

Chapter 10

Cooperative inquiry

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Epistemological Groundings

The primary tradition of research in psychology has emphasized the separation of subject and object, observer from what is observed, in a search for objective truth. In this tradition, it is the researcher who makes all the decisions about what to study, how to study it, and what conclusions may be drawn; and the 'subjects' contribute only their responses to the situation in which they are observed, without knowing anything about the ideas that inform the inquiry. However, another inquiry tradition, which we can broadly call participatory research, has placed a contrasting emphasis on collaboration between 'researcher' and 'subject', so that in the full flowering of the approach this distinction is done away with, and *all* those involved in the inquiry endeavour to act as co-researchers, contributing both to the decisions which inform the research and the action which is to be studied.

The fundamental argument behind this participatory tradition is that it is not possible to have a true science of persons unless the inquiry engages with humans as persons. And since persons are manifestly capable of making sense of their behaviour, the distinction between a 'researcher' who does all the thinking, and 'subjects' who do the behaving is completely inappropriate. And from a participatory perspective, the 'subjects' of the traditional form are really objects – curiously, the word 'subject' wraps around itself to mean both the autonomous human being and the one who is 'subject to' God, monarch, or a scientific researcher. In a science of persons, all those engaged in the inquiry process enter the process as persons, bringing with them their intelligence, their intentionality, and their ability to reflect on experience and to enter relations with others – and, of course, also their capacity for self-deception, for consensus collusion, for rationalization, and for refusal to see the obvious that also characterizes human beings.

A science of persons also rests on a participative view of the world:

Our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author. We participate in our world, so that the

'reality' we experience is a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human feeling and construing. The participative metaphor is particularly apt for action research, because as we participate in creating our world we are already embodied and breathing beings *who are necessarily acting* – and this draws us to consider how to judge the *quality* of our acting.

A participatory worldview places human persons and communities as part of their world – both human and more-than-human – embodied in their world, co-creating their world. A participatory perspective asks us to be both situated and reflexive, to be explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is created, to see inquiry as a process of coming to know, serving the democratic, practical ethos of action research. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a: 6–7)

A science of persons in this sense is not a science of the Enlightenment. It does not seek a transcendental truth, which Descartes and his fellows would have us pursue. A science of persons embraces a 'postmodern' sentiment in attempting to move us beyond grand narratives toward localized, pragmatic and constructed practical knowings that are based in the experience and action of those engaged in the inquiry project. Toulmin (1990) argues persuasively that this can be seen as a reassertion of Renaissance values of practical philosophy.

Thus, the experiential basis on which participative forms of inquiry are based is 'extended'; extended beyond the positivist concern for the rational and the empirical to include diverse ways of knowing as persons encounter and act in their world, particularly forms of knowing which are experiential and practical.

As Eikeland points out (2001), this notion goes right back to Aristotle, and in modern times Polanyi (1958) described clearly his concept of tacit knowledge, a type of embodied know-how that is the foundation of all cognitive action. Writing more recently, Shotter argues that, in addition to Gilbert Ryle's distinction between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', there is a 'kind of knowledge one has *only from within a social situation*, a group, or an institution, and thus takes into account . . . the *others* in the social situation' (Shotter, 1993: 7; emphasis in original). It is significant that Shotter usually uses the verbal form '*knowing* of the third kind', to describe this, rather than the noun *knowledge*, emphasizing that such knowing is not a thing, to be discovered or created and stored up in journals, but rather arises in the process of living and in the voices of ordinary people in conversation.

Many writers have articulated different ways of framing an extended epistemology from pragmatic, constructionist, critical, feminist and developmental perspectives. While these descriptions differ in detail, they all go

beyond orthodox empirical and rational Western views of knowing, and embrace a multiplicity of ways of knowing that start from a relationship between self and other, through participation and intuition. They assert the importance of sensitivity and attunement in the moment of relationship, and of knowing not just as an academic pursuit but as the everyday practices of acting in relationship and creating meaning in our lives (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a).

The methodology of cooperative inquiry draws on a fourfold extended epistemology: *experiential knowing* is through direct face-to-face encounter with a person, place or thing – it is knowing through empathy and resonance, that kind of in-depth knowing which is almost impossible to put into words; *presentational knowing* grows out of experiential knowing, and provides the first form of expression through story, drawing, sculpture, movement and dance, drawing on aesthetic imagery; *propositional knowing* draws on concepts and ideas; and *practical knowing* consummates the other forms of knowing in action in the world (Heron, 1992; 1996). In some ways, the practical has primacy since

most of our knowledge, and all our primary knowledge, arises as an aspect of activities that have practical, not theoretical objectives; and it is this knowledge, itself an aspect of action, to which all reflective theory must refer. (Macmurray, 1957: 12)

However, as well as being an expression of an extended epistemology within a participative world-view, a science of persons has a political dimension. The relationship between power and knowledge has been well argued by Habermas, Foucault, Lukes and others (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001). Participative forms of inquiry start with concerns for power and powerlessness, and aim to confront the way in which the established and power-holding elements of societies worldwide are favoured because they hold a monopoly on the definition and employment of knowledge:

This political form of participation affirms people's right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and which claim to generate knowledge about them. It asserts the importance of liberating the muted voices of those held down by class structures and neo-colonialism, by poverty, sexism, racism, and homophobia. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a: 9)

So participatory research has a double objective. One aim is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people – through research, adult education and socio-political action. The second aim is to empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge: they 'see through' the ways in which the

establishment monopolizes the production and use of knowledge for the benefit of its members. This is the meaning of consciousness raising, or *conscientização*, a term popularized by Paulo Freire (1970) for a 'process of self-awareness through collective self-inquiry and reflection' (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991: 16). As Daniel Selener emphasizes, while a major goal of participatory research is to solve practical problems in a community, 'another goal is the creation of shifts in the balance of power in favour of poor and marginalized groups in society' (Selener, 1997: 12). Greenwood and Levin also emphasize how action research contributes actively to processes of democratic social change (Greenwood and Levin, 1998: 3). Participative research is at its best a process that explicitly aims to educate those involved to develop their capacity for inquiry both individually and collectively.

These four dimensions of a science of persons – treating persons as persons, a participative world-view, an extended epistemology and a liberationist spirit – can be seen as the basis of contemporary action research. Action research itself is currently undergoing an exciting resurgence of interest and creativity, and there are many forms of inquiry practice within this tradition. In one attempt to provide some order to this diversity, we have elsewhere described three broad pathways to this practice. First-person action research/practice skills and methods address the ability of researchers to foster an inquiring approach to their own lives, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. Second-person action research/practice addresses our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern. Third-person research/practice aims to extend these relatively small-scale projects to create a wider community of inquiry involving a whole organization or community (Reason and Bradbury, 2001b: xxv–xxvi).

Cooperative inquiry is one articulation of action research. The original initiatives into experiential inquiry were taken around 1970 by John Heron (Heron, 1971). This developed into a practice of cooperative inquiry as a methodology for a science of persons (Heron, 1996), which places an emphasis on first-person research/practice in the context of supportive and critical second-person relationships, while having the potential to reach out toward third-person practice. In this chapter, I will first set out the logics of the cooperative inquiry method, and then endeavour to show how this takes place within the learning community which is a cooperative inquiry group.

The Logics of Cooperative Inquiry

Cooperative inquiry can be seen as cycling through four phases of reflection and action (see Figure 10.1).

In phase 1 a group of co-researchers come together to explore an agreed area of human activity. They may be professionals who wish to develop their

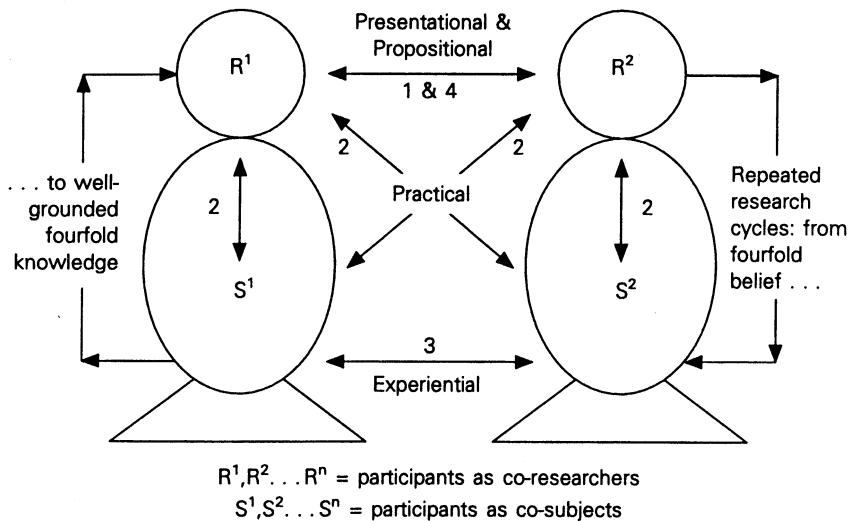


Figure 10.1 The fourfold epistemology and phases of the inquiry cycle. From Heron (1996)

understanding and skill in a particular area of practice or members of a minority group who wish to articulate an aspect of their experience which has been muted by the dominant culture. They may wish to explore in depth their experience of certain states of consciousness, to assess the impact on their well-being of particular healing practices, and so on. In this first phase, they agree on the focus of their inquiry, and develop together tentative questions or propositions they wish to explore. They agree to undertake some action, some practice, which will contribute to this exploration, and agree to a set of procedures by which they will observe and record their own and each other's experience.

Phase 1 is primarily in the mode of propositional knowing, although it will also contain important elements of presentational knowing, as group members use their imagination in story, fantasy and graphics to help them articulate their interests and to focus on their purpose in the inquiry. Once they have clarified sufficiently what they want to inquire about, group members conclude phase 1 with planning a method for exploring this in action, and with devising ways of gathering and recording 'data' from this experience.

In phase 2, the co-researchers engage in the actions agreed. They observe and record the process and outcomes of their own and each other's experience. In particular, they are careful to hold lightly the propositional frame from which they started, to notice both how practice does and does not conform to their original ideas and also to the subtleties of experience.

This phase involves primarily practical knowledge: knowing how (and how not) to engage in appropriate action, to bracket off the starting idea, and to exercise relevant discrimination.

Phase 3 is in some ways the touchstone of the inquiry method as the co-researchers become fully immersed in and engaged with their experience. They may develop a degree of openness to what is going on so free of preconceptions that they see it in a new way. They may deepen into the experience so that superficial understandings are elaborated and developed. Or they may be led away from the original ideas and proposals into new fields, unpredicted action and creative insights. It is also possible that they may get so involved in what they are doing that they lose the awareness that they are part of an inquiry group: there may be a practical crisis, they may become enthralled or they may simply forget. Phase 3 involves mainly experiential knowing, although it will be richer if new experience is expressed, when recorded, in creative presentational form through graphics, colour, sound, movement, drama, story or poetry.

In phase 4, after an agreed period engaged in phases 2 and 3, the co-researchers reassemble to consider their original propositions and questions in the light of their experience. As a result, they may modify, develop or reframe them; or reject them and pose new questions. They may choose, for the next cycle of action, to focus on the same or on different aspects of the overall inquiry. The group may also choose to amend or develop its inquiry procedures – forms of action, ways of gathering data – in the light of experience. Phase 4 again emphasizes propositional knowing, although presentational forms of knowing will form an important bridge with the experiential and practical phases.

In a full inquiry, the cycle will be repeated several times. Ideas and discoveries tentatively reached in early phases can be checked and developed, investigation of one aspect of the inquiry can be related to exploration of other parts, new skills can be acquired and monitored, and experiential competencies can be realized. The group itself may become more cohesive and self-critical, more skilled in its work and in the practices of inquiry. Ideally, the inquiry is finished when the initial questions are fully answered in practice, and when there is a new congruence between the four kinds of knowing. It is, of course, rare for a group to complete an inquiry so fully. It should be noted that actual inquiry practice is not as straightforward as the model suggests: there are usually mini-cycles within major cycles, some cycles emphasize one phase more than others and some practitioners have advocated a more emergent process of inquiry which is less structured into phases. Nevertheless, the discipline of the research cycle is fundamental.

The cycling can really start at any point. It is usual for groups to get together formally at the propositional stage, often as the result of an invitation from an initiating facilitator. However, such a proposal is usually birthed in experiential knowing, at the moment that curiosity is aroused or

incongruity in practice noticed. And the proposal to form an inquiry group, if it is to take flight, needs to be presented in such a way as to appeal to the experience of potential co-researchers.

The Human Process of Cooperative Inquiry

In a science of persons, the quality of inquiry practice lies far less in impersonal methodology, and far more in the emergence of a self-aware, critical community of inquiry nested within a community of practice. So while cooperative inquiry as method is based on cycles of action and reflection engaging four dimensions of an extended epistemology as described above, cooperative inquiry as human process depends on the development of healthy human interaction in a face-to-face group. The would-be initiator of a cooperative inquiry must be willing to engage with the complexities of these human processes as well as with the logic of inquiry. This requires us to recollect our understanding of group processes.

Many theories of group development trace a series of phases of development in the life of a group. Early concerns are for inclusion and membership. When and if these needs are adequately satisfied, the group focuses on concerns for power and influence. And if these are successfully negotiated, they give way to concerns for intimacy and diversity in which flexible and tolerant relationships enable individuals to realize their own identity and the group to be effective in relation to its task (see, for example, Srivastva et al., 1977). This phase progression model of group behaviour – in which the group's primary concern moves from issues of inclusion to control to intimacy; or from forming to norming to storming to performing (Tuckman, 1965); or from nurturing to energizing to relaxing (Randall and Southgate, 1980) – is a valuable way of understanding group development (although all groups manifest these principles in their own unique way, and the complexity of an unfolding group process will always exceed what can be said about it). In what follows, I will use Randall and Southgate's model of creative group process as a vehicle for describing the process of a successful cooperative inquiry group and to indicate the kinds of leadership or facilitation choices that need to be made.

Randall and Southgate distinguished between the creative group, in which there is an exciting interaction between task and people – a 'living labour cycle' – and the destructive group, in which primitive emotions arise, swallow up and destroy both human needs and task accomplishment – Bion's 'basic assumption group' (Bion, 1959). The life of a creative group follows the creative orgasmic cycle that can be seen in all life – affirming human processes such as sexual intercourse, childbirth, preparing food and feasting, and doing good work together. In contrast, the destructive group lumbers between the basic group assumptions identified by Bion –

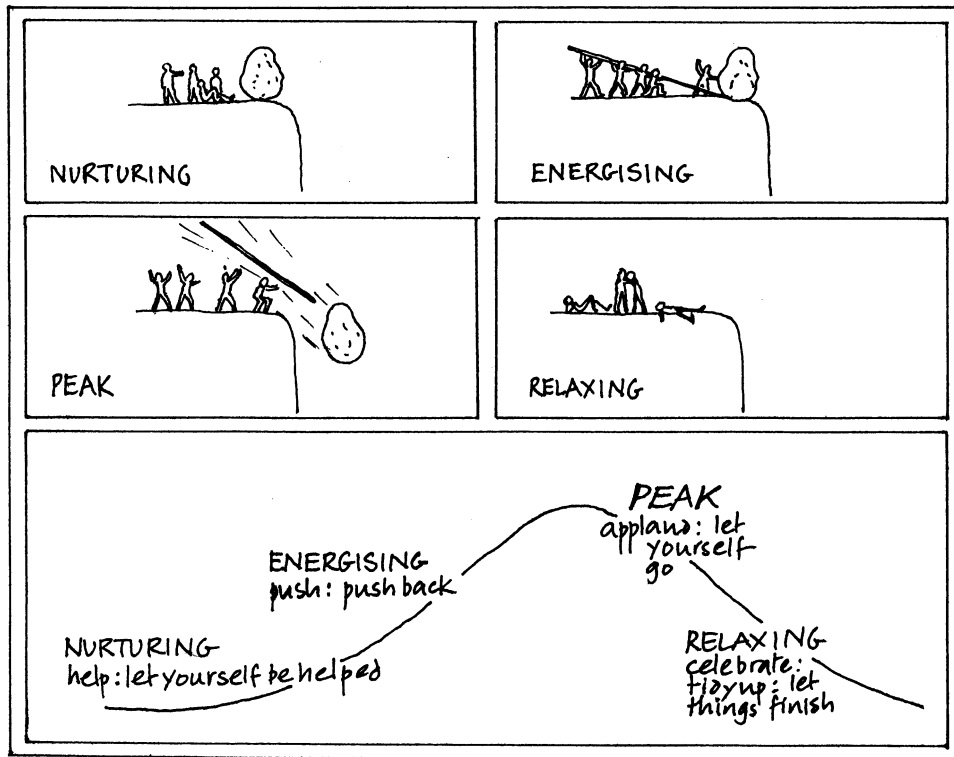


Figure 10.2 The living labour cycle and the creative group cycle. From Randall and Southgate (1981)

dependency, flight/flight and messianic pairing – in its search for relief of its overwhelming anxiety. Between the creative and destructive group process is the intermediate group, which is neither completely satisfying nor completely destructive, but which represents the everyday experience.

The creative group can be described as a cycle of nurturing, energizing, a peak of accomplishment, followed by relaxing (see Figure 10.2).

- The nurturing phase draws people together and helps them feel emotionally safe and bonded. At the same time, early, preparatory aspects of the group task and the organizational issues which allow the group to continue its life and work are attended to. The nurturing phase is about creating a safe and effective container for the work of the group, and leadership is primarily focused on those concerns.
- In the energizing phase, interaction intensifies as the group engages in its primary task. A degree of healthy conflict may arise as different views,

experiences and skills are expressed. Leadership concerns are with the requirements of the task at hand, with containing and guiding the increasing levels of emotional, physical and intellectual energy which are being expressed.

- The peak in the creative group occurs at points of accomplishment, those moments when the emotional, task and organizational energy of the group comes together and the main purpose to hand is achieved. These are moments of utter mutual spontaneity.
- In the relaxing phase, members attend to those issues which will complete the emotional, task and organizational work of the group. Emotionally, the group needs to wind down, to celebrate achievements, to reflect and learn. The task needs to be completed – there are always final touches that distinguish excellence from the merely adequate. And the organizational issues need completion – putting away tools and paying bills. Leadership makes space for these issues to be properly attended to, and usually those naturally gifted as ‘finishers’ come forward to lead celebrations and complete the task.

A group which lasts over a period of time will experience cycles at different levels: mini-cycles associated with particular tasks and major cycles of action and reflection. These will be set in the context of a long-term developmental cycle of birth, maturation and death, with early concern from inclusion, through conflicts and cliques of the influence stage to (possibly) the maturity of full intimacy and on to dissolution. This creative group nurturing/energizing/relaxing cycle interacts with inquiry phases of action and reflection to produce a complex rhythm of cooperative inquiry.

A creative group is also characterized by an appropriate balance of the principles of hierarchy, collaboration, and autonomy: deciding for others, with others and for oneself (Heron, 1999). Authentic hierarchy provides appropriate direction by those with greater vision, skill and experience. Collaboration roots the individual within a community of peers, offering basic support and the creative and corrective feedback of other views and possibilities. Autonomy expresses the self-directing and self-creating potential of the person. The shadow face of authority is authoritarianism; that of collaboration, peer pressure and conformity; that of autonomy, narcissism, wilfulness and isolation. The challenge is to design institutions which manifest valid forms of these principles; and to find ways in which they can be maintained in self-correcting and creative tension.

Establishing Cooperative Inquiry: Focus on Nurturing

The key issues in the nurturing phase are

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- identifying potential group members and establishing a group emotional atmosphere in which potential members feel sufficiently at home to begin to contribute their creative energy
- introducing and explaining the process of cooperative inquiry
- agreeing a framework of times and places for meeting which will provide an organized framework for the major cycles of action and reflection.

A key consideration is to provide sufficient time, create relaxed conversational spaces and provide sufficient information for potential group members to make a considered choice about membership. Experience suggests that most inquiry groups are brought together specifically for the inquiry process – they come together around a shared interest or concern, or are members of an occupational group or an organization, so that when they assemble they will recognize their commonality and potential shared purpose. However, it is the initiating energy of one person who brings them together and creates a potential group:

Kate McArdle is a graduate student using co-operative inquiry to work with young women managers in large organizations. 'At the end of October I took part in a day celebrating 'diversity' within XYZ. I was given half of a stand promoting women's interests. I covered it with bright yellow posters asking questions such as; 'What is it like to be a twenty – something woman in XYZ?' 'Does gender matter?' I littered the entire floor with bright orange flyers, which asked the same questions, gave the date of an introductory session and my contact details. I was expected to remain on the stand, but I had little interest in being interrogated or speaking to people who were not in the age bracket of my inquiry. I needed to use my voice in the right kind of conversations. I wandered around talking to people who looked as if they were in my 'target audience'. We sat on couches, drank coffee, shared stories about my research and their work and exchanged contact details'. (McArdle, 2002: 180)

Carlis Douglas, exploring the question 'Is it possible for Black women to thrive in Britain?' wanted to work with the life experiences of Black women working in organizations to implement equal opportunities policies. '. . . from my extensive network of Black women, I made a long list of managers and professionals with the type of experience I wanted to tap and outlined some criteria for achieving a successful group process. This became the

basis on which I invited women to join the group. I was quickly able to identify potential women for the group, and over a period of 6/8 weeks had long face-to-face, or telephone, conversations outlining my proposal, and requesting their involvement in the research. The first five I approached accepted. (Douglas, 2002: 252)

However, some inquiry groups are actual work or living groups who choose to devote time to inquiry on an issue of particular concern. A group of medical and complementary practitioners working together in an innovative general practice established a cooperative inquiry to explore their interdisciplinary practice (Reason, 1991); an established team of five hospital-based social workers formed an inquiry to explore the tension between prescription and discretion in front-line social work practice (Baldwin, 2001).

Whether the inquiry group arises as an independent initiative or from within an established group, the first proposal to initiate inquiry is a delicate matter: it needs to be clear enough to catch the imagination, address a felt need or interest, attract people's curiosity and interest, and at the same time be sufficiently tentative for potential members not to feel invaded or put upon by yet another demand on their busy lives. Many initiating facilitators of inquiry have spent considerable time talking through their ideas with potential members, sowing seeds in informal conversation. Some have established a reputation in their organization or community as initiators of interesting new projects and are trusted to take a lead; others are able to attract people to their idea, and then have to work to establish an atmosphere of trust and inquiry.

One approach is to write a letter or an email which attractively summarizes the proposal and the method on one side of a sheet of paper and invites people to come to a meeting to discuss the idea in greater depth. It can be a substantial, all-day meeting, with some profile within relevant communities, or a more intimate, face-to-face affair:

Agnes Bryan and Cathy Aymer, black social work lecturers, were concerned to address issues in the development of professional identity among black social workers in the UK, issues they had identified on the basis of their experience and some prior research. They invited a large group of black social work professionals – practitioners, managers and teachers – to a day-long meeting at their university to discuss the issues and explore the establishment of inquiry groups. (see Bryan, 2000)

Elizabeth Adeline, an artist creating context-specific installations, wanted to ask questions about her practice, including the relation between the doing part of being an artist which is tactile, playing

with materials, and the intellectual part which questions the associations of such materials, how they are shaped in the art-making and what it all means. She invited immediate artist friends and colleagues to a meeting at her house to explore establishing an inquiry group.

Such a meeting is often the first occasion at which a potential inquiry group meets, and thus can be seen as the beginning of the creative process, and as needing to address the emotional, task, and organizational requirements of the nurturing phase.

The *emotional needs* of group members are first of all to feel safe, included, and welcomed. The early stages of any group are characterized by free-floating anxiety in which every group member feels more or less isolated and is seeking to know that there are others around sufficiently like them to connect with. They will be asking questions about identity and inclusion – ‘Who am I to be in this group?’ and ‘Who is like me?’ – questions about purpose – ‘Will this group meet my needs and interests?’ – and questions about intimacy – ‘Is this a place where I will be liked and valued?’ If group members are part of an organization, there may be other questions about potential conflict between individual and organizational needs. These questions are rarely fully articulated in consciousness. They are acted out in everyday chit-chat and stereotypical interaction, but, nevertheless, are powerful influences on the group. It follows that careful attention to these questions is essential.

It is usually helpful if the meeting starts with opportunities for people to meet each other. There is nothing more off-putting than the silence that a new group can generate as people come into a room for the first time; and if this is followed by a meeting which launches immediately into a task agenda without hearing why people have come together, the new group can be off to a bad start. In a small group, it may be sufficient for the facilitator to introduce people as they come in; for a large group, some structure of meeting in pairs and trios can be helpful. This can be followed by a round in which people are asked to say their names and what attracted them to the meeting, or some form of ‘name game’ that gives people an initial sense of knowing who others are. The physical arrangements for a first meeting can be important:

I arrived to find a beautiful conference room filled with large wooden tables arranged in a square, on top of which at regularly spaced intervals, were a mixture of mineral waters, glasses arranged in diamond shapes and small dishes of mints on paper doilies . . . I wanted a circle of chairs. I phoned Facilities to remove the tables. Two big men in overalls arrived . . . removed the tables and put the chairs back in a square. Then they all left and I was

alone again. I wheeled the huge plush chairs into a circle and wondered what the women would think when they arrived. Would they be as bemused by what I had created, as I had been by what I'd seen when I'd arrived? (McArdle, 2002: 181)

The *task needs* of the group in this first meeting are to initiate people into the cooperative inquiry method, and explore together the potential focus of the proposed inquiry. Of course, these are closely related to the emotional needs explored above, because people's sense of insecurity is in part associated with uncertainty as to whether the group will meet their needs and interests. Usually, both of these will have been briefly described in the invitation to the meeting, but it is likely that most people's interest will be diffuse and unformed at this stage. In particular, the methodology of cooperative inquiry can be confusing because most people associate 'research' with filling in questionnaires designed by the researcher, not becoming co-researchers in a relationship of mutual influence.

It is here that the initiators of inquiry need to exercise authentic authority in setting out as clearly as they can the principles and practices of cooperative inquiry, and responding to questions and comments from the group. It is important that at this stage potential inquiry-group members understand the logic of the inquiry method and also the personal and emotional investment that needs to be made if the inquiry is to be truly transformational. My own usual practice is to talk through different phases of the inquiry cycle, emphasizing the different kinds of knowing that are primary at each stage, and emphasizing that the quality of the inquiry comes from the quality of engagement that group members have with the issues and their willingness to be experimental in their practices. I find it helpful to give a ten-minute talk, and then invite people to chat in pairs for a few minutes to clarify their questions before opening a general discussion. While clarity at this stage is important, one must also realize that cooperative inquiry, as an experiential process, can be fully learned only through engagement – there are important tacit learnings that take place as people enter the cycles of action and reflection, and as the group develops as a community of inquiry.

This introductory meeting needs also to attend to the inquiry topic proposed in order to generate at least an initial agreement as to the focus. Usually, the initiating facilitator has done some preparatory work: facilitators may be fired up themselves with concern for some issues, have had preliminary conversations with potential inquiry participants, and, by proposing a set of questions or an arena for inquiry, are playing a valuable role in initiating and focusing attention. It is important that the potential inquiry topic is put forward with clarity as an attractive and exciting venture; it is also important that a dialogue is initiated in which the initiator's vision can be explored and amended so that it becomes more generally owned

and genuinely adopted by those who will join the inquiry. Geoff Mead was clear that:

Improving the quality of leadership is a crucial issue for the police service. Learning *about* theories of leadership is not enough. What really matters is for each of us to understand and improve our own unique practice as leaders. (Mead, 2002: 191)

He therefore initiated a series of briefing meetings

designed to help people make a positive decision to opt in to the action inquiry or to decide, without any stigma, that it was not for them. The underlying principle was that of voluntary, informed self-selection. I spoke a little about the rationale for offering this opportunity to focus on leadership and said something about the participative and democratic ethos of action inquiry. I talked about the possibility of transformative learning and asked people to decide if they wanted to take part using their head (Do you have enough information? Does it make *sense* for you to do it?), heart (Are you intrigued, curious, drawn? Does it *feel* right for you to do it?), and will (Are you able and willing to meet the commitment? Do you really *want* to do it?). (Mead, 2002: 196)

This early process of clarifying the inquiry focus, so that the group in time meets with a clear and agreed sense of its own purpose, is a crucial stage in the establishment of an inquiry group. It is not to be rushed. Experience suggests that at least two premeetings, as well as informal conversations, are necessary.

The *organizational needs* of the inquiry group must also be met in these early meetings, and again these overlap with the emotional needs of nurturing the group into being, since people will feel more comfortable if they know they can meet demands such as time and money. A first introductory meeting is often so fully engaged with discussions of method and topic that the organizational details can only be touched on, to be revisited at a second meeting. The most significant decision usually concerns how often the group should meet and for what period of time.

Ideally, the group will have enough time in meeting together at the beginning fully to clarify topic area and details of inquiry method, enough time during the main body of the inquiry thoroughly to reflect on the information and experiences gathered, and enough time at the end to draw to some conclusion and agree about any writing or other reporting that is desired – and also enough time to maintain a healthy group process through social activities – eating together and going for walks are common practices – and more formal group review sessions. Similarly, the group needs

sufficient time between meetings for members to try out and observe their own and each other's behaviour, to gather experience with a thoroughness which matches the complexity of the inquiry topic.

In practice, these decisions are made pragmatically, not on the basis of what is perfect but on what is good enough under the circumstances and for the task at hand. A substantial amount of work can be accomplished in a series of 6–8 half-day meetings, but more time is desirable. As with all aspects of cooperative inquiry, the issue is not one of getting it right, because every decision has its own consequences; rather, it is a matter of being clear about the choices that are made, and their consequences for the quality of inquiry. So, if a relatively small amount of time is available, it is probably better to be modest in the aims of the inquiry group, and to keep the group small, remembering always that the purpose of cooperative inquiry is to generate information and understanding that is capable of transforming action rather than generating valid but impersonal and abstract understanding on a large scale.

In practice, these decisions are usually made on a 'propose and consult' basis: the initiator, with some sense of what is required from the inquiry topic itself, may propose to the group a number of different formats for meeting, and from the group's reaction to these will come to a decision which best approximates a consensus:

The inquiry exploring the theory and practice of holistic medicine met for two extended half-day introductory meetings, agreeing then to meet for six two-day residential workshops spaced at six week intervals. (see Reason, 1988)

Four young women students explored their experience in organizations entirely on the telephone as part of a university term paper. (see Onyett, 1996)

Twelve facilitators and organizational consultants met to explore their practice in a combination of weekends and full half-days over two years.

Inquiries into transpersonal experience have taken place in a residential workshop over a period of a week. (see Heron, 2001)

The inquiry into leadership in the police force met on eight occasions over a fifteen month period starting and ending with a residential two day meeting, otherwise meeting for afternoons during mid-week. (see Mead, 2002)

In summary, in the introductory meetings which launch a cooperative inquiry, the emotional, task, and organizational needs of the group are closely intertwined. The initiating facilitator must work to establish qualities of interaction that will allow the group to grow toward a full expression of the creative cycle. This includes helping potential group members to feel included in an emerging group that can meet their needs, finding a sense of purpose for the inquiry to which people can subscribe and making organizational arrangements that enable the inquiry task to fit into people's lives. I do not think it is possible to overestimate the value of spending time and giving careful attention to these early contracting arrangements, and that is why this section on nurturing the group is substantially longer than those which follow. If you get this right (or at least 'good enough', to borrow from Winnicott), the rest will follow.

Cycles of Action and Reflection: Moving into Energizing

After these initial meetings which establish the existence of the inquiry project, the group is ready to move into the inquiry proper. In terms of the major phases of the group endeavour, this means moving from a primary focus on nurturing toward greater energizing. This does not mean that the work of nurturing the group has been done: every meeting, almost every interaction, involves a creative cycle; and this always includes bringing the group together with a clear sense of purpose as a foundation for good work together. Throughout the life of a group, the business of nurturing continues - 'Who is feeling left out?', 'Who might be feeling oppressed?' and 'Are we clear about our purposes?' In particular, the first full meeting will probably be longer than later ones, and it may be the first occasion when the whole group is assembled: it is worth spending plenty of time on deepening the sense of mutual knowing and discussing in more detail the dimensions of the inquiry task.

However, if the group remains in a nurturing mode, the task of inquiry does not get done (and the group will be at risk of smothering itself in the destructive nurturing mode). The key task need is for the group to establish cycles of action and reflection, since this is the major vehicle for moving the inquiry forward. This research cycling carries a fundamental rhythm of learning through which group members deepen their engagement with the inquiry, open themselves to more subtle understandings, engage with previously unsuspected aspects of the inquiry task, and so on. The research cycling, moving through the four ways of knowing described above, complements the creative group cycle.

A significant chunk of time at the first full meeting of the group is usually taken up in discussing in detail the basic ideas on which the inquiry will be founded, converting the sense of joint purpose into a practical task which can be accomplished. This may involve sharing experiences,

concerns, hopes and fears so that group members raise their awareness and establish a sense of solidarity about what questions are important (Douglas, 2001); more formally, the group may establish a model, or a set of questions to guide the inquiry:

The holistic medicine group, established to explore the theory and practice of holistic medicine in the NHS [National Health Service], spent much of its first meeting with members in small groups reflecting on their practice as doctors, and drawing from this experience themes which defined the nature of holistic practice. By the end of the weekend a tentative five part model of holistic practice had been developed which was to guide the rest of the inquiry. (see Reason, 1988)

These ideas then need to be translated into plans for practical actions (propositional to practical knowing) which will form the basis of members' activities while away from the group. Some groups will simply agree to notice carefully aspects of their experience that fall within the scope of the inquiry:

We ended with an agreement that the time until the [next] session would be an 'exploratory' cycle, rather than taking one of the themes discussed and working solely with that. We talked about today's session as being an 'awareness-raising' one and the coming six weeks as time to mull over, digest and notice more awarely. I encouraged an already present sense of not wanting to rush the process. I believe in order for our questions to be meaningful, we have to give ourselves time to find them and give them space to grow. (McArdle, 2002: 185)

However, it may be appropriate to start more systematically:

The Hospital Group focused on a specific bureaucratic procedure to investigate differences of practice. The document chosen was a form that had to be signed by a potential service user, to give consent for the social worker to contact third parties to seek information about the user. Consent was seen by the authority as good practice in that it reflected partnership. Social workers in the Hospital Group were concerned that requesting a signature was a threatening practice for some people. When they felt that to be the case, they did not ask for a signature, even though they knew they *ought* to. . . . The group devised a technique of investigation and recording. Every time one of the forms *should* have been completed, participants recorded the reason why they did or did

not ask service users to sign the form. In effect, they were required to justify their actions, both to themselves and to their peers in the co-operative inquiry group. (Baldwin, 2001: 290)

The holistic medicine group brainstormed ways in which each dimension of the five part model could be applied in practice and how records of experience could be kept. Each doctor chose activities that were of greatest relevance to themselves and contracted with the rest of the group to study these. (see Reason, 1988)

It may be appropriate for all members of the group either to undertake the same activity or to chose their own idiosyncratic path of inquiry. Whichever way, cycles of action and reflection are established. Group members leave the group with more or less specific plans: they may agree to some very specific activities, as with the social work group, or more generally to observe particular aspects of experience; they may chose to experiment with novel activities, or to deepen their understanding of their everyday practice. They may record their experience through diaries, audio or video recordings, or mutual observation; they may chose to collect quantitative data where relevant. After the agreed period, the group reassembles to reflect on the experiences, to revise and develop their propositional understandings, and to enter a second cycle:

We found that the simple act of sharing our stories, telling each other how we had been getting on with our inquiries, was enormously powerful – both to deepen the relationships between us and as a way of holding ourselves and each other to account. We quickly got into the habit of tape-recording our sessions and sending copies of relevant sections of the tapes to individuals to aid further reflection. Most sessions began with an extended ‘check in’ of this sort and then followed whatever themes emerged. On one occasion, following a ‘spin-off’ meeting arranged by several women members of the group, this led to a fascinating exploration of gender and leadership. We learned to trust the process of action inquiry and that, in an organisational setting at least, it needs to be sustained by careful cultivation and lots of energy. (Mead, 2002: 200)

Some group members will not find it easy to enter this inquiry cycle. They may enjoy the group interaction, enter fully into the discussions about the inquiry, but be unwilling to commit themselves in practice. Others may rush off into new activity without giving sufficient attention to the reflective side of the inquiry. The inquiry facilitator has a crucial role to play here in

initiating people into the iteration of action and reflection, and helping people understand the power of the research cycle.

Heron (1996) suggests that inquiry groups need to draw on both Apollonian and Dionysian qualities in their research cycling. Apollonian inquiry is planned, ordered and rational, seeking quality through systematic search: models are developed and put into practice; experiences are systematically recorded; different forms of presentation are regularly used. Dionysian inquiry is passionate and spontaneous, seeking quality through imagination and synchronicity: the group engages in the activity that emerges in the moment rather than planning action; space is cleared for the unexpected to emerge; more attention is paid to dreams and imagery than to careful theory building; and so on. Apollonian inquiry carries the benefits of systematic order, while Dionysian inquiry offers the possibility of stretching the limits through play. To the extent that co-inquirers can embrace both Apollo and Dionysus in their inquiry cycling, they are able to develop diverse and rich connections with each other and with their experience.

Research cycling builds the energetic engagement of the group with its inquiry task and with each other, and thus meets the *emotional needs* of the group as it moves into energizing. As the group adventures into deeper exploration of the inquiry topic, to the extent that nurturing has built a safe container, members will become both more deeply bonded and more open to conflict and difference. Deep and lasting friendships have started in inquiry groups, but relationships which are already stressed may fracture. When conflict arises between members, the group needs to find a way of working through, rather than ignoring or burying differences, and different members will be able to offer skills of mediation, bridge-building, confrontation and soothing hurt feelings. The deepening engagement with the inquiry task may itself raise anxieties, for, as people start to question their taken-for-granted assumptions and to try out new forms of behaviour, they can disturb old patterns of defence, and unacknowledged distress may seriously distort inquiry. Inquiry groups will need to find some way to draw the anxieties which arise from both these sources into awareness and resolve it – one of the best ways of doing this is to allow group process time in every meeting for such issues to be raised and explored.

The *organizing needs* of the group often revolve around maintaining the schedule of meeting, and, within the meetings, agreeing how much time should be devoted to different activities. Typically, the structure of a meeting will be planned collaboratively, with different members taking increasing responsibility for leading different aspects. As the inquiry progresses, questions arise as to how best to complete the inquiry task, questions which often concern the validity and quality of inquiry. John Heron has explored the theoretical and practical aspects of validity in co-operative inquiry in detail (Heron, 1996) (see Box 10.1); these may helpfully be seen within the wider context of validity in action research (Bradbury and Reason, 2001).

Often the initiating facilitator will introduce these validity procedures and invite the group to consider their implications for their inquiry; this may raise questions about the appropriate balance of convergent and divergent cycling, the quality of interaction within the group, the amount of attention paid to anxiety, the degree to which the group may be colluding to avoid problematic aspects of the inquiry, and so on.

Thus, in the major working phase of a creative cooperative inquiry, group members will continue to pay attention to nurturing each other and the group, while more attention is given to developing energetic cycles of inquiry. The task of the inquiry may become the centre of attention, but it is nevertheless important to maintain attention for the continued health and authenticity of group interaction.

The Creative Peak

Randall and Southgate suggest that the peak is an important aspect of the creative group process, a moment when the 'living labour cycle' reaches a particular point of task accomplishment. In a cooperative inquiry group, which may be extended over weeks or months, there may be many 'mini-peaks', and if the group is successful, there is likely to be an overall sense of accomplishment rather than a sharply defined moment in time. However, such moments do occur, particularly when members bring stories from the lives which show how the group is transforming their experience and practice.

Relaxing, Appreciating and Completing

Randall and Southgate call the third phase of the creative group 'relaxing', which in emotional terms means stepping back from the task, celebrating and appreciating achievements; in organizational terms, it means tying up loose ends; and in task terms, it means adding the final touches to group activities that move the task to completion. Relaxing in this sense is an active, energetic engagement, different in quality from the feeling of 'getting out of the room and down to the pub' that so often characterizes our group experience.

We have also found that many groups express the emotional side of relaxing by choosing to give time to social activities – eating together, maybe going for walks – which provide a contrast to the intensity of inquiry and continue to build and deepen relationships:

After this first [midwives inquiry group] meeting, having tea and coffee with cake or biscuits while we talked seemed such a normal thing to do. After all, people do this ordinarily at any social gathering where conversation is to be the primary activity. Food

Box 10.1 Inquiry skills and validity procedures (adapted from Heron, 2001: 184)

Cooperative inquiry is based on people examining their own experience and action carefully in collaboration with people who share similar concerns and interests. But, you might say, can not people fool themselves about their experience? Isn't this why we have professional researchers who can be detached and objective? The answer to this is that, certainly, people can and do fool themselves, but we find that they can also develop their attention so they can look at themselves – their way of being, their intuitions and imaginings, and their beliefs and actions – critically and in this way improve the quality of their claims to fourfold knowing. We call this 'critical subjectivity'; it means that we do not have to throw away our personal, living knowledge in the search for objectivity, but are able to build on it and develop it. We can cultivate a high-quality and valid individual perspective on what there is, in collaboration with others who are doing the same.

We have developed a number of inquiry skills and validity procedures that can be part of a cooperative inquiry and which can help improve the quality of knowing. The skills include:

Being present and open. This skill is about empathy, resonance and attunement, being open to the meaning we give to and find in our world.

Bracketing and reframing. The skill here is holding in abeyance the classifications and constructs we impose on our perceiving, and about trying out alternative constructs for their creative capacity; we are open to reframing the defining assumptions of any context.

Radical practice and congruence. This skill means being aware, during action, of the relationship between our purposes, the frames, norms and theories we bring, our bodily practice, and the outside world. It also means being aware of any lack of congruence between these different facets of the action and adjusting them accordingly.

Non-attachment and meta-intentionality. This is the knack of not investing one's identity and emotional security in an action, while remaining fully purposive and committed to it.

Emotional competence. This is the ability to identify and manage emotional states in various ways. It includes keeping action free from distortion driven by the unprocessed distress and conditioning of earlier years.

The cooperative inquiry group is itself a container and a discipline within which these skills can be developed. These skills can be honed and refined if the inquiry group adopts a range of validity procedures intended to free the various forms of knowing involved in the inquiry process from the distortion of uncritical subjectivity.

continued

Research cycling. Cooperative inquiry involves going through the four phases of inquiry several times, cycling between action and reflection, looking at experience and practice from different angles, developing different ideas and trying different ways of behaving.

Divergence and convergence. Research cycling can be convergent, in which case the co-researchers look several times at the same issue, maybe looking each time in more detail; or it can be divergent, as co-researchers decide to look at different issues on successive cycles. Many variations of convergence and divergence are possible in the course of an inquiry. It is up to each group to determine the appropriate balance for their work.

Authentic collaboration. Since intersubjective dialogue is a key component in refining the forms of knowing, it is important that the inquiry group develops an authentic form of collaboration. The inquiry will not be truly cooperative if one or two people dominate the group, or if some voices are left out altogether.

Challenging consensus collusion. This can be done with a simple procedure which authorizes any inquirer at any time to adopt formally the role of devil's advocate in order to question the group as to whether any form of collusion is afoot.

Managing distress. The group adopts some regular method for surfacing and processing repressed distress, which may get unawaresly projected out, distorting thought, perception and action within the inquiry.

Reflection and action. Since inquiry process depends on alternating phases of action and reflection, it is important to find an appropriate balance, so that there is neither too much reflection on too little experience, which is armchair theorizing, nor too little reflection on too much experience, which is mere activism. Each inquiry group needs to find its own balance between action and reflection.

Chaos and order. If a group is open, adventurous and innovative, putting all at risk to reach out for the truth beyond fear and collusion, then, once the inquiry is well under way, divergence of thought and expression may descend into confusion, uncertainty, ambiguity, disorder, and tension. A group needs to be prepared for chaos, tolerate it, and wait until there is a real sense of creative resolution.

and fluid as a 'social lubricant' made sense for subsequent meetings as participants were in the middle of working days and their bodies needed nourishment to keep going. (Barrett and Taylor, 2002: 242)

The organizational side of relaxing often involves keeping the group's records in good order, transcribing tapes of meetings, keeping flip-chart records together, providing summary statements of what has happened in meetings, and so on. This may be undertaken by people looking after their own records, or by one or more people taking care of this for the group:

I found that it took a considerable amount of energy and attention to hold the whole process together. Although we shared the tasks of arranging venues and of 'rounding people up' for meetings, a good deal of the work came my way – from negotiating a budget to cover our costs for the year, to writing innumerable letters keeping members in touch with developments and making sure that those who could not get to particular meetings were kept in the picture. (Mead, 2002: 199–200)

The task requirement of the relaxing phase involves doing whatever is required to complete the inquiry, which often centres on how the learning from the project will be written up or otherwise reported to a wider audience. Sometimes groups attempt to write collaboratively, but, more often, one person or a small group does the actual writing in consultation with other group members (e.g., Maughan and Reason, 2001). It is important to agree the basis on which group members can use the material generated by the group, attending both to issues of confidentiality and ownership. A good rule of thumb is to agree that anyone may use the experience in any form they wish, so long as they include a clear statement about how the material has arisen (for example, 'This is my account of the XYZ inquiry group; as far as I know, I have represented the group's learning but I have not checked in detail with all members').

If the inquiry project has formed part of a higher degree or other formal publication that the initiator is undertaking, ensuring an authentic representation is particularly important:

Agnes Bryan and Cathy Aymer initiated and facilitated several inquiry groups of black professionals. Agnes subsequently worked with the transcripts of the groups as part of her PhD dissertation, finding immense difficulties in arriving at an authentic representation. She offered her findings to as many group members as she could, received challenging feedback and rewrote much of her text. She recorded and explored these difficulties of sense-making at length in her dissertation. (see Bryan, 2000)

The relaxing phase of a creative group also involves winding down emotionally, saying farewells and dealing with unfinished business. It is always tempting, particularly if the group has been successful, to avoid

finishing properly, colluding to pretend that the group will meet again (this hints at a destructive dimension to the group's life, placing hopes in a future ideal state rather than dealing with the messy present reality). So time must be given for group members to have their final say as they separate from the group – it is often helpful to have a final 'round' at which members can say what they have taken from the group, and leave behind any resentments or unfinished business.

By Way of Comment

I have offered two ways of seeing the inquiry process – through the logic of the inquiry process, cycling through propositional, practical, experiential and presentation knowing; and through the dynamics of the creative group cycle of nurturing, energizing, peak and relaxing. Please do not try to map these two descriptions onto each other in simple ways, but, rather, allow the two descriptions to interact and illuminate different aspects of the overall process. In the early life of the group, when the interpersonal emphasis will be on nurturing, the group will most likely engage with the inquiry cycle in mechanical and tentative ways. As the group matures, it will be able to engage in inquiry more energetically and robustly, adapting it to the members' own needs and circumstances. There is always a complex interplay between the logic of inquiry and the process of the human group, as is described in many of the accounts of cooperative inquiry (for a collection of these, see Reason, 2001).

Outcomes

If, as I argued at the beginning of this chapter, action research places a primacy on practical knowing, on localized, pragmatic, constructed practical knowings, what is the 'outcome' in terms of a research product? Are 'research reports' (in whatever form) illegitimate, misguided and epistemologically in error? Clearly not, or the accounts of cooperative inquiry processes referred to in this chapter would never have been written. But the outcome of an inquiry is far more than can be written.

The practical knowing which is the outcome of a cooperative inquiry is part of the life experience and practice of those who participated: individual experience will be unique and reflect shared experience. The inquiry will continue to live (if it is successful), and the knowledge passed along, in the continuing practice of participants as informed by the inquiry experience: doctors practise differently and this affects their patients, colleagues and students; black women discover more about how to thrive and this changes how they are as professionals and as mothers; police professionals see how

leadership is a practice of continued learning with others; young women are empowered to speak from their experience; and so on.

So the first thing to remember about all forms of representation is not to confuse the map with the territory. The knowing (the territory) is in the experience and in the practice, and what we write or say about it is a *representation*. Sometimes action research is seen – wrongly, in my view – as primarily a means to develop rich qualitative data that can be put through the processes of grounded theory or some other form of sense-making; but in action research the sense-making is *in* the process of the inquiry, in the cycles of action and reflection, in the dialogue of the inquiry group.

Nevertheless, we may want to write. We may want to write for ourselves, first-person inquiry, to keep records, to help make sense, to review or to deepen experience. Inquiry group members keep journals and dream diaries, write stories, draw pictures and engage in all kinds of representation as part of their inquiry. We may want to write ‘for us’, for the inquiry group and for the community that it represents, to pull together ideas, create frameworks of understanding and communicate what it is we think we have discovered. We may want to write for an outside audience to inform, to influence, to raise questions or to entertain. In these writing projects, it is important to be clear about both authorship and audience. Rather than being written in the ‘voice from nowhere’, reports from inquiry groups are clearly authored by members and directed to a particular purpose.

An Experiment in Cooperative Inquiry

The best way to learn about cooperative inquiry is to do it. The following outline experiment is intended for a group of students to use in a classroom setting to explore together the practice of cooperative inquiry. Clearly, it is not possible to describe such an activity in complete detail (if it were, it would no longer be inquiry!). Rather, I invite you to try the activity out in the spirit of exploring cooperative inquiry in an experiential fashion – and of course you may wish to design a different experiment to explore an issue of your own choice. If your class group is large, you may wish to split into smaller groups to facilitate the process.

Improving Conversations and Dialogue in the Classroom

Undergraduate courses often have seminars running alongside formal lectures, in which students are expected to participate in discussion. But these seminars are often problematic – people do not want to or do not know how to contribute, the ground rules are unclear, and often what happens is that one or two students who are prepared to speak (and are often fed up with their colleagues who will not) dominate the proceedings, while the seminar

leader (often a relatively inexperienced postgraduate student) struggles to keep things going.

Phase 1 (propositional knowing). Identify an aspect of your interaction as a class you would like to improve. It might be a general issue, such as 'Improving the quality of our dialogue in class discussion', or, better, maybe something more specific to the needs of the group. See whether you can identify something you really care about. Then brainstorm practical things you might do to do this and agree on one or more to try out.

Phase 2 (practical knowing). Carry on with your normal class activities, with everyone doing what they can to implement the agreement. Keep some kind of notes of the experience.

Phase 3 (experiential knowing). As you do this, allow yourself to attend to the fullness of the experience; to shyness, irritations, embarrassments, angers, delights and triumphs. Notice the subtleties of experience.

Phase 4 (presentational knowing to propositional knowing). Take some time in pairs or trios to review your experience, and then discuss together what you have noticed. What do you learn from this experience that you should take into a further cycle of inquiry? How could you develop your practices of dialogue? How does what you have learned experientially relate to formal theories you are learning?

An inquiry such as this could continue through a whole semester of seminar meetings, and could focus on skills of interpersonal practice, on questions of authority, gender, power and competition, and so on.

Further Reading

Heron, J. (1996) *Co-Operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*. London: Sage Publications.

Here John Heron sets out the theoretical foundation for cooperative inquiry practice and outlines the many different options in practice, based on 25 years' experience with this approach.

Reason, P. (ed.) (2001) *Special Issue: The Practice of Co-Operative Inquiry. Systemic practice and Action Research*, 14 (6).

Six examples of cooperative inquiry in practice, with commentaries.

Toulmin, S. (1990) *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. New York: Free Press.

One of the most accessible accounts of the rise of Enlightenment science, and its relationship to the spirit of the times, it also provides a powerful philosophical argument for action research practices.

Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2001) 'Inquiry and participation in search of a world worthy of human aspiration', in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds), *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London: Sage.

An introduction to the field of action research and to some of the philosophical considerations about paradigms, world-views and epistemology; contains many useful references to other scholarship on these matters.

Randall, R. and Southgate, J. (1980) *Co-Operative and Community Group Dynamics . . . Or Your Meetings Needn't Be So Appalling*. London: Barefoot Books.

Unfortunately out of print but available through inter-library loan, this is still, in my view, a most useful, practical account of creative group practices.