

## Chapter Five

### Ethics, Story and Action Research

*It was October 28th, 1992, and I was presenting my research to a small group at Kingston University. I went through how I wrote the story, and what I had done with it since then - shown it to the researchers at Stirling, to George and to Harriet. I had also analysed it, and was feeling excited because only that same week, I had thought through the possible reasons why Eloise hadn't taken to our inservice work.*

*'I suppose I can see why you wrote this story,' said Antonia, in a tone which suggested that she didn't see at all, 'But behind all this there are real people with real feelings whom you have to work with every day!'*

*'Yes', I replied, 'I was very careful with what I wrote, and I tried to disguise them so that they couldn't be recognised.'*

*'But' she pursued, 'It's one thing to work out how people tick - how they inter-relate, it's quite another to put your views on the table and to say well, there you are, that's what I think of you.'*

*'But what she's written is quite sympathetic, I think,' interrupted Lauren, before I could get in a reply. 'And she did give it to Harriet to look at and comment on.'*

*'No she didn't,' replied Antonia, 'She only gave what she chose to her!'*

*While I was thinking back over this, Antonia was leading the conversation again. I heard her say she would have been pretty angry.*

*'Why would you be angry?' I asked.*

*'If someone took it upon themselves to write something like that about me, I would be very angry.' she said, sounding as if someone already had written it and she was already angry!*

*Lauren turned to her and said, 'I think teachers have been enormously angry about how researchers take their information and make their interpretations - and the worst cases are when they are identified, but this isn't identified.'*

*'It's got nothing to do with research; the reason I would be angry about it is because it's personal,' replied Antonia, plainly still aggrieved.*

*'But all research is personal,' countered Lauren. 'You remove it through the story, and it's a way of helping people to develop, whereas the alternative is to say you're not doing your job, the children are suffering - you're out!'*

*Charlotte entered the fray at this point, maybe trying to calm it down.*

*'I think it's difficult to talk to people about their jobs without it being personal, because the boundary between the person and their job isn't always very clear,' she said.*

*'But it's the public element of it that would give me concern - going public on it,' persisted Antonia.*

*'But we didn't go public on it,' I said, 'the only sharing that's been done has been tonight and we are a group of supportive researchers, looking at a method of recording data and then using it to improve our actions.'*

*'If these people found out that information had been shared...' said Antonia, only to be interrupted by Lauren who said strongly, 'But information hasn't been shared...'*

*'But if they could identify themselves from this case study, and it had been shared in a public forum, I actually wonder if they would have any professional comeback!' announced Antonia.*

*My heart sank!*

*'And I suspect they wouldn't,' replied Lauren, robustly, 'Just from the fictional form it's done in. That's the safeguard of the method. It's the author's imagination - and what we can do with it is to explore the dilemmas in professional practice and imagine solutions to them - that's what*

*we're doing as a group. And why should anybody want to identify with any of these people anyway?'  
'Mmm,' said Antonia, 'I just asked the question. I don't want to take it any further.'*

The ethical issue was a major one, with several dimensions:

- 1) Is it right to use my experiences to write a story about people with whom I work?
- 2) Do I need to ask their permission before, during or after my writing?
- 3) Should I share the story only with them?
- 4) Should I negotiate the story with them?
- 5) If it might upset them, should I keep it to myself?
- 6) If it might upset them, should I not write it at all?
- 7) If I keep it to myself, is there any point in writing it in the first place?
- 8) Should I write only 'good' things?
- 9) What happens if I decide the participants should see it, but they do not wish to?
- 10) If some of them want to read it but others do not, what should I do then?
- 11) Should I only write about myself?

I decided to discuss the immediate problem with one of my critical friends, Peter, who is one of the other Deputies. Peter would understand the standpoint within the school culture from which I was working, and I could see whether my worries would concern him also. We agreed to talk about it on January 2nd 1993, and with his permission, I recorded the conversation.

We began by talking extensively about Eloise. Peter felt that she was the most difficult of the group to help and was surprised that much of the story concerned her, as perhaps greater strides could have been made, and were made, with the others.

*P It's interesting - there is a great deal of comparison there, and I was also thinking about department D, as to who the Eloise would be in that group.*

*M Oh, so you are translating it into other groups?*

P yes, but I suppose .....there are characters who see all this opportunity to get together to talk about practice as a waste of time because it's got nothing to do with 'what I do in the classroom' ....

M going back to the ethical issues..... it could be argued that the story I wrote isn't my story, it is their story, and as such should be offered to them. I gave the story without Harriet's part in it to Harriet,.....I wouldn't want to be writing things that would be upsetting to the people that are going to read it. But you could argue that for people to change, they need to be upset, insofar as if they've not seen some aspect of the way they behave as other people see them, then they haven't had the opportunity to confront certain parts of themselves, and maybe they need to.....

P mmmmm, and seeing it in a story and in print is another thing again. Without Harriet's story, it's very incomplete isn't it?

M yes, very, which is interesting, because Harriet didn't say this story is incomplete, it doesn't have anything about Harriet!.....I tried to make them unrecognisable.....

P yes, I suspect you can't make them unrecognisable to those who are aware of the issues, but if you offered it around the school, you could probably put that to most other people and they wouldn't see anything to identify anyone with - or they could fit it to any group and say, oh yes, here's someone I know.....but for Harriet it's a very different proposal isn't it?.....

M mmm.....

(Transcript taken from tape no.23, 2.1.93)

In talking this through with Peter, I was gradually confirming in my mind that I wouldn't show the story to the department.

I was particularly interested in Peter's remarks about other departments. I hadn't seen it in quite the same light, but as soon as he mentioned department D, I recognised the features in the story which could be applicable to other departments and situations. I began to think about rewriting the story from a different point of view.

M mmmmm, so if you were to offer the story to heads of department, might they look at it and say, yes, this might apply to my department?

P laughs I think you could do it in some departments, but I think ..... you would get them picking up little lines - you would get them not seeing the wood for the trees I think.....

M what I'm trying to get at is the ethics of writing the story because to me it was very useful ....it pulled all of the year's work together and it was a cathartic way of dealing with all the experiences we'd had, and I've been able to share it with people who wouldn't know them and so on, those people have been able to talk about the story, not the people but the story .....

*P pauses - it's OK to do it when it's outside the context of the individuals.....it's more difficult when it goes back to the people featured in it, I don't know how Harriet would regard herself if she realised she was one of the key characters in the tale*

*M It could be that it might be useful for them to see how, for instance, I might have seen them, but on the other hand, I didn't write it to give to them to say, is this true, because it's a story made up from my experiences.*

*P but it's a story based on a particular set of people isn't it - you haven't been observing two or three sets of people and then made up a story which has elements of all three.....it's like the disclaimer on films - the events portrayed have nothing to do with real people, and everyone looks and says, oh I know what this is all about!.....You question the ethical issue - but if it's well beyond the ken of the people involved, then there's no ethical dimension to it, because anybody else reading it would see it as a story.....*

(Transcript taken from tape no.23, 2.1.93)

We continued to discuss what seemed to me to be an intractable problem. Peter thought it wouldn't have been so difficult if the situation were not so critical within the school for that particular department. Eventually, I put my thoughts together - I was convinced of the power of story as a means of analysing situations, and reflecting on them - only the ethics are difficult! I summed up our discussion:

*M I don't think I can show it to them, because of the various things we've talked about, but from a research point of view, that's quite useful in that having been through writing it and talking about it, I can then say, so OK, one of the things I've learnt is that if I want to be sharing it with them, maybe I've got to have the audience in mind as I'm writing it, and I certainly didn't have them in mind when I wrote that - do you think?*

*P Mmmm*

*M and then if I want to investigate how the situation appears to them, as opposed to how it appears to me, then I need a different starting point.*

*P yes, yes - I was just thinking about how useful might it be as a document for other groups in school .....there are a lot of issues in that.....*

(Transcript taken from tape no.23, 2.1.93)

As a result of this discussion and my previous thinking about the problem, I decided to do two things - one, to use a story I had written called 'Darren' ( in my archives - to be published elsewhere) with department A and two, to write a story which would enable heads of department and year to address

some of the issues which Peter, I and others had identified as being of importance, and which have their origins in 'The Canterbury Tales'. This story became known as 'Just Tell me What to Do' and was presented to the Curriculum Group on March 17th 1993. I shall report on this in Chapter 6.

#### Identifying the major dilemma

I had found the story 'The Canterbury Tales' tremendously useful in many ways. It certainly enabled me to organise my thoughts and to empathise more with the department. But I couldn't resolve the ethical issue, and this continued to worry me. I discussed it with Pam Lomax in February 1993. Her view was that the real problem was with the fact that some of it was secret.

*M Well I don't think anything's been secret!*

*P Harriet's pain is secret*

*M but Harriet's pain is something I made up*

*P come on, you're slipping away from this, you made it up because of the 'dicey-ness' of dealing with other people's deficiencies. Where it becomes a problem is, I think, in acting as an action researcher, with the aim of facilitating self critical communities, what you need to do, in a way, is to justify the point at which you open the story.....*

*M what do you mean, the point at which I open the story?*

*P the point at which you let everybody know what you are thinking about and talking about and doing, because you have presented the data to people, you have made it public, but you've preserved the confidentiality of your participants. If your participants are completely anonymous and confidential and what you're making public is a generalisation based on a case, then certainly you are not doing them any personal harm. On the other hand, within the research itself, you need to actually let her know how she is doing her job!*

*M I have to help her get better at her job*

*P I think that's a reasonable point of view, isn't it? There's no point in mirroring back people's failings - what you do is to support them in moving forwards - now that's a staff development issue.....but there's another question here isn't there, about people being able to put their own defence? It seems to me if you have a session and then you write a story about it which incorporates what happens and then you give the story back to people and they say, well this didn't quite happen - I didn't quite mean that, you can move forward with it. You can then do your interpretation and you can test that out with them as well. Some of those things won't be nice, and you've still got to do them - you can't just be nice!*

(Transcript taken from tape no.34, 25.2.93)

I am in agreement that this is what I ought to be able to do, but I cannot bring myself to do so with 'The Canterbury Tales' because it highlights people's shortcomings too much, and I have judged that they would find that too hard to cope with. Part of this is because the story includes several of them, so sharing their faults would necessarily be among many people. If I were to write an account about only one person, that might be better, because it would be easier and less threatening to talk it through on a one to one basis.

Kelly (1989:100-114) the co-director of the Girls into Science and Technology (GIST) Project discussed some similar ethical dilemmas to the ones I was facing. GIST was an action research project run in schools by external researchers, so in this respect it was very different from my own situation. However, she raised two issues, one, whether it is right to try to transmit one's own values in a project and two, whether it is possible to obtain informed consent in an action research project. The principle of 'informed consent' was the one which concerned me. This principle holds that informed consent to publish attributable data must be obtained from the participants in the research, and that this consent must rest on a full understanding of what is involved. Kelly didn't think this was always possible. She believed that other ethical considerations came into the frame which in some cases, outweighed the 'informed consent' principle, namely, the greater good of the children's education. Kelly queried whether the data could have been given back to the teachers without damaging the development of the project, and finished by saying:

'In the end, we made very little direct use of this material in our reports of the project for fear of damaging the interests of the teachers. But this solution raises its own ethical problems. If you believe, as I do, that researchers have a duty to the truth, and knowledge can help to solve social problems, then suppressing knowledge is unethical.' Kelly (1989:111).

I empathise with Kelly when she said that she was pleased not to have thought through these ethical concerns before starting her research, because had she done so, she 'might never have had the courage to do anything'! I suspect that part of what she meant by this was that although she was clear on the general ethical guidelines of researchers, it is in the 'action present' that dilemmas arise which are

difficult to resolve. Alongside the informed consent issue, my main ethical problems were whether my fictional story was true, and whether I should give it back to the teachers for them to read and comment upon. My contention is that there was no attributable data in my story because it was a fiction, and no real participants in the project up till this time. The fact that I learnt so much from 'The Canterbury Tales' made me feel that, although I would not make use of it for staff development purposes within my school for the reasons I have outlined in my discussions with Peter, I could use an adaptation of it, having the audience for it in my mind as I write, raising the important issues for discussion with the middle managers at Roseacre. This became the story 'Just Tell Me What To Do!'

Simons (1989:128-135) pointed to the similarities in ethical issues between external and internal cases study evaluations, and high on the priority list in both was 'the conflict between the individual's right to privacy and the professional's public accountability'. Simons talked of the inappropriateness of anonymization in an internal study because, firstly, the routine research ploy of changing names and places isn't possible, secondly, the self evaluation nature of internal school studies suggests that openness should exist in order for change to happen, and thirdly, there are advantages to intraprofessional accountability, which can be established through a research record. Of these, the wish to develop open dialogue is the dilemma I want to resolve, and the difficulty is compounded by being an 'insider researcher' because, unlike the external researcher who can escape, I remain at the school in a professional relationship with all my colleagues. However, it could be argued that the ethics of action research are part of the cyclical and ongoing nature of the research and have to be resolved as the research proceeds. It is not a case of reporting and interpreting data and leaving it for teachers to argue about without me being involved. If I think my data reveals something about the teachers I am working with, I need to negotiate this further with the participants, and ideally to give them the opportunity to become co-researchers with me, so that they have ownership of their own concerns and support in overcoming them. Winter (1989:117-120), speaking as an external action researcher pointed to the need to learn from the data rather than to judge it, and to have the audience in mind when writing the report, arranging further discussions with people if he thought their perspective had not been voiced.

Simons (1989:134-5) outlined 'principles and procedures for an independent external evaluation'. For my purposes the most important of these are confidentiality and anonymity, informed consent, and the principle of 'negotiating with the groups they concern on the accuracy, relevance and fairness' of the account. In this thesis, this principle of negotiation is seen in my wish to give back to the participants or co-researchers their story, asking them to read it, to give their informed consent for me to use it, and to discuss pieces with which they are not happy. There are several references in my thesis which both highlight the issues and eventually show how I have resolved them.

#### What is the nature of reality in fictional accounts?

I needed to remind myself of my purposes in writing the story in the first place! I had written it originally to order my thoughts and understand better my situation with the department. But I had been pressed in the meeting on October 28th to say why I hadn't given the story to the 'participants', so that they could say whether my account was a 'true' story. My response was that I was trying to make my own sense of my story, - the story I had drawn from my data - so that my thinking would inform any decision I would make about my future work with the department. I think in the action research sense of 'participants', with its implications of 'empowerment' and 'ownership', I was the only real participant in the events leading to 'The Canterbury Tales'

But whose reality is a story? When people read something, they're actually reconstructing and reinterpreting reality and alternatives so there is no ultimate reality for the story, and therefore, perhaps, it does not belong to the characters. I was reminded that Winter (1988:236), in discussing 'reality' in story, talked of the 'plurality of voices' - the characters in the story, different voices within the characters, and 'various levels of authorial comment (implicit and explicit)' - all interacting, to offer the reader the opportunity to interpret the text according to his or her own experiences, values, attitudes and predilections. Not just to interpret, but to ask questions of the contradictions which arise from the story, - 'to make dialectics a source of enjoyment' Brecht (1974:277).



Winter went on to say that 'a fictional text is not to be taken as imparting knowledge about reality but as raising questions about reality, through the unresolved plurality of its meanings' (see also, Belsey, 1980:91-2). He talked further about writing being a form of self exploration - 'that what it 'means' is not known beforehand and 'put into' the text, rather it is discovered by being written.' (Winter 1988 :237). Writing, he said 'is never simply about the external world, but always (implicitly at least) also about the writer, and about the writer's attempt to write. The act of writing is always self exploratory i.e. reflexive.'

Winter talked of the plurality of voices and also that writing is a form of self exploration, but he also spoke of the part played by the reader. He claimed that the reader was an active participant in interpreting the story, because he or she, in spotting the contradictions or inconsistencies in it, must make an intentional move to fill in the meaning, and he or she would do this by referring to his or her own experiences. Winter called this a reformulation of the self, and Iser (1974:132-3) talked of gaps in the flow of the text which 'force readers to collaborate in maintaining its meaning, by attempting to remedy the gaps and apparent inconsistencies from their own experience.' He said, 'we have the apparently paradoxical situation in which the reader is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality which is different from his own.' This 'dialectics of reading compels us to conduct a creative examination not only of the text, but also of ourselves' (ibid.:145).

I wonder if this 'creative examination of .... ourselves' might arouse anger at the writer who has put into words her perceptions of events, because whoever reads it, in order to make sense of the contradictions and gaps in continuity, has to confront their thoughts about their own practices and experiences? Whether one is on the inside or outside of the story, if one is faced with reformulating one's view of oneself, one may experience discomfort in the process. Could it be that anger is directed at the writer to compensate for feelings of insecurity or annoyance which arise as a result of confronting oneself, or even that by transferring the emotion of anger onto the writer, the reader does not have to deal with the 'creative examination, not only of the text, but also, of ourselves'?

In struggling to understand the ethical dilemmas I had come across in writing this story, I would want to stress that I viewed my interpretation of the situation as being only one of many different ways of seeing things. This is why it was so important to offer the story to other people - so that they could bring their own knowledge, experiences, interests, concerns, beliefs and so on to bear on it, and to open my eyes to different interpretations from the ones which I had written into my story. In this experience of using story in an action research cycle, I found that the story enabled me to engage in reflexivity and dialectic analysis, helping me to know my practice but also raising questions to which, even now, I have not yet found answers. My view of action research is that practice gives rise to theory and interacts with it, being always open to question and therefore to change. Winter (1989:191), in talking about critical analysis, said

'Theories are not, therefore, valid in themselves (as accurate generalisations) but are merely possible strategies which will be tested through practice and particularly through changes in practice. In other words, critical analysis questions the claims of all interpretive theories in the light of the principle that theories and practices are part of an unending process of transforming each other. *Any* 'theory' is therefore only a transitory moment in a cycle of alternations between practice and reflection upon practice, i.e. in the process of developmental change.'

And so I have learnt to keep my mind open, to listen to other people's theories and views, and to know that there may be many alternative theories which might apply to my experiences, but that I shall only know my own practice by continually challenging my theories and changing what I do or how I do it as a result.