Reading Practice:

Essays in Dialogue and Pedagogical Conversation

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Degree for which thesis is submitted: PhD

I declare that while registered as a candidate for the University of Glamorgan’s research degree, I have not been a registered candidate or enrolled student for another award of the University or other academic or professional institution.

I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for any academic award.

Signature of candidate: Kevin Mc Dermott  Date: January 2002
Abstract

How can I, as a teacher-researcher, read my own practice?
How can I, as a teacher-researcher, theorise my practice?

These are the central questions pursued in this thesis. They are pursued through three action research projects. The research took place in Firhouse Community College, a second-level school in Dublin. Each of the projects was concerned with exploring the potential of conversation in a number of different school contexts.

Chapter one relates my research to the literature on action research and to the literature on dialogue in education, and relates my work to the ethical concepts of friendship and care. The chapter also outlines the methodological approach and the data used in the research.

Chapter two relates the interpretative reading of my own practitioner accounts to critical theory and the emancipatory ambition of its reflective practices.

A project on student friendship groups is discussed in chapters three and four. These chapters highlight friendship as an important social and educational phenomenon and identify conversation as a concomitant communicative form. These chapters theorise the concept of pedagogical conversation and relate this concept to Aristotle’s theory of friendship.

Chapter five gives an account of a project with a third-year English class, developed around the ideas of dialogue and friendship. In the course of the project, students
organised themselves into reading and discussion groups that were largely autonomous and self-regulating. Chapter six reviews the role and place of the teacher in the discourse of the classroom, in a dialogic teaching situation, and explores the potential of dialogue as means of enquiry and reflection.

Chapter seven contrasts the peaceable conversation of professional friendship with the disputatious debate that often occurs at formal staff meetings.

Chapter eight offers some reflective comments on the research.

This thesis lays the foundation for a theory of teaching as a form of social practice, characterised by a disposition of care that is associated with friendship, and expressed through conversation. In doing so, it makes a valuable and original contribution to the literature on teaching and school culture. In its development of a dialogic model of research, the thesis makes a contribution to the literature on action research and practitioner enquiry.
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Preface

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot

From ‘Little Gidding’ (1)

When I was about sixteen or so, a priest came to minister in the parish where I lived in Crumlin, in Dublin. His name was Dave Roughneen. He was a community activist, encouraging local people to think about ways of creating a better community, a better future for themselves. The parish was situated in one of the large housing estates, built by Dublin Corporation after the Second World War. Under his prompting, a local development council was established, which set out to transform and renew the community. I got involved in some of the council’s activities. It was my first introduction, though I didn’t know it at the time, to liberation theology, a fusion of Catholic social policy, Marxism, and the ideas of Paulo Freire. My friendship with Dave Roughneen and my involvement in community development had a profound impact on the way I looked, and continue to look, at the world. The social consciousness I developed at that time was directed towards my own locality and towards the politics of central and south America, where a radical Catholic clergy, many of them Irish, were to the forefront in the struggle to transform society, through various forms of social action.

I include this introduction to my present work to indicate how my research concerns are bound up with the person I am and the values I hold, and both the person and the values are related to my life history and my cultural-situatedness. In offering these introductory remarks, I hope they offer you, dear reader, some guidance through this thesis, a thesis which explores dialogue and conversation in a school setting and which, furthermore, tries to conduct its enquiry into practice in a dialogic manner.

Since my teenage involvement with community development, Freire’s work has been foundational. To me it is axiomatic that education is aimed at social transformation
and involves working with people. Education facilitates a coming-to-consciousness. Education is inter-subjective. Dialogue is central to education. Thus, it is not surprising that this thesis looks to explore the emancipatory possibilities of dialogue in my own teaching. Furthermore, it seeks to develop a method of reflection and a method of presentation that are dialogic in character.

***

After my primary degree, I completed a one-year diploma in education. I had come to student teaching with broad and exciting ideas, taken from texts like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (2) At the end of the diploma course, I knew that my practice as a teacher was little different from the teaching I had experienced as a student. Returning to my old school for teaching practice emphasised the similarity. I could not imagine, let alone develop, an emancipatory form of praxis. I did realise, however, that classroom talk was central to understanding teaching, and central to the way I wanted to define myself as a teacher and the kind of praxis I wanted to develop.

So I approached the Education Department in University College Dublin with a view to undertaking some research. I was asked, understandably, ‘What is your research question?’ My answer was vague. Something along the lines of, ‘How can I talk in the classroom in a way that will create a Freirean model of education?’

I was invited to return when I had thought some more on the issue and could frame a research question that was clearer and more easily managed. I was directed towards some articles on ‘Flanders’ Interaction Analysis’, the standard reference for the analysis of classroom discourse, at the time. These were helpful. They convinced me that I did not want undertake research on talk in the classroom that ignored the words spoken by the participants and which traded upon an observer’s pre-existing assumptions and presuppositions.

If I could have addressed their question, ‘What is your research question?’ with my present intelligence, my answer might have been: “The research will question the personal and social practices embedded in my way I talk as an educator, in the context of Freire’s critical pedagogy. I believe that the enquiry into my own practice will be
helpful to myself and others, on both a practical and a theoretical level, and contribute to an emancipatory form of educational praxis.” In other words, I now understand that research involves a review of practice with a view to discovery and change and, as a teacher-researcher, I understand that my own practice is central to the research process.

I did conduct some research on classroom talk, between 1978-1980, but not through the Education Department. I worked through the Dept. of Old & Middle English and English Language Studies, where a lecturer in sociolinguistics, Derek Briton, expressed an interest in my work.

The study I undertook looked at the discourse practices of a teacher and his students in a number of history lessons, in a secondary school in Dublin. I sat in on as a participant observer and recorded the teacher’s classes on a topic in history that he taught to both a junior and a senior class. During the recordings I observed the classes and made field notes.

The key to my analysis of this data was my reading of an article by Jurgen Habermas on communicative competence. (3) Habermas’ description of an ideal speech situation gave me a means of analysing the data in terms of the degree to which the discourse approximated to an intersubjective situation characterised by equality, respect and autonomy. By concentrating on key aspects of the discourse (the presentation of subjectivity, as evidenced in the use of first person pronouns and accompanying verbs, the asking of questions, the making of assertions and the prescribing of discourse rules) I was able to highlight the unnecessary constraints that inhibited the participation of students in classroom discussion.

Habermas’ work, operating within a similar critical perspective as Freire, allowed me to explore pedagogy in a way that addressed the words spoken in the classroom. It also proposed a model of research that was driven by a desire to create a social life based upon mutual respect and responsibility.

So, over two years, I completed a research thesis on classroom discourse. The experience of doing this research left me with a feeling that I had an extraordinarily
rich subject, ‘classroom talk’, and an exciting context, the work of Freire and Habermas, in which to address the subject. However, I also felt that the finished research text did not voice my concerns in a way that I felt spoke to my truest sense of self. Nor did I feel that the finished text was capable of commanding my commitment. Moreover, at the end of the research, I had several unanswered questions.

A major question was, ‘What did my research tell me about my practice as a teacher?’ The answer was that, in truth, it told me very little, because in adopting the stance of a participant observer, I fell into the trap of so-called objectivism, which had a double consequence. Firstly, it rendered the subjects of the thesis, the teachers and his students, into objects - objects of my study. And, secondly, it caused me to displace myself, as a teacher, in the name of research. I wrote myself, as a teacher and a researcher, out of the research.

A paradox of this early research was its failure to embody, in the finished text, the intersubjective and emancipatory values it advocated. It is a paradox I strive to avoid in my present research by: a) enquiring into my own practice; and b) endeavouring to employ/develop methods of analysis and methods presentation that are at one with the aims of the research, that is, which are, in themselves, dialogic. Or to express it differently, in my current work I endeavour to ensure that the values I espouse are expressed both in the epistemology and methodology of the research.

A second question concerned the failure of the thesis to capture the formative and informing nature of research. Why did I feel that the thesis was a report on something that had happened elsewhere, rather than the site in which the work of the thesis had occurred and was occurring? In re-reading my thesis now, it lacks what Gadamer describes as the spirit of dialogue - a spirit of buoyancy, freedom and the joy of success. (4) And I wonder why I felt it necessary to bury the excitement and creativity of the research under a set of conventions that did not seem capable of embodying the interpretative and creative processes that constituted the ‘research’? It is for this reason that my current work tries to capture the dialogic movement of reporting and reading practice in its layout and presentation.
Finally, at the conclusion of my research in 1981, I queried why had I framed a research question ("Are there unnecessary constraints in the organisation of classroom discourse?") in a way that predicted the results before the work was started. In retrospect, it appears that the demand to come up with a manageable research question functioned in much the same way as a closed question in the classroom. It limited the pursuit of the answer. And it is for this reason that I attempt to return to questions in my present work for an interrogatory second or third look.

The experience of having conducted classroom research and, more importantly, the frustrations around the limitations of that research, is an important context for my present work. I want my research on dialogue and pedagogical conversation to do more and to say more than my previous attempt at educational research. I want my current research to speak to my own practice and to make a more substantial contribution to the creation of educational knowledge and theory.

***

Between 1979 and 1998, I worked as a teacher and year head. For most of this time I worked in a large, co-educational, multi-denominational, public-sector school, in west Dublin. Among the communities we served was one which suffered from social disadvantage, not unlike, in many ways, the community in which I had grown-up. I felt a strong sense of identification and commitment to that community. For most of this time, my classroom teaching was largely unreflective, and determined by the routine and organisation of school life, and habits and intuitions I had developed along the way. The area of my professional practice that I did think about, on an ongoing basis, was my work as year head. There were two reasons for this. One was that I worked with a group of tutors, and the daily practice of tutoring was the subject of much discussion and deliberation between us. Because we trusted and liked each other, we subjected our actions to reflective questioning with a view to establishing the validity of particular courses of action. Validity, in this context, was understood as the ethical concern to act fairly and respectfully towards our students, with a view to contributing to human flourishing.
Because our work (the tutors and I) involved discipline, there was often conflict between us, and between us as a group and other members of the teaching staff. In a very practical way, I learned that the issue of validity is as much an ideological issue as it is a procedural one.

And because I was a year head, and, therefore, involved in daily decisions about discipline, and because my understanding of discipline, as the removal of unnecessary constraints and the creation of the conditions in which individuals can become subjects, with a sense of agency about their developing history, was not shared by all my colleagues, I found myself thinking on an ongoing, though unsystematic basis about the relationship between discipline, autonomy, power and coercion. And in discussing these issues within the tutor group, or with other colleagues, and with students and parents, I found myself engaged in a series of debates, dialogues and conversations that struck me as being central to my life as a teacher, though they were not sited in the classroom. And the issue of what made some of this talk productive and educational and what made some of it destructive engaged my attention. An important insight, achieved through reflection and discussion, was that my work was, primarily, relational. And this insight is central to my current and on-going desire to explore and develop the theory and the practice of pedagogical conversation. Put simply: Teaching is not about teaching something, it is about teaching someone.

By the early 1990’s I was ready to return in a more orderly and systematic way to the question which had originally engaged my attention, as I started out on my teaching career – ‘What kind of talk is educational, given my understanding of educational as a form of social action with an emancipatory intention?’ And, after twelve years of teaching, I was interested in opening up the question of what does it mean to be a teacher? How is my practice as a teacher changed when I define teaching as relational?

In turning to educational research, for a second time, I was doing so with a clearer sense of teaching, and a clearer focus of attention. I wanted to return to participant observation, but with myself as the observer and the observed. I was also returning to research with some additional experience of research.
For most of the 1980's I was engaged in a research project on the Irish writer, Kate O’ Brien, who lived and worked in London during the 30’s and 40’s. The focus of my work was her journalism, written, for the most part, in the lead-up to the Second World War and during the war itself. In many respects, this work complemented the research undertaken on classroom discourse, though it may seem, at first, unrelated. There were, however, immediate points of similarity. For a start, I was interested in O’Brien as a writer of essays and reviews, printed in literary journals and broadsheet newspapers. In other words, O’Brien was working in the very tradition that instituted criticism, as a literary form and a public force. In Habermasian terms, O’ Brien was a critic, putting forward her views of an ideal form of social life. And the liberal humanism that she espoused was not very different from the forms of social life that Freire and Habermas proposed – a social life characterised by personal autonomy, respect for others and an opposition to unnecessary repression.

But the question I came back to, again and again, in this work, was the question of interpretation. How could I read/interpret O’Brien’s texts in ways that were insightful and eliminated or addressed the issue of unnecessary constraint, both in the texts and in my readings of them.

I was interested in why, as a writer, Kate O’ Brien, appeared to act in a self-regulating or self-censorious way. I identified and tried to explore the political and gender issues that were central to her concerns, and then I tried to account for the limited way in which she pursued her views beyond where she had initially taken them. This led me towards the area of deconstruction and the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s work, as explored by Culler, doubles back on itself, and it is the text that the critic creates, as much as the text that the critic reads, that becomes the focus of attention. (5)

I found this reflexivity interesting and congenial. Derrida’s work also challenges the emphasis on rationality as a guarantee of truth, a claim made, implicitly in all of Habermas’ early work. Derrida and deconstruction helped me to recognise the absence of the ‘unconscious’ and the affective in Habermas’ work. (In his more recent writing, Habermas addresses the absence of the affective by stressing the requirement...
of solidarity in an ideal speech situation - a concern for the well-being of others and
an empathetic disposition.) (6)

Reading Derrida and reading about him made me conscious of my own self-regulation
and the self-censorship involved in my way of writing about Kate O’Brien, though I
lacked the confidence to strike out in a way that would have created a parallel analysis
of my own critical writing, as I critiqued O’Brien’s critical writing. However, I think
that this parallel awareness must exist in the critical writing of someone who claims to
be working in a reflective and reflexive tradition. It is an awareness that I search for
in my current work. It is an awareness that informs the shape of the thesis and the
movement from reports of practice to readings or interpretation of that practice.

The research on O’Brien convinced me that a rigorous reading/interpretation of a text,
which sought to identify unnecessary constraints, must be sensitive to, and mindful of,
the unconscious and the affective and must address that which a text omits to say as
much as that which it says. In my current work, I have drawn on the concept of
reading as dialogue, a concept found in the work of Gadamer and also in the work of

So these are the formative influences on my work as a teacher-researcher - my early
introduction to Freire; my first experience of classroom research; my work as a
teacher and year head in a school serving a socially disadvantaged community; my
research on a critic, Kate O’Brien, and my thinking around the nature of critical
reading. Mindful of these influences, this thesis seeks to explore and describe the
effect of placing dialogue at the heart of my pedagogical practice. Furthermore, it
seeks to develop the practice and theory of pedagogical conversation in a school
context. As a teacher-researcher this thesis explores the effect of placing dialogue at
the heart of enquiry, both in terms of reading or interpreting my practice, and in
presenting my work. In striving for a dialogic form of presentation, the thesis seeks to
eliminate the dichotomy between dialogic enquiry and a monologic form of
presentation.

***
Reading Practice – Essays in Dialogue and Pedagogical Conversation offers its readers three accounts of practice, in three different contexts, in the school where I teach.

The first account presents my work with senior students on a study-related project, developed around the naturally occurring student-friendship groups. The second is a report of work undertaken in the classroom with an English class. The third reports on work in support of colleagues who were involved in action research projects. The thesis consists of these three accounts of practice and accompanying reflexive interpretations, which seek to read my accounts beyond the limits of the awareness they originally express. In the case of the work with the friendship groups, a chapter, which gives an account of the project, is followed by one which reads or interprets this account (chapters three and four). The same pattern is employed in exploring the work with my English class (chapters five and six). In presenting the work in this manner, I seek to bring a dialogic process into the play. A report of practice, a text of my experience, is read and interpreted. In the act of interpretation, I enter into an I-You relationship, a dialogic relationship, with the self. And the dialogue with the self is a self-reflective process of discovery. In chapter seven, which describes my work with colleagues, the dialogic movement from report to interpretation is contained within the chapter. The report is punctuated with interpretative comments, included in italicised form within brackets. This presentation seeks to capture the essentially dialogic movement of reflection.
The way in which my work is presented is related to my desire to write a thesis that is insightful in relation to its own practice. My ambition is to write a thesis which, while offering insights into dialogue and pedagogic conversation, enacts a dialogic mode of enquiry. My commitment to conversation and my understanding of conversation as a form of pedagogy have grown and developed through the writing of the thesis and through the dialogic nature of the enterprise I have undertaken. The thesis is not a presentation of achieved knowledge, but a presentation of knowledge in formation.

This thesis sets out to be both critically reflective and critically reflexive. For me, the essence of practitioner enquiry lies in the textualisation of experience and the reflexive reading of that text, in a written form, which establishes the possibility of further reading. Understanding, as it is pursued in this thesis, is the dialogic process of moving between reading and writing. And I invite you to share in the process.

Yet, while I believe that reflection can assist in my self-formation and that dialogue can contribute to social transformation, I am conscious that the movement towards understanding is more vexed, contradictory and roundabout than is often admitted in the literature of critical theory. In the work of Freire there is belief, a classic Enlightenment belief, that progress will come from reasoned reflection. However, in the social and personal worlds, our actions and behaviour are not guided by reason alone. Part of my interest in dialogue and conversation is related to their power to represent the nature of social interaction and the process of understanding. The open, divergent nature of conversation, in particular, strikes me as representing the iterative way in which my life and understanding proceeds and I try to capture the movement of conversation in the layout of the thesis. And while I would like to think that dialogic
reflection might lead to progress, I am conscious of my own fallibility. I deny my own values; I lose sight of the insights I have gained; I am distracted by other concerns; or I am thrown off course by false certainties, misapprehensions or poor judgement. The thesis tries to capture this movement of understanding and misunderstanding, of wisdom and forgetting both in my practice as a teacher and in my practice as a researcher into that practice.

Much of my work with students and colleagues is guided by an instinctive or tacit sense of what makes for the good. The process of reflection has confirmed many of my hunches, many of my values. A major hunch is that the pedagogical relation is primarily a personal one and, hence, conversation is the mode best suited to expressing this relation. Moreover, I believe that the exploration of pedagogy as a form of relation that is dialogic, other-seeking and personal (conversational) is valuable both to myself and to others who want to create educational communities. Furthermore, I believe that my understanding of learning as a practical knowledge, generated and developed in conversational contexts, is an important one, which can lead to good pedagogical practice. The thesis presents the practices governed by these intuitions, as well as the theory and reflections which arise from interrogating the accounts of practice.

I think that this dissertation can achieve some of its objectives if I can show how my encounter with the literature of critical theory and the theoretical literature on critical pedagogy has been dialogic and has contributed to my understanding of my own practice and has strengthened the mutual interplay between the theorising of practice and the practise of theory. In teaching, there is an interesting relationship between
theory and practice. Teaching is a practice, a practical procedure. But the practice, the
partially unconscious practice, nearly always precedes the theory. There is, in the
words of Shoshana Felman, “a constitutive belatedness of the theory over the practice,
the theory always trying to catch up with what it was that the practice ... was really
doing.” (7) This insight is similar to Polanyi’s view that the movement of knowledge
is from tacit to explicit knowing. (8) In teaching, we know more than we can tell, as
we dwell in the moment of teaching. Moreover, theory and critical reflection can only
ever partially recover the quality of the practice. A return to an experience can never
be the same as the experience itself. And so it is with these reports and the reflective
interpretations, conversations, around them. However, it is the possibility, however
fleeting and temporary, that I can catch up on myself, understand and affirm the values
that guide my practice, eliminate false certainties, generate important insights and
incorporate them into future practice, that encourages me in practitioner enquiry. The
acts of recounting and reading presented here are constitutive of praxis, are
constitutive of my commitment (itself subject to loss and forgetting) to improve
practice, for my own benefit, for the benefit of my students and colleagues, and for the
benefit of other teacher-researchers.

The reports and readings presented here strive to be personal and specific. Each time,
it seems, that my writing becomes too theoretical, strives to create a body of
knowledge, it is punctuated by the memory of those bodies - my own, those of my
students and colleagues – with whom I have worked or continue to work. This is
important for me because when theory loses contact with the particular and the body,
it loses touch with the meaning and reality of teaching. A thesis on education from
which the body has been excluded distorts rather than transcends the ground of its
being. To write on teaching, as I try to do, is to be caught in the tension between the
generalising tendency of philosophy and the specific and particular nature of teaching.
To narrate teaching and to read its narratives; to transform those narratives into
philosophical and critical discourse is, always, to end at the beginning, to return to the
inevitable particularity of teaching. Thus, I want to reflect and converse about
teaching, seek its essence, while maintaining an absolute attachment to the particular,
to those individuals, including myself, about whom I write.

Of course, in creating these texts of personal experience I work against the effect of
time; work to rescue experience from loss and forgetting. These texts create a
permanent trace of the original experience. Yet, paradoxically, all these texts are
marked by absence, omission and forgetfulness as much as by presence, inclusion and
remembrance. And each time I read or interrogate a text, in a critical manner, I look
to uncover some of its many and varied absences and gaps. As Walter Benjamin
reminds me, every story borrows its authority from death, even as it works against the
effect of death, loss and amnesia. So my readings strive to be alert and seek to rescue
my texts from their own forgetfulness and blindness, for, as Socrates suggests,
searching and learning are forms of recollection. (9) The effect of uncovering what is
hidden, in these personal accounts, has been, for me, a restorative experience.

***

This thesis has been a long time in the making, and I have sought to capture the
progress of the work over time through the employment of reflective strategies, which
are, in effect, second and third readings of the original action research reports and
interpretations. In chapters two and seven, these reflective commentaries appear in
the text in italicised form, within brackets. I have also sought to indicate, in passing,
the years in which chapters were originally written. The reports in chapter three,
chapter five and chapter seven were written in 1993 and 1994 and remain unchanged, apart from minor re-drafting. Between 1994 and 1996, I left aside this work to pursue a different project, which is not recorded in this dissertation. In 1997, I began to explore how the reports of the three action research projects might be interpreted. This led to the first versions of what became chapters four and six, that is the chapters which ‘read’ the practice described in linked ‘report’ chapters. I also began to experiment with incorporating the reading of practice into the one chapter, in drafting what is now chapter seven. The first draft of chapter two was written at this stage in an attempt to frame (and explain) the work of the thesis, and, more importantly, the purpose in undertaking it. It was written as a declaration of intent. In it I described how I envisaged the thesis coming together in a coherent way. In 1999, I returned to this chapter and began to write the italicised commentary. I have maintained this commentary and the future tense of the original out of a desire to capture the temporal and dialogic nature of understanding. I have placed this chapter, ‘The Search for Awareness- An Essay on Reading and Reporting Practice’, after the first chapter, ‘The Search for a Home – Locating the Thesis in Relation to the Literature’. This first chapter relates my research to the literature on action research and to the literature on dialogue in education. Furthermore, it shows how my work is informed by the Aristotelian concept of friendship and the ethics of care elaborated by Nel Noddings.

As is often the case in research, this chapter was the last to be written. Chapter two is also concerned with locating the work. In the second chapter, the interpretative reading of my own work is located within the broader context of critical theory. In this chapter, my own reflexive practice is explored in relation to the emancipatory ambition of critical theory. Thus, there is a clear relationship between the first two chapters. They provide the conceptual framework within which the work might be understood. However, placing them side-by-side is somewhat misleading in terms of the chronology and dialogic process of the research. The introduction of reflective commentaries into the text, as a way of capturing the dialogic process of reading, occurred at a relatively late stage in the research, although the reader encounters these
commentaries in chapter two.
Notes


Chapter One

The Search for a Home – Locating the Thesis in Relation to the Literature

**Introduction**

How can I, as a teacher-researcher, read my own practice?

How can I, as a teacher-researcher, theorise my practice?

These are the central questions pursued in this thesis. They are pursued through three separate, though related, action research projects, in which the work was undertaken through cycles of action and reflection, using a form of action research adapted from the work of Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff (1). Each project took place over an academic year. My reporting of these projects, and the dialogic reflection which interprets and theorises the practice they describe, form the basis of my thesis.

The research took place in Firhouse Community College, a second-level, public sector school, situated in south-west county Dublin. Each of the projects was concerned with exploring the potential of conversation in the three different contexts of my professional life in teaching – working as a year head; working as a teacher of English; and working as a member of a large teaching staff.

The first project took place over an academic year. It involved working with student friendship groups. The project explored the potential of friendship groups to help students in their preparations for their Leaving Certificate examination. Two research groups (one all female, the other all male) were chosen and I, and a colleague, worked with these groups. The students’ account of the projects, my observations and my action research notebook are the primary sources of data. From the students’
perspective, the project was a success. Students valued the support they received from their friends, and identified increased motivation and involvement in their work (2).

From my perspective, the project allowed me to focus on friendship as an important social, educational and communicative phenomenon, a phenomenon largely neglected in the literature on school. In identifying conversation as a vital element in the success of this project, my work in this thesis begins the task of outlining the kind of pedagogical communication that gives effect to the relational nature of teaching. The project also raised a number of questions around the nature of the pedagogic relation outside of the classroom and the subject disciplines, and the presence, or otherwise, of the discourse of the body in school, questions which are addressed in the course of the thesis.

The second project took place over an academic year. The intention of the project was to explore the degree to which a community of enquiry might come into being in the classroom, in a way that combined conversational forms of pedagogy with a classroom organisation based on student friendship groups. The challenge was to work within the scope of real possibility, mindful of the factors that militate against the creation of a dialogic community. These factors, as outlined by Burbules, include a content-driven conception of curriculum; an examination-driven conception of evaluation; and a management-driven conception of the role of the teacher (3). In the course of the project, students organised themselves into reading and discussion groups that were largely autonomous and self-regulating. This project demonstrated the degree to which students can and do learn from one another. Students reported an
increased belief in themselves and an appreciation of the giving and sharing of ideas that characterised their work.

From my perspective, the project demonstrated how Habermas's model of an ideal speech situation could be employed to develop social practices within a classroom context with beneficial results for the learners. (4) Though there is a large body of material on dialogue and education, and though Habermas is a key figure in this literature, there are few descriptions or evaluations of classrooms organised and structured around Habermas's notion of an ideal speech situation. This is, I believe, because Habermas conceives the ideal speech situation in abstract and universal terms, and elaborates its regulative function only in relation to the rationality of public discourse, most notably, politics. The project, of course, raises a number of thorny questions: can there truly be a dialogic situation in the classroom, given the difference in age, status and subject-related knowledge between a teacher and his/her students? What position does a teacher occupy in the dialogic structure of the classroom? What kind of displacement is involved for a teacher when power is re-distributed among students? What is the nature of a teacher's authority when he or she abandons a transmission model of teaching? What is the understanding of knowledge that underlies a dialogic form of communication within the classroom? These questions are pursued in the course of the thesis.

Following on from the project with the friendship groups, this second project extends the idea of a conversational form of pedagogy into a classroom context. The third project shifted the site of my work from the classroom to the staffroom. This project concerned my efforts to support six colleagues undertaking their own action research
over the course of a school year. Their concerns ranged from the teaching of French in a mixed-ability, first year class, to the use of group work in a Health Education class. Through the project we, my colleagues and I, developed a form of professional collaboration that was based on the ideals of goodwill and collegiality, and expressed through a conversational form of communication. Colleagues believed that the project encouraged them to be more reflective in their approach to students and teaching. All enjoyed and found benefit in the collegiate nature of the work. The success of the project suggests that colleagues within a school can form self-directed enquiring communities, of the kind proposed by Lipman (5). In reflecting on my role, the relationship between support and adjudication became an issue for consideration, as did the relationship between dialogue and understanding in situations of conflict. Paradoxically, the harmonious nature of the collaboration that took place during this project caused the acrimonious nature of some of the communication between colleagues at staff meetings to surface, almost as a form of subjugated knowledge. In reflecting on the project and its success, I was forced to address the issue of disputatious relationships and to pursue the question: ‘How do I fulfil my ethical responsibilities towards my colleagues while maintaining a critical, reflective attitude towards the institutional life that we create and sustain each day?’ In reporting on this project, I begin to examine the relationship between individual action research projects and change and improvement in schools. In many educational accounts of action research, there is often a failure to consider the relationship between individual action and the dynamics and ethos of the organisation as a whole. Many school-based action research projects remain classroom bound. This is not the case in my work.
All three projects were motivated by a desire to develop an inter-subjective form of collaboration, directed towards teaching and learning. The projects were attempts to realise values in practice. In the three projects, there was an initial emphasis on dialogue. However, as the projects developed, the emphasis shifted towards conversation as a form of communication best suited to fostering a collaborative culture, based on mutual interest, goodwill, concern and friendship. In conversation, the emphasis falls as much, if not more, on the maintenance of the communicative relation as on the subject of the communication. The distinction between conversation and dialogue is developed in the course of the thesis.

The methodology employed in the study is, essentially, that of action research, as elaborated in the work of Whitehead. Moreover, there is a sustained attempt to conduct the research in a reflexive way, and, in doing so, to demonstrate how reflexivity is, and should be, an integral part of practitioner research. Reflexive in the sense that Derrida might use about his work in philosophy. He suggests that the task he has taken on himself has been to find a place in which "philosophy as such can appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner." (6) In writing this thesis, I have sought to find a mode of presentation that allows me to interrogate and reflect upon my practices and my values as they are embodied in my practices, both as a teacher and a researcher. I attempt to treat my subjectivity, as a teacher and a researcher, as a "mode of relation to the self", as conversation. (7) In doing so, I believe I have responded to the challenge of developing a form of presentation, that charts the relation between the 'I', the self, and 'Me', the self as other, thus demonstrating the characteristics of a
reflexive form of school-based action research, and, thereby, contributing to the model of living educational theory proposed by Whitehead. (8)

This thesis lays the foundation for a theory of teaching as a form of social practice, characterised by a disposition of care that is associated with friendship, and expressed through conversation. In doing so, it makes a valuable and original contribution to the literature on teaching.

**Conceptualising the Thesis in Relation to the Literature**

For me, as a teacher-researcher, reflecting on the nature of the pedagogic relation and the nature of practitioner enquiry, Plato’s Dialogues, in particular *Meno*, in which Socrates is both the teacher and the philosopher of teaching, are foundational texts. (9) From Plato, we get an image of the teacher as learner. The teacher whose authority is based upon a willingness to pursue questions rather than to give answers. In Plato, a teacher is someone who encourages a student to question and to enter into dialogue about ideas. In Plato, teaching, pedagogy, is, primarily, relational and dialogic. My thesis takes this insight and explores its implications for my own practice.

In broad terms, the work of this thesis may be placed in the teacher-as-researcher movement, associated with Lawrence Stenhouse and developed in the work of John Elliott (10). Stenhouse was concerned to promote a culture of self-critical enquiry in education and to develop the role of the teacher as a researcher in his/her own teaching situation. This thesis is written in the spirit of critical self-enquiry. The
thesis also has elements in common with the critical pedagogy, developed from the
twork of Paulo Freire.

Teachers enquiring into their own teaching have employed a variety of different,
though related, methodologies. These include practitioner ethnography, case-study
research, biographical and life-history research and action research. (11) My own
work bears closest resemblance to action research. It has been influenced by the
work of Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead and by aspects of the model of action
research developed by Stephen Kemmis, among others, at Deakin University in
Australia. (12) This model draws on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, as
elaborated in the work of Jurgen Habermas.

Critical pedagogy and action research share an emancipatory impulse. This impulse is
served by a methodology that balances reflection with action. My own work is
reflective, in that it strives for awareness and insight, and it is motivated by a desire to
explore intersubjective forms of communication, which have the potential to
transform the way we relate to our selves and to each other. In this, I identify with
Foucault’s suggestion that “criticism…does not mark out impassable boundaries or
describe closed systems; it brings to light transformable singularities.” (13)

Much of the current action research in education traces its origins back to the
pioneering efforts of the social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, who is credited with coining
the phrase ‘action research’. (14) There is something unsettling, though instructive, in
this tracing, which lays bare the manner in which action researchers seek to situate
themselves, as much as it illuminates the nature of Lewin’s work. For example, Mary
Louise Holly, a former colleague of John Elliott, at the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia, emphasises Lewin's concern with “practical situations of social conflict”, and quotes Lewin’s reference to his work on “the psychological problems confronting any minority group whose space of free movement is restricted by barriers of caste and prejudice.” (15) Holly also quotes from an essay by Dave Ebbutt, which refers to Lewin’s work with Jewish and black minorities and his insistence on “democratically guided social change.” (16) The image of Lewin which emerges from Holly’s presentation is of a human being concerned for the well-being of others and concerned to eliminate inequality and injustice. In Holly’s account of him, Lewin regarded social research as directed at expanding the possibilities for social justice and egalitarian social relations. Carr and Kemmis, in their influential Becoming Critical interpret Lewin’s work as anticipating three defining characteristics of contemporary action research. Firstly, it was participatory in nature; secondly it was democratic in impulse; and thirdly, it was directed at social change and the development of social research. (17) True, they quibble with the positivistic nature of the language he employs, but the picture that emerges is similar to the one presented by Holly. McNiff alerts us to some of the problems with this representation of Lewin and his work. (18) In support of her questioning attitude, she quotes David Hopkins’s view that the “functionalist values that appear in his (Lewin’s) writing tend to offset his commitment to democratic and communitarian values.” (19) Ironically, the one quotation from Lewin in Carr and Kemmis reveals a voice that could not have been anticipated, given the qualities and foundational status that the authors read into his work. Carr and Kemmis introduce the quotation from Lewin by suggesting that “a self-reflective spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting is central to the action research approach.”
(20) They explain that Lewin, from whom the idea of a self-reflective spiral derives, described the process in terms of planning, fact-finding and execution. They then cite Lewin’s example of this process in action. It is a lengthy quotation, which is recorded without further comment from Carr and Kemmis. It includes the following:

For example, in the bombing of Germany a certain factory may have been chosen as the first target after careful consideration of various priorities and of the best ways and means of dealing with the target. The attack is pressed home and immediately a reconnaissance plane follows with the one objective of determining as accurately as possible the new situation. This reconnaissance or fact-finding has four functions: it should evaluate the action by showing whether what has been achieved is above or below expectation; it should serve as a basis for correctly planning the next step; it should serve as a basis for modifying the ‘overall’ plan; and finally, it gives the planners a chance to learn; that is to gather new general insights, for instance, regarding the strengths and weakness of certain weapons or techniques of action. The next step again is composed of a circle of planning, executing, and reconnaissance… (21)

There is no hint of irony in Lewin’s writing, and no indication that Carr and Kemmis intended the example to be read as ironical. It is hard to reconcile the voice of this quotation with the image of Lewin, which emerges from the writings of those who write about him. It is a voice with which I do not want to be identified. It is a voice that encourages me to trace a different line of development from my work. Maybe this is unfair to Lewin. However, the quotation illustrates that there is no direct access to the person, in this case, Lewin, but only to the text which invites analysis and interpretation. Perhaps Lewin’s text is as much a product of prevailing social attitudes and social blindness as it is the product of a single individual. It may indicate how the language we use is, somehow, always second-hand, marked by the usage of others. Perhaps, the invocation of Lewin, in the writing of some action researchers, reveals the anxieties inherent in locating one’s work within a tradition,
Reading Practice

Dermott

reveals the need that is consciously or unconsciously felt to find a home for one’s research? And issues of biography and geography come into play. It is no coincidence that Lewin’s work is influential in the work of those action researchers - Kemmis, Holly and Elliott, for example - who worked at the University of East Anglia, while Friere, whose work is influential in Irish universities, does not feature in any significant way. Therefore, finding a home for one’s research is not a simple matter and, in the case of action research, or reflective practice, which has complex and varied influences, which include classical sources and which cross the boundaries of linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, literary criticism, sociology feminism and ethics, the task is a complex one. Thus, this brief review of the literature can only sound some personally relevant notes, and locate my work in relation to them.

This thesis is concerned with teaching, with language and with understanding. It conceives of language as a social practice, central to the process of education. With Freire it makes an inextricable connection between dialogue and education, and regards education as a process through which people become aware of their subjectivity and their potential as agents, rather than objects, of history. (22) Freire is an inspirational figure, but his work, located in a culture and in circumstances very different from my own, offers few practical guidelines as to how an emancipatory dialogue can become the constitutive element of school life, in the context in which I work. However, Freire’s understanding of the telos of education is the same understanding that animates my own work. For Freire education is directed towards enabling the individual to become a subject who acts upon and transforms his/her world. This transformation, Freire suggests, “is a praxis: the action and reflection of
men upon their world in order to transform it” (23) Interestingly, Freire’s formulation of education as a form of praxis, that is, as action and reflection, parallels the philosophy of the reflective practice movement in education and, more particularly, action research. Freire also emphasises a pedagogical relationship that is marked by dialogue and this dialogue is linked, in the words of Henry Giroux, “to a social project...to the collective struggle for a life without oppression and exploitation.” (24) The work described in this thesis set out to explore ways of making the practice of teaching and learning, and the practice of collegiate action as intersubjective as possible. It sets out to explore the discursive practices which can establish and maintain intersubjective forms of social relations.

No work on dialogue or intersubjectivity can ignore the contribution of Jurgen Habermas, whose ambition of creating an emancipatory social science is founded on a dialogue-centred theory. (25) Habermas begins with Austin’s insight that saying is a form of doing, directed at someone. (26) In other words, language is essentially active, social and dialogic in character. Habermas argues that it is possible to identify the universal constituents of dialogue in the structures of language itself. The system of personal pronouns for example, presupposes communication between or across subjects. (27) For Habermas, every utterance has a double structure – a propositional and an interpersonal one. To speak is both to say something and to address someone. Based on his analysis, Habermas proposes an ideal speech situation, which he argues is anticipated in the structure of speech. This ideal is one in which all participants are autonomous and equal. No one controls what is said, or who speaks. All participants have an equal right to make assertions and to ask questions and the distortions of communication are eliminated. As Connerton points out there is a link between the
theory of communication and the theory of politics. (28) For Habermas, the ideal speech situation anticipates a form of life in which autonomy and responsibility are possible and this is the point of departure for his critical theory of society.

The ideal speech situation is a model against which certain real speech situations can be measured. Although there seems an obvious link between the idea of teaching and learning that derives from Plato's Dialogues and Habermas's theory of an ideal speech situation, the connection between the two is rarely, if ever, made. Habermas himself does not offer any examples of how the ideal speech situation might become a living, speaking reality. The account of the project with my third year English students, organised around the concept of the ideal speech situation, attempts to fill this gap. Of course, educationalists have drawn on Habermas's work, but this has been, largely, at an abstract and theoretical level. An exception to this is Robert Young, who argues that Habermas’s theory can “provide the basis for a detailed analysis of actual examples of classroom interaction, an analysis which can identify communicative constraints on opportunities for enhancing the problem-solving power of learners.” (29) For Young a major problem in schools is that “an inadequate view of knowledge predominates” (30) According to him, many teachers view knowledge as something fixed and determined and their pedagogy consists in teaching students to apply the method(s) that will lead them to ‘discover’ the pre-existing and unchanging truth. Against this prevailing view, Young proposes a view of knowledge as something constructed and discursive. Young argues that the inadequacy of teachers’ understanding of knowledge has led to inappropriate methods of communication in the classroom, methods which inhibit the learners’ participation in the inquiry into knowledge and the claims of knowledge advanced by others, including those made by
teachers. (31) My work shares some of the same concerns as those expressed by Young, especially in terms of the nature of student participation in the classroom. There are, however, major differences in the content and method of our respective work. In his case, he subjects segments of classroom interaction to detailed analysis and critique, pointing out where opportunities for positioning students as the subjects, rather than the objects, of learning were lost. In reading his work, it is hard not to conclude that the teachers, whose lessons are analysed, have become the objects of his study. For example he notes that “the teacher was unable to cope when she lost ownership of the direction of the lesson.” (32) Young’s work proceeds on the assumption that the role of teacher and the role of researcher are separate. It is the researcher, in Young’s work, whose insights are privileged. In my case I enquire into my own practice, so that the role of teacher and researcher are interchangeable and mutually informative. Moreover, there is a fundamental difference in the understanding of teaching that informs our respective work. For Young the moral purpose of teaching is to uphold “the rights of pupils as rational interlocutors.” (33) I don’t disagree with this purpose, but there is more to teaching than upholding the rights of pupils as rational beings, and this ‘more’ is concerned with the interpersonal nature of the pedagogic relation. Teaching is intersubjective. It has a rational dimension that is concerned with enquiry, but it also has an affective, interpersonal dimension, that is neglected in Young’s account of the classroom and the purpose of a critically-informed educational research. From his reading of Habermas, Young argues that a functional linguistics could help us monitor the level of pupil participation in the classroom:

Pupil participation in learning (...) is explicable through functional linguistics because this is a linguistics that examines participation in task achievement
through the achievement of agent roles and the expected contribution of particular agents to task completion in the form of communicative moves. (34)

Young’s account of pupil participation is influenced by Habermas’s concept of communicative rationality and the role that such a rationality might play in the service of human freedom and critical democracy. (35) And I hope that my teaching might contribute to such worthwhile aims. However, the identification of teaching with the development of communicative rationality distorts important aspects of the pedagogic relation, and blurs the contingent, particular and embodied nature of teaching and learning. Teaching is a more complex, existential activity than is suggested by Young’s account.

Young’s failure to give a full account of the pedagogic relation is related to a similar failure in Habermas’s work. While Habermas identifies that all utterances have an interpersonal aspect and, thus, situates communication in a relational context, he is not concerned to pursue this insight or to evaluate the role that sympathy, compassion, concern or friendship play in the creation and maintenance of dialogue and dialogic relations. In this regard the work of Gadamer on the nature of conversation, and Buber on the nature of the encounter in the I-Thou situation fill out some of the gaps in Habermas’s account of communication. (36)

In Habermas, as in Kant, reason and rationality are invoked as the guarantees of truthfulness, at the expense of emotions and affections, and the discourse ethics of the ideal speech situation is characterised by an emphatic orientation towards general
rules and processes of argumentation. Thus, Habermas looks to politics and law as areas where the ideal speech situation might serve a regulative function in seeking to ensure the rationality of the discourse. (37) The tendency in Habermas’s theory of discourse is to privilege rationality, and the processes of argument that support it, over other forms of communication, most notably, conversation. Habermas is alert to this tendency:

The presuppositions of action oriented to reaching understanding are more easily seen in processes of argumentation. This advantage as a research strategy does not signify any ontological distinction, as if argumentation were more important or even more fundamental than conversation or the everyday communicative practice that, constituted as a life-world, forms the most encompassing horizon. (38)

However, Habermas is not interested in exploring the communicative practice of everyday situations. It is the typical and the general, rather than the particular and the contingent, that command his attention. One general principle of real value to education is what Seyla Benhabib refers to as the expectation of ‘egalitarian reciprocity’ underpinning the concept of the ideal speech situation. (39) To commit oneself to this principle, as a teacher, is to bring an emancipatory disposition to the communicative practice of the classroom. The concept of the ideal speech situation also has something valuable to say to researchers. In participating in free communication, participants assume or expect certain norms or standards of behaviour. Habermas refers to these expectations as validity claims. Rehg defines a validity claim as “something claiming to hold transsubjectively and thus open to the give-and-take of reasons.” (40) These expectations or validity claims include:
* Comprehensibility - that the participants will speak in a comprehensible way;

* Truth - that the participants will speak truly and accurately;

* Sincerity – that the participants will mean what they say;

* Appropriateness – that participants will speak in ways that are appropriate to the situation. (41)

In the ideal speech situation, these standards, norms or expectations of conduct may become the subject of the discourse and participants might be asked to justify their conduct in relation to them, or participants might choose to explain their conduct in relation to them, or question their validity. In any event, participants demonstrate a willingness to subject their conduct and/or assertions to question. In other words, the integrity of the ideal speech situation can be reflexively questioned and redeemed. The possibility of subjecting all norms and opinions to reflexive questioning is one that has the capacity to strengthen and safeguard the integrity of research projects. Interestingly, Whitehead suggests that Habermas’s validity claims may provide the basis for evaluating the claims to knowledge made by teacher-researchers. (42)

What interests me in the validity claims associated with the concept of the ideal speech situation is the degree to which these claims are directed at the other. They represent the standards of behaviour which should govern our communication with others. They show a concern for the welfare of the other. They show a desire to be just to the other. In his more recent work, Habermas has given more consideration to the nature of the intersubjective relations within communication. While still primarily concerned with issues around rationality and rationally-motivated consensus and decision making, phrases such as “empathetic sympathy” and “the dignity of each
individual” appear in his work. (43) In other words, Habermas nods in the direction of an ethics of care within the intersubjectivity of a communicative relation, though his discussion, as ever, demonstrates a disregard for particular contexts and individual participants. And it is precisely the ethics of care that inform my discourse practices, within my school setting, that I seek to explore in this thesis and, in doing so, I give a more Aristotelian or practical emphasis to the exploration of communicative relations than is found in Habermas’s neo-Kantian account. As William Rehg notes:

Habermas’s understanding of moral discourse remains problematic in the light of the care perspective, and for a number of reasons. The basic problem (...) is that he conceives morality in terms of *universalizability*, understood in a manner squarely located in the Kantian impartialist tradition. As his critics read him, this means that (...) everything particular falls from view: individual needs and feelings, particular conceptions of the good, all motives except that of finding the moral universal. (44)

Despite the absence of the particular in Habermas, his discourse ethics “locates an interpersonal ‘communitarian’ moment at the very heart of moral insight.” (45) The implications of an intersubjective notion of insight allied to an intersubjective notion of care, are explored in this thesis. In this regard, the work of the philosopher, Nicholas Burbules, is instructive in the manner in which he considers dialogue as a relation:

What underlies and shapes the patterns of interaction in a dialogue are the attitudes, emotions, and expectations that participants have regarding each other and the value of the dialogue itself; these are formed partly out of the dynamic of interaction as the discussion moves along. What sustains a dialogue over time is not only lively interchange about the topic at hand, but a certain commitment to one’s partner; a commitment that might not precede the dialogue, but arises gradually in the spirit of the engagement. (46)
Taking up Habermas’s notion of an ideal speech situation, Burbules extends the discussion beyond an understanding of discourse ethics as the exercise of reason. Giving due emphasis to the interpersonal nature of dialogic communication, Burbules, influenced by the writings of philosophers such as Noddings, suggests that the ethics of discourse involve an ethics of care. (47) A communicative engagement with others is motivated by affective as well as rational factors. Burbules identifies a number of communicative virtues which facilitate the expression of “one’s beliefs, values, and feelings accurately” and which allow one “to listen to and hear those of others”. (48) Reflecting on the idea of sincerity in Habermas’s validity claims, Burbules goes on to suggest that:

One theoretical path to pursue might be to broaden Habermas’s sincerity claim to include attention to broader issues of emotional authenticity and empathy: part of effective communication is in coming to feel certain ways about our partners in conversation. Similarly the success of a communicative relation depends on certain virtues that cannot be taken for granted in most cases, including patience, tolerance for alternative points of view, an openness to give and receive criticism and (...) the willingness and ability to listen thoughtfully and attentively. I have been calling these “communicative virtues”. (49)

Interestingly, Burbules suggests that, because the development of these virtues is “time-consuming, deeply personal, and intertwined with emotional as well as intellectual factors, formal educational settings are not well equipped to develop these virtues when they are lacking”. (50) Thus, he argues that these virtues are more likely to be developed in situations of friendship or in family situations.

However, the action research reports in this thesis describe, evaluate and explore the implications for a form of pedagogy, in a school setting, which is based upon an ethics
of concern, friendship and goodwill and expressed through the kind of virtues described by Burbules. The action of this research seeks to make school a site where friendship can contribute to the creation of an ethics of care, along the lines outlined by Noddings. Noddings’ work on ethics is interesting on many fronts, not least because it conceptualises ethics as primarily relational and posits dialogue as a major component of the ethics she proposes. Noddings describes her work as giving “appropriate attention and credit to the affective foundation of existence.” (51)

Unlike Habermas, Noddings is concerned with the unique and particular quality of each interpersonal encounter. For her, a teacher is someone who enters a relation of caring with his/her students. What this means, she argues, is that the teacher:

the one-caring receives the other, for the interval of caring, completely non-selectively. She is present to the other and places her motive power in his service. (...) In the language of Martin Buber, the cared-for is encountered as ‘Thou’, a subject, and not as an ‘It’, an object of analysis. (...) When a teacher asks a question in class and a student responds, she receives not just the ‘response’ but the student. (...) The student is infinitely more important than the subject-matter. (52)

Noddings’ version of the pedagogical relation is an intersubjective one, informed by an ethics of care. The nature of the care involved in teaching can, I believe, be understood in terms of Aristotle’s theory of friendship. Although Noddings does not refer to Aristotle, it is clear that her work is Aristotelian in character. Noddings’ concept of care is similar to Aristotle’s concept of friendship.

Aristotle’s theory of friendship is of interest to teachers because it allows us to value relationships which are founded on care and which are personally and morally significant. Aristotle sees friendship as allowing a conception of the human good
that is concerned with the other. "Friends," he writes "must have goodwill to each
other, and wish good things to each other." (53) Friendship is a moral virtue and, like
all virtues, it can only find expression and definition in virtuous actions. Friendship
also disposes us to regard the other in a kindly way. If, as Noddings argues, teaching
is relational and caring, then friendship might help us to define the nature of
pedagogical caring. And conversation, in which we turn and grant our full attention
to the other, might be the form of communication best suited to expressing and
sustaining a caring pedagogy.

Thus, this thesis elaborates a theory of conversation; relates this to an ethics of care
and friendship, and situates this theory in the context of the pedagogical relation
between teacher and student; the professional relation between colleague and
colleague; and the relation of friendship between student and student. In doing so, it
makes an original contribution to the literature on dialogue in education.

Methodology

The three school-based projects were undertaken within an action research framework
of action and reflection, loosely based on McNiff’s work. (54) These were then
written as reports, containing descriptions and reflections on my practices. These
reports were, in turn, read and theorised through a process of dialogic reflection. The
combination of the description of practice and the theorising of that practice, through
dialogic reflection, constitutes what Whitehead refers to as ‘living educational
theory’, a theory founded on a dialogic principle, which the form of presentation in
this thesis seeks to embody. (55) As my thesis has progressed, I have sought to
ensure that the ontology which informs it, the theory which it develops and the
methodology it employs are sympathetic and compatible. For this reason, conversation and dialogue are central to my work - as values, as ways of generating knowledge and as methods of presentation.

In relation to methodology, it is interesting to observe the degree to which Lewin’s notion of self-reflective spirals of action and reflection have become essential components of action research in the work of some educational action researchers, most notably, Carr & Kemmis and John Elliott. The former, for example, claim that “a single loop of planning, acting, observing and reflecting is only a beginning; if the process stops there it should not be regarded as action research at all.” (56) For his part, Elliott has developed an elaborate model of the action research cycles. (57) There is a danger, of course, in these schemes that the emancipatory possibilities in action research, the possibilities for self-development, critical self-awareness and praxis, may be lost or diluted in the adherence to a set of procedures. These procedures may become prescriptive, and overly technical. The attention to methodology risks weakening the philosophical ground and the telos of action research. Elliott is clear on the telos of action research, describing it as a “form of practical enquiry aimed at generating wisdom about how to realise educational values in action.” (58) The problem with providing action researchers with a formula for conducting their research is that it assumes the validity of a method, quite independently of the values, creativity, concerns and situation of the practitioner who is required to apply it. The case I am arguing is analogous to the one made by Elliott against the kind of educational theory transmitted to student teachers in initial or in-service contexts. Elliott argues that the teacher educator who transmits educational theory assumes “the validity of a theory can be demonstrated quite independently of
the thinking of the practitioner who is required to apply it." (59) Elliott rightly, in my estimation, challenges this assumption. The elaboration of models of cycles of action and reflection risks becoming an exercise in logic, removed from the social situations in which the reflection and action occurs. In a school context, cycles of action and reflection are influenced by many factors, including such things as the rhythm and turning of the school year; the division of the year into terms; the dynamics of interpersonal relations; the shared intuition between a teacher and students that it is time to move on to new topic, or a different activity. Even Whitehead, whose work is more attuned to the kinds of factors mentioned above, encourages teacher action-researchers to present their work according to a formula of his devising:

I am suggesting that teacher action-researchers present their claim to know how and why they are attempting to overcome practical educational problems in this form:

I experience a problem when some of my educational values are negated in my practice.
I imagine a solution.
I act in the direction of my solution.
I evaluate the outcome of my actions.
I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations.

(60)

It is not difficult to imagine how Whitehead’s set of statements might end up acting against critical awareness, by restraining the way individuals or groups understand their situation. And while much of the impetus to reflect on one’s practice may originate in an experience of negativity with regard to the realisation of one’s values, there may be a host of other motivations. Perhaps, the problem for action researchers lies in the concern to establish their models of action research as systematic and rigorous, so that they meet the requirements of “pure” research and, in seeking to meet these requirements, the models lose something of the nature of research as a cultural construct, and a construct of subjective and inter-subjective understanding and action.
The emphasis in action research in placing an ‘I’ at the centre of the research may well be undermined by the methodology built around it.

In the work of Whitehead, the purpose of practitioner enquiry is a moral one, concerned with the realisation of values in the practice of teaching and learning. Whitehead situates the logic of the question at the centre of practitioner enquiry. Drawing on Gadamer and Collingwood, he proposes a dialectic approach to understanding, and to research. (61) I conceptualise my own work as the process of pursuing the question - what kind of discourse is ethically appropriate in a school setting? This is an iterative process, in which the question is revisited and reviewed. The form which this thesis takes is an attempt to capture the movement of question and answer in the search for insight, and in the construction of ‘living educational theory’. (62) In this regard, I identify with Whitehead’s statement that a central problem “is how to present a dialectic claim to knowledge”, and my thesis may be regarded as a response to this problem. (63) Interestingly, Whitehead views Aristotelian logic as an obstacle to the dialectic movement of reflective enquiry. Whitehead correctly, in my estimation, identifies the propositional logic of Aristotle, which he suggests “eliminates contradictions from correct thought”, as a hindrance to the reflection of practitioners, who experience contradiction or negation in their professional lives. (64) He contrasts this with Plato, for whom contradiction is part and parcel of a dialectic way of thinking. There is a risk, of course, in drawing a distinction between propositional and dialectic logic, that the importance of Aristotle’s example for practitioner enquiry may be lost. In my own case, while I draw on the example of Plato’s Dialogues in presenting my ideas, I equally look to the
example of moral enquiry in Aristotle, in the *Ethics*, in my pursuit of practical
wisdom in my teaching and learning.

For Gadamer, the Platonic dialogues establish the priority of the question in enquiry. Yet Aristotle, whose logic, according to Whitehead, hinders the pursuit of the question, is the one whose questions and speculation in the realm of ethics provide practitioners with questions worth pursuing. In Gadamer, it is Aristotle whose questions bear upon social life - “Criticising the Platonic idea of the good as an empty generality, he (Aristotle) asks instead the question of the humanly good, what is good in terms of human action.” (65) For Freire, the humanly good in education is the creation of an inter-subjective form of life, through a process of reflection and action. For me, part of the attraction of action research lies in its relation to Freire’s understanding of education as a form of reflection and action aimed at creating a inter-subjective form of life. Whitehead’s work has assisted me greatly in my endeavours to realise my values in practice, and I regard his work, in part, as Aristotelian in character, a viewpoint supported by John Elliott:

Whitehead’s point that the reflective practices of teachers embody descriptions and explanations of how to realise educational values is highly consistent with Aristotle’s account of moral enquiry in his *Ethics*. He argues that moral values cannot be understood by simply examining the terms we use to express them in language. This is because moral values are fundamentally defined in and through the actions we undertake to realise them. The implication of this is that our social practices embody ‘descriptions’ of our values. And we develop such ‘descriptions’ by reflecting upon our actions and ways of improving them. (66)

The implication for this for practitioner research is that the data of the research will be descriptions or records of practice.
Interestingly, Gadamer, in discussing Plato and Aristotle in his consideration of the priority of the question, describes a process that is similar to that described by Whitehead. For him, action research emerges as a practitioner experiences a sense of living in contradiction to his/her values. ("To understand the values, which move our educational development forward, I think we should start with records of our experience and their negation.") (67) This sets in train the cycles of action and reflection which attempt to overcome this feeling of contradiction. The foundation for this kind of reflective practice can be traced back to the Greeks. If Plato is considered a founding father, in relation to pedagogy, then Aristotle may be viewed as the founding father in relation to reflective practice. For Aristotle, the moral sphere is one of human action, attitudes and institutions. Moral being, in Aristotle, is human action or practice, guided by reflection. (68) While an individual can have a general sense of the good, the proper way to act in a situation can never be taught in advance. Moral knowledge arises out of a process of deliberation, or dialogue, that inevitably involves what Gadamer refers to as 'self-deliberation'. (69) And what triggers this deliberation, according to Gadamer, is 'the sudden realisation of the question that advances into openness'. (70) This sudden realisation has a negative quality attached to it, a negativity that implies a question:

The real nature of the sudden idea is perhaps less the sudden realisation of the solution to a problem than the sudden realisation of the question that advances into openness and thus makes an answer possible. Every sudden idea has the nature of a question. But the sudden realisation of the question is already a breach in the smooth front of popular opinion. (...) In fact we have experiences through the stimulus given to us by that which does not fit in with preconceived opinion. Thus questioning is more a 'passion' than an action. A question presses itself on us; we can no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion. (71)

Foucault makes a similar point when he says:
For a domain of action, a behaviour, to enter the field of thought, it is necessary for a certain number of factors to have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number of difficulties around it. (72)

What is of interest in Gadamer’s account of the priority of the question in enquiry is that the dialogic process, which the sudden idea gives rise to, is not exclusively a logical one. Rather it is ethical and affective. In Gadamer’s words, it partakes of ‘passion’, an ethical and practical passion. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, suggests that the virtues of understanding, insight and wisdom are practical virtues and are brought to bear by all good people in their relations with others. (73) And it is in relation to others that the sudden idea may cause us to question our practice.

Gadamer may also help us to conceive of reflection in terms of enquiry. For Gadamer, personal enquiry, or self deliberation, is governed by the pursuit of the question which sets in train a dialogic process of question and answer. (74) The inner reflection of the individual is merely an internalised version of the public forms of dialogue and conversation. (75) Gadamer’s work offers us both a metaphor for reflection and an insight into the logic that governs it, that is, the logic of the question. And it is this interrogative logic which, when it is applied to “the analysis and textualization of field data, as well as the formulation of research methodologies ...” and “the broader connections between fieldwork, self-knowledge, textual presentation and the gamut of social relations involved in qualitative research”, constitutes reflexivity. (76) In reflexive enquiry the research itself and the preconceptions, assumptions and presuppositions of the researcher, are all researchable.
The cycles of action and reflection in this thesis were directed at facilitating the realisation of intersubjectivity in a number of school settings. And, although they do not follow the pattern outlined by Carr and Kemmis, or Elliott, the thesis, as a whole, is consistent with Whitehead’s view of action research as a form of educational enquiry and educational theorising, in the manner in which it presents both descriptions of practice and the dialogic theorising of that practice. As Elliott expresses it:

Whitehead’s view (is) that in giving others access to records of his or her reflective attempts to realise educational values a teacher invites them to examine the validity of a claim to know his or her own professional development. But Whitehead’s view of educational theory leads him to point out that these records must not only provide evidence of the theory (concrete forms of action) but also the process by which it was theorised (dialogic reflection with self and others). (77)

Describing Practice.

The primary source of research data for this thesis is the action research notebooks or journals I maintained during the projects. These contain my record of each project, as I perceived and experienced it, and also my reflections and other speculative writing around the existential, theoretical and methodological questions that arose during the course of each project. They also contain quotations from works read. Journalling is an interesting process. It is a way of entering into dialogue with the self. As Joanne Cooper suggests, “a journal is a form of narrative as well as a form of research...a way to learn who we have been, who we are, and who we are becoming”. (78) Journals help us to form what Buber refers to as an I-Thou relationship with the self and, in doing so, to encounter the self as other. (79) Ricoeur expresses it thus: “To
understand oneself is to understand oneself as one confronts the text and to receive from it the conditions for a self other than which first undertakes the reading." (80)

The research journal draws attention to the reflexive nature of my work and of research, in general. It allows me to question or problematise the extent to which research is a writing of the self. Furthermore, it allows me to converse with myself around ethical issues and issues of interpretation. (81) My notebooks and those of other reflective practitioners correspond to the hypomnemata of the ancient Greeks. These were copybooks into which the individual entered quotations, accounts of action, thoughts and arguments. Foucault says of these that:

> They constituted a material memory of things read, heard or thought, thus offering these as an accumulated treasure for rereading and later meditation. They also formed the raw material for the writing of more systematic treatises... (82)

What is interesting for the reflective practitioner, in Foucault’s remarks, is a reminder that writing has played a central part in the formation of the self, from earliest times, and continues to do so. Susan Sontag, writing on Roland Barthes, suggests that his work is “artfully anti-confessional”. She then goes on to say:

> But this commitment to impersonality does not preclude the avowal of the self; it is only another variation on the project of self-examination: the noblest project of French literature. Valery offers one ideal of self-absorption – impersonal, disinterested. Rousseau offers another ideal – passionate, avowing vulnerability. (...) Barthes is the latest major participant in the great national literary project, inaugurated by Montaigne: the self as vocation, life as a reading of the self. (83)

In practitioner research, research becomes a reading of the self, through the writing of the self in the form of research journals, which form the raw material for ‘the writing of more systematic treatises.’ (84) The journals allow the researcher to step back from his/her practice and question it. The more systematic treatises are, in the case of
this thesis, the reports on the projects, drawn from these notebooks. Like the text of
the analysand in the psychoanalytic encounter, these reports are then subjected to
reading and re-reading. It is the writing of the reports and the reading of them that
constitute the reflective practice if the thesis. Reflection is primarily interrogative
and textual, and directed at interpretation. It is, in effect, reading, but reading
understood as interpretative dialogue or conversation. Shoshana Felman, quoting
Lacan, refers to the textual or analytic knowledge of the analyst in the following way:

The analysand speaks to the analyst, whom he endows with the authority of
the one who possesses knowledge – knowledge of what is precisely lacking in
the analysand’s own knowledge. The analyst, however, knows nothing of the
sort. His only competence, insists Lacan, lies in “what I would call textual
knowledge (...) Textual knowledge (...) is knowledge of the functioning of
language, of symbolic structures, of the signifier, knowledge at once derived
from – and directed toward – interpretation. (85)

Hans-Georg Gadamer describes this kind of interpretative reading as dialogue. (86)
And this thesis, which strives to be dialogical, takes the form of a series of texts and
accompanying readings. Not only is the thesis reflective, it also strives to be
reflexive, that is, to engage in the deep hermeneutics of the self. Burbules’s
characterising of dialogue summarises, in many respects, the reflexive ambition of
this thesis, and explains the dialogic method through which this reflexive ambition is
pursued:

Every understanding is practical and is established through a process of
interpretation that necessarily transforms what was initially said or meant into
terms that are salient for the listener. In the context of dialogue, this means
that what begins as an unfathomable difference can become an occasion for
deeper self-understanding, seeing oneself as a stranger through the
understandings of another. (87)

Seeing oneself as a stranger involves risk. Indeed, Richard Winter suggests that
putting oneself at risk is a basic feature of the action researcher. (88) This risk-taking
is, however, not simply an exercise in thought, removed from affective considerations. On the contrary, the thoughtfulness, the reflection, involved in considering ourselves as other, is replete with emotion. Terms like ‘self-study’, self-appraisal’, and ‘self-examination’ can and often do suggest a juridical and confessional process, in which the revealed self is one which has to be denounced. There is a danger that the reflective and reflexive processes of the teacher inquiring into his/her own practices may be destructive and harmful. This is the danger that Dadds warns against in her work. (89) It is for this reason that the mode of relation between the individual and the self is so important in enquiry. There is a need for an attitude of care and concern. It is for this reason that I conceive of the relation between self and self as a conversation, in which both issues and needs are given equal attention. There must be a felt relation between the ‘I’ and the ‘You’ of practitioner enquiry, a quality of connectedness and concern. (90) This idea is eloquently expressed by Cooper:

Journal writing places us in relation to ourselves so that we become both the one who is caring (or one-caring) and the cared-for. Noddings (1984) defines this caring relation as one in which we are obligated to care for ourselves even as we care for the other. (...) In this case (a teacher’s self-reflective journal) the self that is the object of the writer’s reflection is the ‘other’; the writer ‘feels with’ this other self through a process of engrossment, a kind of empathy that involves reception rather than projection. Through writing we are able to receive ourselves, our feelings, our beliefs and to hear our own voices as they tell ours stories in ways that help us to grow. (91)

In placing an ‘I’ at the heart of the research project, and in finding ways of presenting the conversation of the ‘I’ with itself, this thesis exemplifies a form of reflexive research, where research is understood as a return that, in the words of Julia Kristeva, is “simultaneously recollection, questioning and thought.” (92) Research is a form of recollection or review, but it is also the practice of writing, and this thesis seeks to remain aware of how the authoring self draws its authority not only from personal
experience and reflection but from the field of educational research in which it locates itself, with its theories, concepts and texts; the rules and conventions which seek to govern this field, including issues of procedure, ethics, and presentation; and the language with which the self writes itself and is written into existence. Thus, as Frederick Steier notes, “the self to whom our reflexivity refers is most clearly a social self, who becomes ‘that’ self precisely through participation with others, and allows research to become understood as a conversation (or, rather, several).” (93) The conversational nature of my research is further reflected in the references to a wide variety of texts drawn from a variety of contexts.

In addition to my journals, there are other data sources for my research. In the first project with the friendship groups, for example, there are minutes of scheduled meetings between a sample group of six students and myself. These students also wrote a review of the project from their perspective, and there is a published transcription of a taped conversation with six colleagues, who acted as critical supporters. (94) From these multiple perspectives, there is general agreement that the project worked in practical and pragmatic ways – the students found benefit for their study, and found benefit in acting in a way that was collaborative and supportive.

Similar data – students’ notebooks; written reviews by participants; written reviews by a critical friend - support the claims made in respect of the other projects. Triangulation and multiple perspectives establish the truthfulness and sincerity of my work – the events I claim to have happened did happen and there is general agreement on the outcomes of the projects from the perspective of participants and critical supporters.
However, the consensus around the projects hides rather than reveals the issues that are at the heart of this thesis. It is far from clear what the significance of these projects is in contributing to an understanding of teaching and learning in general. How am I to interpret them? Indeed, what is it that I interpret? And what is the relevance of my interpretation for others? The more that the object of research becomes a search for understanding of human action and meaning, the more it becomes concerned with language and interpretation. And so it is in this thesis. Through a variety of methods, that testify to the intersubjective nature of meaning and social reality, I can establish a general consensus on the meaning of the projects for all those involved. However, this shared understanding operates at a surface level. My journals, and the writing diaries of my students, along with all the other sources of data, provide the pre-texts of the research. The text of the research is the action research reports that I write, using the various pre-texts as supporting evidence. It is at this point that the reading of the research text that I have created comes to the foreground – the reading of my practice in the title of the dissertation. This reading or interpretation searches out the sub-text of the research text, using a variety of essentially dialogic or conversational approaches derived from hermeneutics, psychoanalysis and literary criticism. In other words, the work of the research is a series of essays or attempts to understand the meaning of the research text, beyond the level of surface meaning. Writing in 1982, Richard Winter made the following observation, which is still apt today: “The action research/case study tradition does have a methodology for the creation of data, but not (as yet) for the interpretation of data.” (95) Chapter two of this thesis, and the practice of reading that runs through the dissertation may provide the basis for a dialogic model of interpretation.
Notes


8. See Whitehead, (1993), op. cit., p. 56 on the need to develop dialectic modes of presentation.


A good overview of educational research is provided by Martyn Hammersley’s *Controversies in Classroom Research* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993).

In particular, see McNiff (1992), op. cit. and Whitehead (1989) op. cit.

Michel Foucault quoted in Rabinow (1991), op. cit. p. 335.


Ibid., pp. 162-163.

23 Freire (1972b), op. cit., p. 52.


27 This account of Habermas's work on communication is based on Habermas (1970), op. cit.


30 Ibid., p. 21.

31 Ibid., pp. 26-27.

32 Ibid., p. 120.

33 Ibid., p. 18.

34 Ibid., p.124.

35 This formulation is influenced by Henry Giroux's reading of Habermas's work. See his chapter, ‘Rethinking the Boundaries of Discourse: Modernism, Postmodernism and Feminism’ in Giroux (1997), op. cit., pp. 183-233.

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<td>37</td>
<td>In this regard, see Rehg (1994), op. cit., pp. 211-249.</td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>Ibid., p. 29, footnote 17.</td>
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<td>39</td>
<td>Seyla Benhabib, quoted in Burbules (1993), op. cit., p. 76.</td>
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<td>41</td>
<td>I have adapted this presentation from Burbules (1993), op. cit., p. 74.</td>
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<td>43</td>
<td>For a discussion of these changes in Habermas’s work, see Rehg (1994), op. cit., pp. 108-111.</td>
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<td>45</td>
<td>Ibid., p. 245.</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>Burbules (1993), op. cit., p. 15.</td>
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<td>Ibid., p. 77.</td>
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54 McNiff (1988), op. cit.

55 See Whitehead (1989), op. cit.


57 See McNiff (1988), op. cit., pp. 21-46, for an overview of, and comparison between, these models.


59 Ibid., p. 84.

60 See Whitehead (1993), op. cit., p. 54.


62 Ibid., p. 44.

63 Whitehead (1993), op. cit., p. 56.

64 See Whitehead (1989), op. cit., p. 44.

65 Gadamer (1980), op. cit., p. 278.


67 Whitehead (1989), op. cit., p. 43.

Ibid., p. 286.

Ibid., p. 329.

Ibid., pp. 329-330.

Foucault, in Rabinow (1991), op. cit., p. 388.

See, for example, chapter 5, in Crisp (2000), op. cit., pp. 149-150.


See Buber (1958), op. cit.


Foucault in Rabinow (1991), op. cit., p. 364

Felman (1987), op. cit., p. 87.

See Gadamer (1980), op. cit.

Burbules (1993), op. cit., p. 159.


Chapter Two

The Search for Insight - An Essay on Reading & Reporting Practice.

For someone who uses dialogue only in order to prove himself right and not to gain insight, asking questions will indeed seem easier than answering them.
Hans-Georg Gadamer. (1)

The quotation from Gadamer identifies two central concerns of my thesis – the search for insight into the nature and practice of pedagogy, and the use of dialogue and its related form, conversation, as a means of reflection. In this extended meditation of practitioner enquiry, on the reporting and reading of practice, I dwell on the nature and purpose of the research I have undertaken. I dwell on the search for insight and the pursuit of awareness.

***

The search for awareness and insight involves a review of the past and an exploration of the taken-for-granted. This is particularly so in education, where the performative nature of teaching ensures that a teacher’s insights are rarely transparent. On the contrary, they tend to be unconscious, and implicated in practical actions. Thus, the search for insight is always a matter of catching up. The point is made eloquently by Shoshana Felman:

...insight is never purely cognitive; it is to some extent always performative (incorporated in an act, a doing) and to that extent precisely is not transparent to itself. Insight is unconscious, partially partaking of a practice. And since there can never be a simultaneous, full coincidence between practice and awareness, what one understands in doing and through doing appears in retrospect. (2)
The ambition of this thesis is to make conscious what is often hidden; to narrate and enact the process of my growing understanding of the assumptions which underlie my practices as a teacher; to develop my theoretical understanding and my practice of pedagogical conversation; and to devise a way of presenting my work that is itself dialogic in character. The thesis moves back and forth between reports and readings of my work. Each reading constitutes a revisiting of a personal account, an interrogatory second look. The movement back and forth attempts to capture the essence of dialogue, the movement between question and answer, giving and taking; the play of meaning between different points of view. As an activity, dialogue is directed towards discovery, insight and understanding, and prepares the ground for changes in practice that are motivated by an emancipatory intention.

I envisage my dissertation as a set of accounts of my discourse practices in the different school settings in which I work, with accompanying readings of these accounts. In general terms, the dissertation will address a number of questions concerning the nature of dialogue and conversation and the rationale behind their promotion. Equally, the thesis will focus on the issue of the presentation of personal accounts, seeking to create a mode of presentation that does justice to its insights and the dialogic processes through which they are achieved.

Essentially, this work is a form of action research, seeking to understand my discourse practices as a member of the school community with a view to realising the emancipatory and pedagogical possibilities in dialogue, and in the processes of narration and critical reflection. Apart from the action research tradition and the influences already cited, my thinking and my practice have been influenced by critical theory, in particular the writings of Walter Benjamin; the tradition of liberal humanism; a tradition of French criticism which begins with Jean-Paul Sartre and continues in the writings of Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault.
am particularly indebted to the writings of the American critic, Shoshana Felman, on Jacques Lacan, which I find both inspiring and congenial.

While much of the inspiration for this thesis comes from Marxist writers, I am not a committed Marxist. Coming from a culture and a society that has struggled to free itself from an officially sanctioned, Catholic ideology, I am resistant to totalising viewpoints and attracted to writers (and/or individual pieces of writing) who/which challenge conventional orthodoxies. My approach to theory is opportunistic, even piratical.

*(What lies at the root of that statement, "My approach to theory is opportunistic, even piratical."? I think it is born of my unwillingness to be wholly in the Frankfurt camp or in the postmodernist camp. True, I remember my excitement in reading Jonathan Culler’s account of Derrida and the latter’s challenge to the logocentrism of many of our critical assumptions. Yet, at the same time, I felt little attraction to a Postmodernism set up in opposition to Modernity. The challenge to binary oppositions, and the privileging of one term, proceeding by establishing a binary opposition between postmodernism and modernity, with a privileging of the former? No. And I admire the idealism of Habermas and others associated with the Frankfurt school. I admire the ethical basis of their Enlightenment project. I have been struck, amazed even, on a number of occasions, by an almost sneering dismissal of Habermas’s work in the writings of his critics. So, I want to be free to draw moral courage and inspiration from those writers motivated by a commitment to emancipation, while drawing on the antitotalising lessons to be learned from the writings of Lacan and Foucault, and the commentaries on their work. I want to be free of the intellectual sneer, the academic jibing that runs through the competitive discourse of academia.*
And in writing and thinking about dialogue, and attempting to be dialogic, I draw on the distinction, the dialogic as opposed to the polarised distinction, between self and other; ‘I’ and ‘You’; reader and writer; question and answer. Dyadic, integrative structures underpin my interpretative framework, my methodology and my practice. And it is in the movement from one perspective to the other that constitutes dialogic activity as a form of enquiry, as a social activity and as a textual genre. And I want to move back and forth between self and other, between the modern and the postmodern, between the general and the particular, between story and theory, between past and future, between the familiar and the unfamiliar so that the possibility of insight is kept open. I like Henry Giroux's description of Paulo Freire as a 'border intellectual'. Giroux quotes, approvingly, Edward Said's estimation of Theodore Adorno:

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience. (3)

I hope that my work can have the character of the exile, can cross borders and break the barriers of thought and experience.)

Whatever can be deployed to shed light or illuminate my own position, or the position of the students, parents and teachers with whom I work, is seized upon. There is an interrogative impulse which drives my work, a spirit of questioning which searches for better ways of seeing, better ways of doing, better ways of telling. Moreover, there is a pleasure impulse, a spirit of play, which seeks to subvert and break down readings of school, which have the tiredness of authority about them, and which seeks to expunge the false certainties in the language we sometimes use to
describe school. The attraction to dialogue is linked to the impulse to play and pleasure for, as Gadamer observes, “the character of accident, favour and surprise— and, in the end, of buoyancy, indeed of elevation—that belongs to the nature of the game is present” in dialogue. (4)

'To shed light', 'to illuminate'. In what we say we are revealed. My presumption is that criticism involves a patient, detailed reading of a text that is alert and clear-headed until the inevitable aporia is reached, the moment of disquiet or disturbance that may lead to insight and the reconsideration of what had gone before. This kind of reading is referred to as 'Apollonian/Dionysian' and 'uncanny' by J. Hillis Miller. The intention of the patient reader is to find the deeper level beneath the surface meaning. (5)

(Is this surface/depth metaphor the one I want? Does this not suggest that the deep meaning is somehow the 'essential' meaning, whereas I want to indicate that an 'uncanny' reading may search out those gaps, which indicate that what the text says is not what it wants to say. An uncanny meaning reveals the unconscious meaning of a text, the meaning that is different from itself, the potential otherness of a text from itself. If I do not practice this kind of reading in my own work, then I can hardly claim it as a form of reflective/reflexive practice?)

Interestingly, in writing on Walter Benjamin, in his history of the Jews, Paul Johnson observes:

He showed that texts had to be explored to detect not merely their surface meaning but their underlying message and structure. Hence Benjamin belonged to the irrational and gnostic Jewish tradition, like Marx himself and Freud, detecting deep, secret and life-explaining meanings beneath the veneer of existence. What he first began to
apply to literature, and later to history, was to become in time a more general technique, used for instance by Claude Levi-Strauss in anthropology and Noam Chomsky in linguistics. Gnosticism is the most insidious form of irrationalism, especially to intellectuals, and the particular variety of Gnosticism developed tentatively by Benjamin, expanded into structuralism, proved a major force among the intelligentsia from the 1950's onwards. (6)

I think there is genuine insight in the association of deep structure with the gnostic tradition of secret or hidden knowledge. Johnson's description of the work of Benjamin usefully breaks down the usual distinction between a rational and scientific approach to the reading of texts and an irrational and intuitive one. Jonathan Culler, who has done much to elucidate the issues and achievements of various critical and theoretical writing and writers, describes what he refers to as the genre of 'Theory' in the following way:

The works we allude to as "theory" are those that have had the power to make strange the familiar and to make readers conceive of their own thinking, behaviour, and institutions in new ways. Though they may rely on the familiar techniques of demonstration and argument, their force comes - and this is what places them in the genre I am identifying - not from accepted procedures of a particular discipline but from the persuasive novelty of their redescriptions. (7)

What I take from this passage and, reflecting on those works which have most caught my imagination, is that criticism which allows us to see or read with new eyes, and which causes us to reflect on our own position in the world and our understanding of the world, gain their power from their success in redescribing both the object of enquiry and enquiry itself. I relate this to Habermas's idea of distorted communication and the goal of an emancipatory social science, which seeks to remove unnecessary constraints on communication. As Culler describes it, what animates 'Theory' is the desire to free thought from the dictates of convention and habit.
But what has this to do with the specifics of me telling stories of my professional life and my commitment to dialogue and critical reflection? Well, hopefully, the foregoing quotations and my presentation of them help me to set out my stall in relation to this thesis. I want to tell stories that describe my attempts to communicate in a dialogic way in school. I want to subject these attempts to critical reflection and interrogation. I also want to reflect on the stories themselves and the ways in which I have chosen to tell them. I want the reflections to be critical and exercised in a spirit of patient scrutiny or exegesis, concentrating on those moments whose meaning is not readily apprehended. And on those moments when the meaning is too readily apprehended, through the use of ready-made terms, which influence my way of seeing the world. I want to consider and reconsider the stories I tell and seek different explanations for them. The real objects of my pursuit are the insights I hope to earn in the telling of the stories, and in the descriptions and redescriptions of them in my commentaries. I want to discover how I express my understanding of school and how it is expressed for me in the conventional ways I speak, write and think about it. I want to question why I present or position myself as I do in the stories I tell of teaching. I want to reflect on the institutional influences on my narratives. I want to try to reframe my stories, breaking free of institutional perspectives. I do not want my stories to be scripted for me by the professional discourse of school, or the discourse of thesis writing. What is the difference, for example, between telling a story of a teacher and a parent, and telling one of a man and a woman? What interpretative procedures are brought into play by identifying the subjects of a story as a teacher and a parent? As a man and a woman? How much of our knowledge and understanding of the social world is generated by selective telling and interpreting, by normalising judgements? How much pleasure, enlightenment and freedom might there be in interrupting our conventional ways of telling and understanding? And I want to interrupt my own interpretative
Reading Practice  The Search for Insight  Mc Dermott

procedures, catch the moment, as it were, and submit my own work to the persuasive power of redescription. The Russian formalist critic, Victor Shklovsky, distinguishes between 'recognition' and 'seeing':

A phenomenon perceived many times, and no longer perceivable, or rather, the method of such dimmed perception, is what I call 'recognition' as opposed to 'seeing'. (8)

To move from recognition to seeing is part of my motive in undertaking this work. There is no ultimate vision of the reality of school available to us, but we can loose ourselves from the binds of conventional representations of school. We can shake up the language, and the assumptions written into it, that we use in talking about school. There is no doubt that our direct experience of the people and situations of school life is influenced by the way in which we use the language to make sense of our experiences. Consider the range of embedded concepts and assumptions in our use of the words 'teacher', 'student' and 'school'. As I understand it, the enquiry of action research is, in itself, a process of transformation, rescuing essential terms, and their emancipatory potential, from the exhaustion of institutional usage and cliché. One of the tasks of action research is to break down the deficiencies of institutional language by revitalising the way we talk and, therefore, think about school, by borrowing from other disciplines or revising older traditions. My attraction to 'new paradigm' research is the possibility of generating new ways of talking/writing about education that will allow readers (including myself) to see school in new and illuminating ways.

A problem that I encounter with much of the literature on school life, and with the professional language of teachers, is that the scope of behaviour, the actions attributed to the *dramatis personae*, teachers and students, and the explanations of these behaviours, are named and identified by terms which have a deterministic set of
meanings in both the literature and the professional discourse. Thus, for example, the occurrence of the phrase 'Student Culture' in the literature of educational research sets up expectations in the readers, or, certainly, in this reader. I anticipate what is to come by recourse to a frame of reference developed from other uses of this phrase in other texts. Typically, I predict a study of student sub-cultures, or peer pressure, or anti-school culture, or deviance, or delinquency, or 'messing'. The genre sets up its own expectations by the use of its nomenclature just, as in folktales, certain names set up expectations of behaviour and motives. Nor is it simply a matter of expectations. The language of teachers often seeks to define, limit and normalise what it is to be a student, in contradistinction to what it is to be a teacher. Nor is the language of definition, limitation and normalisation fixed. Rather, it exists as a constant set of changing differences. (9) Part of the transformative ambition of this thesis is to resist a codified or genre reading of school that trades upon unexplored assumptions in the language we have developed, as teachers and researchers, to talk about school. Each time we use a word, we engage in a dialogue with the speakers and writers who have used the word before us. Each act of speech is a contribution to the living dialectic of language, so that our meaning speaks us and is spoken by us. Each individual utterance we make is bound up with the meanings previously associated with the words we use while retaining the potential to influence and multiply the meaning of these words. This quality of language, what Bakhtin refers to as 'heteroglossia', opens up institutional meanings and clichés to reinterpretation. (10) The buoyancy and elevation of dialogue is available to us in the way we use words, in the nuances we give them, in the give and take between our use of them and the way others have used them. Thus, social identities partake of the unstable, discursive character of the language used to articulate them, an instability that can be exploited to challenge assumptions and institutional usage. I hope, for example, to play with the meaning of 'teacher' and 'student', in the course of this dissertation.
(As a writer of texts, I am excited by the idea of using words in a living dialectic. There is no meaning without the words I use. As I write, I want to animate the vocabulary around teaching and teachers, so that it sings for you, my real (and projected) reader; and so that it sings for me, as the reader of my own texts. I want to share my astonishment with the way the writers who inspire me use words. In reading Roland Barthes, for example, I am constantly startled into admiration for the way he draws-out (elects?) the meaning of words.)

To tell stories and to read them with a patient interrogative gaze. To move from 'I' to 'Me'. (Again my origins reveal themselves. In the Catholic tradition, grace is earned by good works, so the grace of insight is earned by the good work of patient reading.) Insights, illuminations, enlightenment. Revelation.

A number of years ago, I was asked to speak to some teachers setting out on action research projects. My topic was 'The Analysis of Data'. I titled my talk, 'Strategies of Resistance'. Here is part of what I said:

I want to advocate that you read, interrogate and interpret the accounts (of your practice that) you have gathered by:
(1) Setting aside your assumptions and expectations about what you are going to discover;
(2) Concentrating on small parts and details;
(3) Searching for insights and understanding rather than information;
(4) Being patient.

I believe that any worthwhile analysis of participants' accounts of school is difficult to achieve, primarily because much of what we say and think about school is conditioned by routine, by habit, and by custom. Teachers, students and parents are all socialised into set ways of talking about the cultural process we call school, and we all are socialised into set ways of understanding what happens in school.
Therefore, even when we set out to reflect on our own understanding, to re-read (the accounts) that we have written, there is every likelihood that we will end by rehearsing our common sense understanding. We read and interpret in a narrow way, predetermined by (taken-for-granted) assumptions and presuppositions.

I believe that if we are to gain insights into our situation, we must read our data rather as one might read a poem, concentrating on those parts that are strange or unfamiliar. I believe that we must approach the data of action research with complete openness, with a bracketing of all assumptions, beliefs and values, in so far as that is possible, in order that we might see and interpret our situation in a fresh and authentic way.

From psychoanalysis, we are familiar with the idea of a Freudian slip, the word or phrase which suggests a world of complexity, contradiction and depth beyond the seemingly ordered world of the speaker.

In the same way as the analyst seeks to move beyond the smooth linguistic surface of a patient's account, I think self-reflective researchers have to look for the details which allow us to go beyond the predictable and unilluminating accounts of school that we hear every day.

Thus, for example, of all the conversations about school I have had so far this year, one sentence from a colleague stands out in my mind, as most deserving of examination and reflection. My colleague, in reporting her difficulties with a student from my tutor class related how the boy had stated to her, 'I am not afraid of you.' My colleague, as I understood her, regarded this remark as a challenge to her authority.

Look at the questions which jump out of that statement concerning the world of school and the nature of the relationship between teacher and student. Consider why the teacher thought the comment noteworthy. Consider why the student felt compelled to announce a lack of fear.

It is a strange comment, and I believe that we must defamiliarise school, make it strange, in order to see it with fresh eyes and know it, in an authentic way. This real seeing and knowing must first occur before we can intervene and change our situation for the better. Real seeing must precede any transformative intervention...The student's statement offers a rich source of insight into the reality of school. If you glimpse the world behind this phrase, then you must ask whether this world corresponds to the world you wish to help create in your classroom. In other words, how do your insights into the reality of
school speak to the values you hold?

What do your insights, in conversation with your values, suggest about a way forward in your project? (11)

The search for enlightenment and understanding is not the defining purpose of my work in school. The work is driven by an emancipatory desire to eliminate unnecessary constraints and a desire to develop dialogic forms of communication, which allow maximum scope for the development and realisation of autonomous subjects, and the formation of satisfying and humane relationships.

(I set these educational goals for myself, for my own empowerment. I want my own autonomous subjectivity to be developed. I want to be involved in satisfying and humane relationships. And I want my self to be written, to be inscribed as I write, so that this research, this writing project will contribute to my own formation. I, as much as the students and colleagues referred to, am the subject of this dissertation.)

Apart from describing and commenting on a number of conversations, and the relationships constituted by these and other, similar conversations, the thesis will attempt, with the aid of the Cartesian subject who writes it, to monitor its own procedures and reflect on the nature and authority of its accounts.

Again my origins surface. I am too steeped in the tradition of Catholicism to abandon completely the concept of the unique individual who exercises free will in his/her life. And yet, even as I write 'Cartesian subject', I feel a resistance to the phrase welling up in me. Surely this resistance is the radical difference from me that I seek to suppress in order to stay sane. It is the voice of temptation, to use the language of Pre-Vatican II Catholic morality. The devil, tempting me to be radically different from myself. Or my knowledge that we are never as transparent to
school speak to the values you hold?

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ourselves as we would wish to be. As Lacan says:

It is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather of knowing whether I am the same as that of which I speak. (12)

Mindful of this cautionary note, and seeking to incorporate the ‘otherness’ of the self in use of italicised counter-commentaries, this thesis will seek to establish the validity of a personal account of social action, and establish the value and authenticity of subjective reporting. Hence the thesis will be concerned with the process of narration and with the critical reflections which surround the narrative, and with the idea that understanding is itself a process of narration.

(As I write this, I am narrating. A self-reflexive dissertation, as this one sets out to be, cannot take its own accounts for granted. If I fail to interrogate my own narrative practices, as I proceed, then I will not embody reflexive or reflexive practice. I will end with an unreflective dissertation on reflexive practice! And reflexivity is a central concern.)

Critical Theory

The reflective commentaries of this thesis draw on ideas and concepts from critical theory. In his introductory essay on critical theory and the Frankfurt School, Paul Connerton suggests that Hegel, in The Phenomenology of Mind, developed a concept of reflection which was informed by an idea of enlightenment and the liberation of the subject from coercive illusions. (13) A major ambition of this thesis, or a major ambition of mine, is to achieve a degree of self-enlightenment with a view to exploiting the emancipatory possibilities in that achievement and in the promotion of dialogic forms of communication in an institution which, traditionally, has been based
on a monological form of discourse related to ideas of authority and the transmission of knowledge.

(I am using 'institution' in a general sense, though in the institution where I have taught for 15 years, the discourse of authority and legitimisation is a powerful and pervasive one and its traces appear in my usage, which is one of the issues addressed in the chapter on professional conversation.)

Critical theory, as exemplified by the Frankfurt school, sets itself the task of making apparent hidden constraints and coercion, in order to initiate a process of reflection and action, in individuals and groups, designed to achieve a liberation from past domination and constraints. The end or intention of critical theory is transformation. Critical theory is informed by the values of freedom, justice and equality, and by a commitment to a better life for individuals and communities. The reports in this thesis relate some of my attempts to express my commitment to the ideals of critical theory in my pedagogical practices.

Jurgen Habermas, in his essay 'Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence' looks to Freudian psychoanalysis for a model of how an individual, or a society, might rid itself of coercive illusions. He describes psychoanalysis as a collaborative process, aimed at removing semantic distortions in the patient's texts, typically a dream, through critical dialogue between the patient and the analyst. The explanatory understanding arrived at by the dialogic process is an emancipatory one. Patients become autonomous in so far as they understand their own situation in the world and their actions in relation to themselves.

(In writing the accounts of my professional life included in this dissertation, and in reflecting and commenting upon them, I engage, in effect, in a
collaborative process between 'I' and 'Me', striving for an explanatory understanding of my own actions through critical dialogue, just as the conversations with individual students were often attempts to arrive at explanatory understandings of particular actions.

The search for understanding is the challenge and the pleasure of self-reflective enquiry, with the hope of emancipation and change at the end of the adventure, a hope that will forever be deferred and, therefore, hopefully, always available.

The patient/analyst relationship is, of course, one based upon mutual trust, or a willingness to find that trust. As a model, while it may have relevance for self-reflective enquiry, and other forms of communicative action, it has little relevance to situations where the relationship between the participants is founded on mutual distrust or resistance. (15) And, yet, as I relate, on a one-to-one basis, with colleagues, students or parents, I recognise the possibility and the desirability of working together without constraint or a desire to dominate. However, at the same time, I am conscious of feelings of suspicion, a resistance to invitations to enter dialogue.

The theoretical construct, the ideal speech situation, is an attempt to describe the absence of constraint in a formal way. Habermas believes that it is possible to have a society characterised by an absence of unnecessary constraint and from whose public discussion distortions are eliminated. This, of course, is Utopia, the better world elsewhere. The ideal speech situation is a translation into linguistic terms of the principles of truth, justice and freedom. The construct serves as a standard against which actual speech situations can be judged. In the course of this thesis, the concept of the ideal speech situation will be deployed to shed critical light on examples of discourse from the setting of school, with a view to charting future conduct, future
influences and contributes to the work by the questions and conversations around it. The finished text, is one that evolves and changes emphases over time. This process is often written out of the final version of the traditional thesis. Inner consistency is prized in thesis writing. The thesis as rigorous mono-logic is the ideal. And, in this chapter, I have unwittingly fallen into this mode of writing. A chapter that arose out of a question posed by my collaborator, co-conversationalist, supervisor, Jean McNiff. Jean, you asked if I could justify the use of my reports of practice as valid knowledge. I started writing this chapter in 1997 in response to your question. Some of the reports of practice had been written before that. This, along with the other, reflexive commentaries in the chapter, is being written in October 1999. It arises from another question/comment posed by you. In reading a draft of the first three chapters of this dissertation, you indicated that you experienced a dissonance between the content and the form of the chapters. I am writing this in response to the issue you raised. I am not sure if this dissonance is a bad thing. However, your question (I am using 'you' because I don’t want to fall back unthinkingly into the impersonality of the genre, though I am aware that the 'you' changes. At times it is myself as reader of my own writing, at times it is you. At times it is the members of the conversational group who meet once a month and where some of these ideas are pursued. At times it is the writers I have read. At times it is the impersonalised, projected ‘other’ the external examiner. For, even at its most monological, the thesis presupposes an ‘other’.) directed my thoughts to the nature of thesis writing and to the ways in which I might make my way of writing more dialogic in form. And this surely demonstrates the circular movement of enquiry, the movement back and forth and its essentially dialogic nature.
Reviewing this chapter, in the light of your observation, it is as if, as I was writing, I was looking towards the oral defence of my work, so that a shadow conversation, a secondary, projected dialogue, influenced the way I framed my writing. And this shadow conversation determined, in part, the 'voice' of this chapter and the generally impersonal monological style. (17) Yet, it always struck me that there is a contradiction at the heart of thesis writing, defined as a monologue. For surely, in the attention paid to the scholarly apparatus of thesis writing, to the careful use of quotations and the accurate listing of the source of these quotations, there is an implicit sense of the contexts of academic writing? Underlying the production of the monological thesis is the notion of intertextuality, a written or scripted form of the intersubjectivity of conversation. In citing writers, I reveal my involvement with other texts, in a kind of textualised dialogue. This is an aspect of a dissertation – its presupposition of a dialogic structure - that I must try to understand, explore and draw on as I write. This will be my collaboratively-unique contribution to the ongoing dialogue on the practice of dialogue in education. But I am not anxious, at this point, to iron out the creases, to modify the chapter so that it will seem that I knew where I was going from the outset. My desire is to write a thesis that offers genuine insights into dialogue as a form of enquiry into dialogue and conversational pedagogy, and in this regard, I think my failures and false starts will be as instructive as my achievements in furthering the process. So, this is a plea to my readers, embodied, projected, shadowy, to live with dissonance, with the polyvocality and polylogicality of a dissertation that sets out to be conversational. And your comments, Jean, have also encouraged me to consider the place of "the survey of literature" chapter in a dissertation. This obligation, on the part of the thesis writer, is an invitation to demonstrate a dialogic engagement with others. Reading a book is
analogous to participating in a conversation with a colleague. As Freire says:

When I meet some books – I say 'meet' because some books are like persons – when I meet some books, I remake my practice theoretically. I become better able to understand the theory inside of my action ...

Reading is one of the ways I can get the theoretical illumination of practice in a certain moment. (18)

I think my dissertation can achieve some of its objectives if I can show how my encounter with the various literatures I have read, including the literature of critical theory, the theoretical literature on critical pedagogy, and the literature on action research, has been dialogic and has contributed to my understanding of my own practice and has strengthened the mutual interplay between the theorising of practice and the practice of theory.)

In their elaboration of the ideas of Habermas, Carr and Kemmis suggest that some of the unnecessary constraints, which the critique of discourse aims to eliminate, include: irrational or unjust habits; customs, precedents; coercion; self-deception; or bureaucratic systemisation. (19) How relevant this list is to the rule-governed life of the institution that we call school, a life characterised, in my experience, in an Irish context, by surplus repression, that is repression in excess of that necessary for maintaining civilisation. (20)

Carr and Kemmis describe the immediate aim of emancipatory action research as improvement, and number professional wisdom among its general aims. I hope my practice as a teacher improves through my engagement in this work, and I hope to
grow wise. The choice of the word 'wisdom' hints at the roots of critical theory in classical philosophy, and wisdom is a theme to which this thesis will return, especially with reference to the work of Walter Benjamin and the relevance of his work to the activity of critical reflection. Of course, for a researcher, even one seeking to draw on the ideas of an emancipatory social science, habits of thought and analysis are likely to prove the greatest impediments to enlightenment. It is for this reason, as I shall argue below, that this thesis will employ a narrative mode, linked to a form of commentary modelled on the writing of Walter Benjamin, among others. One more word on the question of wisdom. Roland Barthes, in his inaugural address to the College de France, spoke of wisdom as forgetting and unlearning. (21) Wisdom as the abandonment of the routine and the familiar. We must forget and become innocent before we may see and understand. Wisdom as unlearning.

For me, critical theory is characterised by a nobility of thought and by an essential optimism in relation to human beings. It shares with liberal humanism a concern for personal autonomy and freedom from unnecessary constraints. However, what is sometimes absent in the writing of critical theorists is a sense of the difficulties and confusions in the attempt to lead the moral life, and the Promethean effort, anguish and tumult involved in seeking self-enlightenment. True, Habermas remarks that:

The self-reflection of a lone subject...requires a quite paradoxical achievement: one part of the self must be split off from the other part in such a manner that the subject can be in a position to render aid to itself... (22)

Notwithstanding this statement, there is nowhere in the work of Habermas that we find what Connerton refers to as Adorno's "cherished sense of the unique specificity of things" or people, nor his "partisanship for the individual, for that which is not or cannot be integrated, whose nature resists systematic form" or description. (23) And
it is precisely the particular and individual quality of the people and the social encounters that I want to conserve in the stories that constitute a large body of this thesis. As Marx and Engels remind us, “the first premise of all human history is... the existence of living human individuals.” (24) And it is to this end that I employ a narrative mode of presentation, for it is stories that best communicate human experience. Walter Benjamin observes that the art of storytelling is declining because "experience has fallen in value". (25) Part of the resistance in this thesis is to modes of presentation which offer totalising views of school and which eliminate the particular and the singular, the subtle and the complex. It is for this reason that I look to the tradition of liberal humanism for guidance and inspiration. And to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Walter Benjamin, for there I find a valuing and a celebration of the individual.

Reporting Practice - The Nature of Narrative Accounts.

Action research, in the school setting, has largely been concerned with encouraging teachers to speak about their professional concerns. This speaking has involved, typically, a stating of professional values and a narrating of professional practice. Teachers have told, and continue to tell, stories of their professional lives. (26)

Obviously, these narratives are authentic - they are accounts of practice given by practitioners, in good faith. However, the value and authority of such subjective reporting has been questioned within the social sciences. Objectors, such as Atkinson and Delamont, suggest that practitioner accounts are simply descriptive, offering little by way of real insight or analysis. Furthermore, they argue that case study researchers or teacher researchers lack the methodical and conceptual discipline which sociologists and anthropologists bring to bear on their work. (27)
A basic premise of action research is that subjective reporting is both authentic and insightful and, therefore, has an authority, though this is not, by any means, absolute. Without making exaggerated claims for the forms of educational knowledge generated by action research, it is possible to make a case for the validity of subjective reporting. And in the course of this thesis, I will seek to defend my procedures; claim significance for the insights I achieve, through the process of writing and reading, and argue the value of the conversational pedagogy that I want to represent and enact.

In setting out my work, I will move between narration and commentary. To narrate, I must select, arrange and interpret my experience. In other words, my narratives are not and cannot be ‘pure’ representations of a reality that exists outside of the texts. My stories are personal histories. The essential point, in offering these narratives as legitimate forms of insight into social activity, insights which contain emancipatory possibilities for myself and for the readers with whom the insights are shared, is that I explain and account for the histories I produce, mindful of the purposes and values which shape them. My narratives and the commentaries upon them must explain the process by which insights are earned. If they succeed in so doing, then I think they might constitute what Whitehead refers to as living educational theory, that is a description and an explanation of practice that is part of practice itself. (28)

Lurking in the debate between the conflicting paradigms of social research, between the positivist and the naturalistic schools of thought, is the age-old subjective/objective dialectic. True, the histories written by teacher researchers are informed by a subjective viewpoint, but the object of their histories is the human subject. The universality and systematic nature of some forms of research do violence to the individuality of the lives they investigate. Here I am reminded of Barthes’ aphorism, “Always remember Nietzsche: we are scientific out of a lack of
subtlety.” (29) Action research seeks to capture the singularity of individual lives. In speaking of the limitations of Marxist analysis, Jean-Paul Sartre states the following:

Valery is a petit bourgeois intellectual, no doubt about it. But not every petit bourgeois intellectual is Valery. The heuristic inadequacy of contemporary Marxism is contained in these two sentences....Marxism situates but no longer ever discovers anything. (30)

Action research and the version of action research constituted by my work, seeks to keep the existential individual at the heart of its investigations. Of course, there are no structural or logical differences between the narratives told by an insider and those told by an outsider. In each case, the accounts are, essentially, subjective in so far as that they reflect the interests and needs of the narrator. However, both types of narrative gain their power by their coherence and their persuasiveness, and by the explanations offered as to how they came to take the shape they did. And in seeking to explain my narratives, within the context of this thesis, I am under the same obligation to rigour and justification as any other researcher who wishes to present his/her findings in a public arena.

Reading Practice – The Interrogative Gaze

The subjective/objective opposition is a dialogic one and the relationship between the two terms is not fixed and determined. This is particularly so for someone whose study is subjectivity itself. Roland Barthes presents the problems and complexities of representing himself thus:

I can say to myself 'you'...in order to detach within myself the worker, the fabricator, the producer of writing, from the subject of the work; on the other hand, not to speak about oneself by saying 'he' can mean: I am speaking about myself as though I were more or less dead.
caught up in a faint mist of paranoiac rhetoric, or again; I am speaking about myself in the manner of the Brechtian actor who must distance his character: 'show' rather than incarnate him, and give his manner of speaking a kind of fillip whose effect is to pry the pronoun from its name. (31)

For a practitioner, any account of his/her world involves an objectifying of that world, and of the self, in which the familiar becomes strange. By bringing the interrogative gaze of the stranger to bear on the familiar, a practitioner can question fundamental, taken-for-granted assumptions, or recognise the degree of conditioning or routine in his/her behaviour, within the world under scrutiny. Critical interrogation can help a narrator to, in Freire's words, "arrive at a critical level of knowing". (32) This critical level of knowing moves from a surface understanding to a deeper one. It moves from a conventional understanding of social routines, to an understanding that brackets taken-for-granted assumptions, and investigates social phenomena with an open and critical gaze. The commentaries and interrogatory asides in this thesis are attempts to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the perspective of the self to the perspective of the other.

This critical level of knowing is a dialectic one, constantly changing. It is always becoming, never complete. And what we begin to know, become aware of, through our interrogative analysis, through a reading of the stories we tell, is the social world we inhabit and the selves who inhabit it, mindful that our knowing will be provisional, contingent, and related to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Critical knowing gives me/us the opportunity to change ourselves, in so far as we have the power to do so and, as a consequence, the opportunity to effect some change in our social world or, at least, our way of living in that world.

(Notice the use of 'we' above. I am using one of the oldest rhetorical devices in the book. If I can create a sense of collaborative identification between you and me, dear reader, then the act of persuasion is mostly achieved. As a
reader of my own text, I want to resist the position offered to me. As a reader of my own text, I view with some scepticism the textual authority I claim as a writer. As a reader, I want to engage with the text, question it, generate a dialogic form. This is what this reflective commentary seeks to achieve.)

For me as a researcher within the action research paradigm, the purpose of understanding the educational world I inhabit, and my way of being in it, is to change, to be more. In other words, I strive to organise the events of the past into narratives so that I can reflect upon them and change, if needs be, in the future. The knowledge I hope to acquire through critical reflection, through this thesis, is a self-forming and self-theorising knowledge, and it is a knowledge, or a mode of knowing, that is facilitated by dialogue.

The above is, I think, a neat formulation but there is more to be said. The movement between narrative and critical reflection is also the movement between the past and the present, the particular and the general. The past is structured into a narrative text. This interrogation of this text leads to the development of theory which, in turn, is directed towards future practice. To dialogue is to theorise, to move from the concrete world to a theoretical one. What the dialogue of action research encourages is a return to the concrete world in order to act in it in a new way, informed by the critical understanding we have achieved through narration, reflection and dialogue. The process of action research is educational in the sense proposed by Freire:

Such education must have the character of commitment. It implies a movement from the concrete context which provided objective facts, to the theoretical context where these facts are analysed in depth, and back to the concrete context where men experiment with new forms of praxis. (33)
The return to the concrete involves in Freire's words "a critical self-insertion into reality". (34) It involves a desire to create, through human action, a better future than the past that has been expressed and reflected on in narrative. At the heart of action research, at the heart of my action research, is a desire to be self-determining, to resist being over-determined by social forces and conditioning. Sartre, writing against a deterministic account of history, argues the need to "restore to the individual man his power to go beyond his situation by means of work and action." (35) Action research seeks a similar restoration. Through this dissertation, this work and action, I seek the means to go beyond my situation. Is not that the essence of research - to go beyond? The commitment to reflective, critical enquiry is to create a future that is more than the past. As Freire says, "humans modify the world in order to be more." (36) In addition, being more, enlarging our understanding of what it is to be human, and living out that understanding, affects our being in the world, our thinking about the world, and our expression of the world.

*(As I reread what I have just written, I am conscious that I have said what I wanted to say but, also, there is more to be said. For while I believe that reflection can assist in our self formation and transformation and that dialogue can constitute a collaborative and co-operative effort to change ourselves and our relations and, hence, the social world we inhabit, I am also conscious that the movement towards understanding is more vexed, contradictory and roundabout than the symmetry of Freire’s presentation. In Freire, there is an implication of forward movement, of progress. His is a classic enlightenment belief in the power of reasoned reflection. However, in the social and personal worlds, our action and behaviour is not guided by reason alone. My attraction to dialogue and to conversation is related to its power to represent the nature of social interaction and the process of understanding. The open, divergent nature of conversation, in particular,)*
strikes me as representing the way in which our lives and understanding proceeds. I try to capture something of the movement of conversation in the layout of the thesis. In some cases, narrative accounts are explored through readings which mark a movement from the concrete to the theoretical; in other instances, the concrete and the theoretical merge and blur, or the theoretical precedes a report of practice. My ambition as a teacher is to forward myself and to invite others - students, parents and colleagues - to collaborate with me in the process. But I forget, or I lose sight of the insights I have gained or I am distracted by other concerns; or I am thrown off course by false certainties or misapprehensions or poor judgement. The thesis tries to capture this movement of understanding and misunderstanding, of wisdom and forgetting. And I draw comfort from Jean-Francois Lyotard's reminder that "nothing of what you write will be authoritative. You lend yourself willingly to this prescription: 'to go there, without knowing where.'" (37) And while I am conscious that in these opening chapters, which attempt to situate what is to follow in a theoretical framework, I have not always found the voice I want, I trust that the dialogic enquiry I wish to pursue will result in me finding a method of presentation that will embody the practices I have pursued and wish to pursue further and generate the insights that I believe can come from a dialogic and conversational approach to research and communication.

Reporting Practice & Reading Practice – The Words We Use

Action research, as a means of enquiring into our condition, with a view to creating a better future, seeks to be inclusive. Critical enquiry, in the action research paradigm, is not the preserve of philosophers or social scientists. Everyone is a potentially knowing subject. The general intelligence, which liberal education seeks to foster,
the kind of intelligence that the educational system in Ireland seeks to foster, is capable of critical enquiry and practice. Furthermore, the narratives of individuals, and their reflections upon these accounts, expressed in the clear language of general intelligence, can communicate in a powerful way the personal insights that inform critical enquiry. The language of which I am speaking is a shared medium between all the participants in school life, a medium that is robust, yet sophisticated; capable of defamiliarising school; yet neither condescending not patronising. Put another way, if critical enquiry is to be transformative for more than just the individual enquirer, then its insights and concerns must be expressed in a communicable form that encourages discussion and collaborative action. Chapter five of this thesis, presents an account of collaborative action in the classroom that had an emancipatory effect for all the classroom participants. It was not a case that I was the researcher and the students were the researched. Rather, we worked together to improve and explore our practices in relation to the reading of specific literary genre.

Very often, it is a narrative expressed in simple language which has most power to move us and which causes us to reflect most deeply. Thus, I look to the poet Raymond Carver, as much as to Paulo Freire or Jurgen Habermas, to express the truth that we can modify our actions in order to be more:

I'm 45 years old today.
Would anyone believe me if I said
I was once 35?
My heart empty and sere at 35!
Five more years had to pass
before it began to flow again.
I'll take all the time I please this afternoon
before leaving my place alongside this river.
It pleases me, loving rivers.
Loving them all the way back
to their source.
Loving everything that increases me. (38)
What action research, or more particularly, the community of researchers with whom I converse, has encouraged in me is a confidence to create texts, and to refer to texts other than academic ones, to express and share insights. The openness of action research to all texts, to all reports, is like the openness described by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Here no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. Men teach each other, mediated by the world...At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are simply men who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know. (39)

There is an analogue, to the participatory intention of action research, to be found in eighteenth century Britain, at the time when the institution of criticism was in its infancy, in periodicals like the *Spectator*, which were written in a capacious but socially accessible language that was, in the words of Terry Eagleton, "able to encompass art, ethics, religion, philosophy and everyday life." (40) The social presupposition that informs these early periodicals, and which informs current action research and my work with students, is that every individual has the capacity to judge and be critical. The commentators and critics writing in those early journals were giving voice to ideas that could be understood and, potentially, produced by every member of society. In this century, criticism, literary, sociological and philosophical, has distanced itself from the public sphere, though the liberal tradition of public debate and comment survives in many of the broadsheet newspapers.

The more that criticism or theory moves away from the public sphere, the more it risks making itself irrelevant to the lives of the subjects of its writing. The more that educational theory moves away from practice, the more irrelevant it risks becoming to teachers and students. Of course, the eighteenth century public sphere was, essentially, a male institution. Interestingly, the assault made by the newly created
public sphere, in eighteenth century Britain, on notions of authority based upon social privilege, has its counterpart in this century, in the women's movement and its assault on the authority of male rationality. What the women's movement and the public sphere have in common is the making public of private forms of subjectivity in order to assert their validity and value, in ways that call into question received norms of authority.

(Just as I wish to challenge the received norms of thesis writing by inscribing myself into the text; by theorising a dialogic form of text; and by developing a dialogic form of presentation.)

From its earliest moment, the tradition of critical thought, or critique, has been an oppositional activity, questioning what is taken for granted, or what is not said. For me it is important that action research maintain this oppositional stance. And it is true that challenging received ideas and subverting norms may call for new terms, new ways of saying what cannot be communicated by institutionalised discourse. As Roland Barthes observes, “To state matters clearly, between jargon and platitudes, I prefer jargon.” (41)

I want to speak as myself and for myself in this thesis, just as I want to provide opportunities for my students to speak for themselves in the conversations, which take place in school. People have a need to tell their stories. The work of the American Folk Historian and broadcaster, Studs Terkel, testifies to the extraordinary richness of personal accounts. In his collection Working, Terkel tells of his constant astonishment at the dreams of ordinary people, of their sense of personal worth; of their search for meaning. He quotes the words of Tom Patrick, a Brooklyn fire fighter as evidence of this:
I worked in a Bank. You know, it's just paper. It's not real. Nine to five and it's shit. You're looking at numbers. But I can look back and say, 'I helped put out a fire. I helped save somebody.' It shows something I did on this earth. (42)

Terkel relates that when first asked to do the book he worried because he was not a sociologist or an economist. In the end, he discovered that conversation, talking and listening, was what was required. There is an instructive lesson for the teacher and the researcher in this, a lesson that I have tried to put into practice in the projects reported in this thesis.

**Subjective Accounts - Issues of Power.**

Encouraging individuals to tell their stories, to impose an order and coherence on the flux of experience, to construct their own histories, is a powerful form of empowerment. And making individuals powerful can threaten other individuals within the institution or the system within which the empowerment takes place.

This being the case, the encouragement that action research gives to subjects to speak for themselves has a political import within the world of education and educational research and, of course, within schools themselves. The encouragement to teachers to record their histories and to define the meaning of these histories for themselves claims back territory that has been colonised by researchers from academia, whose work has offered little transformative potential, either social or personal, for teachers or students. In contrast, action research invites teachers and, increasingly, students to express and transform their world in and through their own words and actions. The demand of action research, in its resistance to institutional claims to knowledge concerning education, is that teachers and students be heard in telling their stories of school and teaching. Of course, claims to knowledge which do not command widespread consensus can only create tension within schools and
action researchers can often occupy an oppositional stance in the politics of school life.

In attempting to distinguish between academic writing about school and education, and practitioner writing, I found a distinction made by Northrop Frye, in his study of the Bible, is useful. Frye considers the difference between the writing of Homer, which he designates as poetic or hieroglyphic and that of Plato, which he terms heroic or hieratic. He elaborates the difference thus:

All words in this (Poetic) phase of the language are concrete: there are no true verbal abstractions. Oninas' monumental study of Homer's vocabulary, *Origins of European Thought*, shows how intensely physical are such conceptions of soul, mind, time, courage, emotion, or thought, in the Homeric poems. They are solidly anchored in physical images connected with bodily processes with specific objects. (...)

With Plato we enter a different phase of language, one that is "hieratic". (...) In this second phase language is now more individualised, and words become primarily the outward expression of inner thoughts or ideas. Subject and object are becoming more consistently separated (...) The intellectual operations of the mind become distinguishable from the emotional operations; hence abstraction becomes possible, and the sense that there are valid and invalid ways of thinking, a sense which is to a degree independent of our feeling, develops into the conception of logic. What Homeric heroes revolve in their bosoms is an inseparable mixture of thought and feeling; what Socrates demonstrates, more especially in his death, is the superior penetration of thought when it is in command of feeling. (43)

What I think is apparent in action research, and in the movement of practitioner enquiry in general, is a turning away from hieratic language, from a privileging of the abstract above the concrete, the mind above the body; the soul above the heart; the idea above the person. Yeats writes in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion':
Those masterful images because complete  
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?  
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of the street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,  
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut  
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start,  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart. (44)

Here he privileges mind over heart, intellect over emotion, order over disorder.  
What action research seeks to do is to make a critical self-insertion into the  
metalanguage of education and school in order to restore the relationship between  
object and subject, between mind and heart, between ideas and bodies. (This kind of  
restoration underlies the reading of practice presented in chapter four.) And this  
restoration leads back to stories, to narrative as the mode best suited to conveying  
human experience in all its particularity. Frye’s contention that Socrates, through his  
death, demonstrates the superior penetration of thought when it is in control of  
feeling may well be true. However, in my own work, thought separated from feeling  
abandons too much of the richness of human experience to be an adequate account of  
social and personal life.

Action Research & Liberal Humanism – Valuing Lived Experience

The desire of those involved in action research to encourage other individuals to  
publish personal accounts of their learning and development and to make the self the  
centre of investigations has affinities with the tradition of liberal humanism.  
Usefully, action research, and the personal accounts which constitute its canon, can  
be situated within this liberal intellectual tradition, in addition to its more usual  
situating within the tradition of critical theory.

The tradition of liberal humanism, in England, has, through individuals such as Joseph
Addison, John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot and E. M. Forster, stressed the importance of individuality, personal feelings and personal relations. In broad terms, the common threads which run through the writing of these representative figures are: a valuing of individuality and personal experience; a view of society as an aggregate of unique individuals; a belief in personal morality associated with the development of the mind; and a belief in the necessity of freedom and tolerance. (45) The following passage from John Stuart Mill's 'On Liberty' is reasonably typical:

> It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation; and as the works partake the character of those who do them, by the same process human life also becomes rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings, and strengthening the tie which binds every individual to the race, by making the race infinitely better worth belonging to. In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is, therefore, more valuable to others. (46)

Liberal humanism expresses faith in the intelligence of individuals to make sense of the world and to express their understanding in language that is free, non-specialist and accessible to all. The public sphere, as Jurgen Habermas terms it, of eighteenth century England, included coffee houses, clubs and journals in which private individuals gathered for the free exchange of opinions. (47) The right to speak and judge was not based upon power, privilege, or social authority but upon the intrinsic value of the contribution. Good sense, reason, and insight allowed access to the discursive world of the public sphere. Common sense, clarity and comprehensibility were highly valued. But interestingly, it was the idea of exchange, of dialogue, that lay at the heart of the public sphere. The dialogic nature of the discursive public
space allowed for the expression of that which was not always comprehended but which was pursued through dialogue. Just as in conversation in situations in which we feel safe, we pursue those insights that remain at the edge of comprehensibility, at the borders of our ability to express and articulate what it is we mean to say, and the conversation proceeds on the basis of a collaborative effort at making ourselves comprehensible to ourselves. An important part of the pedagogic relationship is to establish the conditions in which the pursuit of comprehensibility can be undertaken collaboratively by teacher and students.

Of course, it is not a giant step from the public sphere of the eighteenth century, as visualised (and idealised) by Habermas to his formulation of an ideal speech situation, in which individuals enter social discourse as free, autonomous and equal participants, and where incomprehension is as valuable in furthering dialogue as knowledge. Here are interesting models for the establishment of the discursive world of our educational institutions, a world in which freedom, equality, and reciprocity are its structural and structuring foundations, and where individuality is valued and encouraged. What questions arise, in this context, concerning the discursive possibilities for students and parents within the hegemony of schools? It is a belief in the possibility of creating a public sphere in the school setting, of establishing an approximation to the ideal speech situation, a belief in my potential and the potential of my colleagues and students and the parents with whom I work to contribute to a pedagogical conversation that animates my practice.

The concepts of the public sphere and the ideal speech situation are constructs of the mind. Action research must be mindful of the insight of the liberal tradition that any investigation of subjectivity must treat of the whole person, body and mind. In
Speaking of E. M. Forster, Lionel Trilling says that he celebrated the "the salvation of the loving heart, the passionate body and the liberated personality." (48) Where does the passionate body and the liberated personality fit into the ideal speech situation? What account of the body and the heart must be included in a study of dialogue in schools? In the course of an essay on Roland Barthes' pedagogy, Steven Ungar quotes the following:

Teaching is not only very personal, it is also very physical. The teacher there, walking from the library to his office, dispensing smiles and warm greetings to fresh-faced students, is me. I talk a lot about souls - perhaps too much - but no soul have I ever seen that did not come in a body and when I teach somebody I teach some body. (49)

An extended reflection on school discourse must not empty that discourse of its personalness or intimacy. In chapter four, I try to pursue the insight that teaching somebody is to teach some body.

The relevance of the liberal humanist tradition, and the values it upholds, is clear. Action research, viewed in the light of the liberal humanist tradition, is a contemporary assertion of the values and ideas which, over a long period of time and through a variety of genres, fiction, essays, and autobiography, have been asserted and defended. And the defence of these values has often taken an oppositional stance, challenging dominant orthodoxies. Liberal humanism, as a critical force, is concerned with language, with the ways in which we represent ourselves and the ways in which we need to reimagine that representation to maintain our freedom. What liberal humanism gains from critical theory is a wider social dimension to the transformative potential of critical understanding. What critical theory gains from liberal humanism is a concern for individuality and lived experience that is not divorced from social and communicative theory.
Liberalism, though not a concise body of doctrines, has always valued private thoughts and emotions and, consequently, valued "variousness and possibility" to use a phrase from Lionel Trilling. (50) To value variousness and possibility has both a political and an intellectual implication. It means working for a society that guarantees personal freedoms and sponsors the personal voice. During the Second World War, the personal testimony given by E. M. Forster, a celebrated liberal humanist, was an important contribution to the public debate on the issue of responding to the totalitarian threat to democratic institutions and personal freedoms posed by totalitarian movements. The substance of Forster's remarks was important but of equal importance was the example of public discourse that he set: Public discourse as the exchange of personal stories and ideas. In the discursive economy of liberalism, personal stories and insights are freely exchanged and, furthermore, they are valued for their various and subjective content. The liberal imagination imagines a world that is free, complex and governed by reason, in so far as that is possible. Liberalism, in its most insightful moments, imagines a world that is both intellectually and emotionally satisfying and which, in its generosity, sets an example that all may follow who strive who bring into existence a vision of "a general enlargement and freedom." (51) The impulse of the liberal imagination is to keep the world open and complex, rather than closed and simple. For action researchers, working in a school context, in a society that is often rule governed and which may regard education as a matter of "suppression, inhibition and forbiddance", the temptation to simplify and close down openings is great and must be resisted if we are to do justice to the "variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty" of human activity and human motivation. (52) And the ambition of this thesis is to do justice to the variousness and possibility of school life and to the representation and analysis of it.

The liberal imagination, has, of course, shown itself to best advantage in works of
fiction, in accounts of individual lives which strive to understand and illumine the lives they represent. The storytelling of action research must also strive to provide us with insights into the lives of its subjects. And it may well be that action research has as much to learn from literature and literary criticism in seeking to understand the life of individuals as it has from the social sciences. Especially the idea of bringing into the open what is taken for granted, or what goes without saying.

The concept of the liberal imagination, like that of the public sphere, is not without its problems. It is, in part, an ideal and, in part, a literary and historical description. However, it is a term that is useful in keeping to the forefront the aim and nature of the enterprise that is action research, an enterprise that fosters forms of social relations, which are based on the principles of autonomy, equality and reciprocity, principles which threaten hierarchical structures and exclusivist claims to knowledge.

**Reading Stories- Conditional Assent**

This thesis is, essentially, a story, or a collection of stories with accompanying glosses or commentaries. The commentaries seek to interpret the story within the categories established by critical theory and liberal humanism, categories such as: dialogue, subjectivity, reciprocity, enlargement, critical consciousness and defamiliarisation. The reflections are prompted by a pedagogical impulse, the impulse, in Barbara Johnson's words, "to transform linguistical knowledge into existential knowledge and to fill gaps and discontinuities with casual explanations, moral judgements or, at the very least, evaluative descriptions." (53)

However, the thesis is born of another compulsion, also pedagogical in nature, namely the compulsion to tell the story, "to repeat what has not yet been understood" and which, sometimes, continues to escape our understanding in any form other than
the telling and re-telling of the story. (54)

To deny the possibility that stories may fascinate us precisely because we cannot translate them into existential knowledge or moral aphorisms is to deny the variousness, complexity, difficulty and non-continuities of human life that liberalism wishes to celebrate. And a study that is essentially narrative in form, must be aware of the power and amplitude of a good story, an amplitude that goes beyond the closed endings of information or commentary. Discussing the difference between information and stories, Walter Benjamin states:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it is new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of realising it even after a long time. (55)

The meaning and order that we seek to impose on a story, through our commentary, is part of our need, our rage, indeed, for order and completion and, through these, fulfilment but, even as we move towards this closure, we must be aware of its limitations, of its artificiality and, even, perhaps, its falsification. Therefore, a study that is both story and glossary must tread its way between the pleasure and fulfilment of making sense of what has been told, and the disappointment of emptying the story of its richness. Moreover, a study that is a narrative and a reflection upon narrative can never give anything other than "conditional assent" to its own conclusions, born as those conclusions are of the needs and desires of the storyteller. (56)

Furthermore, a study that is also a narrative must acknowledge that the lives recounted in the study, including that of the storyteller, have their beginning and ending outside the study. They are always more than the portion recounted and subjected to commentary and interpretation. Roland Barthes sums up the difficulty
of writing about oneself in a series of witty propositions:

I would be nothing if I didn't write. Yet I am elsewhere than where I am when I write. I am worth more than what I write. (57)

Life is always more complex than our attempts to define and categorise it. The richness of language extends beyond the power of a grammar to describe it. However, that should not stop us telling stories of our lives and dwelling on them, provided we are clear as to the purposes of the telling. And one purpose of this thesis is to celebrate the richness of life in school and the individuality of those with whom I come in contact. Another purpose is the pursuit of the emancipatory possibilities which may arise from my reflection on the history that I write. To pursue these possibilities with the intention of maintaining a praxis governed by a commitment to freedom, autonomy, reciprocity and equality. Action research is the form of enquiry that I wish to pursue because it best suits the purposes, personal and pedagogical, which animate my setting out on this narrative, reflective process. And it may well be that the controversies between different forms of educational research have dwelt too much on methodological issues and not enough on the purposes, social and personal, of the researcher.

"To Be Forwarded in Ourselves" – The 'Why' of Reading & Reporting Practice

Enlightenment is a first step in critique. The second involves a commitment to action and reform, to praxis. There is little point in achieving a self-reflective autonomy if one's praxis is regulated by the structures of a restrictive social order. For this reason, Carr and Kemmis suggest that a truly emancipatory action research must be participative and collaborative. (58) This is the dilemma, and has been the dilemma, for all forms of liberal thought. The fully developed human subject sees the potential to transgress or cross social and ideological boundaries, even as he/she
submits to the oppressive forces of society. In working as a teacher and year head, I inhabit a space where the institution of school, forms of subjectivity and social relations meet and interact. These three and their interaction are the areas of interest I want to dwell on. It is in this space that I hope to effect change and devise collaborative forms of action that facilitate the development of autonomous subjects; social relations based on respect and reciprocity; and cause changes in the way the institution of school is constituted. (In moments of fancy, I imagine that this space has been transformed into carnival, a discursive space of play and role reversal, where enjoyment, fun and creativity are privileged over hierarchy, authority and limitation.)

For Jean-Paul Sartre, writing in 1946, freedom is constitutive of our human identity. Each individual is in possession of him/herself and is responsible for what he/she is. Moreover, in having responsibility for what we are, we have responsibility for others. In proposing who we are, we also propose what humanity is. For Sartre, "there is no hope without action." And he suggests that Existentialism is no less than "an ethic of action and self-commitment", in a world that is intersubjective. Sartre's claim for the absolute freedom of each individual to create him/herself through his/her actions does not ignore social conditions and forces. However, he argues that every individual purpose is an attempt either to "surpass these limitations, or to widen them, or else to deny them or to accommodate oneself to them." The heart of existentialism is "the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realises himself in realising a type of humanity." The work of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault alerts us to the difficulty of achieving a genuine autonomy, given the extent to which power and social control operate through discourse practices and, hence, permeate our assumptions and presuppositions. The first steps towards a genuine emancipation becomes the questioning of dominant and pervasive points of view. Empowering ourselves is often, in the first instance, a matter of
struggle in a personal capacity within an institution. But unless the struggle leads to
the creation of a dialogic community, acting in collaboration, the likelihood is that the
questioning individual, the exception, will be assimilated into the institution and the
challenge to things-as-they-are will be minor and ineffectual. (66)

Notwithstanding this, the challenge offered by Sartre is for us to define the kind of
human purpose that we propose in our actions, and the kind of identity we strive to
bring into being for ourselves and for others. For Sartre, freedom is the foundation
of all values. For him, the individual who wills his own freedom must also will the
freedom of others. For Sartre, to deny that we are free to choose our values and
free to express these values in our deeds is, at best, a form of deception and, at worst,
a form of cowardice. Again, this is challenging. It demands of individuals the
courage of their convictions and lays the resolution of contradiction or inauthenticity
at their door. It challenges me, as an educator, to create the enabling conditions for
human agency, notwithstanding the problematisation of this concept by
postmodernist critiques of the concept of the Cartesian ego.

What is the relevance of this to action research? Well, Sartre places individual
action and subjectivity at the heart of determining the quality and meaning of life.
He challenges individuals to propose their purpose in relation to the social situation in
which they find themselves. He challenges me to propose my purpose in my work in
school. He challenges each of us to exercise our freedom and, in doing, so to will
the freedom of others.

Of course, Sartre's views and perspectives did not stay static. Interviewed in 1968,
Sartre's remarks provide further challenges for practitioner research or, to use his
term, "theoreticians of practical knowledge". (67) Essentially, Sartre argues that
intellectuals or theoreticians of practical knowledge, live in a "a state of perpetual
contradiction" between their class interests and their rational critique of society which suggests that the transformation of society, in the name of all humanity, can only occur at the expense of the class from which they themselves come. (68) In other words, the theoretician is one who discovers in himself internal contradictions which, Sartre argues, can only be overcome by "radical action":

But what is certain is that the task of the intellectual lies in freeing himself from his contradiction (which is ultimately the contradiction of society itself) and for that purpose occupying the most radical position. (69)

What implications are there in this for the individual practitioner, who seeks to understand his own situation and to eliminate inner contradictions? What are the limits of radical action? Sartre suggests, quite simply, that radical action is determined by "the scope of real possibility". (70) This is the image of the theoretician of practical knowledge as the man of sensible action, rather than the romantic figure of heroic failure. I find this immensely reassuring.

What is of real interest in this interview, is the development of Sartre's ideas on existentialism from an ethics of action with the individual as a self-theorist, to the later idea of the theoretician as a living contradiction, who must face his/her inner conflict before proceeding to exploiting possibilities of action which will create a better society for universal, as opposed to bourgeois, humanity. Now, it seems to me that Sartre, speaking in 1968, might well have been announcing the beginnings of the kind of work undertaken by action researchers where many of the research enquiries begin with the sense of contradiction spoken of by Sartre. What characterises action research is the Sartrean belief that each individual can move beyond his/her situation. A human being exists in relation to his/her situation, and can influence that relation. Human beings are never simply a product of history. Hazel Barnes, in her introduction to Search for a Method, states:
Freedom is a fact and it is the object of an imperative. To say that man is free is to say that he is responsible for what he does; it is also to say that he has the possibility of living creatively. (71)

To strive to understand one's situation involves a movement back to understand the past and a projection forward to an imagined future. In Sartre, we find a model of research understood as praxis.

(I surprise myself by my return to the writings of Sartre for inspiration. In the last few years, my reading of critical theory has had a mainly postmodern flavour. It is an exciting body of work. However, I experience as a loss the general absence of belief in the potential of personal agency to effect social transformation, in many postmodern texts. This sense of loss explains, I think, my return to Sartre and my invocation of E.M. Forster and liberal humanism. In both Sartre and Forster, I find a belief in the potential of the individual to act as an agent of transformation.

The calling-into-question of the unitary subject in postmodern texts causes me no alarm or surprise. I was never persuaded by the Cartesian cogito, 'I think, therefore I am.' Why not, 'I raise my hand in recognition and smile, therefore I am.' Our sense of individuality is related to our intentions, emotions, bodily integrity and relationship to others, as much as to our consciousness. The radical otherness of the subject, apparent in the unconscious, a recurrent theme is postmodern writing, is an idea I find familiar. In the Roman Catholic tradition, in which I grew up, I was taught, from childhood, that the human soul is divided, drawn in equal measure to virtue and sinfulness. This division, in the Catholic tradition, only serves to emphasise the extent of the freedom of the individual. I am
free to choose either goodness of sin. To choose the good, to practice good works, contributes to my redemption, as well as helping to realise the peaceable kingdom on earth. Is it any wonder that, as an adult, I am drawn to those writers who write on personal agency, or to those visionary writers, like Habermas and Freire, who imagine a world made better by the transformative potential of human agency?)

In Freire's writing, the scope of possible action is considered in the light of structural and cultural constraints upon praxis. Although writing about Latin America, his remarks have a relevance for school life in Ireland, especially in relation to defining the dominant features of the culture of school and the implications of these for the creation of autonomous subjects who work to transform their own situation, through emancipatory acts, which challenge the everyday language and the social practices that work to limit their horizons. Freire's distinction between a director society and a dependent society is a useful one in thinking about the relationship between teachers and students, as I have experienced them in my professional life. (72) The role of a year head is one which involves mediation between the claims of teachers to be directors and the claims of students to have a voice with which to challenge the actions of the members of the dominant society. And just as Freire writes of the peasants' tendency to attribute the social structure of their societies to some inherent incapacity in themselves, so it might be argued that many teachers and students think and act as if the students were naturally incapacitated and, therefore, dependent. (73) This kind of thinking, culturally and historically determined, can and does, in my estimation, lead to Marcuse's "surplus of repression". The teacher/practitioner who identifies this repression inhabits a precarious position, belonging to neither the teacher side nor the student side of the dialectic of school. And it is for this reason that dialogue, the most rational form of discourse, is the form best suited to communicate insights and seek the collaboration of others in creating more
autonomous and just forms of social structures in schools. In order to bring changes about, the reflective individual must act in a purposeful way, with a view to eliminating unnecessary constrains and limitations on freedom in the course of daily encounters, to create dialogic situations.

This thesis is part of the commitment to create dialogue. It is not a report on something that happened elsewhere, an account of a conversation that is completed. It is an integral part of the process of searching for awareness, of engaging in emancipatory practices. It is inescapably dialogic. For Gadamer, understanding is, *sui generis*, dialogic. (74) I don’t know where this thesis will end – in one sense there is no end to conversation, there is always the next question to be asked – nor do I want to know, for that would be to close off the possibility of new insights emerging in the process of reporting and questioning. To have determined what I want to say before I begin to say it would be to substitute an authoritative monologue for an open, divergent and emancipatory dialogue, and that would unravel the commitment that animates this venture.

(This chapter deals, essentially, with the theory of practice but this, of course, was not the originating point of the thesis. I can remember, around 1992, having a conscious desire to be more dialogic in my interaction with students. That intention coincided with my meeting Jean McNiff and Una Collins and, with their support, I engaged in a number of projects on the development of dialogic practice. I reported on these projects to a group of teachers interested in new paradigm research. Later, much later, I began, in conversation with Jean and other colleagues, to consider the writing and reading of research reports as a form of practice that could be subjected to the same dialogic intention as my speech practices in school. To gain a clearer sense of the trajectory of the work and its chronological
development, chapters three and five might be read as the starting points.)
Notes


7 Culler (1983), op. cit., p. 9.

8 Cited in Tony Bennett, Formalism and Marxism (London: Methuen, 1979) pp.53-54.


15 See Connerton (1976), op. cit., p. 37 on objections to Habermas.

16 There is a useful discussion of Aristotle’s threefold classification of disciplines in Mark K. Smith, Local Education: Community, Conversation, Praxis (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994) pp 162-164.


20 See Connerton (1976), op. cit., p. 29 on Marcuse.


26 See for example, Whitehead (1993), op. cit. and also the work of Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, on the Safe and Caring schools project at the University of Calgary.

27 See Paul Atkinson & Sara Delamont, 'Bread and Dreams or Bread and Circuses? A critique of 'Case Study' Research in Education' in Martyn Hammersley (ed.) (1993), op. cit., pp.204-221.


32 Freire (1972a), op. cit., p. 33.

33 Ibid., p.36.

34 Ibid., p.42


36 Freire (1972a), op. cit., p. 55,


38 Raymond Carver, from 'Where Water Comes Together with Other Water',
Reading Practice  The Search for Insight  Mc Dermott


41 Ungar (1983), op. cit., p.5.


45 I have drawn on Rukun Advani's E.M.Forster as Critic (Beckenham, Kent: Croom Helm, 1984) for this summation of the Liberal tradition.


49 Steven Ungar 'The Professor of Desire' in Johnson (ed.) (1982), op. cit., p. 82.

51 Ibid., p. v.

52 The formulation of education as suppression, forbiddance and inhibition is taken from a remark of Freud's cited in Shoshana Felman, 'Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable' in Johnson (1982), op. cit., p. 23.


54 Ibid., p. vii.

55 Benjamin (1973), op. cit., p. 90.


59 Adopted from Eagleton (1984), op. cit., p.110

60 This idea of carnival comes from the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin. See Burbules (1993), op. cit., pp 63-65, for a discussion of dialogue as carnival.


62 Ibid., p.44.

63 Ibid., p. 48.

64 Ibid., p. 47.


68    Ibid., p. 15.

69    Ibid., p. 17.

70    Ibid., p. 18.

71    Hazel E. Barnes in her introduction to Sartre (1968), op. cit., p. xxi.

72    Freire (1972a), op. cit., pp. 57-60.

73    Ibid., p. 63.

74    This is the central thesis of Gadamer (1982), op. cit.
Chapter Three

Reporting Practice - Conversation Among Friends

The work reported in this chapter took place during the academic year of 1992/1993. I was working as year head to students in sixth year, the final year in secondary school. Together with four tutors and a fellow year head, Pat Corcoran, I was concerned with exploring ways in which the students might be assisted in preparing for their Leaving Certificate examination. Following a conversation with a student and her friend, I began to consider the idea of working with all the students in the year, in their friendship groups, towards the creation of study support networks. I was interested in seeing whether the friendship group might be incorporated as a working unit for year head and tutor purposes. I was also interested in reflecting on the changes, if any, that might occur in my role as year-head, as a result of this project, and my way of relating to the students. (1)

Background to the Project. June-September 1992

In June 1992, a student in my year group (fifth year) came to tell me that she was pregnant. She was accompanied by a friend, who was also a member of the year group, and the telling of the story was shared between them. The students initiated the conversation, which took place at the end of the school day as I was leaving my classroom, and we sat and talked in a social/group area. Our meeting was informal, open and friendly. What struck me most, when I thought back on our conversation, was the nature of the dialogue in which we had engaged. The personal note was strong. This was not dialogue as instruction. I was not Socrates leading Meno to the place where I wanted him to be. This was conversation as “the mutual exploration of one another’s individualities.” (2) The direction was determined not by the dictates of an argument to be followed but by the needs of the participants and the situation. On reflection, I was also struck by the part played by the friend. She provided a kind
of reflective commentary, on the progress of the conversation, and my reaction to the news of the pregnancy. ("See, I told you there'd be no problem about coming back to school.") This commentary encouraged the student to speak of her fears and her feelings about her pregnancy, and to ask, on occasions, my advice.

Reflecting further on the conversation, I understood that I had been invited into the friendship to act as a supportive adult, on the students' terms. I had not conducted a conversation. I had been in conversation. And because the two students were conversing to me as a pair, they were less self-conscious than they would have been if they had come to see me separately.

In September, the student returned to school, and I discovered that her pregnancy was known to three of her close friends. The progress of her pregnancy was recounted in the same informal way as it had begun, only now there were four voices. The telling of the story was, invariably, good-humoured and cheerful. Many matters, including the question of informing other students and teachers, were decided by the student in consultation with her friends.

My conversations with the students continued with the same inclusive, divergent character. In these conversations, the individual students expressed their personalities in a freer and more natural manner than heretofore. At one level, this expressed itself in their good-humoured banter and joking about school. At another level, they sought my opinion on issues that, I think, might not otherwise have surfaced. These ranged from subject choices and problems with individual teachers, to conflict with parents. From my perspective as year head, I found the blurring of distinctions between the official and the unofficial side of school, the formal and the informal, to be intriguing and, potentially, helpful in allowing me to see myself and the students in a more complete way. I discovered, for example, that one girl, who
was not an academic achiever, by any standards, had an unerring sense of judgement regarding people and situations that was not apparent in the classroom. Moreover, she demonstrated a social competence and confidence that was not evident in her classroom behaviour. In short, I saw my four students in a new light and I grew fond of them.

I thought about these friends and how they related and conversed with each other and I realised the benefits they derived from belonging to their group. And I concluded that an important and supportive network of relationships was not being called into operation, by the school, in its efforts on behalf of the students. Therefore, I began to consider the idea of working with the naturally occurring friendship groups, on a regular basis, for year head purposes. To this end, I drew up a rough map of the friendship patterns in the year. Some groups were easy to identify; others were less so. In cases of doubt, I simply asked students about their friends in school. I also informed the students of the possibility that I might begin to work with them in groups, though I was not able to articulate my ideas beyond this initial statement. The students entertained my half-understood idea with their customary politeness and tolerance, and I was confident that while I was speaking of that which I didn’t yet fully comprehend, it was comprehensible. (3)

At a tutor/year head meeting, in early October, a number of students were identified as being at risk of giving up in their efforts to cope with the demands of Leaving Certificate study. The tutors agreed to give support to individuals, through work in the tutor class and through interviews with the individuals concerned. I undertook to address the problem by working with the friendship groups, and the tutors considered this a worthwhile venture. Thus, the project began to take shape.
First Cycle of Action and Reflection. October-December 1992

Initially, in early October, I spoke to individual groups, on an informal basis, suggesting that the members of the group make a conscious effort to talk to each other about their successes and failures, in relation to school work and exam preparation. I asked them to make school work and the Leaving Certificate an important part of their conversation. Furthermore, I suggested that group members might give encouragement to those individuals whom they felt were in real difficulty in preparing for the Leaving Certificate. At this initial stage, I asked one student in each group, the person I perceived to be the nucleus of that group, to keep me in touch with the progress being made by his/her friends and to alert me to individuals who might benefit from tutor or teacher support. My next step was to call a meeting of these 'leaders' and explain how I saw the project developing.

This was not a good idea. A number of students told me of the references being made to 'Mc Dermott's spies', and one student approached me to find out why she had not been chosen as the contact person. Obviously, to persist with this system risked isolating individual students from their friends and risked causing students to feel slighted or overlooked. It was also clear that the low-key and informal contact I was hoping to establish could not really flourish through the procedures I had chosen.

At this point, I decided to use the action research framework to keep the initiative going, and to force myself into a more critically reflective mode of action. At the same time, my colleague and fellow year-head, Pat Corcoran, expressed his interest in improving his practice as year-head, through action research. Pat, quite independently of my thinking, was interested in the operation of friendship groupings, and recognised the failure of the school to tap into this rich, developmental resource. Pat was very interested in my ideas, and we agreed to work on the project as co-researchers.
The next significant development occurred when we discussed our project with Jim Connolly and Breda O'Reilly-Hogan, from the V.E.C. Psychological Support Service. The value of focused, professional dialogue cannot be overstated. Discussion allowed Pat and myself to state explicitly the values and assumptions which, intuitively, were informing our action, namely, the importance of dialogue and free exchange between teachers and senior students. Furthermore, through dialogue, we began to understand the importance we attached to the social basis of school life. In other words, the discussion helped generate our own knowledge. We gained access to our desire to regard each student as an individual, but one who is also a member of a social group. We recognised the support and affirmation that the group offers its members. Through our conversations we began to articulate a view of student groups that was radically different from many of the accounts to be found in sociological studies. Peer support not peer pressure was the most vital characteristic of student groups in our experience. Through this dialogue we began to move away from the web of association in the institutional usage of the term, 'student culture'.

More practically, our discussion with Jim and Breda helped us to decide on a manageable way of recording the project. We decided to monitor the progress of two groups - one all male, the other all female - and to use the students' accounts of their progress, before and after this initiative, as the primary evidence of the study. The two groups were chosen because we judged them to be representative of the general academic and social profile of the year group as a whole. (An interesting fact is that no student identified her/himself as belonging to a mixed friendship group, though the school is co-educational.)

This meeting helped us to establish for ourselves the importance of encouraging all the members of a student friendship group to see themselves as possessing personal
strengths and the capacity to initiate ideas. Pat and I were conscious that our workload did not give us sufficient free time to work together with both groups, so Pat elected to work with the male students (Group A) most of whom were known to him, though he didn't teach any of them, and I elected to work with the female group (Group B). Obviously, as year head, I knew all the students but my relationship with most of the students in this group was quite remote.

On reflection, the decision to work separately was a mistake. This was especially true in relation to Group B. I had a well-defined institutional identity as year head and this acted as a barrier to the creation of the kind of speech situation and the kind of conversation I hoped would come into being. Moreover, it was the issue of group dynamics that Pat and I saw as the major source of potential difficulty, in our work. We knew that we wanted each student to feel free to contribute and express her/his opinion in the group situation. We knew that we wanted a dialogic model of communication but we were not confident that we could bring it into play. We also foresaw the need to have some practical suggestions to offer to students, demonstrating how group action might be taken on improving study. We felt that without offering practical suggestions, or eliciting them from the students, the initiative would lead to no more than a temporary boost to the morale and cohesion of the group, and we wanted to effect some significant improvement in the groups' motivation and approach to study.


For the first meeting with Group A, Pat and I both met the students. We both saw it as important that the students should understand the context in which the project was taking place, so we explained our involvement in the action research project, through the Marino Institute of Education, and our wish to improve our practice as year heads.
We suggested that the friendship group might be used as a resource to help the members meet the difficult requirements of Leaving Certificate study. We presented ourselves as co-learners with the students, and invited them to participate in a joint venture. The students were receptive to the idea and agreed to become involved.

I had a similar meeting with Group B, explaining the project and inviting them to participate. I was careful to sketch out the possible benefits of the project, without promising any definite return for their involvement. As with the other group, the students agreed to participate. This meeting was quite different in tone and tenor from the meeting with Group A. I believe that my position as year-head, a role, which has a strong administrative/discipline profile in the school, inhibited the development of the kind of openness achieved at the meeting with Group A. My presence with Pat, at the first meeting, demonstrated to the students the collaborative and friendly nature of our (the teachers') enterprise. Furthermore, the presence of two adults, relating to each other in a spontaneous and friendly way, without resorting to the artificial formality of much teacher-teacher communication, in the presence of students, helped the students to overcome their instinctive caution in speaking in the presence of two authority figures within the school hierarchy. In the case of Group B, the students were attentive and interested, but I could not open the encounter into the free exchange I had hoped for. Instead, the meeting had a classroom quality, with the teacher talking and explaining, and the students listening quietly and responding briefly when invited to do so. Moreover, the focus of the project - study - was, almost certainly, too close to the official menu of school life to create the positive change in role behaviour, for both teachers and students, that I believed could result from working with friendship groups.

At these two initial meetings, we asked the students to assess their present situation, with regard to study, and we proposed using these statements as the basis for further
discussion and future action. The students identified two broad areas of difficulty: a) Problems with motivation and concentration; and b) Problems related to the study of individual subjects.

At follow-on meetings, both pre-arranged and ad-hoc, we discussed practical ways of overcoming their difficulties. Ideas and suggestions which were tried included:

- Studying in groups or in pairs;
- Beginning revision with the most recently covered topic in class;
- Making subjects maps;
- Identifying important topics in each subject;
- Following a common revision plan for a subject;
- Phoning a member of the group for advice on solving a study or homework problem;
- Sharing successful study outcomes with the members of the group.

At the beginning of March, when Pat and I sat down to review progress to date, we were in agreement on the merits and worth of the project and aware of the many questions it raised for us in relation to our own practice as year heads. We were both of the opinion that working with the friendship group was a worthwhile practice that merited further consideration. We felt that study was a worthwhile focus, even though we recognised that a study-related project contributed to the habit of dependency which students often develop in the formal context of school, and to the habit of domination which teachers often develop. Neither of us was confident that we possessed the communicative skills necessary to bring dialogue into play as a matter of course. We were further concerned by the fact that the students regarded us, in part, as study counsellors and they disclosed their difficulties with subjects and teachers. On occasions, they asked us to supply an expertise that, they said, their subject teacher lacked. These situations were uncomfortable for us both. We did not
want to break the social bond and the commitment we had established with the students through our conversations. Nor, however, did we want to break the obligations of colleagueship by talking about colleagues behind their backs. Inevitably, however, the opening of the relationship between teacher and students, and the commitment to maintaining conversational involvement, leads to discussion on the shared context of school and we had to deal with this development as honestly and tactfully as we could. We also became aware that talking about school and strategies for coping with study, could lead us to impinge upon the autonomy of our colleagues. We were fortunate that we learned this lesson in a rather amusing way, as Pat proposed a solution to Group A, in relation to after school study, which ran counter to an instruction I had given to all the members of the year group. What we learned from this was the necessity of retaining a sense of humour; of not panicking when you cannot deliver what you have promised; of compromising and remaining supportive of your colleague.

At this point in the project, we began to understand that the question of role identity was at the heart of our work, not least in the changing relationship between us. Up to the time we began to work on the project, each of us had administered our respective year group in an autonomous manner. Now we began to discuss how this collaboration might lead to future co-operation and discussion on the values and assumptions which we brought to the administration of our year groups.

Another interesting development, which was not part of the project monitored by us, was an attempt to involve the friendship group in the resolution of student-teacher conflict. In following up a serious complaint, made by a teacher against a student, I found the student was not receptive to my attempts to mediate and his manner was hostile and adversarial. The involvement of a friend of the student in discussing the matter removed the air of hostility, and the situation was resolved in a rational way.
The recourse to the friendship group created a calm atmosphere for the resolution of the conflict.

Our meeting with Jean McNiff, Una Collins and Jim Connolly, on March 11th 1993, was very valuable, because it allowed us to see our work through the eyes of interested outsiders, and we found that their comments, observations and questions generated new understandings, as well as encouraging and validating our work.

**Final Cycle of Action and Reflection. March/April, 1993.**

In mid-March, Pat and I met with our respective groups, and reiterated our original idea of mobilising the friendship group in support of study. We invited the students to assess the initiative, and suggest ways of improving or extending it, in the future. This series of conversations, in the final phase of the project, were open and friendly. In particular, with Group B, I found the students to be refreshingly honest, humorous and self-aware, in their assessment of their own study. This was particularly true of one student whose classroom personality was dour, and who lacked confidence in her academic ability. Her brightness and keen sense of the ridiculous found expression in these discussions, as they had never done in the classroom. Moreover, from my perspective, the project was worthwhile if only for allowing a small number of students to express positive aspects of their personalities in a context sponsored by the ‘official’ side of school. In the case of Group A, the project caused me to view two of the students in a new light. I recognised a thoughtfulness in them that I had not seen or suspected. Indeed, as a result of the project, I nominated one of these students to address President Mary Robinson, on behalf of the senior students, when she visited the school in February 1993. These final series of conversations also assured us that the earlier anxieties we had felt, regarding our lack of communicative skills, were excessive.
Pat and I discussed whether the students' comments and our own observations were sufficient evidence to evaluate the project. We were conscious that we had not used Christmas reports and reports based on pre-Leaving Certificate examinations, for example, as an objective measure of the students' academic performance, over the course of the project, nor had we sought the views of subject teachers on any notable changes in the students' attitude or school performance, during this period. However, we decided that the evaluations and conclusions of the participants in the project were the ones that most mattered. Furthermore, we believed that the validity of these claims could be tested and proven within the context of the ongoing conversational involvement that had developed between the participants in the project. We were free to question the students on the meaning of what they claimed and the evidence they had for saying it. We were also free to ask them if they truly believed in the claims they made. Equally they were free to question us. As Habermas might present it, such was the nature of our conversations that the validity claims of comprehensibility, truthfulness and sincerity could have been invoked and redeemed, if the need arose. (5) The students' evaluations indicate that the use of the friendship group was of benefit to them in organising their study, and they saw its real and potential value. From our point-of-view, as researchers, we realise that the project had an effect on the study behaviour of the students, and an equal effect on our thinking as year heads. Certainly, our approach to the role will be influenced by our renewed sense of the social basis of schooling. We intend to work with tutors in developing the friendship group as a unit in tutor work. We also see a role for friendship groups in the resolution of serious conflict between teachers and students. These initiatives will have to be explained to our colleagues, and will involve us, as year heads, in promoting a collaborative and less role-governed, model of teacher-student relationships. In addition, following on the advice of our students, we will encourage each friendship group to give support to its members in preparing for the
Leaving Certificate. Working with the friendship groups, from the beginning of the sixth year, should give sufficient time for the formation of the conversational relationship, between teachers and students, that is necessary in order that the group retain its characteristic way of relating and supporting its members.

Interestingly, in the recent Green Paper on education, published by the Department of Education, no mention is made of the importance of student-student relationships in the totality of school life. We, following this project, see the student-student relationship as a primary one, one which should be recognised and taken into consideration in school planning and practice. We are further convinced that working with friendship groups will allow individual students to give fuller expression to their personalities, and create greater mutual respect between teachers and students.

In conclusion, we believe that working with friendship groupings is an effective way of helping students prepare for the Leaving Certificate examination. Working on the project has provided us with ideas for using friendship groups in other tutor contexts. Finally, the project has persuaded us of the importance of developing ways of relating to students that go beyond the role-governed ones of institutional relationships. The informal, friendship group plays a major part in the life of students and we, as teachers and administrators, do not exploit this resource for the benefits of our students or ourselves. However, to intrude into the informal and unofficial side of school, must be done in a way that does not alter the kinds of relationships which were central to the project. In other words, working with friendship groups means reflecting on our own practices as year head and teachers and modifying them to create the kind of social context in which educational conversations can take place.
Sharing Practice

A couple of months after writing this report, I was asked to address a session on action research, at an in-service day for teachers from schools administered by the County Dublin Vocational Education Committee. My brief was to outline the structure of an action research enquiry and to give an account of the project with the Friendship/Conversation Groups. This short address provided an opportunity for reflection on the pedagogical and conversational practices we employed in the course of our work with the students.

What is of interest in revisiting the remarks I made at the in-service day, a number of years after they were written and delivered, is the extent to which the project undergoes a transformation in the acts of describing, interpreting and presenting it to an audience of teachers. The aims are presented with a clarity that was not there at the outset:

Our aim was to encourage the students, who were in sixth year, to regard the Leaving Certificate as an integral part of the agenda of their group. We wanted to persuade them of the value of working in a collaborative and co-operative way in preparing for the examination. This initiative or intervention arose out of a belief that an important and supportive network of relationships was not being called into play by the school. We believed that the friendship group was as valid a unit for working with students as the subject class or the tutor group, or individual students.

The project was, essentially, about three things: Firstly, building up student morale and a shared sense of purpose, in relation to the Leaving Certificate; Secondly, developing study skills within the groups; and Thirdly, encouraging the group to provide peer support for individuals who were experiencing difficulties in coping with the demands of the Leaving Certificate.

What is also striking is the way in which the abstract language I employed eliminates the affective dimension from this record of our practice. However, this account of
our project includes the voices (or the written traces of their voices) of the students, who are strangely and unaccountably absent from the original narrative. In sharing our practice, I quoted from a number of the students' evaluations:

Rhonda: The friendship/study group was a great help and support to me during sixth year.

Peter: In my experience, studying with two or three others is very productive. Motivation is stronger, and so too is the level of involvement and enjoyment. Different people are stronger in different areas, so the sharing of information is useful.

Patrick: The idea is a good idea, but it should have been started earlier.

David: If a friendship/study group is not working, it should be scrapped. A scrapped group is not a failure, but a study option that didn't suit a particular group. If the project is well worked out and introduced properly, it will be very successful and of great benefit to all who use it.

In general, the students' responses indicate that the project was beneficial to them and, in their eyes, the idea has real potential. Within the friendship groups, students shared their resources; pooled individual skills and strengths. And, as a result, there was a noticeable increase in morale. After the publication of the Leaving Certificate results, students from three different groups expressed the belief that the project had assisted them in gaining high grades, in a number of subjects.

Because I was addressing an audience of fellow-teachers, I referred to the Leaving Certificate examination results as a way of validating the findings, introducing an 'objective' measurement in a way that I considered unnecessary when preparing a report for an action research conference. In evaluating the benefit of the project for myself and my colleague, Pat Corcoran, there is an emphasis on the social and
community basis of schooling.

*I think Pat and I got a renewed appreciation of the social basis of schooling. We saw the benefits of a collaborative and less role and rule governed model of teacher-student interaction. We saw how the context of the friendship group allowed individuals to give fuller expression to their personalities than was the case in the classroom. We saw the potential for regarding the friendship group as an important unit in serving the needs of our students.*

Interestingly, the report touches on the idea that teaching is essentially a practice, whose theory is intuitive and largely unconscious. Theory catches up on practice, after the event, as is the case in my presentation to colleagues months after the project.

*From a personal/professional point-of-view, we found the project gave us the space to reflect on our practice as year-heads. I think we rediscovered the values and assumptions which, intuitively, were guiding our practice. And in teaching, where so many of your responses are reactive, it was refreshing to find that reflective space.*

Implicit in the above statement is the idea that the relationship between values and practice is an important criterion in the assessment of the success of the project. My remarks then go on to name the colleagues with whom we conversed, suggesting, I think, that the theorising of the project took the form of collaborative dialogue.

*We both enjoyed the contact with Una Collins and Jean Mc Niff of the Marino Institute, and Jim Connolly and Breda O'Reilly-Hogan, of the Psychological Support Service, a contact that took the form of constructive, professional dialogue. And I think that extended, constructive dialogue is a fairly scarce commodity in the school setting.*

I do not think that my reading of the project on Friendship Groupings, at that time,
September, 1994, was particularly insightful or pushed the meaning of the project beyond obvious limits. Even so, it serves to demonstrate how practice is elaborated and theorised in the course of reflection and revisiting; that understanding occurs over time (and is forgotten over time) and, thus, the present is rarely indicative in relation to the theorising of practice. Furthermore, the reading of the project demonstrates how reflection and revisiting can generate insight. And it is in search of insight and awareness that I now wish to subject the account of the Friendship/Conversation Project to a further reading in the chapter which follows.
Notes


3 I am paraphrasing a statement of Jean-François Lyotard. “Of course, you speak of what you don’t comprehend. But it doesn’t necessarily follow that it is incomprehensible.” See Lyotard (1982), op. cit., p. 76.

4 The nature of the involvement between the partners in dialogue is discussed in Burbules (1993), op. cit., pp. 36-46.


7 A version of this address is reproduced in Mc Niff & Collins (1994), op. cit., pp. 91-93.
When your affection is kindled, the world of your intellect takes on a new tenderness and compassion. (...) Aristotle says in De Anima: ‘Perception is *ex hypothesi* a form of affection and being moved.’

John O Donoghue (1)

My re-reading of the report on the friendship/conversational groups centres on two aspects – the original conversation, which gave rise to the idea of working with the friendship groups; and the manner in which I have recounted the project.

**Conversational Pedagogy**

The origin of this project was outside the classroom. The conversation with the student and her friend happened after the official timetabled school day had ended. The extent to which our concept of school is governed by an instrumental, technocratic rationality is evident in the rigid structuring of the school day and the assumption that students must be controlled, both temporally and spatially, through a disciplinary routine. Teaching and learning take place in designed spaces at designated times. (2) The effect of the way school is organised is to divorce students from the influence of their friendship groups. The distrust of ‘peer group’, in the professional discourse of teachers, bears traces, I think, of the monastic distrust of close friendship among the members of a religious order. Friendship is not seen as a moral phenomenon. Friendship is not seen in terms of collaborative and nurturing practices. Yet, here was a pedagogical conversation happening outside the sites and the times designated for teaching and learning. Here were two friends supporting and influencing each other, operating as an inquiring community and inviting me to collaborate with them. This conversation reminded me forcibly that the pedagogical
relation is primarily a personal relation; that teaching and learning occur in situations
when we are acting out of the circumstances of our own lives, as much, if not more
than when we set out consciously to teach and learn. (3)

I have chosen the word ‘pedagogy’ here for the wealth of meaning it has for me. Not
only is it associated with Freire’s concept of education as a form of dialogue, free
from what Heidegger calls “the authority of the know-it-all or the authoritative sway
of the official”, it also suggests the importance of the affective dimension of the
teacher-student relation, as evident in Barthes’ use of the word, or its French
equivalent, ‘pedagogie’. (4) For me, the word also carries something of the meaning
of the Greek word *phronesis*, a concern to act truly and rightly directed at other
human beings. (5) So, the teaching and learning associated with ‘pedagogy’ is,
therefore, dialogic, other-seeking and personal. ‘Conversation’ carries a similar range
of meanings. While some commentators, regard conversation as inferior to dialogue,
I think the term ‘conversation’ emphasises the importance of the relational element in
communication. (6) It reminds me of the communicative virtues of trust and affection
that are shared with pedagogy. (7) Nor do I think that the logical thread of
conversation is, necessarily, weak, an argument made by Matthew Lipman. (8) A
conversation may be characterised by an exchange of feelings, thoughts and
understandings while still retaining the investigative, inquiring characteristics that
Lipman attributes to dialogue. (9) For me, a pedagogical conversation is one in which
there is a willingness between the participants to establish and maintain a mutual
relation, based on trust and goodwill, and a willingness to pursue issues of learning
through a collaborative process of dialogue. In other words, the emphasis falls
equally on the idea of relationship or community and the idea of inquiry. In the case
of the student and her friend who engaged me in conversation, we were searching for
the practical knowledge needed to cope with the contingencies of being pregnant and
at school. Burbules’ characterisation of the spirit of dialogue captures the essence of
the concept of conversational pedagogy. He argues that to persist in the process of
dialogue requires:

A relation of mutual respect, trust and concern – and part of the dialogical
interchange often must relate to the establishment and maintenance of these
bonds. The substance of the interpersonal relation is deeper, and more
consistent, than any particular communicative form it might take. (10)

In Lipman’s terms, the students and myself formed an inquiring community, guided
by the needs of the particular student in what Buber calls her “present and particular
being”. (11) The purpose of the conversation arose out of her situation. The practical
knowledge we sought was sought and generated through conversation. This
conversation was not an incidental part of my teaching day but, in all its informality
and conversational nature, its most important pedagogical moment, defining for me
what it means to be a teacher. Both the students and I were disposed to act in a true
and good manner, though we had no prior knowledge of the right way to act. That
was the telos of our conversation. The conversation was a form of praxis. It was
reflective action informed by respect and mutual regard, aimed at discovering our
own wisdom, including the wisdom of humour and irony. (12) Conversation is a form
of communication that respects the freedom of the other. To engage with others in
conversation is, in Sartrean terms, to will their freedom, while celebrating their
individuality in all its aspects. To converse is, also, to open oneself to the possibility
of befriending and being befriended.

Recounting the Project

As I reread my original report on the Friendship/Conversation Project, I am mindful
of the question of personal identity, in the context of the institutionalised social
relations of school. I recognise that the institutional roles of teacher and student hide
the plurality of lived experience, and this plurality remains mostly hidden in my account. I see that the discourse of the body is not heard in my account, just as it is not heard in school. And though every student is some body, is, in Merleau-Ponty’s phrase, a body-subject, this fact is glossed over by me, as it is glossed over in schools. A student's pregnancy is only the pre-text for my account. I hurry on to other things, just as in schools the pregnancy of a student is rarely addressed in the public space or discourse of school. As a teacher, recounting my experience, I reproduce the norms of the institution. There is, in schools, a tacit agreement that the knowledge of the body and sexuality is suppressed, rendered unconscious. In the day-to-day reality of school, the bodily materiality of students is an abstract rather than a concrete reality. There is a tension between a desire for equilibrium and the potential dis-equilibrium of sexuality. In this regard, Jane Gallop's remarks on the work of the Marquis de Sade are apposite:

The tension between a desire for neat order and the specific details that seem outside any order enacts one of the central Sadian conflicts: the conflict between rational order, that is, "philosophy" and irrational bodily materiality. Sade's work seems to be a long, concerted effort to subsume the body, sexuality, desire, and disorder into the categories of philosophy, of thought. But there is always some disorderly specific that exceeds the systematising discourse...This tension bespeaks a contradiction at the heart of pedagogy. (13)

In this instance, the pregnancy of a student is the disorderly specific that threatens the ordered rationality of school life. In school the potential disorder of sex and sexuality is subsumed into the conceptual framework of the curriculum. Sex is addressed in schools as a component of the subject Biology, or Health Education, or Religious Education. It is mediated by the language of the subject, a language that separates the operation of the intellect from that of the body. Sex and sexuality, are subsumed into timetableable blocks of forty minutes. They are ordered both intellectually and temporally. The presence of a pregnant young woman in the place from which sex
Reading Practice Is Any Body There? McDermott

has been excluded, save in its rational, abstracted guise, is a challenge to the neat
order of a systematising approach to life. An approach that seeks to control student
bodies even as it glosses over the sexuality of those bodies. Thus, students are
required to be in this place at this time; to clothe themselves in a given way; to be
clean and sanitised.

In the story I have told, the tacit agreement which suppresses a knowledge of
adolescent sexuality was broken not by my doing, but by the intervention of the
students themselves, by the student herself, the girl, the young woman, who was some
body carrying a child. A sexually mature, young adult. The boundaries of the social
relation between student and teacher were shifted. After the initial conversation, the
students, the four friends, took over the on-going conversation and I entered it, not as
a subject-presumed-to-know, but as a-subject-willing-to-learn. What bound us
together was the search for practical wisdom and the trust and affection that
developed in this search. An affective bond, rarely mentioned in the literature on
teaching and cautiously voiced in schools. There was and could not be any question
of suppressing the reality of this young woman, her sexuality and her incipient
motherhood. In fact, these realities formed the basis of our conversations, of a search
for practical knowledge to meet the exigencies of the circumstances. And the
conversations were intimate by virtue of the intimate space in which they occurred,
and the intimacy of that about which we conversed. And they were laughter-filled
conversations, for I don't want this account to be an over-earnest imagining of myself.
Interestingly, the literature on conversation and dialogue often presents conversation
as something less than dialogue, a distinction based on granting a privileged position
to 'mind' and 'intellect' (dialogue) over 'body' and 'emotion' (conversation). (14)

Through the series of conversations I had with these four students, my affection was
engaged and my intellect took on tenderness and compassion. Re-reading the story I
wonder, now, if desire was present in my relationship to the young woman? Desire to help, certainly, and perhaps the desire to help and to nurture is itself a translation or sublimation of sexual desire? I am not sure. Perhaps, all teaching involves a suppression of the knowledge of love and desire in order to promote the love and desire of knowledge? Or is this merely a witty formulation that pleases me? No, there is more to it than that. Freud, for example, in writing on his teachers, recalls how he and his fellow students transferred the ambivalent feelings they possessed for their fathers onto their teachers. (15) This transference is elaborated by Lacan into a view of teaching as an affective relation: "The person in whom I presume knowledge to exist (...) acquires my love." (16)

Roland Barthes pursues this idea in his writing on teaching. Steven Ungar concludes his essay on Roland Barthes, 'The Professor of Desire', thus:

Only by acknowledging desire in the very moment of denying it can the Professor of Desire teach the knowledge of love and love of knowledge, thus fulfilling the nurturing function essential to the learning process as a continuous affirmation of joyful wisdom. (17)

Barthes himself writes in his characteristically playful and provocative style:

Here is what the teacher demands of those taught: (...) to let himself be seduced, to assent to a loving relationship (granting all the sublimations, the distances, the checks consonant with the social reality and the presentiment of the futility of the relationship) (18)

In Barthes, there is a refusal to regard critical understanding and pedagogy as intellectual activities, abstracted from the emotions and body. There is an affective motivation in his work. Thus, Barthes emphasises that teaching is more than a technical, functional activity. True, the terms of a teacher's employment demand, and
his/her students expect, that the teacher will teach the use of the special language of his/her teaching subject; that he/she will teach the techniques of passing examinations; that he/she will administer the institutional requirements of education. However, there is more. And the more often goes unacknowledged, or finds no expression in the official discourse of school or education. Students may transfer primal emotional experiences to teachers. Without realising it, teachers may cause a disturbance of hostile or loving feelings in students. Of course, a student might, unwittingly, cause a teacher to experience or reproduce a suppressed pattern of feelings. Why is it that some students bring out the best in us and some bring out the worst? Why is the question of sympathies and antipathies so little addressed in the training of teachers? The analyst is encouraged to recognise his/her feelings in relation to patients and to guard against uncontrolled responses or inappropriate behaviour. Why are teachers not similarly encouraged? Is it because teachers, as a professional body, are too attached to the idea of mastery and a transparent consciousness of the self? Too preoccupied with the exercise of disciplinary power? Too attached to the supremacy of the Law? Of notions of completion and perfectibility? Too unwilling to admit that the position of a teacher is interminably that of someone who is learning? Lacan denounces the opposition between teacher and student, "between the one who knows and the one who does not know". He suggests that "the most corrupting of comforts is intellectual comfort, just as one's worst corruption is the belief that one is better." (19) What teaching can learn from Lacanian psychoanalysis, as from critical theory, generally, is the need for self-critical interrogation. Indeed, the potential of teaching is related to its willingness to question the authority upon which it rests. In Socrates, in Freud and in Lacan, this authority rests, paradoxically, on its ignorance, on the acknowledgement of what is not known.

Why is the affective, subjective dimension of teaching so rarely encountered in the
literature on education? Is it that teachers want to be professional, without professing the operation of feelings and desires in their profession?

In setting out a body of knowledge, Barthes says, we put out a discourse, we establish an interpersonal relationship, without always knowing how the self we put out is being received by those whom we address. (20) Teaching is, among other things, a suppression of our affective need for affirmation. The suppression provokes an anxiety. How do we know that we are loved by our students? How do our students know that we love them? And if a teacher becomes conscious of a student’s love, what is the appropriate reaction? To feel threatened? To surround it with danger signs? To feel compassion? To suppress the knowledge? To see pedagogy as forbiddance and prohibition? A student’s love for a teacher is a disorderly and disconcerting force, which problematises many of the tacit assumptions about pedagogical relationships and the mastery and control of teachers.

Perhaps the concern with rules and regulations, with prohibition and inhibition, is a sublimation of our love? We show our love by upholding the Law. The upholding of the Law derives from a fear of allowing emotions, banished in the institutionalised relations of school, to surface.

Clearly the distinction (Love/Law; Knowledge of Love/Love of Knowledge) are not this clear cut but, in the context of critical writing, of making strange by a redescription of the activity of teaching, the displacement of the love of knowledge by a knowledge of love does reveal neglected aspects of the teaching situation. It reveals its interpersonal nature and the intimacy of its space.

Is it possible that the love of knowledge is a force, a process which contains within itself the suppression of the knowledge of love? The most persuasive and insightful
treatment of this theme that I have read is David Thomson's *Woodbrook* (1974) in which his recollections reveal that the love of knowledge is the knowledge of love in the relationship between him and his pupil, Phoebe. (21)

"The suppression of the knowledge of love." In revisiting this story of friendship, there is something that I am suppressing. It is a suppression of the knowledge of death. Walter Benjamin suggests that it is death which gives authority to stories of human experience. "Death," he declares "is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell." (22) What every story of note reveals is the "The tiny, fragile human body." (23)

Death is the great silence out of which the living speak. It is the unconscious knowledge that we suppress in living. How much truer this is in school, where the young come to be prepared for their setting out in life. School creates an illusion of eternal youth. The age profile of the students never changes, never varies. In such a context, it is not surprising that the silence around death is complete. In school death is forgotten.

Just as the adolescent sexuality is ignored and forgotten, until it breaks through the veil of silence, spills beyond the systems and classifications intended to contain it, so too is death. Teaching is recollecting, says Socrates. (24) What have I remembered, what forgotten knowledge lies behind the story? A Death. In the stories we tell of life, the lives we describe move on. Or don't.

In my school bag, I carry a memorial card for a boy whose voice echoes through this report. Perhaps, now, I am only beginning to understand the significance of the story I wanted to tell. As in many instances in life, we know that what we want to tell is important, without fully understanding its meaning. The meaning of this story is
becoming clearer to me as I write and reflect upon it. Though I am aware that I can have no access to a definitive, exhaustive reading. Moreover, its significance for me to day, six years after the events described took place, is different from its significance when I first told it. The story now resonates with the events that have occurred in the intervening space, just as all stories, snatched from time, are changed by the very temporality they seek to defeat.

What is the pedagogical imperative when faced with a young woman who is carrying a child? What is the pedagogical imperative when faced with the death of a young man who falls into a river and is held there for two weeks before the water delivers him back to his family and friends? To be buried on Christmas Eve? The friends in this story? Group A. How shamefully inadequate a description of the boys and girls, the young men and women, in this story: ‘Group A’, ‘Group B’.

In every story of school, of youth and life, the unspeakable Other, Death, is present, though suppressed as a knowledge we do not want to admit, a knowledge we want to refuse.

So what is the pedagogical imperative that emerges from these stories? It is not the suppression of desire or love, but rather their translation into tenderness for our students in all their fragile, bodily materiality. True, the terms of the contract between student and teacher have social and economic determinants. Yet, the existential relation goes beyond that and lies at the core of teaching, of pedagogy.

Strangely enough, in recollecting, I understand that the importance of the existential relation, the affective bond between teacher and student was taught to me in a living way by the students whom I taught. The support of friends in a period of personal crisis, the joyful support and the living, dialectic teaching of their being together,
demonstrated the potential of what Barbara Johnson terms "positive ignorance", the pursuit of a knowledge of which no single person, no teacher, is in possession. (25)

What is the fear that governs school life that so much of the folklore of teaching deals with the negative aspects of student culture? Why is there a consistently negative presentation of student friendship groups in the literature? I believe in the validity of my original insight - there was an impressive quality in the friendship between the students I worked with. There was an acceptance and an affection for each other - an acceptance of the full person, heart and mind, body and soul - that was instructive. The students were my teachers. Just as there was an admirable and instructive affection shown by the young men to each other when their dear friend was lost.

Ray Carver, the American poet and short-story writer, in addressing students graduating from college, dwells on a line from St. Teresa. "Words lead to deeds...They prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness." (26) In the light of the knowledge of adolescent sexuality, in the light of the knowledge of death, let tenderness be the pedagogical imperative that informs our practice.

And so a story whose surface meaning begins with friendship has deeper meanings: Friendship; Sexuality; Birth and Death. Tenderness.

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Influenced by Shoshana Felman’s writing on Freud’s reading practice, I want to consider the relationship between story and commentary, between the practice of teaching and the theory of that practice, in practitioner enquiry and in my own work. Teaching is a practice, a practical procedure. But the practice, the partially unconscious practice, always precedes the theory. There is a constitutive belatedness of the theory over the practice, the theory, the critical reflection, is always trying to
catch up with what it was that the practice, the teaching, was really doing. Moreover, theory and critical reflection can only ever partially recover the quality of the practice. (28) And so it is with these reports and the reflective conversations around them. However, it is the possibility that we can catch up on ourselves, understand and affirm the virtues that guide our practice, eliminate false certainties, generate important insights and incorporate them into future practice that encourages us in practitioner enquiry, in recounting and reading our own practices. The acts of recounting and reading are constitutive of praxis, are constitutive of our commitment to improving practice both for our own benefit and the benefit of our students. As Max Van Manen states:

It is by sharing stories...with one another that we reflect upon our pedagogical practice. We ask, 'What really happened here?' ‘What sense do you make of it?’ ‘Should I have acted this way?’ ‘What would you have done? Why?’ or ‘What should I do now?’...Through narrative reasoning we become accountable: we give account of what we have done, what we think we should do, and why we think that our actions are good, responsible and appropriate or not....By interpreting the meaning of our lived experience...we gain pedagogical thoughtfulness and tactful intuition...Herein lies the significance of narrative for the virtue of teaching: by telling anecdotes about the daily practices of teaching and by reflecting in a pedagogical manner on those experiences, the person may discover the pedagogical qualities or virtues that give coherence, purpose and meaning.... (29)

Afterword

I am troubled by what I have written. Can I justify telling a story in which I refer to the death of a young man, who was my student, and write of the memorial photograph I keep in my possession? What is the place of this story in my thesis? Yet, I think my writing, even at its most personal and subjective, bears a relationship to philosophy, to the philosophical question, ‘What is the nature of teaching?’ The
narrative portion of my writing, on the friendship/conversational groups, constitutes an ontological quest. (30) I take as my example, Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, a text about photographs that is, at once, personal and philosophical, narrative and analytical. (31) Just as Barthes searches for the essence or *eidos* of photography, so I search for an understanding of the nature of teaching, a quest that brings me, repeatedly, to a realisation of the situatedness of teaching and its interpersonal quality. Each time, it seems, that my writing becomes theoretical, strives to create a body of knowledge, it is punctuated by the memory of those bodies - my own, those of my students and colleagues – with whom I have worked or continue to work. When theory loses its connection to the particular and the body, it loses touch with the meaning and reality of teaching. A thesis on education from which the body has been excluded distorts rather than transcends the ground of its being. To write on teaching is to be caught in the tension between the generalising tendency of philosophy and the specific and particular nature of teaching. To narrate teaching and to read its narratives; to transform those narratives into philosophical and critical discourse is, always, to end at the beginning, to return to the ineluctable particularity of teaching. The photograph of my student reminds me of that particularity, reminds me that when I teach somebody, the body is mortal, as I am. Derrida, writing of Husserl remarks, “The appearing of the *I* to itself in the *I am* is...originally a relation with its own possible disappearance. Therefore *I am* originally means *I am mortal*.” (32).

The photograph of my student leads me back to the personal and temporally forgotten beginning of my quest. It reminds me that the search for insight into the nature of teaching, and the manner in which I have sought to pursue it, has an origin that is
personal, situated and contextualised. As Barthes notes:

In the photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute particular, the sovereign contingency...the This (this photograph and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the Tuche, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression. (33)

The photograph of my student brings to mind someone who was unremembered at the time I began writing this chapter, yet whose memory influenced everything I have written. And I remember the Socratic maxim that knowledge is remembering. And the memory of the student who died acts as a counter-memory, a memory excluded from the version of the narrative I told. For remembering is a narrative genre, one in which the disparate pieces of the past are structured into a persuasive coherence. Stories, in the words of Peter McLaren and Tomaz Tadeu da Silva, “help us to remember and also to forget. They help shape our social reality as much by what they exclude as what they include.” (34) Therefore, like all narratives, remembering is open to re-telling and reformation. For every memory I relate, there is an unexpressed shadow memory, that is radically other. Thus, the story of an impending birth is shadowed by the story of an impending death. And through this ‘uncanny’ reading of a memory, I engage in a dialogue with my past that reaffirms my commitment to a student who died, and affirms my commitment to those students with whom I will work in the future.

Theoretical discourse deals with the present or with a projected future. Narrative refers to the past out of which reflection arises. And the dialogue between a remembered past and an imagined future, the movement between the past perfect and
the future conditional, is necessary to ensure that critical discourse does not forget the affective, personal context out of which it arises. In relation to the photographs he inspects Barthes says, 'I see, I feel hence I notice, I observe, and I think.' (35) I want to reflect and converse about teaching, seek its essence, while maintaining an absolute attachment to the particular, to those individuals about whom I write.

I have heard many discussions on the ethics of including the names of respondents and interviewees in the reports of qualitative research. The discussions have always centred on the issues of confidentiality and the right to privacy. I have never heard a discussion on the ethics of omitting from theoretical writing any references to unique individuals, without whose lives there would be no theory. In an ethical sense, ignorance is forgetting. Thus, the attempt in this thesis to create a conversational mode of presentation, to move back and forth between self and other, between past and future, between narrative and analysis, between the general and the particular. This is the creative tension which, I hope, animates the work, a tension captured in William Blake's (general) dismissal of generalisation: “To generalise is to be an idiot. To particularise is the alone distinction of merit.” (36) I want this thesis to particularise and I want it to have a narrative quality, for as Hans Kellner suggests, “Narrative always remembers, even when it remembers forgetfulness.” (37)

**Honouring Friendship**

If the desire to remember is part of the motivation in writing this thesis, so too is the desire to honour friendship. For students, friendship is central to school life, yet it is largely ignored in the literature on school or, if it is addressed, it is through the study
of group behaviour, in the context of the sociology of delinquency and counter-school cultures. (38) Ronald Reed, following C. S. Lewis, suggests that friendship may be frowned upon by school authorities because it involves ‘a secession of sorts from the group’, and supports an essentially anti-authoritarian position. (39) In a Socratic teaching situation, in a dialogic and conversational pedagogy, the questioning of authority and the desire of individuals and groups to move beyond a compliant, passive, subjectivity should be welcomed. And, if friendship supports the creation of intersubjective communication and social practice, then friendship, too, should be welcomed. Therefore, against the tendency and the epistemology of mistrust and suspicion around student behaviour, I want to consider friendship in an ethical context. In a conversation with Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus make the following observation:

In classical literature, friendship is the locus of mutual recognition. It’s not traditionally seen as the highest virtue, but both in Aristotle and Cicero, you could read it as really being the highest virtue because it’s selfless and enduring, it’s not easily bought, it doesn’t deny the utility and pleasure of the world, but yet it seeks something more. (40)

For Aristotle, friendship involves the practice of virtue. (41) A friend acts out of his/her goodwill and concern for the other. Friendship is an activity and a disposition. Friends recognise and reciprocate each other’s concern. They trust each other. (42) Hans-Georg Gadamer sees the exercise of friendship, of concern for another, as a form of phronesis, that is, of moral knowledge and action, applied in concrete situations. He writes, for example, of the advice given by a friend:

Only friends can advise each other or, to put it another way, only a piece of advice that is meant in a friendly way has meaning for the person advised. Once again we discover that the person with understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected; but rather, as one united by a
specific bond with the other, he thinks with the other and undergoes the situation with him. (43)

Interestingly, Gadamer suggests that compassion and concern are essential to true understanding. In true friendship, individuals participate in a form of virtuous social practice. Lawrence Blum argues that a friendship which involves “a very deep and genuine regard for the friend’s good is a morally excellent relationship.” (44) The moral excellence lies “in the development and expression of the altruistic emotions of sympathy, concern and care – a deep caring for and identification with the good of another from whom one knows oneself clearly to be other.” (45) Of particular relevance in Blum’s treatise on friendship are his remarks on special relationships, such as the friendship groups with whom I worked in school:

It is important to recognise that genuine devotion to a particular group... is in itself morally good ... It is morally good in that it involves (among other things) an admirable degree of sympathy, compassion, and concern for others. Moral philosophy ought to be able to give expression to the moral value of such an attitude, and an exclusively universalist perspective cannot do so. (46)

Teachers are in a unique situation to attest to the friendship between pupils, and to promote and affirm this virtuous behaviour. In an educational environment that is increasingly influenced by models of economic enterprise that are individualist, competitive and self-centred, the promotion and valuing of friendship in schools, and its necessary link to the virtues and dispositions of goodwill and concern, born of affection, might provide a necessary corrective to a culture that seems unwilling or unable, in Debra Meyerson’s phrase, to honour affection. (47)

Friendship, viewed through an Aristotelian lens, is a practical virtue expressed in
community and related to particular, existential situations. Thus it is that
conversation, itself originating in concrete situations, and distinguished by its
attention to the relational nature of communication, is the communicative form in
which friendship will be best expressed. Interestingly, Aristotle relates the
continuance of friendship to the activity of conversation. (48) If true friendship is
morally good, does it follow that the conversation, which expresses this friendship, is
a morally excellent form of communication? Certainly, the conversation between
friends has the capacity to pursue enquiry and to honour emotion, to attend to both the
propositional and the relational dimensions of communication.

Aristotle speaks of a complete or perfect friendship. (49) This friendship is both
useful and pleasurable, but it goes beyond these into a realm of virtue:

Complete friendship is that of good people, those who are alike in their virtue:
they each alike wish good things to each other in so far as they are good, and
they are good in themselves. Those who wish good things to a friend for his
own sake are friends most of all, since they are disposed in this way towards
each other because of what they are, not for any incidental reason. (50)

It seems astonishing that the lesson of friendship that Aristotle teaches in his
Nicomachean Ethics, namely that friendship can be morally excellent, has not been
taken up in the service of education. Bhikhu Parekh, in his analysis, stresses the
voluntary nature of friendship and the reciprocal liking that accompanies it. He also
suggests that friendship admits of degrees. (51) This definition may seem to preclude
situations where mutual affection is absent, or where goodwill is not acknowledged or
reciprocated, as can be the case in teacher student relationships. Friendship, however,
is a virtue, a relation and a practice. As a relation, it develops over time. And it may
require patience. As Aristotle observes, “though the wish for friendship arises
quickly, friendship does not.” (52) However, the willingness to cultivate friendship, the disposition to befriend, and a commitment to practice friendship, that is, to act in ways that show concern for the other and to seek his/her good, can be regarded as both desirable and virtuous in terms of the pedagogic relation. Although she makes no reference to Aristotle, Nel Noddings’ ethics of caring is Aristotelian in nature. (53) For her, an ethics of caring is rooted in “receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness’. (54) Starting from the idea that relatedness is constitutive of humanity, Noddings elaborates a relational ethics, based on caring. She distinguishes between natural and ethical caring. In the latter relation, the one-caring may be guided by a sense of obligation or moral imperative. In Noddings’ view, in a pedagogical relation, the obligation to care is more important than the obligation to convey information. She declares: “The student is more important than the subject”. (55) For Noddings, an important motive in ethical caring is the desire of the one-caring to sustain his/her sense of an ethical self. The ethical self is a vision of our best self and the commitment to care for the other, to act out of concern for the well-being of the other, even in situations where the other may not inspire natural caring, or reciprocate our good-will, is motivated, Noddings argues, by a concern to nurture our own best self:

The ethical self is an active relation between my actual self and a vision of my ideal self as one-caring and cared-for. It is born of the fundamental recognition of relatedness; that which connects me naturally to the other, reconnects me through the other to myself. As I care for others and am cared for by them, I become able to care for myself. The characteristic ‘I must’ arises in connection with this other in me, this ideal self and I respond to it. It is this caring that sustains me when caring for the other fails, and it is this caring that enables me to surpass my actual uncaring self in the direction of caring. (56)

In Aristotelain terms, in seeking to befriend another, we seek to befriend ourselves.
And the self we seek to befriend is our morally best self – a self that we remember and desire to re-create in present and future action. In this way, what Noddings refers to as caring and what I think of as befriending are instances of self-realisation and self-theorising. In some cases friendship and caring are examples of moral behaviour conducted under the injunction of ‘ought to’, but they are also instances of behaviour born out of memory and imagination. We remember the best self that we achieved in past encounters and we imagine the best self we can be in future encounters. The notion of a best self implies a continuous conversation with the self, a continual remembering and re-imagining of a self that we strive to re-achieve in our daily encounters.

While Parekh, defines friendship in terms of partiality and personal liking, Aristotle’s definition of friendship appears to encompass an impartial and impersonal dimension, which is explored in the discussion on the nature of professional friendship in chapter 6. At this juncture, however, it is worth reiterating the educational value of friendship and it is worth encouraging teachers to affirm students in their friendships. In this way teachers could honour friendship and facilitate the emergence of a disposition and a practical virtue that would allow young people, at a vulnerable age, to feel a sense of belonging and connection.
Notes


2. The ideas here are influenced by Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power. For a discussion of disciplinary power, Clegg (1989), op. cit., pp. 167-178.


5. *Phronesis* is discussed by Carr & Kemmis (1986), op. cit., p. 33. However, I don’t think they give sufficient attention to the concern of *phronesis* with others.


7. For a discussion of communicative virtues, see Burbules (1993), op. cit., pp. 41-46.


12. The foregoing is influenced by Aristotle’s classification of the disciplines.


15 See Felman (1982), op. cit., p. 35.

16 Ibid., p. 35.


23 Ibid., p. 84


The formulation is based on Eagleton (1984), op. cit., p. 110.

This paragraph is a rewriting of a passage from Felman (1987), op. cit., p. 24.


I take the idea of the ontological quest from Gary Shapiro, whose brilliant reading of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is the inspiration for this postscript. Gary Shapiro, ‘To Philosophize Is to Learn to Die’ in Steven Ungar & Betty McGraw, (eds.) *Signs in Culture: Roland Barthes To-day* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1989), pp. 5-31.


Barthes quoted in Shapiro (1989), op. cit., p. 12. I have added the italics.

One of the marginalia written by Blake on his copy of Sir Joshua Reynolds *Discourses*. Blakes’s heavily annotated copy of the 1798 edition of the Discourses is in the British Museum. I am grateful to my colleague, Paddy Murray, for drawing my attention to this and for his discussion of Foucault’s views on the validity of general argument.


42. Ibid., pp. 142-152.


45. Ibid., p. 70.

46. Ibid., p. 80.


49. Ibid., p. 147.

50. Ibid., p. 147.


53. See Noddings (1984), op. cit.
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Chapter Five

Reporting Practice - Toward a Dialogic Classroom.

The conversation that gave rise to the project on the conversation/friendship groups was an informal one that happened outside of the routine of school. And while it represented a significant pedagogical event, it was not representative of my discourse practice as a teacher of English, or of the situations in which I practise teaching. The work with the friendship groups was based on a belief in the pedagogical potential of student-student conversation. The challenge to me as a subject teacher was to explore ways in which a community of enquiry might come into being in the classroom, in a way that combined conversational pedagogy and student friendship groups. The challenge was to determine the scope of real possibility, especially against the background of the factors that militate against the creation of a dialogical community. The factors outlined by Burbules as creating what Habermas might deem distorted communication in schools are as relevant to Ireland as they are to America:

1. A content-driven conception of curriculum in which ‘coverage’ of material becomes a primary goal;
2. A test-driven conception of educational aims, in which outcomes that cannot be measured in this way are pressed further and further into the background of educational aims;
2. A management-driven conception of the teacher’s role, in which maintaining conditions of order and discipline become, not means to educational ends, but ends in and of themselves. (I)

I was conscious of some if not all of these considerations, especially as the students were facing into the Junior Certificate, the state examination taken at the end of their third year of secondary education.

Notwithstanding this, I wanted to work with the students in creating a situation that approximated to Habermas’s ideal speech situation. I wanted to use the
transformative and liberating potential in the idea (and the actuality) of the social construction of reality, and the status and power ascribed to my identity as a teacher, to create, through collaborative action with the students, the conditions in which an intersubjective situation in the classroom, and an order based upon consensus, might be established. (2) I wanted to escape, as far as possible, the dictates of those habits and routines, which, over the years, had hindered the creation of the ideal classroom situation I envisaged, and which militated against the pedagogical practices which might have contributed to its creation. I wanted to remove all the unnecessary constraints on the social and communicative order of the classroom. I was drawn, and continue to be drawn, to the idea of breaking the contradictions between values and practice. Or, to express it in a different way, I wanted the values I professed to be embodied in pedagogical and communicative practice. In setting out to work with my class at the beginning of the 1993/1994 academic year, I wanted to be in good faith with myself; I wanted to act in a manner that spoke to what was truest and most valued in my concept of self, or, to use Noddings' phrase, my ethical self. (3) I saw the project as an act of self-formation, within my professional life. (4) Furthermore, I saw the project as the means through which the students could, if they accepted the invitation I extended to them, exercise a degree of autonomous agency.

In relation to the practice of English, I wanted the students to recognise their inherent competence to do the subject. (5) I saw no absolute difference between the students' practice of English and my practice. Granted, my practices were sometimes more developed or more sophisticated, but not finished or completed. I saw myself as developing my practices and sought to share my insights with the students. Equally, the students were developing their practices and trying to share their insights with each other and with me. I was drawn to Chomsky's idea of the innate competence of every individual. I wanted a classroom situation, which nurtured the competence and confidence of each member of the class. I wanted the students to see themselves and
me as belonging to a community of learners, a community of readers, a community of writers, that went beyond the classroom walls. I wanted to disown the judicial and legitimising practices of teaching, and vest the legitimisation of learning with the learners themselves (and myself), within the scope of real possibility. I wanted to demonstrate with the students that interpretative, critical and creative skills are developed in the individual, in community. I wanted the students' work in English, and my work with them, to contribute to their self-formation and a positive sense of self. I wanted the classroom to become a place of collaborative enquiry, along the lines outlined by Lipman. (6)

Finally, I wanted to use the project to reflect on the strategic reading practices that might assist a learner, or a group of learners, in reading particular genres in an insightful and competent manner. I wanted to develop my own practices in genre-specific reading, and share my growing understanding with my students. The remainder of the chapter gives an account of my work written, originally, in early summer, 1994.

Starting Points

Over the years my teaching persona and my teaching styles have evolved and become, to some extent, routinised. (7) Reflecting on my practice as a teacher, I realise that I have developed many unconscious habits and strategies which have more to do with conforming to institutional norms and expectations, such as maintaining quiet in the classroom, than with my conscious sense of self, or the values which support it. Indeed, I am aware of the distance between the ideals and values to which I am committed, and the practices which I have unconsciously developed, between my articulation of democratic, collaborative values and my employment of many non-democratic teaching strategies. In the past, I have not addressed this concern in any
concerted way. My reflection on practice has mainly centred on my work as a year head, and my desire to develop forms of communication with students, outside the classroom, which were not oppressive, and which were genuinely intersubjective. My action research project for 1992/1993, reported and reflected upon in chapters three and four of this dissertation, describes one attempt to move beyond role-governed behaviour in my contact with students. However, this year, because I resigned my position as year head in August 1993, I was free to give more consideration to my teaching than I have done for a number of years, and I decided, for my own enlightenment and in a spirit of intellectual curiosity, to investigate my own practice, and to bring it into line with my educational beliefs and values. I use the word 'curiosity' deliberately, because I see a danger that action research might come to have a judgmental or guilt-inducing power in the lives of teachers. I don't want the reporting of our projects to have a confessional quality, an occasion where we gather together to confess our teaching sins and then seek absolution from our peers, firm in the resolve never again to slide into a state of unconscious contradiction in our teaching lives! So, I believe it is important for us to avoid the negative connotations of becoming critical, and, instead, emphasise the creative excitement for the practitioner in subjecting his/her practices to critical scrutiny, motivated by a desire for a feeling of authenticity. And while this is a serious concern, it need not be undertaken in a solemn or humourless manner. Thus far in the year, I have derived much fun and enjoyment from the action research project. The project has raised many interesting questions for me as a student/teacher of both education and English, and it has encouraged me to think about the values I wish to express in my professional life.

In beginning to give some coherence to the assumptions and commitments I have developed over the years, I came back to something I read fifteen years ago, by Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre says:
The individual is nothing but what he purposes; he exists only in so far as he realises himself; he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is. (8)

I admire the implication in this passage that we can take control of much of our lives. I subscribe to the optimism which believes the individual can act consciously to transform him/herself, even within restrictive social circumstances. I see subjective and intersubjective experience as the origin and locus of many of my own important insights, even allowing for the degree to which subjectivity is socially and discursively constructed. In studying education in university, I was disappointed by how little attention was paid to the subjective experience of teachers and students, to their experience, insights and feelings about school. When I began teaching I wanted consciously to recognise and respect the individual subjectivity of the people – students, teachers, parents – with whom I came in contact. I wanted to give as full an expression to my subjectivity, as circumstances and my disposition allowed, and to take control of my professional life, in so far as I had the power to do so. I wanted to be free, and I wanted to use my freedom to facilitate the emancipation of my students, to allow them to exercise choice in their self-formation. While reading around the subject of classroom talk, for a research project which I undertook between 1979 and 1981, I came across many articles on the way in which individuals make social situations happen, and the skills and competencies we all employ in the simplest social encounter. (9) Reflecting on the idea of the social construction of reality, I began to see how accomplished all members of a society are in simply talking and being social. Imagine the difficulty of writing a grammar of social behaviour, or of describing the internalised assumptions and knowledge we bring to bear in making everyday reality happen. And yet the vast majority of students, in Irish schools, including many who are labelled failures by the system of assessment we employ in the Irish educational system, are accomplished members of society. I determined,
therefore, at the outset of my teaching career, to see my students as competent, and encourage them to become aware of their own competencies, as they engaged in learning.

So, I began my teaching career with a strong notion of the importance of individual subjectivity, and the creativity and competence of each individual. I also had a strong commitment to the value of dialogue and to the idea that education is an effect of community. The intellectual commitment to dialogue came from the writing of Jurgen Habermas, which I read while undertaking the research mentioned above. (10) Habermas writes of an ideal speech situation, an idea of truthful, just and free communication, which, he argues, is implied in the very structure of speech itself. Habermas's theories are, to my mind, very ennobling. He suggests that if we did not suppose that pure communication was possible, notwithstanding the many instances of distorted communication we encounter, we would not engage in communication in the first place. Pure communication or the ideal speech situation is characterised by Habermas as affording an equal opportunity for all participants to select and employ speech acts, and to assume dialogue roles. It is a linguistic conceptualisation of the ideals of freedom, truth and justice. (11) Its usefulness is that it allows us to measure the ways in which ordinary communication falls short of the ideal. In so far as we become aware of the constraints and distortions in our communicative encounters, we begin to emancipate ourselves from them. During my research project, between 1979 and 1981, I envisaged the kind of classroom communication I would like to facilitate when I began teaching myself, and, of course, it approximated to the ideal situation outlined by Habermas. Both the students and myself would be free, and the communication we shared would be free from constraint. This did not materialise. When I got my first teaching post, I was concerned with surviving in the classroom, and adopted whatever strategies that allowed me to maintain an appearance of order, and allowed me to work through the prescribed curricula. The need I felt to fit into
the smooth running of the institution became the dominant influence in the
development of my teaching style. This unconscious need was more powerful than
my self-conscious commitment to subjectivity and pure communication.

As a teacher I have been fortunate enough to experience learning as an effect of
community, through my work with a number of colleagues. In 1986, I was appointed
year head to a Transition Year group, and worked with Patricia Branigan, Eileen
Murphy and Joan Tuohy in co-ordinating the year. Around the same time I had been
team teaching with another colleague, John Mc Donnell. Looking back over the
eight years we have worked together, I would characterise us as a “self-reflective
community of educational practitioners”, to borrow a term frequently used by Carr
and Kemmis. (12) I have learned, and continue to learn, a great deal from my
colleagues, all of whom, in their practice as tutors, express the values in which I
believe. What impresses me about my colleagues is the manner in which they afford
equal dialogue rights to the students. They offer the students subject positions out of
which the students can develop and express their full personalities. My colleagues do
not rely on social distance or the status of being a teacher, or fear, or any other such
coercive tools. They are brilliantly themselves, and my conduct as a year head was
shaped and influenced by their example and our dialogue.

I have included this potted history of my value-formation to indicate that the action
research project I have undertaken this year did not arise out of a vacuum. I wasn’t
one kind of person last year, and now find I have become another kind of person this
year. What has happened is that my classroom practice, rather than my work with
colleagues or students, outside of the classroom, has become the focus of my
reflection.

This report describes my attempt to give conscious expression to my values, in the
work I have undertaken with my students in a third year, English class. The report is partial and incomplete, as the project itself is incomplete. This account is essentially my telling of the story, though it also includes the voices of some of the students. The data for the report comes mainly from the action research notebook or journal I maintained over the course of the academic year.

**Organising the Classroom Situation.**

Rereading my journal I discover that I have eleven entries relating to the principles which should govern the organisation of the classroom situation. (13) Some of these entries record an insight or raise a question which needs further deliberation; others are intended to be made public and shared with the students. The following entries are reasonably typical. They show that the movement of my thought was/is circular, and that the question of the classroom situation was/is a fairly constant element in my reflection. I look upon these entries as metastatements, as statements about the organisation of talk itself, and I believe that this kind of reflection should be shared between teachers and students if we wish to arrive at a consensus about how we wish to collaborate in the classroom.

September 29th 1993.
I want to move to a situation of motivation being intrinsic – the students having a sense of themselves, of their subjectivity being expressed, their realisation of their worth. A conflict free environment. A translation from 'you' mode to an 'I' mode of discourse.
I want to make space for students to be reflective; to conceptualise themselves as subjects who are writers.
I must begin with idea of their communicative competence. Stress this.
Offer the students an opportunity to develop as they want to. Encourage them to assess their own work, recognise its worth, think about how it might be developed. I want this process to be non-competitive. A consensus approach. The teacher as supporter, not an agent of surveillance. (14)
October 2nd 1993.
The classroom situation is recreated each day. The teacher can use his powerful role to enfranchise students – to interrogate the situation – to ask the students’ willingness to participate in creating classroom order. First principle – allow students to be subjects. Allow them show their subjectivity in exercising choice – invite them to participate – give them real opportunity to refuse. Move from non-reflecting participation to conscious participation. Invite students as individuals. Invite students as class group. Invite students as friendship groups. Students may see this invitation as a game, feel there is little real freedom. (15)

December 9th 1993.
I am attracted to the idea of adopting a theoretic attitude to everyday routines. Calling into question the background consensus of the correctness of certain norms – e.g. a) teachers teach and students learn; b) teachers keep order and enforce discipline; c) teachers know. As a teacher, I want my practice to encourage autonomy and responsibility, to help students and myself to become subjects who are critical and free. (16)

February 22nd 1994.
The new style of teaching is not an abdication of responsibility. As a teacher I am still making decisions with regard to issues such as switching from one activity to another, for example, from poetry to fiction. I invite the students to agree with my proposals, agree on topics to be covered and the order in which we will do them. It is still my responsibility to see that students are prepared for the state examinations. The project is not about burdening them with responsibility, but it is about giving the students a greater sense of vested interest in the activities of the classroom. For some topics, there is need for a lead-in – some introductory comments, some explaining and sharing of my ideas; giving a rationale for the way of proceeding. The attempt to arrive at a consensus is not simply a game, or if it is a game it is only so in the sense that the creation of all social situations follows rule-governed behaviour. The project is an attempt to replace coercive practices with emancipatory ones. As a teacher, I need to remind myself of my own aims. The students don’t demand dialogue or insist on their right to be consulted, so the onus is on me to act as a guarantor of their autonomy, to protect their subjectivity. (17)

Extending invitation to students to share my enthusiasm for the subject; to become knowing subjects; to be involved in their self-formation; to offer me, as teacher, opportunities to share my practice.
Idea is to replace authority and power as a motive to students' action with their willingness (to participate).
Idea of seeking consensus about what to do, and how to proceed in the classroom.
How to make a socially defined category of individuals -- students -- participate in and define their own interests and values.
How to guarantee their rational autonomy to create situations in which they, the students, are personally engaged in their work.
How to grant the students a self-directed exploratory freedom in which learning emerges from the student's problematic, not from the sometimes unintelligible problematic of the teacher, or the subject as codified in school terms.
Opening up the same potential for action and practice for the students as I claim for myself. (18)

These excerpts give a fair indication of the general framework or problematic within which I conducted my research. Some of these entries were written after reading articles or sections of books. The last entry, for example, was written while I was reading Critical Theory and Classroom Talk, by Robert Young, and is, in part, a response to something I read. (19)

At regular intervals, I shared my understanding of these ideas with the students. The students were generally attentive and interested. In a second year class, where I employed many of the same practices as in my third year class, one student was sceptical, and questioned the reality of the freedom I appeared to be offering the class. The student asked me what I would do if he, or some other of his classmates, decided not to engage in the collaborative enquiry. I told him I would respect the exercise of his freedom. I also pointed out that I was not an entirely free agent in the context of the school as an institution. I was not sure, for example, if the class tutor, the year head or the principal would accept my arguments in favour of granting absolute freedom to students in relation to doing or not doing a school subject. Nor was I certain that parents would accept the force of my arguments. I did guarantee, however, that I would defend students' right to be autonomous. My sceptical questioner replied that the whole thing sounded like a piece of reverse psychology.
He found it difficult to accept that there was no strategic or hidden agenda to my
action. For a few days, this student didn’t participate in class or undertake any
homework. He then opted back in. Fortunately, this token refusal to join in the
collaboration was the only one of its kind.

We, the students and myself, did agree that work that was done by the students simply
because a teacher had demanded it offered fewer opportunities for self-development
than work that was undertaken in a spirit of willing co-operation. Therefore, for the
duration of the project, students were free to decide on opting in or out of work.
Students also had the right to share or not to share their work with others and myself,
as they chose. In the same way, we agreed that students could opt in and out of
participating in class. Non-participation, however, was not to cause disruption or
annoyance to those who wished to participate. So, students were free to take a nap, if
they so desired. Other changes in class routines are described in the discussion of the
work undertaken on different literary genres.

In addition to the general problematic of the classroom situation, I was trying to
develop a framework for doing English, and working out the practical structures
which would give effect to my aims as a teacher, and as a teacher of English. The
general framework for doing English is described in the next section of the report.

**Doing English – A General Framework.**

In trying to think out a model of English that reflected my values, I drew on three
interrelated ideas:

a) Innate Competence. The idea that everyone possesses an innate
competence in interpreting and using language, and other related symbol systems;
b) The idea that knowledge, in the domain of English, is a form of practice; and 
c) The idea that to do English is to enter a community of fellow practitioners and to be in dialogue with others.

The idea of innate competence raises the question of why it is that students who use interpretative skills in a wide variety of contexts – talking to their friends and family; watching films or TV programmes; reading books – often feel themselves inadequate in reading and interpreting literary texts in the classroom context. Reflecting on the degree of competence students display in their everyday use of language, one must conclude that the written work produced by many students, for school purposes, lags behind their general use of language. In notes I jotted down in May 1993, prior to commencing work on this project, I wrote on the importance of telling the students of my belief in their ability. In the early stages of the project, I shared my understanding of the innate resources individuals possess to produce and understand language, and gave the class a brief outline of Chomsky’s notion of linguistic competence. I encouraged them to trust in their abilities as language users, and to believe in their own inner resources, which, I suggested, could be tapped in doing English. I spoke about my feelings on the idea that individuals could be deemed failures in doing English. The idea of failure could only relate to a language game, called English; it couldn’t relate to a native speaker’s competence to produce and interpret language. Developing this idea, I suggested that we forget about the idea of failure. Having achieved a consensus about working together for the year, we agreed to get rid of the fear of not meeting some arbitrary standard. This did not mean, of course, that we abolished the idea of critical assessment, or reflecting upon writing practices. It did mean that we began with an acceptance of the work we produced, and determined to understand, in a conscious way, the elements that went into
producing it, with a view to refining them or making them more sophisticated, as we thought fit.

The use of 'we' in the above paragraph is not merely rhetorical. I wanted the students to think about my role as teacher and to see me as a fellow practitioner, as someone, who through this project, was trying to improve my own practices as a teacher. In a lesson in September, 1993, I spoke of understanding as a movement of thought that circles around a territory, and changes – growing and/or retracting – repeatedly. This idea became central for me. I wrote in my journal in October:

Ownership of Knowledge?
I want to think of it (knowledge) as shared. The teacher as knowing, but learning. Cultural competence developed, but still developing. Students as knowing, but developing. Their cultural competence developing. Difference between teacher and students a matter of degree. Students can learn from my practice. I learn from my practice with them. Knowledge is a way of life, a way of doing. (21)

This extract from a student's notebook shows Jonathan reflecting on some of these ideas:

29th November 1993.
The work on the diary is much better work than any other time in English. The option to opt out and do no homework takes a lot of the pressure off your shoulders. I try to do my homework well because to get good comments off your friends makes you feel like you've really achieved something. The way the classroom is organised every Wednesday improves the way you look towards English. I understand most of the things he is explaining most of the time. It is funny in a way how teachers are meant to know most things, and even he or she is still in the process of learning. (22)

The idea of sharing knowledge ties into the notion of English as a form of dialogue. Dialogue, and the possibility of creating it in the classroom, lies at the heart of my project. Initially, I was frustrated that my classes did not have an obvious dialogic structure. But over the year, I believe the underlying structure has become dialogic,
even if the surface structure may not appear so. This may seem disingenuous.

However, I am convinced that most studies of classroom talk have been too mechanistic in their approach, and have failed to distinguish between what might be called a dialogue orientation and a monologue orientation. The following extracts from my journal indicate my reflections on this topic:

May 1993.
Dialogue. The teacher and the students. Writers on the course and the students as writers. The students as writers with each other. The latter will be important. Students will be asked to nominate a student to work as a colleague or to work in small groups, exchanging ideas, discussing problems. Idea of creating a sense of the intersubjective nature of learning. Too often schools and the examination process posit the individual as the target audience - the individual taught in a class group - but not learning through interacting with the group. (23)

October 1993.
The speech situation spills beyond the classroom. Dialogue with texts. Teacher’s commentary received silently. Dialogue internalised. Discussed among friends. Responded to in writing journals. Intersubjectivity not necessarily reflected in classroom, but created by classroom. (24)

November 24th.
Idea of involving another circle of readers. I have asked the students’ permission to write to parents telling them about the project. Students are free to involve parents if they so wish. If agency means anything, it means choice. (25)

March 1994.
Many studies of what happens in the classroom are based on recordings of forty-minute chunks. Dialogue is conceptualised as speaking and listening within the space/time of the classroom. But considering dialogue beyond class periods and the physical boundaries of the classroom, and taking into account the inner speech of pupils and teachers, of people engaged in dialogue with themselves, then a typical move in a subject dialogue might be characterised as:
a) Teacher talking about a topic or a text;
b) Students silently considering what is being said (in the classroom) and reflecting upon it (outside the classroom);
c) Students’ writing a piece of work which is their response to the topic/text, and to the teacher’s comments;
d) Fellow students/parents/teacher reading and responding to the student’s work;
e) Student responding to the comments of the readers.

This characterisation of classroom dialogue seems to me to have the virtue of recognising that things begun in the classroom remain discursively alive after the bell rings to end a class period. It also allows for recognition of the fact that students are more discursively resistant to the teacher’s apparent domination of the official timetabled class than appears from any recording of a lesson. The site of resistance is often elsewhere - the corridor, the canteen, the copybook, but it (the resistance) is there, and a dialectic operates. What most research on classrooms neglect is the rich matrix of relationships within which the relationship between the teacher and the students is located. (26)

The fact that a dialogue does not develop in the face-to-face situation of every class is not an indication that dialogue is not taking place. As I write this report, there is no face-to-face dialogue taking place, though I am in dialogue with myself, and with those writers whose works I have read in preparing the report. And the writing of the report is an anticipation of a dialogue to come. As I write I see myself as entering into a dialogue, though it may be some weeks before I engage in face-to-face discussion with colleagues. However, it would be nonsensical to say that action research is not about dialogue. In the same way, a teacher who shares his/her practice with the students, and invites them to enter the dialogue, to practice English, is creating an open situation which has to be characterised as dialogic. Through the project I have come to understand dialogue as a value, as a way of conducting one’s life. It is a bigger or a more total concept than is granted in the study of classroom talk that I have read. And the reality of the underlying dialogue, in the classroom situation, is, I think, captured in this exchange from Jonathan’s notebook:

You wrote about the tone of the play unlike me. Well done!
Neil.

Jonathan,
Your work is very well presented and well-written. I like the way you put everything under a heading, which is something that I will have to do from now on. You have included all the points possible and you must have spent a lot of time writing your English. Your work is excellent. Well done.
Brian.
Jonathan,
Your work is well written. You must have spent a lot of time on it. It is well put together. I got a lot of ideas from your work.
Niall.

I was happy with the comments I received. The one major fault I had was not putting quotes into it, like Neil’s and Brian’s work. The quotes not only improve the work vastly, but if you do it like Neil and Brian, with different pen colours for the quotes, you improve how it looks tenfold. (...) I could kick myself for not doing that. (27)

Reading Fiction. September 6th – October 14th, 1993.

In keeping with the general aims of the project, the challenge for me was to work with the students in a way that would allow them to demonstrate their competence in reading and responding to Of Mice and Men, the novel we were reading together. For this reason, I began our work on the novel by sharing with the students my understanding of how readers typically make sense of what they are reading. I spoke of how readers move around a text, forwards and backwards, pulling incidents together; reinterpreting in the light of ongoing insights and further information. I spoke of motifs in novels, of patterns of repetition, which have a predictive effect, and of how small events, in a novel, can prefigure more significant ones. I referred to patterns of repetition, which may come to have a thematic significance for the reader. In general, I spoke of understanding, in relation to reading a novel, as a constantly shifting process. I suggested that all of us had developed many skills in reading novels, including the skill of visualising characters, and imagining scenes.

I was careful to point out to the students that these ideas were based on my own reflections and my reflection on a number of books on the subject. I brought Teaching Literature by Michael Benton and Geoff Fox into class, as I wanted the students to have a sense of my involvement in a dialogue on the subject. (28) I didn’t want to present myself as being in possession of ‘x’ amount of cultural knowledge.
Rather, I wanted the students to see that I belonged to a community of people involved in talking and thinking about literature and the way in which we read and understand it. Furthermore, I wanted the students to see that my understanding of the process was simply a working hypothesis, liable to further changes and shifts. I wanted the students to feel that they were being invited into this dialogue, and that their reflection upon their own reading practices were, potentially, as important and insightful as anyone else’s.

The organisation of the work on the novel was quite straightforward. I read the novel aloud in class, or a student did the reading, if he or she so wished. I tried to verbalise my response to what I was reading. I demonstrated my practice in reading the novel, and invited the students to think about their own practice. I invited students to question both the process of reading, or the interpretation arising from the practice. I was careful to emphasise that a reading of the novel could never be definitive, as the individual reader brought so much of him/herself to the reading. I emphasised the idea that novels come to life and are interpreted in the mind of the reader, so that readers, as much as writers, create a novel’s meaning. I also spoke of the way in which a writer can try to make the reader see the novel in a certain way, but the reader can resist this manipulation, if he or she chooses. In relation to Of Mice and Men, I referred to the writer’s use of third person narrative, which gives an impression of impartiality, even though the narrative is focussed on Lennie and George.

With these general ideas serving to illustrate the theme of competence, throughout the six week period, we worked through the novel. At the end of each class I asked students to reflect on what we had read, and what I had said, and to jot down their own responses, if they so wished. I asked the students to undertake one writing task a week, and to produce a piece of work, which they regarded as being of high quality, for sharing with their friends, in the groups they had formed. One period a week was
given over to exchanging their notebooks, and commenting on the work they had produced. I had no part in this exchange unless I was invited by an individual, or a group to read work.

The writing tasks were intended to evoke their response to the novel, and were as open as possible. The tasks are not recorded very accurately in my journal, but they were along these lines:

a) Write on the opening of the novel, and the questions it raises in your mind. Say how you think some of the issues raised will be resolved.

b) Take a key moment in the novel, like the fight scene. How have earlier events led to this scene? How do you think it will effect later events in the novel? Where is the tension in the scene? What did you fear would happen? What did you hope would happen?

c) What mood is established by chapter four? What creates the mood? How does this mood influence your prediction of how the novel might end?

d) Read the end of the novel to-night. Try to capture all the things you feel and think about the end, and the novel as a whole.

e) Do you think that the ending of the novel has been prefigured by any earlier incidents?

In encouraging the students to take themselves seriously as writers, and to see themselves as belonging to a community of writers and readers, I stressed the importance of developing judicial practices in relation to their own work and the work of classmates. I wanted to generate a climate that was supportive, but not necessarily non-discriminating. To that end I offered the following guide-lines to students for reading and commenting on the written work of their fellow students:

For the Reader
In reading a piece of work, ask yourself:

a) Is what it says of value?
b) Is the way it is said impressive?
c) Is the piece of work put together in an organised way?
d) Is the piece written to the topic.

**For the Writer**
Read the comments. Write your reflections on the reading of the comments. Think out how you might change – how the interaction has forced you to think about your work.

On reflection, I was not satisfied with these instructions, as I considered that they did not go far enough in dispelling the negative sense of criticism that many students understood to be the purpose of reading work. So, I reformulated them, in the hope of establishing respect as the primary critical attitude:

Read to find the good in a piece of work.
Read to find the truth in a piece of work.
Read to learn from your friend’s work.
Read to think about your own work.
Read to share ideas.
Read to be of help.
Read to compare.

These guidelines did encourage the students to read in a supportive and positive way. They also helped to establish the collaborative nature of the enterprise. Critical comments were written in the student’s notebooks, and then the writer wrote a response to the critical comment, as in the excerpt from Jonathan’s notebook, quoted on pages 151-152. In this way, I hoped to establish the idea of dialogue and reflection. Problems with spelling, grammar and punctuation, which I designated ‘technical difficulties’, were not marked, though a reader was free to point out any recurring pattern which he/she noticed.

In general, I was very happy with the students’ response to the exchange of notebooks. There was a keen sense of enthusiasm, and a willingness to help each other. The students felt that the standard of work had improved, and that the fear of
failing had been removed from the classroom. At intervals over the six weeks, I asked students to record their views of the project and the advantages, if any, they saw in it for themselves.

During this phase of the project, a number of issues arose which need further consideration. Chief among these was the question of a critical vocabulary. I debated with myself the question of giving the students a number of critical terms, which they might take on board as ‘empty categories’, to borrow a phrase used by James Britton in discussing Vygotsky’s contribution to pedagogical theory, which might subsequently find embodiment in their own critical practice. (29) The other possibility was to let the students develop the critical practice and an attendant vocabulary through their own experience, without a conscious intervention. In the end, this later course was the one I adopted. However, I have not had the opportunity to analyse the critical comments to establish if the students developed a critical vocabulary. This is a question I would like to pursue in future work.

Looking back on the initial phase of the project, I am happy that the underlying structure of the discourse was dialogic, and that the students had begun to develop a more collaborative approach to the doing of English. This spirit of collaboration in captured in this comment by Jonathan, from Neil’s notebook:

Neil,
This is another great piece of work, except for one problem – you forgot to write about the tone of the play. This is probably the best lot of homework the group has done as a whole.
Jonathan. (30)

The second phase of the project involved the reading of Romeo and Juliet and presented me with a new set of problems.

The second phase of the project centred on reading Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. I knew the students were not looking forward to doing Shakespeare, and had little confidence in their ability to read the play, in an independent manner. For this reason, I spent some time talking to the students about the differences between reading a play and reading a novel. These introductory comments were presented as a working hypothesis, liable to change through the force of better argument, or as a result of further reflection or new insights. As a teacher, I was claiming the right to put forward ideas and initiate a dialogue. I was not claiming any special privileged position once that dialogue commenced.

Essentially, I suggested that one of the biggest obstacles to reading a Shakespearean play was our tendency to read it as a novel, and to expect to find the same degree of verisimilitude and consistency that we find in most realist novels. Judged in the same way as a novel, we find a Shakespearean play hopelessly inconsistent, with a confusing variety of tones and moods. To counteract this tendency, I proposed making a conscious effort to keep in mind the nature of seeing a play in the theatre – two hours of non-stop action – as opposed to the reading of a novel – no set time with the opportunity to reread and move around the text. From a writer's point of view, writing for the theatre must present a different set of problems and possibilities than writing for the reader of a novel. So, the difference between the two genres, from a writer's point of view, became a focus. I then encouraged the students to think about the differences between the ways we might visualise a play and a novel. I invited them not to visualise the play as something real, but rather to keep in mind the clearly contrived and artificial nature of theatre. 'Playacting' became a key word, in this context. In keeping with the idea of encouraging the students to trust in their competence, I suggested that the text of a play is simply an invitation for the reader to
imagine the play into existence; an invitation to imagine how we would make believe in a given space; to imagine how we would stage the action. Reading a play, I suggested, offered a wide-ranging freedom to the reader, and each reader was a potential director.

What I find interesting about the project, from my perspective as a teacher, is the way in which the desire to create a dialogue with my students, forces me to consider ways of talking about literature which guarantees that the students' involvement will be as wide-ranging, free and speculative as possible. On a few occasions, I found it difficult to find ways into the play that satisfied the overall ambition I have for the project. This extract from my journal, from November 1993, indicates the developmental nature of my own practice and understanding:

Reading a play is an unsettling experience. Hard to find a consistent reader-position, because there is little consistency in the position of the characters - unstable relationships. Play is a series of discrete moments. The tension between immediate effect, and our desire for unity and consistency. This is less obvious when we go to a theatre performance, where the uninterrupted flow of the play gives us a sense of unity. The heightened awareness of play time; the need to entertain the spectators; give them breaks (release the tension).

Seeing a play is a non-reflective experience; reading a play – an entirely different apprehension. In reading we control much more our involvement. (31)

After this note, I have included a statement of my aim in this phase of the project:

Aim

Trying to find a way of talking about plays/novels/poems which is true to the genre, and which allows the students to write. Developing distinctive ways of treating each genre. (32)

Both the students and myself were a little frustrated in trying to talk and respond to the play simply as a text, so we availed of an opportunity to go and see a production
of the play, by the English Shakespearean Company. Seeing a production generated the kind of engaged discussion I had been hoping for. A lively exchange of views developed on a number of issues: the way in which scenes were acted; the response of the audience to different moments in the play; the changes of mood in the play.

Seeing the play provided us with a focus for our discussion. We saw how particular scenes, and the style of language and playacting which went with them, set a dominant mood. So, for example, there was general agreement that the ball scene helped the audience decide on the kind of play they were watching, and toned down the pantomime effect of the opening scene.

Arising from this discussion, the remainder of our work on the play centred on the following questions:

a) The extent to which Juliet and Mercutio set the dominant tones of the play;
b) The difference in language and playacting between public and private scenes;
c) The director's input – where was this most evident?
d) The scene is which Juliet is discovered 'dead' by the nurse and her family. What was your opinion of how this scene was played?

What I liked about our exploration of the play was the way in which the students found their voices in relation to Shakespeare, and began to consider my views as one set of possibilities. I think their notebooks show the reality of the dialogue that took place between us all.


The third phase of the project involved reading poetry and, from my perspective, this phase has been the most rewarding one. I considered many ways of approaching the
teaching of poetry. In the end, I decided that I would offer students the freedom to work on their own initiative. I invited students to select twelve poems and to read and respond to them in whatever way they liked, with whomever they liked. There was no limitations on the poems that could be selected, though clearly textbooks, and the poems students had read in secondary school, played a large part in determining the range of poems available to the students.

The first week of the poetry project was given over to reading poems, and I read poetry books and made them available to students for inspection. Some students were a little unsure about what they should/could do, once they had selected the poems they liked. For that reason, I made a number of suggestions. These included:

a) Group poems under thematic or other heading.
b) Frame ten questions about a poem.
c) Write a short essay which answers your own questions.

These suggestions, vague and unspecific as they were, give students the confidence to proceed. I undertook to read a number of books on the reading of poetry, and to share any useful ideas I came across. The idea of reading and sharing became important to me as the project developed. What was the point, I reasoned, in keeping the sources of my own empowerment from the students? This strategy of offering suggestions, or sharing ideas, which the students were free to accept or reject as they wished, did seem to me to create a truly intersubjective situation in the classroom. And while I have no way of judging if the standard of work produced by the students, working on their own and with each other, is higher or lower than the work they might have produced in a didactic situation, I am certain that there is a positive benefit for the students' sense of self when they are involved in their own self-formation through reading and writing.
As the students worked away on reading and responding, I read, or circulated around the classroom asking if I could be of assistance. At this time, I was working on preparing a textbook which contained many poems, and I shared my own methods of reading and making sense of poetry with a number of students. I showed them how I had noted particular words, phrases or lines which struck me in some way or other. I showed students the notes I had made around these marked passages. I showed them some of the questions/statements I had written to myself in the margins of particular poems. Through this sharing, I became aware of my own procedures – the constant returning to poems; the condensed notes; the formulation of questions. In Teaching Literature by Benton and Fox, I came across a metaphor for reading poems which I liked. (33) They describe a poem as a house which we visit and revisit until we know our way around it. This metaphor seemed to me to be apt. I began to speak about ‘visiting poems’ and developed a vocabulary around the metaphor, which I think, was useful to the students, and which did not force on them any particular view of a poem, or force them to view the process of reading, in any particular way. The house metaphor also allowed me to talk about viewing a poem from different perspectives, just as a photographer might view the entire structure of a building or zoom in on particular details. I wanted to give the students the confidence to look at poems in any number of different ways. In one discussion with a student I suddenly realised that viewing the poem as a visual object on the page gave many hints on the rhythm and verbal texture of a poem. I may have understood this in an intuitive way, but I cannot remember ever verbalising this insight. So, the sharing of ideas was a two-way process. In my second year class, where I employed many of the same teaching practices, a student compared the rhythm of Auden’s ‘The Night Mail’ to rap, a connection and insight that I thought quite brilliant and which I doubt I would ever have thought of. Arising from this, I suggested that students could include some song lyrics in their selection of poems, if they so wished.
With my second year group, who found this approach to poetry quite difficult, I suggested that they might write notes on four areas:

a) Noticing.
All the things you notice about a poem. Is it long/short? Is it written in stanzas? What shape does it have on the page? Does it rhyme.

b) Picturing.
What pictures or images does the poem create in your mind? What feelings do these pictures cause you to feel?

c) Meaning.
I think the poem might mean this...
These are some of the themes...
This word/phrase/line makes me think of...
These are some of the questions I have...
These are some of the things I don't understand...

d) Feeling/Mood.
These are the feelings the poem causes in me...
The poem captures these feelings...
I liked/ didn’t like the mood because...
I would/wouldn’t read more poems by this poet...

These guide-lines are clearly directive, but they served to give students, streamed into a less academic class, confidence in their ability to write about poems with a minimum level of teacher intervention. On reflection, I should have included a heading which encouraged the students to relate the poem to other types of art, or to life experiences to which the poem spoke. The placing of pieces of literature into some context does, I think, help the students to make sense of it, and to see the vital relationship between one text and another and literature and other cultural forms.

The quality of engagement in the classes during the poetry project gave me real satisfaction. I began to look upon myself as a facilitator, and to regard the students as practitioners. I believe the classroom was the site of what Carr and Kemmis call 'practical action research'. (34) I was the facilitator who had formed a co-operative
relationship with the students, the practitioners, "helping them to articulate their own concerns, plan strategic action for change, monitor the problems and effects of changes, and reflect on the value and consequences of the changes actually achieved." (35) In trying to do this, I had also helped myself to articulate my own concerns. I now see the formation of co-operative relationships as the key to developing dialogue in the classroom. The role of facilitator, as opposed to the traditional role of teacher, is not always an easy one. A colleague remarked that the role I was developing for myself involved a lot of talk about teaching, outside the classroom, and little teaching inside it! Reviewing the project to date, I think I have not been interactive enough. The students have a natural courtesy and a reluctance to disturb the teacher, which prevented them for engaging me in dialogue, or seeking my advice when it might have been useful for them to do so. However, despite these reservations, I am more than happy with the quality of work produced by the students in a largely self-directed environment. Consider, for example, Marina’s remarks on William Carlos Williams’ ‘The Artist’:

I think this poem is about optimism in depressing circumstances. I think it is more sad than amusing because it reminds us that people don’t always get what they want, but should never lose their dreams no matter how old they are. Talent can lie in the most unsuspecting places. Mr. T. must be a predictable person because of the response to his outburst. Although doing something unexpected of him, he doesn’t seem at all embarrassed. As soon as his wife enters the room the magic of the moment disappears. Reality has re-entered their lives. She wants to know what has happened but an image such as that cannot be created twice. The image of a man living his farfetched dream in a dull monotonous lifestyle is greatly appreciated by the woman. As I read the poem I felt sorry for Mr. T. The sight of a grown man doing ballet unexpectedly is pitiful but also there is a sadness in the poem caused by the fact that nobody laughed at Mr. T. ... I think it’s the way you visualise the poem that gives it its meaning. I like this poem very much. (36)

Conclusion.

What claims am I making for this action research project? I am claiming that I have
worked consciously at forming a co-operative partnership with the students in my
class, with the ambition of creating a classroom order based on reason, consensus and
equality. I have tried to develop my teaching practices so that they give effect to my
respect for the students as independent subjects, responsible for their own formation.
I have sought to bring my understanding of critical theory to bear on the classroom
situation.

Can I present evidence to support my claims? Well, clearly, this report is part of the
evidence, as is my journal. The notebooks of the students are a primary source of
evidence. This project has influenced my teaching in other classes. I invited four
students from my second year group to give me their assessment of the poetry project
we did together. Here are some of their responses:

a) I think that if you’re free to choose the poems you like, that’s better (...) You can relax and pick the right (poem), the one you like most. Andrew.

b) We can write our opinion on the poems and it is much more interesting than
your teacher saying ‘learn that poem for tomorrow’. Michelle.

c) I myself prefer to work alone because I don’t feel rushed and I have more
time to think about what I am going to do and how to do it. I recommend this
(way) as it leads people to think more than usual. Amanda.

d) I like this way of doing poetry because it gives the pupil a better chance to
pick a poem he/she likes and it can also show the teacher how good the
student is. I like a poem much better when I read it myself rather than when
the teacher picks a poem and tells you to study it. I think other students will
like doing poetry like this as well. Gary.

Encouraged by the response of the students, I invited my sixth year students to form
reading groups for exchanging essays, and explained how the system worked in the
third year class. They agreed to try it. This is what two of the older students thought
of the new practice:

a) Working in the group is the ideal environment in which students can help and be helped simultaneously. Group work depends on the giving and receiving — sharing — of ideas. It also depends on each member being able to give and accept constructive criticism. We have had to become our own critics this year and for some this hasn’t been easy.

Caroline Earley

b) The second class on Friday now involves passing around work from student to student — this I believe is going well and works better than the teacher listening to one person reading out and commenting on it. This class is better because there is more personal participation by the students. Students get to read and learn from other people’s work, see the different styles of writing, see where others might have gone wrong and thus where they themselves might have gone wrong and therefore change it to improve. This way means that the students have to assess their own work and push themselves and not depend on the teacher (....) Working with classmates provides more belief in yourself.

Gwen Cantwell.

The final piece of evidence comes from my colleague, Terry Mulcahy, the year head for third year. Terry paid a visit to the class at my suggestion. I told him that we were involved in a project and invited him to speak with the students about their work. I did not give him any background to the project. After the visit he wrote:

7\textsuperscript{th}, December, 1993.
The students were working on Romeo and Juliet, looking through the text of the play for early indications of how the play would end. They were then to write an assessment of these and pass their work to other members of the group for assessment and comment. They could then choose to pass it to Kevin for his assessment and comment and finally they could add their own comments assessing their own work and the comments made upon it. This approach has been running in the class for some time. It was used for example when the novel Of Mice and Men was being studied.
All of the students I spoke to were very positive about the class, about their own work, about the work of other members in the group, and all of them said that it was a great improvement on the traditional approach which they had followed last year. All of those questioned said they were now spending longer on homework, were producing work of a higher standard, felt less pressure and felt more positive about the subject and about the class. They felt the comments from their peers were fair and that the comments were given
and received in the spirit of work and without personal consideration.

The attempt to become a reflective practitioner, and to allow the students to be autonomous and responsible for their own learning has I believe, been worthwhile and educational.
Notes


4. "This project." This report of my practice was originally written for an action research conference held in Marino Institute of Education in May 1994.

5. In speaking of competence, I am influenced by the work of Habermas (1970), op. cit.


10. In particular Habermas (1970), op. cit., influenced my thinking.

11. For an excellent account of Habermas's theory of communicative competence, see Mc Carthy (1976), op. cit.


15. Ibid., p. 7.
16. Ibid., p. 29.
17. Ibid., p. 39.
18. Ibid., p. 43.
24. Ibid., p. 8
25. Ibid., p. 21.
26. Ibid., pp. 45-46.


32. Ibid., p. 18.

33. In checking the source of this metaphor, I discover that the metaphor they use is a poem as a piece of sculpture, which we are obliged to view from different angles. The misremembered metaphor appears in Benton & Fox (1985), op. cit., p. 17.


35. Ibid., p. 203.

Chapter Six

Reading Practice - The Teacher: The One Who Refuses To Be The-One-Presumed-To-Know.

"Practice is a key word. I'm trying to move away, in my own mind, from the idea of knowledge as (a) possession. (...) One of the things I am trying to convey to my students is that understanding is a process." (1)

Three years after writing this report, I read something which confirmed for me the validity of the insights I had attempted to translate into committed action in my work with the students in my English class. (Students, who, as I write this, have just completed their final examinations in secondary school, reminding me, yet again, how these stories of school always begin in media res, how the lives they describe begin and end outside them, how, ultimately, all storytelling and interpretation is a fragmentary project, never able to cope with the prolixity of the life that it seeks to capture. Following the example of Walter Benjamin, I return, again, to the story, to prise it open a little more, not so much to discover an achieved knowledge, but to glean a little counsel/comfort for the life which continues and which generates further stories, further mysteries, impasses, confusions. (2)) What I read came from Northrop Frye's introduction to his study of the Bible, The Great Code: The Bible and Literature.

The teacher, as has been recognised at least since Plato's Meno, is not primarily someone who knows instructing someone who does not know. He is rather someone who attempts to re-create the subject in the student's mind, and his strategy in doing this is first of all to get the students to recognise what he already potentially knows, which includes breaking up the powers of repression in his mind that keep him from knowing what he knows. This is why it is the teacher rather than the student who asks most of the questions. (3)

This passage struck me with the force of revelation. It sent me hurrying to read
Plato's *Meno* and from there, on a hunch, I returned to Jonathan Culler's account of Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* which I had originally read without thinking of the pedagogical implications of deconstruction. (4) True, I had incorporated some of the ideas I had gathered from deconstruction in my work as an English teacher with my students in third year, but I had not considered the opportunities afforded by the work of American post-structuralists to reflect on the nature of teaching *per se*. The chance acquiring of an issue of *Yale French Studies*, devoted to pedagogy and literature, was one of those fortuitous events upon which so much research depends. Here I read Shoshana Felman's account of the work of Jacques Lacan, which amplified the Freudian dimension of the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, and which dealt with the pedagogical situation of the face-to-face dialogue in such a rich and provocative manner. Felman's essay is among the most exciting pieces of work I have read on pedagogy, and it provided a context in which I could consider my work as class teacher and as a year head. I found Felman's elaboration of Lacan's teaching style to be congenial to my way of thinking and helped to sustain my project. (5) And, for good measure, Felman, began her essay with the very quotations from Plato's *Meno* that I had marked in my copy. In the tradition of Biblical exegesis, I read this as a sign.

Felman's essay and the passage from Frye supported the ideas that informed my work with the third year students, namely, that teaching is:

a) A drawing out of what the students know;
b) A form of conversation or address in which the individual, through dialogue, generates his/her own knowledge.

Furthermore, the essay gave support to the idea that there is no essential difference between the practice of a teacher and the practice of a student, though there are, clearly, differences in age and experience. From the *Meno* and from Felman's article, I drew encouragement and a renewed confidence in the implications for pedagogical
practice that I was reading into aspects of Habermas's work on dialogue, most notably his notion of an ideal speech situation. Furthermore, the Meno and Felman's work helped me to broaden the scope of my ideas into the more problematic area of my work with individual students, outside of the boundary of the classroom. I knew that the record of my work in the 1996/1997 year was a rich source for analytic reflection and patient reading and, through the Meno and Felman, I began to form a notion of how my sense of the materials' importance might be articulated. And even though the record of that year falls outside the scope of this dissertation, its influence is evident in the manner in which I address some of the issues relating to problematic communication, among colleagues, in chapter seven.

In Plato's Meno, Socrates disclaims his knowledge. His method is to help the student to recognise himself as a potentially knowing subject. On the first page of my notebook for the project with my third year English class, I wrote:

(My) Interest (is) in validating subjective judgements. If part of the aim is to encourage the expression of subjectivity, then there must be a willingness to accept and develop the individual's ability to judge. (6)

This seems to me, in retrospect, to be an essentially Socratic position. Sometimes the student's resistance to owning what he/she knows has to be met. Socrates is the one who asks questions and sometimes the one of whom questions are asked. Socrates does not present himself as being in possession of the answer to the questions he poses. The answer emerges in the dialogue. Sometimes the questioner sees the knowledge in the other that the other doesn't know he/she has and vice versa. The teacher is the one who asks the questions to keep the conversation alive. For dialogue is the condition of learning. And not knowing is a prelude to dialogue. The entire project with the students in the third year English class, as I embarked upon it, and as I regard now, in retrospect, involved a form of didactic self-reflection. I learned, as
the students learned. What I learned, however, was that education is 'an effect of community' and I learned, eventually, to quieten my anxiety that attempting to encourage a disposition to learning, and creating a learning atmosphere, was, somehow, less honest than transmitting quantities of knowledge. (7)

Here are the relevant passages from Meno:

**Meno**

Can you tell me, Socrates - does virtue come from teaching? Or does it come not from teaching but from practice? Or does it come to people neither from practice nor from being learnt, but by nature or in some other way?

**Socrates**

Well, stranger, perhaps you think I'm some specially favoured person - I'd certainly need to be, to know whether virtue comes from teaching or in what way it comes - but in fact I'm so far from knowing whether it comes from teaching or not, that actually I don't even know at all what virtue is! (8)

**Meno**

Yes, Socrates, - but what do you mean by saying we don't learn, but what we call learning is recollection? Can you teach me how that is so?

**Socrates**

Only a minute ago I said you were a rascal, Meno, and now you ask me if I can teach you - I who say there's no teaching, only recollecting ... (9).

Felman quotes these passages in her essay and makes the point that Socrates begins his teaching by asserting his own ignorance and the "radical impossibility of teaching". (10) She points out that Freud made the same claim and suggests that in doing so both of these teachers open up the question of teaching and suggest new possibilities:

As much as Socrates, Freud has instituted, among other things, a revolutionary pedagogy. It is my contention (...) that it is precisely in giving us an unprecedented insight into the impossibility of teaching that psychoanalysis
has opened up unprecedented teaching possibilities, renewing both the questions and the practice of education. (11)

Felman suggests that Socrates is a true pedagogue because he confronts the impossibility of teaching: "You see, Meno, that I am not teaching anything, but all I do is question." (12) In Lacan's pedagogy, Felman sees the working out of the implications of Socrates' and Freud's insight, most notably in his critique of teaching and learning as the imparting and assimilation of 'substantialized knowledge', and in his emphasis on dialogic learning. (13) In Socrates, through the employment of a method – dialogue – that is social and public in nature, we see a model of teaching and learning as social practice. Ron Reed characterises Socrates' method thus:

Socrates says explicitly, "I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small." What motivates Socrates, what gives force and urgency to his questioning, is an awareness of this lack of knowledge. When he is being most 'Socratic', when he is functioning in the early Platonic dialogues, Socrates is not so much trying to convince others – he is not being a Sophist – as he is trying to convince himself, to find reasons for belief, to find justification. Because Socrates does not know, he must inquire. (14)

In the real pursuit of insight and understanding, the question will always take precedence over the answer. In reflecting on my work, as I proceeded with my students, I recorded the following idea in my notebook:

What I know is always a working hypothesis, liable to change by the force of better argument, or be transformed by future reflection and insight, by new cycles of experience and reflection. (15)

In this moment, I catch myself as a Socratic teacher, not making claims to any absolute, achieved knowledge, but rather claiming no more than working assumptions that may change. And if change occurs, it will occur through dialogue, through a willingness to follow an enquiry where it leads. A dialogue that is open, speculative
and rigorous may well elicit from us that which we did not know that we knew.

Felman characterises psychoanalysis as a pedagogical experience. (16) She suggests that it is a unique and original mode of learning:

This new mode of investigation and learning has, however, a very different temporality from the conventional linear – cumulative and progressive – temporality of learning, as it has traditionally been conceived by pedagogical theory and practice. Proceeding not through linear progression but through breakthroughs, leaps, discontinuities, regressions, and deferred action, the analytic learning process puts in question the traditional pedagogical belief in intellectual perfectibility, the progressivist view of learning as a simple one-way road from ignorance to knowledge.

It is in effect the very concept of both ignorance and knowledge – the understanding of what 'to know' and 'not to know' may really mean – that psychoanalysis has modified, renewed. (17)

In the collaborative, dialogic structure of the classes with the third year students, there was a similar sense of the students’ understanding developing in what William James calls the flights and perchings of thought. (18) Conversation is a useful metaphor for the way in which understanding developed in the students during these classes. One student speaks of ‘discussing homework and exploring each other’s ideas.’ (19) Another student speaks of swapping ideas and advice with his friends and refers to the ‘good conversations’ they have about the texts on the course. (20) Matthew Lipman, in a discussion of Paul Grice’s work on conversation, captures the essential point that conversation is, effectively, shared practice. The work of conversation is carried by all the participants:

Conversations are not smoothly continuous; there are gaps and seams everywhere. We blurt something out and then we back off. We allude and intimate; our partners gather and surmise. The work of conversation, of putting together what is meant from the bits and pieces that have merely been said, involves what Grice calls implicature. And implicature is made possible because conversation is a shared experience with shared values and shared meanings. (21)
What Lipman fails to address is the degree to which the shared experience of conversation is a means of accessing and generating understanding. So the work of conversation is not simply the reading and extrapolating of the intended meaning of each participant, it is also the assistance given to all participants to explore their own ideas and discover what it is that they know. In this sense, understanding is less about receiving knowledge than it is about achieving knowledge. And the achievement is a shared one. And, in this context, teaching is not about the transmission of knowledge, rather it is about the establishment of the conditions in which knowledge can be achieved. The friendship groups and the students’ willingness to think about how they learn provided these conditions.

From the evidence of the students’ notebooks and the comments they wrote on each other’s work, their collaborative learning was not only motivated by a desire to learn but also by a desire to encourage and affirm their friends. The enquiring communities they formed were predicated on the twin pillars of enquiry and friendship. Their communication attended to both the propositional and the interpersonal aspects of learning in community. The concern for the well-being of the other, that lies at the heart of friendship, did ensure that the community of enquiry was a safe place for the individual members to try out their ideas. The friendship ensured that what Reed refers to as ‘ethical rules’ and ‘manners’ developed as a matter of course:

If it is to be a community of inquiry, members must be willing to listen to one another, accept the other’s perspective, and see it as valuable. Communities of inquiry develop what Thomas Hobbes would call rules of large and small morals, what we today would call ethical rules and those of manners. Not only do we have to respect each other as person and inquirer, that respect is exhibited in the following of rules and procedures relating to how we talk, how frequently we talk and so on. Those rules will change from community to community; they will always be subject to review and revision, but a community of inquiry that had no rules of etiquette and manners would quickly degenerate into a less-than-pleasant and less-than-educational place.
The communities of enquiry formed by the students worked to a scheme of work determined by the syllabus and the requirements of the state examination for which they were preparing. Thus, their work centred on a novel, a play, a set of poems and writing tasks arising from the reading of these texts. The work was, therefore, deliberative and focused. It had a clear purpose while, at the same time, it partook of the quality of encounter, as Buber describes it:

Each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being, and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them. (23)

The students were present to each other and willing to listen and respond to each other's ideas and to read each other's work in a purposeful way, without losing sight of the 'I-Thou' relationship which bound them together in the first place.

The friendship at the heart of the collaborative process between the students ensured that there was little resistance to learning. In the *Meno*, Plato suggests that learning is a form of recollection, a hypothesis based upon the pre-existence of the soul. This proposition may be regarded as an ironic refutation of the empty logic of the sophists. (24) However, the translation of Plato's theory from a mystical to a psychological account opens up an interesting perspective on learning. For if, as Plato's Socrates suggests, knowledge is a form of recollecting, then ignorance can be construed as a form of forgetting. Knowledge, in Socrates formulation, is a force, a disposition and a process, rather than a possession, a property or a product. In the same way, continuing the metaphor, ignorance is a will to forget, a suppressing of potential knowledge. Ignorance can thus be conceptualised as an energy, a mode of resistance rather than a property. This idea is immensely interesting and helps to locate a centre of attention for teachers: the site where students resist learning. And a challenge: how can that resistance be overcome? Teaching then becomes a matter of creating
the conditions in which resistance can be lessened. In this context, Felman likens the situation of teaching to the situation of psychoanalysis:

Teaching, like analysis, has to deal not so much with lack of knowledge as with resistances to knowledge. Ignorance, suggests Lacan, is a passion. Inasmuch as traditional pedagogy postulated a desire for knowledge, an analytically informed pedagogy has to reckon with 'the passion for ignorance'. Ignorance, in other words, is nothing other than a desire to ignore: its nature is less cognitive than performative. (25)

Again, these ideas, developed from Felman's reading of Lacan, are congenial to me and echo my previously expressed conclusions:

(I am) interested in the idea that a teacher can will freedom, can work/act in a conscientious way to create the conditions of freedom in the classroom. (26)

The will to freedom marks, I believe, the beginning in creating the conditions in which a disposition to learning can be encouraged and the resistance to learning overcome. And learning that is conducted through and between friends is a form of learning in which resistance plays little or no part. Thus, I met with little or no resistance to the new method of organising the classroom from my students. And it was a new form of organisation. The exchange of ideas between the individual students, in the reading and discussion groups, generated a new classroom configuration and new levels of energy. The students, the friends, in each group, shared a common purpose and, around this purpose, became self-organising and, also, it must be said, self-regulating. As their confidence grew in the discipline of English, so they became more disciplined. This was problematic for me. It was not so much that I was bothered by a loss of power but by the displacement of attention, by the virtual silence of my role. Nel Noddings suggests that in a caring relation, the one-caring is present to the other and experiences a motivational displacement away from self. (27) She further suggests that caring can only be completed by the cared-for.
receiving the good-will of the one-caring. But what happens when there is no 
reciprocity, when the one-caring is not a presence for the cared-for? Noddings quotes 
Gabriel Marcel on the concept of disposability – the willingness to make oneself 
available and present to the other – and its contrary, indisposability:

One who is disposable recognizes that she has a self to invest, to give. She 
does not identify herself with her objects and possessions. She is present to 
the cared-for. One who is indisposable, however, comes across even to one 
physically present as absent, as elsewhere. Marcel says: “When I am with 
someone who is indisposable, I am conscious of being with someone for 
whom I do not exist; I am thrown back on myself.” (28)

As the students grew more self-reliant and self-regulating in their friendship/reading 
groups, I was conscious of being in a classroom, among students, for whom I did not 
exist, and was thrown back on myself.

Roland Barthes suggests that there is a fundamental tie between teaching and speech. 
(29) The teacher defines himself by the act of speaking, especially in the speech 
performance that is confident and authoritative. Barthes associates the authoritative 
speaking of the teacher with Authority and the Law and suggests that "the imperfect 
orator hopes to render less disagreeable the role that makes every speaker a kind of 
policeman". (30) The role of the teacher has, traditionally been bound up with the 
concept of mastery. The teacher is someone who knows. That presumption of 
knowledge creates a dynamic between students and teacher that is similar to the 
relationship between an analysand and an analyst-presumed-to-know. The analyst- 
presumed-to-know receives the respect, even the love of the analysand. The 
relationship to authority is as much a matter of affection as it is epistemological or 
judicial. Lacan, as quoted in Felman, makes this claim in a more insistent and 
authoritative way than I have expressed it:
“As soon as there is somewhere a subject presumed to know, there is transference,” writes Lacan. Since “transference is the acting-out of the reality of the unconscious,” teaching is not purely a cognitive, informative experience, it is also an emotional, erotic experience. “I deemed it necessary,” insists Lacan, “to support the idea of transference, as indistinguishable from love with the formula of the subject presumed to know. I cannot fail to underline the new resonance with which this notion of knowledge is endowed. The person in whom I presume knowledge to exist thereby acquires my love.” “Transference is love...I insist: it is love directed toward, addressed to, knowledge.” (31)

What, however, is the affective relationship between students and a teacher who makes no claim to total knowledge, who, in his metastatements, refers to the position of the teacher, in the words of Felman as “the position of the one who learns, of the one who teachers nothing other than the way he learns.” (32) The students were clearly fascinated by this idea, and one of them included the comment in his notebook, “and Mr. Mc Dermott can learn from our views.” (33) And this positioning of myself did cause me anxiety. To speak imperfectly, tentatively, or to admit to one's confusions, uncertainties or ignorance, may be received by a student audience, steeped in the tradition of the magisterial authority of the teacher, as incompetence and weakness. And the concept of teacher authority is so embedded in our culture. A popular text on teaching speaks of authority in these terms:

The teacher’s prime task is to organise and manage pupils’ learning. This involves exerting control over both the management of learning activities and the management of pupils’ behaviour (including the maintenance of discipline). Unless pupils accept the teacher’s authority to organise and manage in this way, effective teaching is likely to be undermined. (...) There are four main factors involved in establishing and maintaining authority:
- Status
- Teaching competence
- Exercising control over the classroom
- Exercising control over discipline. (34)

However, it was less the possibility of losing my authority that caused me concern than the fact of remaining silent, or virtually silent, for much of the time I was
supposed to be teaching. This was a radical reversal of the teaching situation, and a radical dis-association of teaching from speech. Barthes compares the position of the teacher to the position of the analysand in psychoanalysis. In speaking, the teacher is exposed before a silent audience:

Imagine I am a teacher: I speak, endlessly, in front of and for someone who remains silent. I am the person who says I (...) I am the person who, under cover of setting out a body of knowledge, puts out a discourse, never knowing how the discourse is being received and thus forbidden the reassurance of a definitive image – even if offensive – which would constitute me. In the expose, more aptly named than we tend to think, it is not knowledge which is exposed, it is the subject. (35)

How much greater is the anxiety of a teacher who is not invited to say anything. How much more exposed is he, as he stands at the top of the class awaiting an invitation to join the conversation that does not come. Barthes suggests “that when a teacher speaks to his audience, the Other is always there, puncturing his discourse.” (36) The Other who punctures the silence of the silent, non-authoritative teacher is a loquacious master. How, the silent teacher asks himself, I ask myself, am I fulfilling my contract if I do not speak? For surely, the will to teach is a will to speak. The acceptance of a silent role demands courage and confidence that education is an effect of a self-organising community. Paradoxically, my success in creating small communities of learners caused the greatest anxiety in relation to my role as a teacher. And in relation to my place as a teacher for, on many days, as I stood at the top of the class, the students sat around tables, facing each other. In other words, the change in the classroom organisation led to a radical displacement of me as teacher. Barthes suggests that this sense of displacement is appropriate in the space in which teaching takes place:
In the teaching space nobody should anywhere be in his place (I am comforted by this constant displacement: were I to find my place, I would not even go on pretending to teach, I would give up). (37)

And the outcome of a critical practice that is reflexive will almost certainly be such a displacement but this does not eliminate the anxiety - as a teacher I might not have a fixed place in the discursive economy, but I do so in the economy. I am employed as a teacher; I am paid for teaching. Can I justify abandoning the traditional function of teaching in the name of an insightful pedagogy of ignorance? There is something else lurking in the back of my mind. Action research, like all oppositional stances, involves critique, a calling into crisis, a displacement not only of habits of thought and language but of people. To speak and write as an action researcher, a critic, is a matter of force and forceful action. And this force can dislodge the stable position of one's colleagues. My account of practice has focused on my relation with my students without referring to the wider context of the institution in which this relation unfolds. The capacity of the institution to accommodate what might be seen as others as a maverick form of teaching may suggest more about the authoritative capacity of the institution to tolerate difference than to my efficacy as teacher in a non-traditional role. And, paradoxically, the choice I exercise in questioning my own authority testifies to the very authority I seek to interrogate. Burbules makes the point tellingly:

Even such choices as encouraging the questioning of one’s authority, or provisionally setting it aside, are decisions that only a person in authority has the latitude to make. Indeed, such choices have the effect they do, in many cases, precisely because it is clear in all parties’ minds that they occur within a broader framework in which authority is agreed to. (38)

Freire emphasises the importance of respect in the pedagogic relation, which he conceives of as a dialogic relation. (39) Even where there is a difference in educational attainment the partners in dialogue look to learn with and from one another. To dialogue is to be in contact with another. What I found difficult about
the success of the project were the moments when there was no contact between
myself and the students and, therefore, I was cut off from a source of affective
affirmation, cut of from the flow of concern and respect that marks conversation
between those who have a friendly disposition toward each other. In these
circumstances, I almost longed for the role of the teacher as policeman, the one who
upholds the rules of the classroom and exercises a magisterial authority, or even the
role of the teacher as therapist, who might address with individuals their refusal to
acknowledge themselves as knowing. Any role, in fact, that would have allowed me
to feel a sense of participation.

In a certain sense, though I do not wish to succumb to the rhetoric of exaggeration,
refusing to be the-one-presumed-to-know led to my isolation in the classroom. And
that isolation was, on occasions, the source of anxiety. I am sure that many of my
colleagues experience similar periods of anxiety and doubt in their professional life
but the professional culture of teaching, as I have experienced it, does not readily
allow for the expression of these kinds of feeling. The ideal of the authoritative
teacher, rational and emotionally controlled, is still dominant in the profession. (40)
Speaking of anxiety in schools, Chris James and Una Connolly suggest that a teacher
contains the anxieties of the learner in a secure framework. (41) The change in the
organisation of the classroom removed the framework in which my own anxieties
could be contained. The loss of the structural dynamic between teacher and student
effected, on occasions, my confidence in myself as a professional. And, whatever
else may be said of the traditional role of the teacher as the one-presumed-to-know, it
does provide individuals with a secure place in the discursive economy of the
classroom.
Reading My Own Accounts

At those times in the classroom, when the relation between teaching and speaking was unbroken, much of my contribution to the dialogue with my class dealt with the strategies appropriate to reading in a specific genre, while in my notebook, as quoted in my report of the project, I worry away at the nature of dialogue. And the questions of genre and dialogue return now, as I write and think. This dissertation deals with dialogue and conversation. Is dialogue a specific genre, with an appropriate set of interpretative or reading strategies? Is dialogue a means of interpretation, a means of enquiry? Or is it both - a form of discourse and a form of enquiry? Are enquiry and reflection one and the same thing? Are reading and interpretation one and the same thing? And what of this dissertation? Can I say it is a dialogue with myself on my own practice and a means of enquiry into that practice? How does a reflective practitioner practise reflection? How do I generate a dialogue with myself on my own practice? Who is ‘self’ and who is ‘other’ in this dialogue – the ‘I’ and the ‘You’? And how does the dialogue proceed? Is there a model that I can follow? Plato’s dialogues, perhaps? Interestingly, he presents his philosophical enquiries in the form of dialogue. He gives us an example of a written, philosophical text that keeps to the forefront the idea of the intersubjective nature of enquiry. And although the dialogues pursue philosophical questions, they do so in a non-systematising way. Indeed, the texts are essentially literary and experimental, employing a repertoire of representational and rhetorical figures – metaphor, metonymy, anecdote, digression – within the developing conversation of the participants, a conversation that is, in turn, set within the criss-crossing, back and forth movement of the question and answer, though not always dominated by this movement. So, here is an example of dialogue that is both a literary form and a method of enquiry. Here is an example to keep in mind as I set about enquiring into my own practice.
In the structure of this dissertation, I have tried to maintain some of the essential features of dialogue, namely the criss-crossing of perspectives and the pattern of question and answer. Gadamer suggests that discourse which seeks to be insightful must proceed by way of questioning:

Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be opened up by the question. For this reason, the way in which dialectic proceeds is by way of question and answer or, rather, by way of the development of all knowledge through the question. To ask a question means to bring into the open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled. (42)

This willingness to pursue a question, to put ideas into play involves the taking of risks, even to the point of illogicality. (43) Gadamer refers to a discourse characterised by a spirit of risk and open questioning as ‘conversation’. He suggests that the work of hermeneutics might be described as “a conversation with the text.” (44) But what does this mean in practice? In this context, Vincent Crapanzano provides a useful gloss on the etymology of ‘dialogue’:

Dialogue comes from the Greek dialogos. Dia is a preposition that means ‘through’, ‘between’, ‘across’, ‘by’, and ‘of’. It is akin to dyo and di-, ‘two’. As a prefix in English dia suggests a ‘passing through’ as in diathermy, ‘thoroughly’ or ‘completely’ as in diagnosis, ‘a going apart’ as in dialysis, and ‘opposed in moment’ as in diamagnetism. Logos comes from legein, ‘to speak’. It may also mean thought as well as speech ... Hence, etymologically, a dialogue is a speech across, between, through two people. It is a passing through and a going apart. There is both a transformational dimension to dialogue and an oppositional one.... (45)

In reading my own work, I am not, however, trying to oppose it; I am not engaging in a disputation between I and You. I am, rather, trying to listen to what the You is saying, and questioning it, so that my understanding of it might be better. For this reason, it might be more correct to say that I imagine this thesis as a conversation.
Gadamer wrongly, in my estimation, interchanges the terms ‘dialogue’ and ‘conversation’. The process he has in mind is one directed at the meaning of texts and utterances. For him, dialogue is always about something. The relation between the participants is established more by logic than by any interpersonal quality. Nowhere does Gadamer consider how we are affected by what we hear and read. The openness that he values is an intellectual one. This may well characterise dialogue, but conversation is a form more responsive to the interpersonal character of communication.

At the outset, I envisaged the thesis as a text accompanied by a series of reflective glosses. I was thinking of the literary example of Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, where the tale is accompanied by a prose commentary. However, as Barbara Johnson points out, the prose gloss, that runs in the margin of Coleridge’s poem, constantly seeks to limit the meaning of the text by providing an authoritative, didactic, interpretation. (46) This was not my intention in moving between reports and reflections. The reflection, in this thesis, seeks to provide a questioning second look, to move beyond where the original reports stop, or to review the texts of the report with a hermeneutical curiosity, with a sensitivity to “the text’s quality of newness”. (47) In reflecting on the reports, the challenge is to read them so that the questions they raise are pursued beyond what my assumptions or presuppositions suggest is the answer to these questions. Reflection, then, is concerned with freeing the reader from the his/her own prejudicial interpretation of texts. This thesis, then, as an exercise in extended reflection, is concerned with freeing myself from the prejudicial reading of my own practice, and the from the limiting perspective of custom and convention.
While I think I am justified in suggesting that this dissertation has some conversational features, it lacks, of necessity, the interlocutionary dimension of the face-to-face encounter. But just as in Plato’s writing, dialogue is, in essence, a genre, so, too, in this thesis, conversation is a discursive genre, in which the parts are organised into a shape, based on the movement of question and answer, in which the roles of speaker and hearer (writer and reader, I and You) are alternated, and where the focus is on both the propositional content and the affective content of the communication, as it is in all I-Thou relationships. Thus, I produce written accounts and, then, in further written accounts, I seek to interrogate and interpret them – I seek to ‘read’ them. But is this mere wishful thinking? Is it really possible to dialogue with the self? Gadamer’s work, in the words of Steven Crowell, emphasises “the dialogical moments in text interpretation.” (48) For Gadamer, a text works as a partner in a conversation constituted by the reader’s questioning of the text. The text is a ‘voice’ in the conversation:

A conversation is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus it is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says. (...)

All this, which characterises the situation of two people understanding each other in conversation, has its hermeneutical application where we are concerned with the understanding of texts. (49)

Paul Ricoeur, on the other hand, emphasises the difference between writing and reading and, what he calls the speaking-answering situation. (50) For him, the reading of a text lacks the quality of exchange that is evident between a speaker and his/her listener. Hearing, however, for Gadamer, represents the kind of openness that
a reader must bring to a text if he/she is going to enter into a meaningful relation with what is read. (51) It is this relation, this conversation, that constitutes interpretation. Interpretation arises from the interplay of text and reader, the I and the You. This interplay is, however, of a narrow and limited kind. It is an interplay directed at establishing meaning, not an interplay directed at establishing and sustaining the relation between those who speak with each other. In Gadamer, as I have previously indicated, it is the pursuit of meaning through dialogue that is of interest, not the relation between those who converse. Thus, the ethics of discourse are subordinated to the logic of discourse. Notwithstanding this, the establishment of reading as a paradigm of interpretation allied to the description of reading as dialogue are helpful in helping us to conceptualise the nature of reflection and enquiry.

In reflective practice, the text becomes the voice of the ‘self’ and the interrogative reading becomes the voice of the ‘other’. Here, Lacan’s view of reading is helpful: “It is obvious that in analytic discourse, what is at stake is nothing other than what can be read; what can be read beyond what the subject has been incited to say.” (52) In reading beyond what the self has been incited to say, we detect the difference of the self from the self. We detect the otherness of the self from itself. And this is the aim of an analytical reading by a practitioner of the texts he/she has produced. In attempting to encounter the otherness of our subjective reports, through an interrogative process, we put ourselves at risk; we bracket our assumptions, in so far as we can, and submit ourselves to the force of the movement of question and answer, to the crossover of voices – the voices of narrative and argument, the voices of reflection and interrogation. Of course, there are limitations to the analogy of reading as dialogue. It is, after all, only the reader, the other, who can raise questions of the
text, the self. However, the texts we generate in answer to the questions posed in our reading can, in their turn, be subject to interrogation and generate further texts. Thus the process, like face-to-face dialogue, is subject to renewal and extension by virtue of the next question, by virtue of the writer’s (speaker’s/self’s) willingness to turn reader (listener/other). If we can attend to the texts of the self with the attitude of the other, then our own texts may become revelatory and surprising. However, our own texts may provide only as many surprises as we are prepared to allow them. There is no guarantee that we will view our own work through the eyes of the other, bracket our assumptions and prejudices to a sufficient degree to allow us to go beyond what we have been incited to say, in the first instance. And the purpose of going beyond is to make the self self-aware, so that the self can learn both what it knows and what it ignores. In reflective practice, we seek to reveal our self as other so that we can welcome the stranger within and learn to live in creative harmony with our otherness, with our difference from ourselves. Steven Crowell, paraphrasing Levinas, says: “Dialogue … is born in a “traumatism of astonishment,” in the desire for instruction in the presence of the “absolutely foreign”. (53) For Felman, reading that is attentive and open can interpret a text beyond the limits and limitations of its own awareness, thereby revealing what, otherwise, might have remained hidden. (54)

There is a danger that this descriptive account of the dialogue of the reflective practitioner with him/her self may seem isolating and narcissistic. However, the self-dialogue that lies at the heart of reflective practice is a public enacting of the interior dialogue that we all pursue, which, in its turn, is often the anticipation of a public performance directed towards some real or projected Other. I think of the dialogue of the reflective practitioner in the same way that Stephen Tyler views the Renaissance
version of dialogue. According to him, dialogue was understood in terms of the structure of thought itself:

Thought was simply the inner from of the outer dialog, any civilised person engaged in thinking was doing within himself the same thing two civilised persons would do in external dialogue. There is here no separation between inner and outer discourse. They are only different loci of the same activity ... thinking is not an activity separating one from another but is the continuation in another place of a public communion with dialogical others ... The art of talking and the art of thinking were the same logic, not as the mono-logic of deduction and syllogism, assertion, and statement, but as a dialogic of e-duction, discourse, and question and answer. (55)

I am not sure where the foregoing leaves me. And I feel dispirited that the same basic questions return in my work, and the answers seem as contingent as ever. Perhaps, though, this is in the nature of dialogue and dialogic enquiry. Perhaps, at this moment I have reached the point of uncertainty, the necessary aпорia, which opens up a reflective space and which prepares the way for the next exchange and criss-crossing of voices and opinions, questions and answers, repetitions. For dialogue is surely iterative, characterised by a quality of differential repetition, so that familiar questions will be revisited and reformulated and re-considered. (56) Just as understanding and moments of insight are iterative, temporal and, therefore, temporary – subject to loss and forgetting. And the dialogic renewal of old questions, like the recollection of previous moments of understanding, has a refractive effect, so that we remember that we have considered these things before, but the revisiting is, somehow, novel. I think this is a view that keeps to the spirit of the Platonic dialogues:

Plato’s definitions of dialogue, like the process of the dialogues as a whole, are neither systematic nor conclusive. On many matters Socrates contradicts himself within and across dialogues, further exemplifying the notion of dialogues as crossing and blending voices rather than as settling arguments, as evolving co-knowledge rather than as the ‘testing of propositions’ ~ Aristotle’s
definition of dialectic. The dialogues are atemporal; within and across
dialogues the 'same' question recurs, and each time it has a different force and
a different answer depending on context. 'Where we have gotten to', in
Socrates' recapitulations, is nearly always a subtle version of 'back to where
we started', a return that in the most shining cases brings with it an improved,
but never final understanding. (57)

And I take comfort.
Notes


5. This formulation of the congeniality of an argument is modelled on Frank Kermode, Forms of Attention (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) p. 87.


7. The proposition that education is an effect of community comes from Britton, (1994), op. cit., p. 262.


11. Ibid., p.70.

12. Ibid., p. 72

13. Ibid., p.71.

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<td>17.</td>
<td>Ibid., p. 76.</td>
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<td>Reed &amp; Johnson (1999), op. cit., p. 79.</td>
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32. Ibid., p. 88.


36. Ibid., p. 195.

37. Ibid., p.206.

38. Burbules (1993), op. cit., p. 34.

39. See Freire (1972a), op. cit.


43. Ibid., p 489.

44. Ibid., p. 331


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<td>52</td>
<td>Quoted in Felman (1987), op. cit., p. 21</td>
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<td>Crowell (1990), op. cit., p. 356.</td>
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<td>Felman (1987), op. cit., p. 15.</td>
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<td>Tyler (1990), op. cit., p. 293.</td>
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<td>Tullio Maranhao has some intriguing but frustratingly brief comments to make on repetition, in his introduction to The Interpretation of Dialogue (1990), op. cit., pp 11-12.</td>
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Chapter Seven.

Reading and Reporting Practice - Talking With Colleagues: So Many Reports, So Many Questions.

So many reports
So many questions

Bertolt Brecht
from 'Questions from a Worker who Reads' (1)

'The lure of all texts lies in a revelation, of things veiled coming to be unveiled.' (2)

Here is an account of my work supporting colleagues who undertook action research projects in the course of the academic year 1993/1994. Just as in my reading of my report on working with students in their friendship groups, my reading of this report evokes a counter narrative. And, perhaps, the lessons learned from Lacan on how to read with an attentiveness to the radical otherness of texts are the most important lessons for practitioners who want to be both reflective and reflexive in their practice, including the practice of reading itself.

This report/story of my work with colleagues was originally written during May of 1994. The questions and reflections, which punctuate it, and the extended reflection which follows it, were initially written over June and July 1997, during a time of enormous political tension in Northern Ireland. The story of the Troubles finds its way into my thoughts. What is repressed returns. For years, I have argued against the Republican position. Now, in the most unlikely place, the political views I have consciously suppressed surface.

I write these glosses and I am written by them. I am both producer and product.
Where, then, is my freedom? In interrogating how I am formed by the words I use
and employing my freedom to resist any over-determination.

Here is my report, interrupted, punctuated by my questions. Those questions pursued in the afterword.


This report is an attempt to tell the story of my work in supporting action researchers in Firhouse Community College, in the 1993/1994 academic year. This support role was undertaken at the invitation of Marino Institute of Education. The report is a straightforward account, from my point-of-view. I haven't sought the views of the action researchers themselves, or the principal or vice-principal, on the effectiveness or otherwise of my work. (3) Nor have I sought the views of Gerry Gordon of Marino, who supported my work in the school. When the action research projects are completed, it is my intention to elicit the views of researchers on the role of the support person, and how, in their view, this role might be extended or developed, and to discuss the role with the school management. I see this report as a contribution to the on-going review and development of the action research model of professional practice and development being undertaken by Marino Institute of Education. It is my opening statement in a dialogue that I hope will continue over the next couple of months.

(Is a story ever straightforward? Is a personal account ever straightforward? Stories textualise experience. The making of the text is itself a form of interpretation, a meaning-making and generative activity. There is rarely a one-to-one relationship between our personal accounts and the events they describe. Many factors intervene between the event and the account. And the 'I'
who writes the story is both active and passive, subject and object, inscribing and scripted. I write as a researcher, employing a language already in existence, a research langue. But the parole is mine. And the text I create is part of my own formation, governed by my self-conception and my self-desire; governed by my understanding and assumptions; governed by my moral purpose; governed by my desire to create a well-rounded tale.

And the text I write is then read, as I am trying to read it now. And this reading leads to further writing. This surely is the essence of critical hermeneutics – the textualisation of experience; the reading of that text; the further writing that constitutes the reading and which establishes the possibility of further reading. Understanding is the dialogic process of moving between reading and writing. And this understanding, this search for awareness, is intended to foster deliberative action - praxis – in the turning from this textual dialogue to life. (4)

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"It is my intention to elicit the views of researchers"

How evident is the vulnerability of future aspirations, when viewed retrospectively; the impossibility of commanding the future; the necessary idealism of future orientations. We revisit the past with a hope of creating a better future but school is not an institution that allows for the easy implementation of considered planning. School is an institution in which the present has a force that the future cannot command. In my action research notebook, for 1996/1997, I have written:
"Teachers' Complaints are coming in faster than I have the time to deal with them. My interventions (with students) are not having long term results." (5)

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Who, I wonder, is the addressee, the imaginary 'You' of this report? How does language change when we imagine the 'You' of our conversation? How do we imagine ourselves according to the other whom we address? What is the source of my anxiety in this re-reading? The unknown 'You' who will read this revisited story? The Professor, the One-Presumed-to-Know? Is the anxiety that the writing will not live up to some indefinable standard? Will not be strong? The question of judgement. The question of a judicial gaze, invested with the power to pass this thesis as valid knowledge. The same power vested in me as teacher. The indignation of some students when I throw the issue of judgement back to them. The shadow of an official reader constrains the writing of the text. As I write, I try, unconsciously, to anticipate the discourse of the other)

The report is, essentially, a chronological account, though I have sought to indicate the primary concern that governed my practice during particular stages of the project.

(Why is it chronological? Because, I suspect, a chronological narrative organises events, and events can be described with reasonable confidence. It is not too problematic to describe a practice. In this case, the practice of educational conversations. It is more difficult to theorise on the subject. Narratives tell stories. They have a reassuring structure - a beginning, middle and end. But the interest lies in the gaps and discontinuities that every narrative seeks
to close, to hide, because all narratives drive towards completion, closure, just as researchers strive to bring their projects to a conclusion, an end. A false end? A fiction? Can I bring my work to a close? Not really, for it starts in medias res and will end likewise. In these enquiries I hope to go beyond the present moment of my understanding and even that may involve a return to where I started. Disappointment is an inherent part of interpretation, for the inexhaustible plurality of texts means that every reading is provisional and contingent, temporal and limited. Frank Kermode reminds himself that he must “resist the illusion that what I am saying can have any permanent rightness or value.” (6). I open my experiences to apprehension and interpretation by translating them into texts. However, the act of translation, however permanent and unchanging the stories I create, ensures that my reading will never be singular. For my readings, like my understanding, are always temporal and restless. And for every story I create, there is another radically different one that my reading seeks out.

To create a text of a personal experience is to work against the effect of time; to work to rescue experience from loss and forgetting. A text, this text, creates a permanent trace of the original experience and gives a coherence to personal time and self-identity. Yet, paradoxically, every text is marked by absence, omission and forgetfulness as much as by presence, inclusion and remembrance. And each time we read or interrogate a text, in a critical manner, we look to uncover some of its many and varied absences and gaps.

As Walter Benjamin reminds us, every story borrows its authority
from death, even as it works against the effect of death, loss and amnesia. (7) So our readings must be alert and seek to rescue texts from their own forgetfulness and blindness. Our readings must strive to be 'uncanny'. For, as Socrates tells Meno, learning is remembering. Thus, as I have tried to do in re-reading my accounts/texts of personal experience, presented in earlier chapters, I must seek the otherness of this account of my work with colleagues. The effect of uncovering what is hidden, in our personal accounts, is, I think, redemptive and restorative. In the eloquent words of McLaren and da Silva, a revelatory reading hastens “the flight of repressed thought from the threshold of the unconscious to the progressively enlarged horizons of insight.” (8)


When I spoke with the principal of the college, Michael Geaney, on acting as a supporter of action researchers, he was supportive and enthusiastic about the idea. At the first staff meeting of the year, in September, 1993, I was invited, by the principal, to give an outline of the action research project I had undertaken with my colleague, Pat Corcoran, during the academic year of 1992/1993. I spoke for about ten minutes, giving a brief outline of the project on friendship groups, and stated the value I saw in action research for professional self-development. I spoke of the role of Marino Institute of Education, and mentioned the possibility of university accreditation for any of my colleagues who might be interested in undertaking research. I offered to give people more information on request.

(This passage reveals the writer’s need (my need) to place the story.)
the discourse, the practice, the action enquiry, within an institutional setting; it reveals the wish for validation, respectability. Marino Institute of Education. The University of Glamorgan. The same need/wish/desire out of which this gloss is written. The need in a teacher to have his/her claim to knowledge verified? The demand by a prospective employer that you produce evidence of your degree and teaching diploma, to show that you are in possession of knowledge and have been accredited for this possession.

Now I want to be accredited for saying that I am not in possession of knowledge and wish to possess a title for divesting myself of knowledge! I want a title for saying that the only conclusion is that there is no conclusion, that the task is interminable, that education is an unceasing practice. Unless, of course, I abandon being an educator.)

At the end of September, I was one of a panel of teachers from schools under the administration of the County Dublin Vocational Education Committee, who addressed all the teachers in the county, at a seminar organised by the Psychological Support Service.

Following both of these presentations, a number of teachers in the school spoke to me about possible projects. Some were interested in doing formal projects, through Marino, others were interested in using the action research methods to address an issue or a problem, without going through any official reporting of the project.

Most of the discussions with colleagues took place in the staffroom at breaktime, or over a cup of tea, during free periods. For the most part, I told people about the
project on friendship groups and spoke of the benefits I had derived from the experience. For those who were interested, I gave copies of material on action research, made available to me by Marino Institute of Education, which I had found useful.

(The word 'official' gives me pause for thought. It is associated with actions which have been sanctioned by a controlling or governmental authority. The appearance of the word indicates, I think, the extent to which school is theorised as a site of official control, or the extent to which I have taken on board that theorisation. The reluctance of some colleagues to report their practice may suggest their fear of subjecting themselves to the gaze of the governing authority, just as students are often reluctant to say too much in the presence of a teacher. The governing authority has the power to validate what counts as education in schools, and the power to sanction activities or practices deemed uneducational. The governing authority is disciplinary, in both the epistemological and the repressive senses of the word.

Of course, the reluctance to make public may stem from other causes. At times it appears that the culture of the staff-room is inimical to the sharing of practice, to the idea of the teacher as learner. Is the culture of teacher learning a threat to the knowledge claims of the teaching profession? By telling stories of their teaching, by becoming, in Dewey's phrase, "scholars of their own consciousness", do teachers risk losing the professional respect of their colleagues? (9))

At a staff meeting, on November 1st, I was given a half-hour slot to organise a
meeting for anyone interested in action research. Six people came to the meeting, and I went through the action research framework.

By the beginning of November, I felt that a sufficient awareness of action research had been created in the staff to enable a number of projects to proceed successfully. In all, there were five projects, including my own. Apart from myself, the teachers involved in the projects were: Mary Bourke & Carmel Boyle; Patricia Carey; Peter Caulwell; Joan Mulligan & Zita O'Sullivan.

(The naming of names. The question of identity. The issue of confidentiality. For me, there is something demeaning in not granting people their identities. I think there is an ethical question to be answered concerning the emptiness of the identities that many researchers give to their subjects. I don’t want to deprive my co-workers of their identities, or present them as evidence, in the case that I am making. Of course, it is more than the naming of names. I strive to respect the wishes of my co-conversationalists with regard to confidentiality and anonymity. I want to avoid, however, the adoption of an ‘I-It’ attitude in my work, avoid the unnecessary objectification of the subjects of my research. On the contrary, I want my practice to be characterised by an ‘I-You’ attitude, and the ethics that this implies – an ethics of concern, respect and appreciation, to paraphrase Burbules. (10) I want my practice to be intersubjective. In striving to meet the other as a ‘You’, I lay the foundations for encountering myself as an ‘I’. )
How Can I Support my Colleagues in Undertaking their Projects?

In the first week of November, I spoke to each of the participant action researchers. The conversation with Joan Mulligan centred on the objectives of the project for herself, the students and the parents. (At this early point in the year, Zita O'Sullivan was acting as a critical friend to Joan, but, as the year went on, Zita conducted a project that paralleled the one undertaken by Joan.)

(I didn’t know the object of Joan’s enquiries. I was asking real questions, not the closed questions of much classroom talk. The answers, developed through the conversation, were the outcome of the conversation. Again and again, this notion of conversation as a means of generating knowledge. Why have I not seen it before? This thesis is, in essence, a series of essays in generating knowledge, through a dialogic process. And dialogue, which contains within itself the possibility of insight and encounter, is an expression of hope. (11))

With Patricia Carey, the conversation addressed the amount of extra work, beyond the preparation and teaching of classes, demanded by the action research approach. I made the case that the project was simply a reflection on one’s practice, and did not demand any more additional work than that of journalling.

(I wonder about the phraseology, “I made the case.” Does it suggest that I adopted the role of a sceptical, adjudicative listener, someone who must be persuaded of the validity, truthfulness of the other’s words? Did I practise the privileged listening of the teacher, assuming the role of the official adjudicator of what counts as knowledge? Or did I engage in an exchange of ideas? I am not sure.
Reading Practice

Reports & Questions

Mc Dermott

and my action research notebook sheds no light on the nature of the exchange between us. Yet, in this phrase, I read a trace of the defendant/judge figure. I read the teacher as being positioned in the realm of the law.

In the adjudicative discourse of the law, knowledge and the adjudication of knowledge are vested in a professional group, judges. Knowledge, in the discourse of law, is not the outcome of dialogue, but is, in effect, an adjudicating authority granted to professional groups. Knowledge is a social power, exercised through authorised agents.

Is not this the kind of relationship to knowledge and the kind of discourse I have been trying to avoid in my work? Why did I make a case, as I put it? Why did I not reformulate or use my freedom as a participant in a conversation to adopt a different subject position? Is this part of the socialisation of teachers that we accept these kinds of discursive roles? That we are not questioning enough of the idea of knowledge as an adjudicating power? Or am I over-reading my own text? Is this simply evidence (I fall again in the language of the law) that I fear that my own discourse practices are radically other than I desire them to be? Set against this fear is the onus on me, as a reader of my own texts, to read “in ways that are interruptive of taken-for-granted” assumptions. (12) It is better to risk over-reading than to read without interrogating the assumptions that underlie my reports.

Peter Caulwell had, originally, intended to undertake a project focused on the problem of student smoking. Under pressure of work, he decided not to go ahead. Peter was working on an analysis of examination statistics, which he had been asked to do by
the principal. We spoke of the possibility of using the action research framework to present an analysis that might indicate the areas of school policy that could be informed by such data.

(Most of the action researchers with whom I have worked, or conversed, have been involved in reflecting on issues of personal relations within school. It seems that it is the specificity and particularity of our relating to individuals, which is least governed by generalisable rules or imperative norms of conduct, which encourages teachers into thinking beyond the routine and habits of their professional lives. I think it is true that the greatest challenge to any theory is the particularity of individuals. And there must be a constant movement back and forth between theory and concrete individuals, inhabiting particular social contexts.

So many reports, so many questions.)

Mary Bourke and Carmel Boyle had thought out their project, on group dynamics and student integration, in a very clear way. In my initial conversations, I encouraged both of them to keep a journal, and amplify their concerns and the philosophy of school that underlay them.

('Encouraged'. Teaching is essentially a lonely and singular practice, as presently constituted. There is little feedback to teachers from teachers about how they are doing, little interpersonal, professional validation as part of the climate of schools. My colleague, Gerry Jeffers, poses the question:)

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“How do we challenge the model which we have grown up with in schools of ‘the stand-alone-teacher’? I think that many teachers understand their roles along the lines of ‘When I close the doors behind me in the classroom, I am king or queen of the show.’ Such independence can be imprisoning.” (13)

Such isolation can be unnerving. The culture of territorial possession, ‘my classroom,’ and of privacy, ‘closing the door’, leads to a culture of silence, in which teachers do not talk, for the most part, in an open, professional way about the successes and failures of their teaching. Closing the door also raises the idea of being closed to new imaginings, new descriptions of what one’s practice is. Is it possible that teachers are, as a professional group, closed in, fearful? Certainly, it is the emancipatory ambition of this thesis to open my own practices to new possibilities and insights.)

After this first round of meetings, I realised that my own practice as support person needed modification. I was too eager to try to be supportive, and this eagerness took the form of processing, or not processing, information as it was presented to me, and immediately trying to make a suggestion to move the project on. I decided to take a more relaxed approach that was not uncomfortable with muddle and indeterminacy. Indeed, I began to see muddle as an inherent part of working through a concern. It was for the researchers to devise solutions, not the support person. Consequently, I determined to stress the notion of journalling, of being in dialogue with yourself, as a primary part of the project, and invited the researchers to frame their concern as a question. (I also began to appreciate and reflect upon the practice of Una Collins and Jean Mc Niff as supporters of my action research, in 1992/1993.) I began to see the value of letting questions sit for a day or two, and returning to my colleagues if I had anything worthwhile to say.
(Wanting to be the subject-presumed-to-know. The anxiety to justify a pedagogical position as tutor. Going back to an image of education vested in an authoritative (male) figure, replete with knowledge. The question of 'the question' in education. The question asked by the one-who-knows, in order to recreate the subject in the student's mind; the question asked by the students to the one-who-knows, which maintains the relationship of ignorance and knowledge. What quality is there in me, or in any individual teacher, that he/she presumes to know? Why do we feel the need to presume to know? Is this need always accompanied by the suppressed fear that we might not know?

I want to read and think around this topic of the question and the one-who-presumes-to-answer. What attracts me to Gadamer’s work is the way in which he situates the question in the pursuit of learning. For him, in hermeneutics, the question takes priority over the answer. (14) Similarly, in pedagogy, the question takes priority over the answer. There cannot be learning, or the openness that encourages the disposition to learn, without questioning. And because learning, in this model, is predicated on the pursuit of that which is not known, under the impetus of the question, it presumes a dialogic structure, inherent in the nature and movement of questions and answers. Habermas suggests that the structures of question and answer, within language itself, suggest that there is a universal model of communication that is social and intersubjective. (15) But only if questions are open, and if everyone has an opportunity to ask and pursue questions)

By this stage of the year, I was enjoying the role of support person, and made a
request to Brian Gallagher, the Chief Executive Officer of my local educational authority, County Dublin Vocational Educational Committee, to give me a two-hour concession from teaching to develop the role. Brian was sympathetic to the idea, and agreed to the request. I also asked him to consider the idea of having my 'A' post of Responsibility given over to developing action research, on a trial basis, in the 1994/1995 session. He is, currently, considering this request, which has been supported by my principal, Michael Geaney.

(The request was granted for the year. Alas it has come to an end.

The word 'enjoy' in a thesis. Is there room for it? Yes, for Barthes, that hedonist! Are theses necessarily, normally and inevitably serious? Are theses intractably normative? (16)

How similar are the rules of scholarship to the legal code in presenting rules and regulations as natural and necessary, rather than arbitrary and historical, in presenting the formal and the impersonal as a privileged mode of discourse. In questioning rules in a ludic spirit, we expose claims to knowledge that are fixed and determinate. We offer a resistance to totalising and powerful discourses. We create an opening, a space equivalent to the concept of carnival in Bakhtin, a space in which discipline is suspended. We resist. (17) To resist is to be aware of the limits on freedom, to interrogate the constraints that operate upon us, even if these constraints are so embedded in the tradition in which we operate that we fail to see them as constraints. An emancipatory social science, of the kind envisaged by Habermas, questions the limits placed upon communication by powerful interests, including schools and research institutions, limits which govern, or
which seek to govern, the presentation of knowledge by prescribing the
shape, organisation, and language of a research text. (18))

Because of the two-hour concession, I set aside five class periods a week and
informed the action researchers that I was willing to discuss their projects, during any
one of these periods, if they so desired. In the meetings towards the end of
November, I stressed the steps of the action research framework and, again, talked of
the centrality of journalling and of having a critical friend, though I think my
colleagues saw me as fulfilling that role. I also encouraged the idea of triangulation in
validating their claims.

The meeting for support staff in Marino, in November, was very useful. The
discussion with Marian Fitzmaurice, Eileen Brennan and Gerry Gordon gave me an
opportunity to reflect on practice, and to set an agenda for the remainder of the term
till Christmas. My intention was to give the researchers space to get on with their
work, at their own pace, and to give them information as they requested it. I began to
see the image of the support person as an E. M. Forster type – possessing a relaxed
will and a relaxed mode of interacting with the researchers, but holding strong
convictions, and conveying my sense of belief in the value of asking questions of our
practice. I saw the role of the support person as someone who gave professional
support to those teachers who wished to interrogate their own practice, and the values
which underpinned it.

(The Imaginary. How we imagine ourselves. My vanity in the
invocation of the E. M. Forster, that shy, retiring, homosexual who, in
an age of Fascism and totalitarianism, had the courage to speak
publicly in defence of the primacy of personal relationships and to
declare in his celebrated 1938 essay, ‘Credo’, “I hate the idea of
causes and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." (19) The choice of the particular and the personal over the general and the abstract. Heroism by association. Forster is, however, an important figure for me, important in that he championed personal accounts in the public sphere, and understood their importance as forms of resistance to the totalising discourses that dominated public life in Europe in the late Thirties and early Forties. And his rejection of grand theories in favour of a modest championing of the virtues of friendship and tenderness, strike a chord in the context of this study, which conceives pedagogy in relational terms, within the context of Aristotle’s ‘small’ theory of friendship.)

On December 2nd, Gerry Gordon visited the school and met with Peter Caulwell. This visit was very helpful to both Peter and myself. Gerry moved the conversation from the content of Peter’s projects to the vision of education, or the version of life, which informed it. For my part, I came away wanting to encourage all the action researchers to see how their commitment to a change of practice was evidence of their commitment to a version of life informed by their values and beliefs. In speaking to Mary and Carmel, shortly after Gerry’s visit, I spoke of the version of life that I believed informed their project, and, in doing so, I think I held up a mirror to them that gave an affirming reflection of their work.

(Holding Mirrors. The importance of reflecting back the brilliance of your colleagues. The value of describing what people are doing, as you see it. The reluctance that many teachers have to value their work or claim credit for it, or present it as value-filled. One of the aspects of my involvement with action research has been the opportunity to
speak in public about the work of my colleagues. At a symposium celebrating good practice, held at Marino Institute, in May, 1995, I gave an overview of the work of eleven of my colleagues in Firhouse Community College. I concluded my description of the projects with the following remarks:

"The symposium is a celebration of good practice. What I believe is especially worth celebrating, in the projects I have outlined, is the extent to which the projects are driven by educational and personal values, values which promote independence and respect. The projects are driven by a strong sense of idealism in relation to the kind of school, the kinds of classrooms, the kinds of relationships that people want to see formed. This idealism is neither naïve nor unrealistic. The projects are also driven by a clear view of the ways in which teachers, my colleagues, want students to experience learning; and the projects are driven by the teachers' desire to foster the self-esteem of students, and the desire to take themselves seriously as educators.

I think it is remarkable the extent to which the action research accounts reveal what I would call the ethical humanism of teachers – their strong commitment to enlarging their experience and understanding, and the experience and understanding of the students.

I think it is also worth stating that important issues are addressed and important insights gained, with a view to making the school, where we live our professional lives, and which we share with our colleagues and students, a better place. I value the future orientation of action research. (20)

I have said on many occasions throughout this thesis that the reading of my accounts of practice is a search for awareness and insight and is therefore, interpretative in orientation. However, I don't make the distinction between interpretative and emancipatory that is often made in the literature. I love the imagery of enlightenment, of the light
dawning, a favourite metaphor among teachers, for the way in which students experience “breakthroughs in their learning.” (21) I hope that whatever enlightenment I achieve can be put in the service of an emancipatory end, so that my work has a transformatory effect, however small. In this way the interpretative procedures I employ can contribute to my critical practice.)


After Christmas, Gerry Gordon visited the school and we met with Joan Mulligan. I see the value of visits from interested colleagues, from outside the school staff, as developing the idea of a professional audience for the practitioners’ work. On Friday, January 21st, all the action research practitioners were invited to a working lunch, where each project was explained and discussed. This meeting helped the researchers to make the transfer from the informal, chat of most of the conversations on action research in the school, before Christmas, to focussed, professional dialogue.

(As I have been reading these accounts of my practice, I have moved away from the distinction between ‘conversation’ and ‘dialogue’ employed here. Were I writing the above account to-day, on October 30, 1999, I would probably substitute ‘conversation’ for ‘dialogue’, in keeping with the arguments I make in chapter four of this dissertation.)

As part of the formalising process, the researchers agreed to my suggestion that a summary of projects could be included in the weekly staff information sheet.
distributed to all the teachers in the school. I saw this as the beginning of the process of making public the research we are undertaking.

By this stage in the year, I was seeing the role of the support person, in the school setting, as someone who helps to create a climate within which professional dialogue may take place, through which dialogue practitioners may become self-reflective, and develop their understanding of their own practice and, hence, move their projects forward.

(The words ‘community’, ‘understanding’, ‘dialogue’. As I write this paragraph, on the 4th of July, 1997, the new Northern Ireland Secretary, Mo Mowlam, is due to announce her decision on the request by the Portadown Orange Lodges to parade from the church at Drumcree down the Garvaghy Road. There has been much debate on the issue. Today, I heard a radio discussion on R.T.E., chaired by Rodney Rice. There was a representative of the SDLP, the Women’s Alliance and the Orange Order. The terms ‘dialogue’, ‘understanding’, ‘community’ were used by all speakers. Yet, there was no agreement on the nature of the problem; no agreement on what the situation was that they wish to resolve; no dialogue. Why? I don’t know. I think because the reality that each described was so mediated by their respective cultural and political points-of-view, that they did not know what the other was talking about. The spokesperson for the Women’s Alliance spoke of trying to understand the subject position of those who differed from you. Is that where real dialogue lies? In listening attentively to what the other is saying and asking questions? Is this what is involved in the process? The ‘You’ helps the ‘I’ to understand that what the ‘I’ says is always more, and/or different,
from what the ‘I’ thinks it means. And likewise when the ‘I’ becomes the ‘You’. The listening, the questioning, the reflection, the exchange of subject positions must always precede understanding? And the search for understanding, within a dialogic relationship, involves risk: the risk involved in hazarding your position and perspective in an attempt to see things from the perspective of the other. As Crowell, summarising Gadamer, expresses it, dialogue involves “the symmetrical movement toward a fusion of horizons between reciprocally self-effacing participants who ‘risk’ inherited prejudices within a common interrogative orientation toward the truth.” (23) In the world of Northern Ireland, many participants, it seems cannot risk their inherited prejudices.

Is this relevant to the way staff meetings turn out? Is a failure to understand the other what inevitably happens when participants talk as knowing subjects? In April 1997, at a weekly meeting of the principal, the deputy-principal and the year heads, we discussed the outcome of staff workshops on the promotion of the school in the local community. For the second year in a row, the numbers of students applying to the school has fallen by circa 20%. The minutes of the meeting, recorded by the principal, read, “A heated discussion took place.” My contribution to the meeting was as heated as anyone else’s. There was a clear division among those present. Some believed the school to be disordered and the students disrespectful; others believed the school to be ordered and the students respectful. Discipline and the behaviour of students were at issue. And there was clearly no agreement on the ‘reality’ that we were attempting to describe. I did not recognise the school in the descriptions some of
my colleagues gave of it; they did not recognise my description of the school. We could not see or were not prepared to see, what the other was talking about. We were not prepared to put our prejudices at risk. Illustrative anecdotes provided examples and counterexamples to the opposing versions of school life. In one anecdote a student's behaviour was rude and threatening to a teacher. In another, a student's behaviour was helpful and respectful. Each anecdote/example was used as an index of school culture and the general relationship between teachers and students. The adversarial nature of the communication between the opposing points-of-view did little to allow us to explore the issue. Once the lines of opposition were established, the communication was about defending the line. This was communication as play or war, in which defence and attack were the moves which structured the communication. And it may be, as Gadamer suggest in his analysis of play, that I did not argue from a position of self-possession but was, in fact, caught up in the argument. (24) The arguments played me, rather than I played the argument. Undoubtedly, there can be an excitement and a release in losing oneself in play, and a similar range of emotions may be experienced in losing oneself in argument. But what is lost in striving to win an argument, in asserting my point-of-view over that of another? For Deborah Tannen, what is lost is the possibility of a new perspective and the achievement of insight. (25) The desire to win an argument closes down possibility. Noddings suggests that the masculine principle, logos, which she characterises as detached and logical, needs to be counteracted by a feminine principle, eros, which she characterises as receptive, responsive and relational. (26) For her, the concept of relation carries the implication of care and concern.
And yet there was a relation between us, as we argued, a relation that allowed the argument to proceed, to move back-and-forth, even as we competed to win. But it was not a relation of concern and care.

So, how do you characterise the relation between people who oppose each other in disputatious conversation? How revealing are the metaphors of play or combat? How adequate are they in describing the dynamics of motive that exist between participants in a heated discussion? To what degree is an argument, a heated discussion, about an issue and to what degree is it about the relationship between those who argue? To what extent, if any, can argument be assimilated to the erotic? (27) Gill Plummer and Gwyn Edwards, in a conversation about conversation, speak of a ‘seductive voice’, and about conversations which ‘dry up’ or which are no more than ‘stroking’.

(28) The sexual undertone in their language reminds me of the embodied, relational nature of the face-to-face (body-to-body?) encounter. How much is the excitement of some arguments related to the desire to seduce or provoke? The desire to dominate or submit? How do we engage in discussion in such a way that we might be encouraged to renew the relationship? To what extent is the invitation to discuss bound up with emotions and desires evoked in us by the other? What are the emotions and desire which attend our conflictual relations? What influence do these have on the way we address each other in discussion? And what about the practice of talking? Can argument be assimilated to the aesthetic? How does style bear upon the establishment and maintenance of communicative relationships? What is the relationship between style and self-assertion?
The practice of conversation with colleagues. There is a radical difference between these heated discussions and the collaborative talk of my work with colleagues in the action research projects. This is a central issue in relation to my practice. It lends itself to an action research question, or a series of questions, of the kind discussed by Whitehead. (29) How can I improve my practice in discussing school and policy issues with my colleagues, so as to create a sense of collaboration? How can I improve my discourse practice to avoid any unnecessary closure of the discussion. How can I improve my discourse practices so that there is a mixing and exchange of subject positions? How can I practise and help to create peaceable speech? How can I express concern for my colleagues as I express convictions that are not shared by them?

Gadamer argues that in enquiry it is the question which takes priority, and, as a consequence, the theories, explanations or insights we generate will always be relative to the question which initiated our exploration. This thesis attempts to pursue some of the questions which strike me with the force of urgency, none more so than those pertaining to practice. It is a similar kind of urgency and a similar recognition of the priority of the question, which animates Whitehead’s work.

It is the destructive, closed, aggressive discussions that have taken place between staff members, discussions in which I have participated, which are brought to mind by my account of the positive work of the action research projects. These heated discussions are like counter
memories or subjugated knowledge, shadowing my account of my work with colleagues on their action research projects.

In a conversation following the project on friendship groups, I spoke of the work of a year head in the following way:

As year head, a great deal of time is spent mediating between teachers and students. You are constantly attempting to set an agenda for the conduct of the year and seeking the co-operation of both teachers and students in implementing it. The agenda I set caused some animated discussion and, on occasions, conflict. (30)

One conflict with some members of staff arose out of my work with the sixth year students on the friendship groupings. Having worked to establish relationships, which were not bound by institutional roles and which sought to minimise the radical otherness of the students, a small number of students spoke of their difficulties in attending the obligatory classes in Religious Education, which they saw as essentially confessional, taught as they were by Roman Catholic teachers, under the jurisdiction of the Dublin Archdiocese. I supported their right to absent themselves from class. Without doubt, my action caused dismay and upset to some my colleagues, who interpreted my behaviour as a betrayal of collegiate loyalty. (31)

How do you make conflict a nurturing process? How do you maintain an oppositional stance, an attitude of critical interrogation, without hurting colleagues? How do you open up openings? Action research, in schools and in universities, constitutes a challenge to existing hierarchies, to existing power bases, to existing claims to knowledge.
What are the ethical safeguards that the action researcher must reflectively and self-reflexively employ to ensure that this opposition does not hurt colleagues unnecessarily? How do I see that each of those whom I oppose is also an ‘I’?

Part of the answer to the question, ‘How can I improve my practice’ can be found in the model of psychoanalysis, conceived by Lacan. We can begin, by leaving aside our histories, the issues and debates we have fought over, the history of power in the institution; we can begin conversations as if for the first time. Often it is the history of prior encounters that dictate present responses. We allow ourselves to be formed by habit, routine or history.

Real progress begins with the admittance of not knowing, and the putting at risk of the self; involved in this, for there is a radical potential in not being sure Felman quotes Lacan: “As Plato pointed out long ago, it is not at all necessary that the poet know what he is doing; in fact, it is preferable that he does not know.” (32) More recently, Jacques Derrida observed, “When I don’t know what to do, this is not the negative condition of decision. It is rather the possibility of a decision.” (33)

Although my action research notebook for 1996/1997 was largely concerned with the conversations I had with individual students, time and again, it was the question of conflict with colleagues which I reflected on:

Students’ right of reply (to a teacher’s complaint) is a right. The necessity of a colleague going to another (about the
students’ version of events) is a necessity. (34)


(What prevents a good school coming into being?) History of fifteen years. Cannot lay that aside. (...) Key incidents. Appointments. Jealousies. Feelings of being ignored. Developed habits and routines, including habits of thought and ways of perceiving people. (...) The attribution of motives to individuals.

Staff Council is the forum where much of the prejudice and history of the school is replayed. Not an open meeting of open minds as much as the meeting of closed minds? (...)

(What teachers) need are self-sustaining, self-affirming relationships. Need to love the source.

(As a teacher) you must seek out the people who increase you; who expect high standards from you; who will be critical in a generous way. (35)

In voicing different perspectives on school, on what is important, on what is problematic, there will be disagreements. (...) There will be tension.

The key is to dispute without becoming bitter, without allowing the differences to become disabling. Einstein’s comment, ‘No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew.’ (36)

We can see the world anew by seeing it from the perspective of the other. The peaceable conversations of the action research projects of 1993/1994 and 1994/1995 serve to highlight the forcible conversations with others. This question of conflict is so important that I want to give some space to it in the afterword, which follows this report. It is the issue of conflict which most insistently arises for me in this account of my harmonious and productive collaboration with colleagues.)
The visit of Jean Mc Niff and Gerry Gordon, in late January, was an important point in the development of an action research community, within the school. What was most interesting about this meeting was the degree to which the researchers began to identify common elements in each project. The idea of a community of learners was an important concept in four of the projects, and there was a useful sharing of ideas. Jean related the work of teachers in Firhouse to research projects in other schools, and to published accounts of research in educational journals. This linkage made people a little uncomfortable, as they didn’t want to make larger claims for their work than it merited; at the same time, it gave everyone a sense of belonging to a wider community of teachers who were reflecting on their practice and attempting to improve their situation and the situation of their students. Jean emphasised the commitment to making the research public. She quoted Stenhouse’s definition of practitioner research as “systematic enquiry made public”. (37) The presence of Gerry and Jean, in itself, placed the work in Firhouse in a wider scheme of things. This meeting helped to strengthen the resolve of the participants to see the research process through to a finished report.


The meeting on January 29th, 1994, gave me pause for thought. For the first time, I began to see that my work as a supporter had the same ambition, and was driven by the same values, as my project with my third year students. In both cases, I was hoping to create a climate of dialogue, supported by critical reflection, that would, in turn, develop practice. In the meeting with the researchers, I had seen how dialogue, within a community who share the same desire for self-development, could lead to insight and a deepening understanding of both theory and practice. I had seen, in other words, how learning is an effect of community.
Arising from my reflection, I determined to channel my energies into establishing the conditions and the occasions for professional dialogue. The sense of enthusiasm generated by the meeting resulted in my fellow researchers asking me many questions about research methods, and the presentation of reports. I shared my knowledge and, more importantly, the sources of my knowledge. As with my students, I didn’t want to keep for myself the sources of my own empowerment. And, in trying to think out the best way of responding to the requests of my colleagues, I was conscious of how my attempts to develop a new role, as facilitator of the students’ self-directed learning, were related to developing the role of the supporter.

If the support role is, essentially, to create dialogue, then it follows that the supporter must be sensitive to the kind of discourse role he creates for him/herself. I am now very conscious that a supporter cannot dictate or monopolise the conversation with the researcher. Hence, asking the question ‘What is your concern’, is a useful one, as it invites the researcher to take control of the conversation; it invites the researcher to establish its dimensions and set the agenda. This kind of question allows the researcher to speak of his/her interest. It establishes a listening role for the supporter, in the first round of conversation. The question which the supporter might subsequently ask should, I think, be related to issues of clarification, and allow the researcher to express his/her understanding of their own work.

I have found that a useful exchange is one in which the supporter retells the research statement to the researcher. In doing this, I have been able to check my own understanding of what I have previously heard. The retelling also gives the researcher an opportunity to gain an objective view of their work, and change elements of its presentation, if they so desire.
Following the example of Jean McNiff and Gerry Gordon, in their visits to the school, I have tried to relate the researchers’ accounts of their projects to other, similar research. This also serves to give the researchers an objective correlative for their own work. In the same spirit, I have sought to disassemble a research statement and isolate the constituent parts. This procedure gives the researcher a chance to gain a discursive mastery over his/her own research statement, by rejecting or changing the emphasis I give to the component parts, in my breakdown of the statement.

(I think I would probably substitute the words ‘confidence’ and ‘clarity’ for ‘mastery’ in the above paragraph. I think these two paragraphs are important. There is no point in acting as a support person for a colleague without trying to develop discourse practices which are collaborative and which generate further understanding and a disposition towards pursuing the concerns of the researcher. In considering how I can support my colleagues, I seem to return to two basic ideas – the priority of the question in enquiry, and the ethics of friendship that informs the relation between those who enquire together. There is little point in setting out on a collaborative project only to reproduce the traditional relationship of the teacher-presumed-to-know and the student-presumed-to-be-ignorant. Habermas’s notion of an ideal speech situation is relevant here, where there is no formal dominance of the conversation by any participant. As I write, I see how the various reports and projects described in this thesis all return to a central action research question: ‘How can I improve my discourse practices to ensure that all the conversations in which I engage are truly pedagogical?’ Interestingly, Freireprivileged ‘teaching’ over ‘facilitating’ in an address to community educators in Scotland. His remarks are, in some ways, surprising:
I am an educator. I am not a facilitator. The act of teaching is not included in the concept of facilitation. As a teacher, I have things to teach. I don't need to feel ashamed. If a teacher says he is equal, he is incompetent, or trying to get some favours from the students. But being different from the students does not mean being authoritarian. It means being competent in order to get the respect and support of the students. (38)

Underlying these remarks is, I think, a commitment to praxis; a commitment to the ethical and moral basis of teaching, and, perhaps, an urgency about change. Whatever I can teach my colleagues is bound up with my dialogic practices. In these I hope to be competent.)

What I am trying to indicate by these examples is my growing conviction that the role of the supporter demands, in addition to listening skills, the development of discourse skills, which offer subject positions to the researchers. The role of the supporter is to help the researcher further his/her own understanding of their work, through a dialogue in which the researchers' concerns are paramount.

How Can I Encourage Researchers to Conclude Their Work?
March 1994. Towards Reports.

On the last day of February, we held another meeting of all the researchers. Borrowing an idea from Ray O’Neill, who was also supporting teachers in their action research projects, this meeting was held in the staffroom, over lunch. In addition to the researchers, Jean Mc Niff and Gerry Gordon attended from the Marino Institute,
and Jim Connolly and Breda O’Reilly-Hogan, from the V.E.C. Psychological Support Services. A number of staff members from Firhouse joined the meeting to hear about the work being done by their colleagues. (An invitation had been extended to all members of staff). This meeting served to highlight the interest taken in teacher-led research by different sections of the educational community. The importance of making teachers’ accounts of their work available to other teachers was discussed, and Jim and Breda offered to facilitate the circulation of reports, within the thirteen schools in the V.E.C. scheme. This offer, along with the information on accreditation, affirmed the researchers in their work. The matter-of-fact approach taken by Jean in relation to accreditation was refreshing. Her view that teachers should, naturally, be accredited for their work, needed to be stated, as there had been, it seemed to me, a reluctance to seek accreditation for fear it might seem dishonourably self-serving.

My plan for March was to give every encouragement and practical assistance to all the action researchers, in the preparation of their reports. I really believe in the value of reporting the projects. It is through the process of reflecting on one’s practice, in preparing work for public presentation, that the researcher gains an insight into his/her own values. This kind of reflection has to be self-realising and self-affirming. However, examinations, school tours and my work on my classroom project meant that I did not get to see the researchers as often as I had hoped to do. In discussing the shape of reports, I suggested that the researchers might include the prehistory of their project, showing how the concern arose, in addition to the cycles of action and reflection. I stressed the importance of evidence, and of incorporating the voices of students and other teachers or parents, where that arose. I have found it easier to give advice of this kind than to follow it myself!

(Writing this gloss, in October 1999, I am struck by my use of ‘reporting’ and ‘reflecting’ as if these were obvious and clearly understood practices. As I
have re-read my accounts of my action research projects, I have come to
realise that the practices of reporting and reading, have become central
concerns. It is through the reading of my report accounts that much of the
reflection is achieved. Thus, my interest in the lessons in reading to be
learned from Gadamer, and from Felman’s account of Lacan.)

What Benefit Have I Derived from my Work as a Supporter of Action Research?
April 1994.

The contact I have had with my colleagues, through action research, has been very
satisfying. It has provided me with many opportunities to engage in collaborative,
educational dialogue. This dialogue has been between a wide range of people:

a) the teachers who undertook action research projects;

b) a number of teachers who used the action research framework for examining a
concern, without undertaking to report on their practice;

c) Jim Connolly and Breda O’Reilly-Hogan of the V.E.C. Psychological Support
Service;

d) staff members from Marino;

e) fellow supporters – Marian Fitzmaurice and Ray O’Neill, in particular - working
in other schools;

f) Michael Geaney and Gerry Jeffers, principal and deputy-principal of Firhouse
Community College;

g) students who worked with me on my classroom project;

h) teachers of English from schools in the Tallaght area, with whom I shared my
research ideas, at an in-service session, in the Schools-for-Active-Learning
project, sponsored by University College, Maynooth.

I have included this list to give some indication of the way in which the action
research approach does encourage educational dialogue.
Coming towards the end of this year's involvement as an action research support person, I look forward to consolidating the position of action research in the school. I believe that several of the projects will be further developed next year, and a number of teachers have discussed plans for prospective projects. I look forward to contributing to the creation of a truly educational community, in dialogue with itself.

I thank Marino Institute of Education for giving me the opportunity to develop my own professional practice.

(In the following year, 1994/1995, eleven teachers, including myself, were engaged in action research projects, while a further fifteen spoke to me about the idea and expressed an interest in doing some work in the future. The senior post of responsibility, which I hold in the school, was allocated to supporting my colleagues in their work. However, due to changes in the staff, my post of responsibility reverted to year head at the beginning of the 1995/1996 academic year, and I worked with the students in this year group, until my secondment to the In-career Development Unit of the Department of Education & Science, in August 1998.

In February, 1996, Jean Mc Niff and I spoke about the action research projects which had been taken place in Firhouse over three years, and why they had not continued in the 1995/1996 academic year. There were, we agreed, a number of reasons why the projects ran out of steam. Some of these were to do with changes of policy in Marino Institute and the move towards a modular M.A. programme; some to do with the changes in my responsibilities in the school.
The move towards a more formal recognition of action research projects, through the M.A. programme, which I thought would be an agent for promoting action research in the school, worked against it. Most of my colleagues saw the prospect of embarking on a modular programme as too much of an imposition, as an external force which would put them under pressure and be a source of anxiety. Ironically, an initiative, which set out to alleviate teacher anxiety by providing collegiate support, lost much of its energy when teachers felt it becoming a source of anxiety. I think this says much about the way in which some teachers view university courses. I don’t think these colleagues were prepared to hold their work up for examination and have it judged as valid by those for whom the work did not have a vital meaning. Nor were they interested in changing the nature of their work in order that it might meet the formal requirements of university regulations, which they saw as having little relevance to their professional lives. At the same time, a number of those involved in the projects are pursuing further courses or intending to do so. For me, the work with colleagues in school continued, on a day-to-day basis, until my secondment, and my current work with teachers, in the context of in-career development, is informed by the ideas of peaceable speech and conversational pedagogy. Meanwhile, I continue my involvement with the conversational group, set up by Jean Mc Niff, where I have talked out many of the ideas in this thesis.)

Afterword: The Practice of Critique.

I engage in critiquing aspects of school policy and disciplinary routines, in the school
where I teach. How do I fulfil my ethical responsibilities towards my colleagues while maintaining a critical, reflective attitude towards the institutional life we create and sustain each day? How do I practise critique and nurture professional friendship? Freud’s critique of pedagogy might provide a useful starting point for considering the question of critique in a school setting.

Education must find its way between the Scylla of non-interference and the Charbydis of frustration... An optimum must be discovered which will enable the education to achieve the most and damage the least. (39)

In critique, it is important that a balance be struck between necessary critique and the unnecessary hurt of colleagues. As a reflective practitioner I must try to develop a practice of critique that is intellectually honest but considerate of the feelings of others. A practice that is insightful in terms of the institution, its weaknesses and blindness, yet nurturing of the people who work there. A practice that does not contribute to “other people’s loneliness and sense of rejection.” (40) A practice that is defensible on ethical grounds. A practice that honours professional friendship and which contributes towards the creation of a peaceable kingdom, through peaceable speech. A practice which seeks to give effect to collegiate feelings of goodwill. Barthes writes of ‘peaceable speech’. He says:

One of the things that can be expected from a regular meeting together of speakers is quite simply goodwill, that the meeting figure a space of discourse divested of all sense of aggression. (41)

Almost immediately, he puts up a qualification. “Such a divestiture arouses resistances.” Barthes envisages a discourse in which the force of utterances, the violence of language, is made gentle. A discourse in which we do not judge,
subjugate, intimidate, or advocate. Barthes realises that such a discourse is a fanciful creation, an ideal, but one which we can use to identify the degree to which our use of language is characterised by force. It is a variation of the ideal speech situation of Habermas.

And the notion of goodwill, derived from Aristotle’s theory of friendship, is a challenging one for a regular meeting together of speakers. A staff. Colleagues. The challenge is to find where there is a resistance to the creation of peaceable speech and address the resistance.

Barthes suggests that there are three kinds of resistance to peaceable speech. Firstly, there is a cultural resistance, a suspicion of pacifism as a humanist lie. This kind of mistrust might be particularly true in Ireland, given what Nina Witoszek and Patrick Sheeran describe as “the tradition of vernacular hatred” that manifests itself in verbal aggression. (42) There is a psychological resistance, born of a desire for psychic liberation through conflict. Some individuals find a cathartic release in confrontation and the angry use of language. Finally, there is a political resistance to peaceable speech, which does not want to see language robbed of its polemical or advocatory force.

It is in the political area that my own sense of resistance lies. My own sense of opposition. My conviction that an oppositional stance, a critical stance, is imperative if institutions are not to atrophy, if the school where I teach is not to atrophy. Foucault argues that “Justice always must question itself, just as society can exist only by means of the work it does on itself and on its institutions.” (43) The creative and sustaining work an institution does on itself is the work of critique, of self-reflective criticism. Foucault insists that “Real profound changes spring from radical criticisms, from the assertion of refusals, and from steady voices.” (44) I hope that the criticisms
I have voiced have been offered in a creative and sustaining spirit.

Undoubtedly, radical criticism, from within an institution, and its persistent, steady voice is a claim to superior insights and to power and is likely to cause conflict. One of the challenges for me is to practise criticism without reverting to a totally abstract language which not only removes the bodily materiality of those who may be affected by the practice but which also fails to honour emotion. To practise criticism only as an exercise in logic, ignoring and separating the operation of the intellect from the operation of the emotions is, to use a Sartrean phrase, to be in bad faith. It is to succumb to a version of dialogue as debate and disputation, a dialectic version in which the human quality of encounter, of the I-Thou relationship, is replaced by a reductionist logic. And this logic may lead to the closure of dogmatism.

To insist on criticising when no one is listening, or when the conditions which brought forth the criticism no longer apply, is, again in the words of Sartre, a failure “to take stock of the scope of possibility.” (45)

However, the insistence of the steady voice, rehearsing the same criticism under a compulsion to repeat, may itself become institutionalised, forming part of the institution's identity, so that there is no onus on me, as critic to have my criticism understood and no onus on my addressee/s to understand what is being said. In Shklovsky's terms, the practice of criticism must lead to a seeing that moves beyond recognition. And the practice of criticism may itself form part of the political self-interest of the critic, claiming a discursive space that implies the superiority of his/her insights over others and claiming a privilege of his/her practice over another. Every claim to insight that I make is made over another's blindness. However, as a critic, as a reader of practice, I may have my readings shown, in turn, to be blind in some important regard. Nor can it be guaranteed, no matter how well disposed we, my
colleagues and I, are, that collective interrogation of our shared experience will lead
to a unified and agreed reading of that experience. A collective reading of the world
of a school may lead to contradictory and conflicting interpretative accounts of that
world and, consequently, different views on how the world should be transformed to
make it a better place. It is in relation to these differences that the need for peaceable
speech arises, and the need to acknowledge tensions and conflicts.

The practice of criticism must always return upon itself, never settle into one critical
place. Foucault, we are told, admired those who sought to live out Merleau-Ponty’s
urging that one “never consent to be completely at ease with one’s own evidence.”
(46) It is an exhortation that those involved in critique might do well to heed. It is an
exhortation that I have sought to put into effect in my critical readings of my own
accounts. Reflexivity may be understood as the disposition to withhold consent from
one’s own authority.

The kind of speech situation in which there is no unnecessary judgement, subjugation,
intimidation or advocacy, is realisable in many situations as, for example, in many of
the conversations referred to in this report. These kinds of conversation are one in
which not-knowing is as valuable, even more valuable, than knowing, in terms of
generating understanding. These are conversations in which goodwill and concern
govern the pattern of communication. But not all speech situations in school are
characterised or characterisable in relation to friendly enquiry.

For example, the recurring question of ‘discipline’ and its relationship to staff morale,
which finds expression in nearly each of the six staff days held each year in the school
where I teach and, no doubt, in many other schools. On the issue of discipline, there
is dissension, and because there is dissension there is little dialogue as there is no
agreement on the question that needs to be pursued. In the words of Richard Mc
Keon:

The basic problems of dialogue are, first, to find ways to make certain there is agreement concerning what is in question and, second, to understand what is conceived to constitute a satisfactory answer to the question. (47)

Discussions at staff meetings are less "an intersubjective exploration of a problem or question" and more "a struggle over whose voice and perspective will be the dominant one." (48) The failure to agree on the question and the failure to find consensus is not a failure of dialogue. Is it a sign of the institution's failure to address the issue of discipline or to settle on a position for students in the discourse of the school? Or have the debates on discipline become ritualised, part of the institutional structure of the school, expressed in language in which the problem is recognised but not seen? Are the staff meetings themselves an institutional barrier that, as Habermas might express it, systematically distort the attempt to be dialogic?

We, my colleagues and I, can all agree on the need for justice in the institution we create and support the call for a just society, within that institution, but the processes which give effect to justice, and the strategies to be employed in supporting a just society may never find agreement. So, is it self-defeating to believe that there can be any final settling of the question of discipline or final agreement on the position of students?

My asking these questions is not innocent. As teacher, year head, and long-serving member of staff, I have argued that the idea of an absolute settling of the question of discipline is an illusion, and argued for the inclusion of students in the discourse of the school. My practice as a year head seeks to give the students a subject position in the discourse of the school. As year head I mediate between students and the
rules/laws laid down by the teaching staff.

Of course, a major difficulty in this, or any narrative of conflict, is its relationship to reality. There are a plurality of narratives that may be constructed around events. There is the question of how critique fits into the learning/teaching biography of those proffering the critique and those affected by it. How do my values and the intellectual traditions which I admire influence my narration? How does one live within a culture, an institution, a school that is divided and disputatious on key issues? How does one search for peaceable speech in a divided situation? How do I search for peaceable speech as I express my views on discipline? The easy part of theory is to describe the ideal speech situation; the difficult part of practising critique is to find ways round the differences which divide, ways which do justice to the personality, body and intellect of the Other, while, at the same time, revealing the constraints on communication and the institutional habits which cause communication to be distorted.

Klemm and Schweiker in their review of Paul Ricoeur's work suggest that he has sought to describe "the conflicts that vex human beings in the domain of knowing, willing and feeling." (49) These conflicts, for Ricoeur, display the human fallibility of fallen existence. Whatever about a fallen existence, I experience myself as fallible, especially in relation to conflict in the workplace. Ricoeur believed that we are seldom transparent to ourselves. (50) We can only read ourselves in our texts and actions. And though the project of reading the self has a distinguished history, the reading may be subject to illusion and misreading. In this regard, the idea of a critical friend, invoked in action research, is interesting. (51) In the interest of balance and perspective, should I seek as a critical friend, in the school where I teach, somebody who opposes my viewpoint? Should I seek to retain his/her friendship as I engage in critical dialogue?
The difficulty, complexity and variousness of the moral life.

These are not academic questions. These are vital questions. These are ethical questions. How can I practise a form of discourse that is peaceable, self-critical and free from unnecessary constraint, which seeks to effect change, in a culture that is divided and unable to agree on a shared narrative of the differences that divide? How do I develop the practical wisdom required for the practice of peaceable speech? How do I practise critique in a peaceable way that is attentive to the concerns of the other, and his/her well-being? How do I find the practical wisdom to be critical without being destructive? So many questions.

Conclusions. Furtherances. Repetitions.

From a theoretical perspective which, however, is a limited perspective, the debates at staff meetings are struggles in the realm of theory, versions of school life ascribed to by opponents, founded on competing claims to knowledge, constructed from different points of view, informed by different values, driven “by the chaos of our strongest feelings.” (52) Every claim to knowledge, even the claim to not-knowing, is a claim to power. It is a claim made over another claim, in the competitive economy of knowledgeable discourses. Every claim to knowledge is a situated and contingent claim that has a specific resonance in the micro-politics of a school and the matrix of relationships among teachers in a school. There is a world of difference between debate and dialogue, and more so between debate and conversation. It is the difference between holding the line, denouncing the position held by your opponent and swapping sides. It is the difference between stasis and dynamism, between closings and openings, between holding on and letting go.
And so I make a claim, a competitive claim for the superiority of dialogue over debate, and conversation over dialogue. And in the political economy of school, this claim is a will to power.

In a staff which is divided and disputatious, there is much debate, especially at staff meetings, but little dialogue and less conversation. Debate which arises from different, competing perspectives on discipline and the student. Debates which are contentious, polemical, aggressive. There is little inmixing of positions, to echo a phrase from Lacan. (53) There is little willingness to put the self at risk, to engage in carnival. In using the word ‘carnival’, I am thinking of the concept of the ludic imagination. However, as Deborah Tannen reminds us, the Latin for school, ludus, derives more from the military sense of the word – training exercises for war, than from the freer associations of the word ‘play’. (54) The structure of staff meetings, in which contentious issues are often put to a vote, contributes to the \textit{de facto} conceptualisation of discussion as a war game, characterised by a combative series of moves and countermoves, examples and counterexamples, in an effort to win the contest. The procedures, designed presumably to foster participatory decision-making, create a system of binary opposition, creates an ‘us’ and a ‘them’.

Debates on discipline and the place of the student in the institution involve fundamental philosophical questions on human nature and social order. However, these are not only philosophical debates, but are also struggles for status and power within the institution, within the political/discursive economy of the school. The role of year head is not simply a pastoral position; it is a position of power.

The debates at staff meetings on discipline and the students are not instances of peaceable speech. Implicitly, opponents view the other side as failing in some vital
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respects: failing to respect students, failing to discipline students. So, the conversations with colleagues, working on action research projects, are a welcome form of interaction, and point a way forward. A relief from the sympathies/antipathies engendered by staff debate, from the differences which divide; from disputes over propositional content. For, in discussing action research projects, it does not matter what is said. It is the structure of the relationship that is important.

But, of course, I have convictions. I am concerned with making assertions, with the propositional content of my utterances. I am opposed to certain claims to knowledge, especially those which are, in my estimation, absolute and totalising. For some colleagues, the school, like the state, is the source of laws and law making. There is no doubt concerning its legitimacy or its competence to make rules. Crises, such as staff demoralisation, are due to causes such as the incompetence of the law enforcers (principal, deputy-principal, year heads), or a lack in those who are subject to the law (students): a lack of respect; a lack of socialisation; a lack of merit.

Yet, this is a clearly inadequate account of the reality of school. (Just as this abstract account is an inadequate account of the quality of lived lives, of the viewpoint of those I oppose. Ah! There's the rub!) Solutions to problems are seen in the light of the way in which the world is represented. Solutions centre on the need for more rules, more enforcement. Solutions are tendered (tender-ed?!) in a language of reasonableness and self-evident explanation. In psychoanalytical terms, the very 'reasonableness' of the language of the law, its rules, logic, definitions, exhortations, forbiddances, prohibitions, create an illusory order which can never be re-created in the material world. In other words, the very tidiness of the language of law and order, is symbolic of its opposite, the absence of such. There can be no complete mapping of language onto the real. In the interests of law and order, for the greater good, the rule of law will be upheld. That the upholding of the seeming, seamless logic of the discourse of order may result in disorder has to be explained by a lack, not in the
language and the illusion that it creates, in its imaginary order, but in the aberrance of those who do not yield to the language’s logic and beauty.

Today, the 6th of July, 1997, the Chief Constable of the R.U.C. Ronnie Flanagan, has announced that the Orange march is to be allowed down the Garvaghy Road. Residents have been barricaded into their area, effective prisoners in their housing estate, denied the right to protest on the road or the footpaths where the Orange men will parade. Denied the right to go to their church for Sunday Mass, in order that the Orange lodges may parade from a church service at the Church of Ireland church in Drumcree. For the third year in succession. So many reports. So many questions.

There is a crisis in the legitimation of the state in Northern Ireland. The answer, from the state’s perspective, seems to be more policing, more enforcement. There is no reality available to us other than the one mediated by the language in which it is articulated. To critique the point-of-view, you must critique the language in which it is expressed, and which expresses the reality. The language is a determining factor in the reality it voices. That the upholding of the law has led to rioting, disorder, and disarray is attributed by many to the intemperance of the Catholic, nationalist communities, to their failure. It is not a failure of language; it is not a failure of the state; it is a failure in people.

The way we look at the world is governed by the desire we have to see the world in a certain way. Yet the reality may not always or may never correspond with what we want to see. The language of law and order presents a “fantasy, a favoured view of reality”. (55) The state uses a degree of violence or coercion or surplus repression to make the reality correspond to it. That the view of the world, which calls this violence down in support of itself, might be false or fanciful is violently stamped out, if needs be, in the case of the state, and by a surplus repression, in the case of the
school, which attributes the unruliness of the real to some lack in the students rather than to the false and, consequently, repressive gaze of the institution. It is in ordering the world in symbolic terms and persuading us of the possibility of mapping this order onto the real world that language sets up expectations that cannot be met. This is the creative falsity of language.

I know that, in writing this, I am working at the limit of my ability to understand and command the meaning of the words I am using. And yet these questions of law and order, authority and repression are important and central to my concerns as a citizen and as a teacher, and central to the conflicts in which I have been engaged and which I have engaged in. So the effort, the confusion is worth persisting with and returning to. As Socrates teaches us, a state of *aporia* or deep confusion is often essential before a deeper understanding is achieved. And I remind myself of Polanyi's tacit knowledge, reassure myself that “in all cognitive contexts, we know more than we can tell.” (56)

For dialogue to succeed there must be a willingness to acknowledge the possibility of not-knowing. There must be openness to change. In staff meetings, speakers are knowing subjects, putting out a polemical position, vis a vis the law. The situation is similar to the adversarial situation of the court room. There is a position and there are the adherents and the detractors. The challenge is to devise a form of discourse practice that encourages the move from debate to dialogue.

The view taken in relation to the absolute nature of the law is polemical. To cite the law as transcendent and absolute minimises human discretion and uncertainty. From my polemical point of view, this represents the institutionalisation of irrationality in the name of reason. The law becomes a totalising ideology. Knowledge is achieved and expressed in laws. Therefore, debate and discourse is terminable. In this way the
concept of the law is mobilised to limit the discretion of those who are in position to see that laws/rules are put into effect.

The invocation of the law in schools amounts to a declaration of the radical otherness of students, who alone are subject to its writ. The law divides into those who are subject to it and those who are not. Adherents of the law see school in sectarian terms: teachers; students.

My choice to work with individual teachers on problems for which there are no ready-made answers represents a conscious moving away from impasse of staff debates on discipline and the law.

Just as my conversations with students, on the basis of one-who-doesn’t-know, is a political act, which calls into question the authority of the law. This is an oppositional act in the political economy of staff discourse. It opposes those who uphold the law. The radical potential of not-knowing opposes the view that in a society governed by the law, there is only right and wrong, reward and punishment.

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Discourse practices have a meaning in the embedded relationships of the school as an institution: practice as a source of conflict; practice as a source of tension. The view by some of my colleagues that I am not upholding the law. The counter view that because the law is not applicable to teachers, there is a lack of self-criticism and self-reflection in relation to its operation. Can we, my colleagues and I who disagree, practise a form of conversation that corresponds to Habermas’s ‘communicative action’, a form that in the words of Mark Smith “enlightens and connects and that is oriented to mutual understandings”? (57)
The disputed claim that "Hard cases make bad law". The triumph of the general and the total over the particular, the fragmentary.

The treating of students as citizens-in-formation.

How can we generate a form of professional dialogue that is truly community based? Or will there always be differences between the order that we imagine, the order that exists, and the order that we suppress?

How can we interpret and critique practices in school without invoking the history of past debates and succumbing to the compulsion to repeat? The history of the institution and the antipathies and sympathies generated in the course of this history, may cause colleagues to "unconsciously enact past conflicts and emotions, unwarranted by the current situation and disruptive with respect to the real issues."

Arnett suggests that a true community is a community of memory, one that does not forget its past. In the Christian tradition, there is, what Hans Kellner refers to as an 'anamnestic imperative' – 'Do this in memory of Me' - an imperative that in Ireland is reinforced by the historicist nature of our national identity. In a context where memory of the past influences the way in which we anticipate the future, Nietzsche's advocacy of forgetfulness has an appeal. Institutions with a history of conflict might do well to remember that the human mind, for its own well-being, forgets and represses more than it remembers and conserves. How do we learn to forget what needs to be forgotten?
Can professional friendship survive in a situation of conflict? Professional friendship, like all friendship, involves a commitment and a concern for the well-being of a colleague. Arnett denounces what he refers to “a tyranny of intimacy”. (62) But even in the absence of personal liking, can colleagues commit themselves to civil and peaceable conversation, informed by goodwill? Is there a moral onus on us to make this commitment?

Perhaps, this is simply a Kantian version of ethics - the good lies in action that is not born of natural inclination. However, the form of moral action I have in mind is derived from Aristotle’s theory of friendship and is associated with a conversational form of communication. The conversation of professional friendship may differ from that of the conversation of friends, but only in a matter of degree – it may veer more towards dialogue, towards enquiry based on propositional knowledge, but it will not ignore the relational element, and it will seek to keep the well-being of the other to the fore. And where there are differences, these differences, in the context of professional friendship, will be tested in an ethical manner, in what Foucault, echoing Gadamer, refers to as “the serious play of questions and answers”:

In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal elucidation, the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion. (…) The person asking the questions is merely exercising the right that has been given him: to remain unconvinced, to perceive a contradiction, to require more information, to emphasise different postulate, to point out faulty reasoning, etc. As for the person answering the questions, he too exercises a right that does not go beyond the discussion itself; by the logic of his own discourse, he is tied to what he has said earlier, and by the acceptance of dialogue he is tied to the questioning of the other. Questions and answers depend on a game (…) in which each of the two partners take pains to use only the rights given him by the other and by the accepted form of the dialogue. (63)
Where discussion is conducted under an ethics of reciprocation, which legitimates the presence of the other, each side of an argument will be heard. And it will be heard because each participant affords the other permission and, therefore, authority, to voice his/her argument. In an ethics of reciprocation, in an ethics of professional friendship, our authority is relational and derives from the other. And if this process does not lead to consensus, it may well lead to what has been referred to as 'reasonable disagreement.' (64) And reasonable disagreement may co-exist with professional friendship, such that disagreement is not experienced as a destructive phenomenon, bound up with resentment, anger and hatred.

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In this account of my work with colleagues, as in all the accounts in this thesis, there is a desire to retain/enact the process whereby some new understanding was achieved and the desire for further understanding was generated. The thesis tries to capture the process of becoming insightful. And since life goes on and there are continually new encounters, further encounters, the search for awareness/insight is never completed, never reaches a terminable point. Understanding is a narrative process. We must revisit stories of our experience and, often, when we have gleaned some wisdom/illumination/awareness/insight from the process, the situation has moved on and new confusions await us, new understanding or the recollection of former ones need to be enacted, interminably. And our understanding is expressed in language in which every utterance, every attempt to say or write what we mean may well be characterised by a simultaneous deficiency and exuberance, conveying less and more than it intends. (65)

So, I report and question my reports.
So many reports.
So many questions.
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3. Subsequently, I did seek the views of the teachers involved, and they responded to a short questionnaire which I gave them.

4. This formulation of understanding is adapted Klemm & Schweiker (eds.) (1993), op. cit., 9.


11. For a discussion of dialogue as an expression of hope, see Ibid., p. 40.


22. The staff bulletin was used to update all staff members on the action research projects.


24. Ibid., pp. 91-99.


27. In posing this question, I am mindful of Susan Sontag's claim that Barthes "assimilated intellectual practice itself to the erotic". See Sontag (1993), op. cit., p. xxii.


30. See Mc Niff & Collins (eds.) (1994), op. cit., p. 95

31. Some of the issues which arose from this conflict were subsequently addressed at staff council meetings and a number of changes were introduced.

32. Felman (1987), op. cit., p. 94.


35. Ibid., pp-43-44.


37. For a discussion of research as 'systematic enquiry made public', see McNiff, (1993), op. cit., pp. 41-45.

38. Quoted in Smith (1994), op. cit., p. 31


44. Ibid. p. 268.


50. Ibid., p.8

51. On the idea of a critical friend, see, for example, Mc Niff, (1988), op. cit., pp. 83-84

53. The phrase is "the inmixture of the subjects". It is quoted in Felman (1987), op. cit., p. 61.


61. Ibid., p. 63.


64. The phrase is from John Rawls. It is quoted by Paul Ricoeur in 'Imagination, Testimony and Trust' in Kearney & Dooley (eds.) (1999), op. cit., p. 12.

65. The idea of the simultaneous deficiency and exuberance of language is taken
Chapter Eight

Conclusion: Furtherances, Crossings, Repetitions.

Why have I presented my work like this? What understandings and insights have I achieved? What claims am I making for my work in relation to my own practice as a teacher and as a researcher? What relevance does my work have for other teachers, for other researchers?

These are some of the questions I have in mind as I offer these afterthoughts, these repetitions, crossings and furtherances. (1)

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The work of writing this thesis constitutes a form of praxis. The three accounts of my work in Firhouse Community College relate my efforts in translating my commitment to the idea of an ideal speech situation into practical action. The thesis itself demonstrates my development of a critical practice of reading, and the concomitant development of the theory and practice of pedagogical conversation, through a framework of action research.

Through the writing of this thesis, I have gained access to a practical wisdom that will influence future praxis, both as a teacher and researcher. The central question which informs every chapter is, 'How should I act?' How do I make myself the subject of my own reflection with a view to developing an emancipatory praxis? I believe that my accounts of practice, and my readings of these accounts, have followed an emancipatory trajectory.
In writing this thesis I have opened my own practices to new possibilities and insights. I have acknowledged that understanding is a process, one that is subject to loss and forgetting, so that insight is often a question of remembrance. And, thus, I have endeavoured to remember and to subject my remembrance to critical scrutiny.

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There is, in this thesis, an insistence on the practice of reading, on reading as a form of work. The thesis attempts, in its practice, to transcend the dichotomy between practice and reflection, between the monastic division of work and contemplation, what Roland Barthes refers to as “the false opposition of practical life and contemplative life.” (2)

The thesis moves back and forth between reports and readings of my work. Each reading constitutes a revisiting of a personal account, an interrogatory second or third look. This movement back and forth captures the essence of dialogue – the play of meaning between different points-of-view. Thus, the thesis criss-crosses between question and answer; self and other; the modern and the post-modern; the general and the particular; story and theory; past and future; the familiar and the unfamiliar so that the possibility of insight is kept open and the closure of dogmatism is avoided. And the movement between report and reading, between narrative and commentary, gives access to my practice and to the theorising of that practice through dialogic reflection.

In the writing of the thesis I have sought to monitor and interrogate my procedures, in order that I might submit my own work to the persuasive power of re-description.

On occasions my reading of my practice catches the way in which the language of the
institution is inscribed in my texts, revealing the fact that I am schooled and
disciplined by the institution and its assumptions. In monitoring myself, I have
sought to avoid adopting the monologic form of much thesis writing and the self-
regulatory practices, which contribute to a monologic style of presentation.

In the same spirit of questioning, I have sought to expunge the false certainties in the
codified language that is sometimes used to describe school. In these essays I have
attempted to make a critical self-insertion into the metalanguage of school in order to
restore the relationship between object and subject, mind and heart, which has been
severed in much of the professional and academic discourse on school.

The thesis employs a method of close reading of my practitioner accounts, which has
potential for my own future work and for the work of other self-reflective enquirers.
This critical, close reading examines the assumptions and the presuppositions in my
account of my practice, and interrogates them drawing on models of critical
hermeneutics, literary criticism and psychoanalysis, as represented in the work of
Gadamer, Benjamin and Lacan, among others.

The thesis demonstrates that close reading, and the reflection that accompanies it, is a
means of interrogating and theorising practice, which pursues original accounts
beyond where they initially go. In this regard, the emergence of counter-narratives,
through close reading, is an important source of insight, which will, in turn, contribute
to praxis. In time, this new praxis will be textualised and subjected to close reading.
And so the process will begin again, suggesting that the search for awareness is
interminable.
The counter-narratives and commentaries, which emerge through the close reading of my own accounts, invite me to read beyond what I had been originally incited to say. In these counter-narratives, I detect the difference of my self from itself. And this, I believe, is a proper ambition for all reflective practitioners. In encountering the otherness of my subjective reports, I put myself at risk. I bracket my assumptions, in so far as I can, and submit myself to the force of the movement of question and answer, to the crossover of voices – the voices of narrative and argument, the voices of reflection and interrogation.

The thesis looks to the model of Plato’s Dialogues, where dialogue is both a genre and a means of enquiry. As a genre, in Plato’s model, dialogue is characterised by its variety and betwixt-and-between nature – it is a literary representation, a narrative, a drama, a philosophical enquiry. It is a practice and a representation of practice. The suggestion that Plato’s Dialogues might provide a model for the presentation of practitioner accounts is, I believe, a useful one.

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This thesis seeks to demonstrate how my work in school is motivated by a desire to create a form of communication that allows for the creation of autonomous human beings. It demonstrates my belief in my potential and the potential of my colleagues, students and parents, with whom I work, to bring pedagogical conversation into being. I regard pedagogical conversation as a collaborative form of action, which facilitates the development of autonomous subjects and the development of social relations based on respect and reciprocity. I believe pedagogical conversation has the potential
to cause changes in the way that people relate to each other in school and to contribute to human flourishing, especially in relation to the culture of the staff-room. The reports in this thesis demonstrate that I have worked consciously at forming a co-operative partnership with the students in my class, with the ambition of creating a classroom order based on reason, consensus and equality. I have tried to develop my teaching practices so that they give effect to my respect for the students as independent subjects, responsible for their own formation. I have sought to bring my understanding of critical theory to bear on the classroom situation. Equally I have sought to bring my understanding of action research to bear on my enquiry into my practice. And, in turn, I have sought to develop my understanding of both practice and theory through dialogic reflection.

This thesis is mindful of the body and the heart in its presentation and strives not to empty its discourse of personalness or tenderness. It is informed by a belief that teaching is, primarily, a relation, and the existential bond between teachers and students is an affective one. If this is the case, then conversation, the turning towards the other, combining as it does the criss-crossing and mindfulness of dialogue, with a sense of familiar association, implied in the very word ‘conversation’, is the form of communication best suited to express the pedagogic relation. Habermas argues that a “humane collective life depends on vulnerable forms of innovation-bearing, reciprocal and unforcedly egalitarian everyday communication.” (3) I believe that the conversational practice I have sought to theorise and develop, informed as it is by Aristotle’s concept of friendship, contributes to the creation of a humane, collective life and makes a significant contribution to educational theory and practice.
This thesis strives to retain a sense of the unique specificity of people. As Marx and Engels remind us, “the first premise of all human history is... the existence of living human individuals.” (4) The thesis seeks to keep the specificity and particularity of the teaching situation to the fore, in narrating and reading its accounts. Implicitly, the thesis argues that it is this specificity which encourages me, as a teacher, to think beyond the routine and the habitual in my professional life.

This thesis draws strength from the example of Socrates, Freud and Lacan who saw the potential of teaching resting on its willingness to acknowledge what is not known. Thus, there is an emphasis in the thesis on the teacher as learner. I learned from the example of the student friendship groups in promoting self-esteem. My discourse practices were, and continue to be, influenced by the lesson of the conversation of the girl and her friends who informed me of her pregnancy. Through participating in conversations with these girls I learned, in a conscious way, that knowledge is generated through conversation. I think the work described in chapters three and four is an important counter-narrative to the presentation of student culture in much of the literature on schools.

Within the classroom, the thesis recounts the development of the practice of reading literary genre, both in myself and in my students. Related to this is the development of my practice in reading the genre of personal accounts. My reading, my writing, my classroom practice have all been governed by a commitment to the development of an emancipatory practice.
The thesis expresses, I believe, an important truth about the nature of understanding, and moments of insight – namely, their iterative, temporal and, therefore, temporary quality, which makes both understanding and insight subject to loss and forgetting. And the dialogue through which understanding is pursued is also iterative, characterised by a quality of differential repetition, so that familiar questions are revisited and reformulated and re-considered. And the dialogic renewal of old questions, like the recollection of previous moments of understanding, has a refractive effect, so that we remember that we have considered these things before, but the revisiting is, somehow, novel.

This thesis tries to keep its subject open to possibility by resisting any false sense of closure or completion, and by giving conditional assent to its insights. Therefore, this thesis is not a final say on the subjects it addresses. There is much that I wish to pursue. Can I be critical and oppositional, while practising a form of peaceable speech? Can I will my own freedom and that of my students in conversations with individual students, in the disciplinary context of the school? How do issues of power/knowledge affect the realisation of pedagogical conversations?

Hope, tenderness and friendship are the virtues that pedagogical conversation seeks to express. In writing about the success of a pedagogical form of conversation, in this thesis, I remember a different set of conversations with students. Conversations that were initiated with individual students as part of the disciplinary regime of the school. Conversations with students who were troubled and, often, troubling. Reflecting on a number of these interviews, I recorded the following in my action research notebook:
In my interviews with the students, I am trying to encourage them to see
themselves as historical beings. Aware of the past, seeking to take control of
their present in order to create a better future.

Individuals can make their own history even if they are not in control of the
conditions within which they have to operate.

The effort is to help the students and myself to be more than the conditions
and the situation in which we find ourselves.

To be free is to have responsibility for your actions and to have the
opportunity to live creatively. Economic oppression, familial oppression,
institutional oppression and personal anxiety can reduce the possibilities of
creative freedom.

Each person’s history is the history of the stories we tell ourselves about who
we are and the stories we are told about whom we are. I want the students to
tell their stories of themselves and to find a self-identity that offers hopes of a
brighter future and a self-fulfilment that is creative. (5)

In writing this I was expressing my hope for individual students. My personal desire
to see a student make progress and develop has, of course, to co-exist with the
institution’s desire to have a student who is not a disruptive force in the smooth
running of the school. Is the creation of a subject something which arises from the
play of the system and for the system’s benefit? Is the subject a repressive rather
than a liberating or emancipatory idea? I think not. In creating a conversational space
in which a student may express his/ her subjectivity; in encouraging a student to
review his/ her past and project a better future, pedagogical conversation may allow
the individual to identify his/ her best self and have that self recognised, affirmed and
strengthened. In this respect, pedagogical conversation does more than simply serve
the institution’s need for good order. Every conversation with a student has as its
ultimate goal what Lacan refers to as “the advent of an authentic speech and the
realisation by the subject of his history in relation to a future.” (6) But how to bring
these conversations about? There’s the question.
This thesis expresses my commitment to the creation of situations of dialogue and conversation, in a school setting. Furthermore, the thesis may be read as a response to the challenge posed by Jack Whitehead that action researchers present evidence of the dialogic reflection that leads to the theorising of practice. (7) This thesis is not a report on something that happened elsewhere, an account of a conversation that is completed. On the contrary, it is constitutive of dialogic reflection and emancipatory practice. I do not know where my research will end. In one sense there is no end to conversation, for there is always the next question to be pursued, and the old question to be re-visited. Nor do I want to know, for that would be to close off the possibility of new insights emerging in the process of reporting, questioning and conversing. As Mikhail Bakhtin suggests:

There is neither a first word nor a last word. The contexts of dialogue are without limit. They extend into the deepest past and the most distant future. Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be fully grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue. At any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue’s later course when it will be given new life. For nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival. (8)
Notes


Bibliography


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