. Alternatively, if the student needs support to initiate the action phase of an inquiry we must find ways to provide this without taking charge of the project. We will typically debate the dilemmas as we see them with the student.

<u>Moving from action to reflection and intellectual development.</u>

A contrasting pattern is for students to prefer active engagement and dive into this early in the inquiry. This may well be their preferred style of learning, but it has both benefits and costs which we then discuss with them. Sometimes the reflective aspect of the research is repeatedly neglected as more action opportunities arise, then we become particularly suspicious and challenging. Sometimes the student is wary about their ability to work conceptually and so will avoid moving on to explore more theoretically. Some students satisfy their initial learning needs through such action and announce that the research project has served its purposes, thus declining to write a thesis for validation.

The tension here is between staying with the safety of action, in which the student feels skilled <u>*versus*</u> *the challenge of testing out their less confident reflective talents.*

Our role is to help the student notice and interpret their patterns of behaviour. We try to support them in honouring and engaging with their reflective and intellectual abilities. These may be less accessible to them than action for various reasons, and together we explore the potential dynamics involved.

<u>Developing appropriate skills</u>. There is something about embarking on research that makes most people feel inadequate and unskilled. This feeling of inadequacy can take many different forms - intellectual, interpersonal, emotional, empirical, entrepreneurial and so on.

> Nirodha is highly intelligent with an excellent academic track record. We were talking about how she could relate the inquiry work she had done to the

> writings of others in this field. Noticing her own resistance and close to tears she exclaimed, "This is so difficult. It is the most difficult thing I have every done."

Many people initially fear that they cannot possibly achieve the interpersonal and emotional skills required to manage a co-operative inquiry group. They are further deterred by the uncompromising statements about the level of personal development involved made by leading figures in the field. Heron states baldly that:

> the discipline and rigour involved in this sort of research is formidable... (Quoted in Reason and Rowan, 1981, p. 245)

and Torbert asserts that

> a person must undergo a to-him unimaginable scale of self-development before he becomes capable of relationally valid action. (Torbert, 1976, p. 167)

> *Hilary, a highly competent senior manager in the health service, refused for months to contemplate setting up a co-operative inquiry group because she didn't feel she was skilled to do so. Having conducted a successful interview phase of research, she decided that co-operative inquiry was the only ethical way to explore further the difficult role issues for health visitors she was hearing about. She established a small group with which she worked most successfully over nine months, trusting her experience and own good sense as a primary guide. (Traylen, forthcoming)*

The key tension here is between feeling adequately skilled to engage with and learn from a daunting task <u>*versus*</u> *wanting to be so fully prepared, so sure in advance that one will succeed, that one never engages.*

Our purpose is, again, to help surface the dilemmas and support the student sufficiently for them to encounter the learning available rather than shield themselves with inappropriate defence. We may, for example, help them explore their need to get everything right if this seems to be inhibiting their full engagement with the research. We will also talk through the phases of inquiry in advance, trying to anticipate potential problems and build in quality attention and review processes, so that the chances of the student being under-prepared is reduced.

<u>Developing intellectual competence.</u> The intellectual theme is often a focus of particular concern for postgraduate research students. There are several reasons for this. Studying for an MPhil or PhD carries a lot of social kudos, and therefore anxiety. The latter qualification, particularly, is seen as a pinnacle of academic achievement in a society which over-values the intellectual. This can draw out immensely driven and competitive behaviour in some people. But often a student's intellectual self-confidence has been damaged and undermined in earlier life. They come to us with all the appropriate qualifications, but not trusting their abilities to think for themselves, or believing that

their kinds of conceptual thinking - perhaps because they seem more intuitive or emotion-related - are somehow not legitimate.

> Bob had few scholastic qualifications before he did his MPhil with us. He produced a thesis which was innovative in style, analogically expressing in its form his vision of evolving knowing. Having passed, and finding that several people read his thesis end to end in one sitting and thoroughly enjoyed it, Bob felt he had been awarded his "academic credentials". He attended a public seminar and asked persistent questions, noticing his lack of embarrassment or diffidence in doing so.

Another intellectual challenge that most students face is that there seem to be so many ideas around, so much that has to be read and known, that they can become swamped by other peoples' frameworks and thus have no space to develop their own. Other people's thinking often acquires an undue weight of apparent authority by being published in books and referred to in cryptic phrases by other students and supervisors. We do not believe all-encompassing literature searches are necessarily relevant, especially as many of our students will be exploring the intersections of different academic topic areas, making this an impossible task. We do look for engagement in depth with relevant and stimulating theoretical sources. What the limits of this should be is another topic of on-going debate and negotiation between us.

The intellectual competence required for <u>non-traditional</u> forms of research is particularly problematic because it involves the skill of stepping outside the framework of one's own thinking. Frameworks of understanding serve as temporary resolutions as we participate in creating our worlds. We need them, but also need to "hold them lightly", and be ready to discard them when they are in danger of becoming rigid and reified. We often think of this in terms of Bateson's levels of learning (Bateson, 1972). While Learning II takes place within a framework of knowledge, Learning III moves beyond and looks over the boundaries of frameworks. The latter is a pretty tall order, because it involves going beyond the bondage -- and thus beyond the safety -- of a particular paradigm, and importantly also beyond the taken-for-granted sense of self. Torbert (1987, 1989, 1991), explores similar issues in his application of the theory of ego development to action inquiry. Thus for us inquiry requires high quality self-reflection about the processes of our own knowing.

The tension here is between grounded, free-flowing intellectual creativity <u>versus</u> being held back by doubts about one's own intellectual competence or undue reverence for other people's ideas.

Our purposes are to provide a stimulating intellectual environment in which students can work, and support for the kind of learning which takes them beyond their initial framings of the world. It is this kind of learning that we think they are implicitly seeking by joining us, but it is also learning which challenges their current life formulations and so is inherently risky.

We believe that most people are held back in their intellectual development by failing to respect their own talents; our role is then to support them in un-learning these limitations. Sometimes, however, we do come to feel that, for one reason or another, someone is unable to achieve the intellectual quality necessary to gain the degree they want (this is more often about PhD than MPhil registration). We would share these concerns with the student and work on their implications. This is a difficult and painful part of our work, made more problematic because by then we are usually highly identified with the student as a person and with their aspirations for the research as a personal, political and social initiative. In such interventions we are clearly invoking our more 'official' roles as the students' advisers on the academic system and its requirements, not that we see these as fixed or overly-constraining. It is however our responsibility to keep these in mind at all times, but in dialogue with the individual student's needs.

Communicating. When it comes to writing about their research, many students encounter problems. Most often they re-experience doubts about their competence - "I can't write" - or worry that they cannot tell the full story of the research because it is too personal or too challenging of mainstream ideas - "I can't write that!". Many will be concerned about who will read their thesis - parents and work colleagues, especially - and not want to disclose truths they have learnt through the inquiry process which would disrupt or shock particular audiences. Often academic spectres emerge, partly to allay such anxieties, and the writing becomes dry, cryptic, distanced, defensive - and so very different from the lively and sometimes chaotic process of research.

We work with students to help them find their authentic voices and forms for expressing the research. We particularly encourage people to start writing early on in their inquiry to keep a continuing record of their developments, and to write in an uncensored way initially to see what emerges. Later they may make protective choices about what to include in their thesis, often able to comment reflectively on the boundary of privacy they have chosen.

The tension here is between finding forms and courage to express one's own knowing versus feeling hampered by doubts about one's competence or received notions of appropriate writing and presentational styles.

The supervision process

As we mentioned above, while as research supervisors we do recommend reading, debate ideas, teach methodology and engage in other more traditional activities, our attention and interest centres on these issues of personal process. What kinds of behaviour do we engage in?

Noticing and reflecting: We try in all our supervision engagements to cultivate a dual attention. While our primary attention may be focussed on an issue of theory or

methodology, we attempt at the same time to continually ask ourselves, "What else is going on?"; we try to pay attention to cues in our own and the student's behaviour that might hint at other issues. We share our wonderings and our observations with our students as freely as we are able.

For example, a student may report that they are still not able to take the research initiative they keep promising themselves and us. As we offer suggestions and become excited about the possibilities, we may notice that we (as supervisors) are taking the lead and generating new ideas, but that the student is playing a more passive, receptive, dutiful role. We will then comment on this apparent pattern, explore its possible foundations and persist in surfacing our concerns if we feel the student is trying to reassure us superficially.

<u>Making the mirror conscious</u>: As we have mentioned above, we believe strongly that the supervision process and students' participation in the postgraduate groups, mirror the research process. We try to make this connection conscious by asking explicit questions about potential connections, and by pointing out links as we see them.

<u>Scanning for other themes</u>: Quite often we find that a student may be attending primarily to one aspect of the inquiry when we suspect that the key issue resides in another. Typically this involves over-concern for methodological or intellectual subtlety as a means of avoiding a more personal issue that the work is throwing up. Noticing and questioning what is not being attended to is one of our most important functions as supervisors, it involves commenting on the framing of the research rather than becoming trapped within it.

So we spend a lot of time in supervision sessions wondering what else is going on, scanning the field for other concerns, testing out possibilities about what is and is not happening, trying to make issues figural when appropriate, trying to help bracket some issues with a "good enough" resolution so that other concerns can be attended to.

<u>Using a range of intervention strategies</u>: Our style of working requires us to use a range of intervention strategies and to be able to move between them flexibly and with appropriate timing -- and we do not always do this skillfully. We believe we use far more facilitative than authoritative interventions (Heron, 1989) -- although our students may not interpret us as doing so. We are particularly aware of needing to integrate support and challenge in our responses to people's work, and to build relationships robust enough to take open feedback, in both directions.

Sometimes we encounter difficulties if our interventions are experienced as too challenging and insufficiently supportive, causing the student to feel misunderstood and bruised, but unable to say so. This may be the result of insensitive comments on our parts, and is more likely to happen if we are concerned about the quality of the student's

work and they do not share our doubts or viewpoint. In this situation we may pay attention to how we two relate, one trying to make the criticism of the student's work clear, whilst the other attends to the general process and supports the student in articulating their view. If we take complementary roles in this way, we must, however, guard against confusing the student, or encouraging them to think that one of us supports their work and the other does not.

Noticing, or leaving open to question, our own personal, political and social processes: What we bring to supervision is obviously a vital aspect of the relationship. Throughout this paper we have explored ways in which we try to use our experiences and understandings in the service of the student and their project. We must also be clear about our agendas and their potential impacts. We could, for example, project our anxieties or passions about a particular research theme or type of literature onto the student. Our co-supervisor or the student will then need to be able to say "I think that's your issue". Again it helps to have two us, to open the field more widely in terms of both interests and potential questioning.

Issues of authority: We find many challenges in managing our own authority as educators and as academics. We believe strongly that we both have a lot to offer: we have developed a particular range of perspectives on the conduct of inquiry; we have strong and clear opinions about issues of epistemology and methodology; we are both forceful personalities who want to be influential.

At the same time we are troubled by what we might call the received view of science. Traditionally science occupies a privileged position as a producer of knowledge, and carries with it many myths about what is the correct way of doing research. At its best traditional scientific research has offered us creative insights into our place in the cosmos; at its worst it is a destructive dogma which will allow only one kind of truth, part of the oppressive patriarchy of the Western world. It seems to us that the idea of human persons as creative inquirers into their own and other people's living and practice can easily become submerged within these myths so that the neophyte researcher becomes more interested in what they *should* do than in creative exploration of what is possible.

It fascinates and disturbs us how quickly some aspect of the received view of science emerges in many students' attitudes, and how closely this is connected with authority. Peter in particular is often an early focus of struggle with authority, probably because he is a man, and because he is acknowledged as a key figure in the development of co-operative approaches to inquiry. Students may either attempt to find out from him what is the correct approach to co-operative inquiry, or they may resist and rebel, refusing to explore the potentials of the method. Judi, as an acknowledged champion of muted voices, is sometimes seen as a potential ally against a new masculine hegemony. To the extent that these issues of our authority are resolved it remains alarming to notice how quickly they recur, especially at the slightest hint of evaluation.

So we find we have to face in two directions at once. On the one hand we are concerned that our students produce high quality work, and we will be challenging and confronting when this is not the case. On the other hand we do not believe that there are any ultimate standards for quality, but rather that these arise in dialogical relationship with co-researchers, with theoretical perspectives, and with one's own inner promptings.

Concluding reflections

This paper sketches some of the issues we have been increasingly aware of over the past ten years and have discussed informally many times; articulating this perspective has helped us clarify our views of our practice. We suspect that by making our view of our practice explicit both to existing and potential students we will all heighten our awareness so that our inquiry process becomes more fully part of our lives and our practice continually develops.

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