

**A practitioner inquiry project to develop an
emerging framework for conversational
consulting through personal and
collaborative inquiry and practice.**

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Abstract

This project is a practitioner inquiry into the practice of a form of organisational consulting that uses conversation as its primary contracting and change process. To provide a backdrop I begin by locating the practice in the management consulting domain, and specifically in an emerging field becoming popularly known as Dialogic Organisation Development. Conversation with the literature opens up the historical and theoretical assumptions that have shaped the field to date.

Using this broad context I outline my consulting practice as an employee of the Office for Public Management Ltd (OPM). My interest in using conversation as a process in consulting relationships is described and my inquiry aims are outlined:

1. To develop my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively.
2. To explore the potential of conversational inquiry approaches to support the development of conversational consulting skills amongst a group of management consultants (including myself).
3. To combine the learning from both individual and collective strands of research to offer management consultants an emerging framework that defines 'Conversational Consulting' more accurately, describes the practice in greater depth and helps them understand some of the ways in which they can develop the necessary skills to practice confidently and effectively.

To support the achievement of these aims I begin by engaging in a conversation with the literature and focus particularly on social constructionist texts. This work reshapes my understanding of the potential of conversational consulting.

I explain my rationale for selecting a participatory action research method called Co-operative inquiry. This is a framework involving consulting colleagues at OPM in a shared inquiry into the role of conversation in our practice. This report describes the inquiry process and how thematic analysis processes are applied to group meeting transcripts. My approach uses the first two inquiry aims as the lens through which I interpret the material. In parallel, I continue my own individual inquiry by maintaining a learning log and engaging in conversation with a client. This material is subject to a similar thematic analysis.

The learning themes identified across all three elements contribute to an emerging framework with recommended activities to support the development of practice. The framework consists of three

main elements, individual consulting practice development, collaborative development and learning with clients. I discuss how my original definition and understanding of conversational consulting has changed as a result of the project. My on-going commitment to inquiry and sharing my learning with others in the field is outlined alongside closing reflections on the experience and personal practice impact of the project.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Title: A practitioner inquiry project to develop an emerging framework for *conversational consulting* through personal and collaborative inquiry and practice.

(Working Definition of Conversational Consulting: A contracted, helping relationship through which people skilled and knowledgeable in conversation as a change process work with clients to create conversations that make a positive difference to businesses/organisations.)

Introduction

This introductory chapter locates my research in the domain of Management Consulting, and specifically but not exclusively, Organisation Development (OD) Consulting theory and practice. The historical context of this type of management activity serves as a backdrop for recent developments in theory and practice which I briefly outline. My own interest in the subject area is explained as is the rationale for a Practitioner-Inquirer project focussing on the development of a framework for Conversational Consulting. In conclusion I outline the report structure. Detailed definitions of terms will be explored in subsequent chapters.

An overview of the history of Management and Organisation Development Consulting

Management Consulting

'How can I improve the performance of my organisation?' is a question asked by all Chief Executives. They, after all, are charged with delivering better shareholder returns and sustaining a competitive advantage in a changing marketplace. The same question is echoed in the public and voluntary sectors where resources are limited by tight budgets whilst demand for more and better services is growing.

The history of management consulting to date has been closely linked to providing answers to the question of achieving improved performance. A generic definition of management consulting reflecting this traditional perspective is offered by Milan Kubr:

‘Management Consulting is an independent professional advisory service assisting managers and organisations to achieve organisational purposes and objectives by solving management and business problems, identifying and seizing new opportunities, enhancing learning and implementing changes.’ (Kubr 2002: 10).

Kubr (2002) then separates consulting activity into two broad domains. Firstly, consulting which offers technical advice on, for example operational processes or accounting systems and secondly consulting which aims to address the human behavioural dimensions of change in organisational contexts. Such a division is of course arbitrary given the interplay between technical processes and human interaction but none the less tends to continue to be reflected in the structure of the management consulting industry. McKinsey & Company, for example, one of the largest and longest established management consulting firms in the world, continues to separate out organisation from strategy and business technology in its offerings to clients (McKinsey and Company 2013).

The focus of this doctorate is on consulting activity that aims to help Chief Executives and other organisational leaders to improve the human aspects of organisational performance. Arguably that really does encompass every aspect of organisational life. However, for my research purposes I will concentrate on a family of management consulting activities that are located in what has become generally known as Organisation Development (OD).

Defining OD could be a thesis in its own right given both what it can encompass and the rapid changes in knowledge and practice it is experiencing. At its simplest OD is ‘the body of knowledge and associated practices that support organisational change’ (Cantore and Cooperrider 2013: 285). Such associated practices can include Coaching, Mentoring, Leadership and Management Development amongst many others. In conventional OD terminology these are described as ‘interventions’ in support of an OD action plan and emerge from an initial diagnostic process between the consultant and the client (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011).

Emergence of Organisation Development

Organisation Development's origin as a distinct consulting discipline goes back to the late 1940's and early 1950's. Richard Beckhard (1969), one of OD's founding fathers, suggests that it was a child of its time. Organisations during the first half of the century up until the end of World War 2 had been concerned to implement scientific approaches to managing production processes and the perspectives and feelings of the workers were considered by and large immaterial. The social mood shifted following the ending of the war and workers increasingly expected to gain some social benefit from participating in organisational life. Managers began to be interested in how to achieve this whilst improving productivity (generally known as the Human Relations approach). They looked for ideas to their management consulting firms who in turn looked to academics in a variety of University departments for ideas. And so OD began to emerge as a new discipline built upon the foundations of management science, psychology, sociology, organisational theory and organisational behaviour. Management consulting firms, quick to spot the commercial opportunities, began to add OD as a strand to their consulting offerings for clients.

Arguably the early proponents of OD followed the management trends of their times. Just as management theorists like Taylor (1912) with his scientific management and Fayol (1949) with his principles of management had seemed to promise approaches to fit all circumstances so OD theorists implied that there was a rational scientific way of managing the development of all organisations.

This is evidenced by the way OD theories and consulting in the second half of the 20th Century adopted linear models that usually began with a diagnostic phase involving the collection of significant data which points to an objective organisational reality. Examples include Lewins' (1951)'Un-freeze-Change-Refreeze' and Force Field Analysis models along with Richard Beckhard's emphasis on OD being a 'planned change effort 'involving 'systematic diagnosis' which is 'managed from the top' (Beckhard 1969:9-10). The language reflects a somewhat mechanistic approach to the human aspects of organisation.

As Grievs (2000) points out this interpretation of history is neat and serves to provide a rationale for the emergence of OD but does not give us any clues about how managers, in this new post-war people orientated climate, should handle the tensions between control by organisations and the

empowerment of individuals given their overriding priority as managers to improve individual and organisational performance.

Personal and Collective Inquiry

For over a decade I have been intrigued by how conversation as a process may have the potential to help mediate such tensions by creating change in organisational contexts that is both empowering *and* improves performance.

My initial interest was sparked by my role as an internal consultant working across a health and social care system supporting improvement strategies. I observed that some of my most effective interventions occurred when I facilitated conversations between professionals drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and organisations within the system. When done well, and focussed around a question of importance to all parties, such work resulted in 'light-bulb' moments that appeared to impact positively by shifting mind-sets and changing some visible behaviour. Both outcomes were desired objectives of the system improvement strategy.

To investigate this phenomenon I convened two self-nominated small groups of co-researchers from amongst managers and together, for a six month period, we co-investigated the nature and impact of conversation in our work. Using Co-operative inquiry (Reason 1999) as our chosen method the research made a substantial contribution to my MSc thesis which focussed on the question:

'Can I, as an internal OD consultant and change agent, influence the nature of conversation in the workplace?' (Cantore 2004:1).

At the end of the inquiry co-researchers spoke of growth in personal self-confidence to use a conversational style of leadership, new insights connecting experiences in their personal life with their role at work, growing awareness of the potential for conversation to impact on the organisation as well as some aspects of power dynamics and organisational culture which mitigate against a conversational approach. As initiating researcher I also learned much about the potential role of inquiry in the workplace as an aid to individual and collective learning and development. At the time I also noted that people inside and outside the organisations began to take an interest in the topic and the research process. Findings from this research also contributed to my first co-authored book, *Appreciative Inquiry for Change Management* (Lewis, Passmore and Cantore 2008).

What became apparent to me on reflection is that these initial experiences encouraged:

- My own personal interest in the nature of conversation in organisational contexts and my own desire to understand it as a phenomenon and offer it to clients in a consulting practice.
- A continuing desire to develop as an individual conversational practitioner through both individual and collective inquiry. Given that conversation in organisational contexts is a participative process I came to the conclusion, partly as a result of my Masters research and partly from reflection on experience, that developing as a conversational practitioner is not necessarily only an individual activity but also can benefit from participative inquiry.
- Consideration of further individual and collective inquiry exploring both the construct of 'conversational consulting' and how individual practitioners might develop their skills in the field. This report is one output from an on-going inquiry process.

Developing my practice and research interests

I subsequently left my NHS career in 2005 and joined a small public sector consulting firm called the Office for Public Management (OPM) where I specialised in Leadership and Organisational Development . Here I further developed my interest in the role of conversation in organisational contexts and routinely began to offer clients the opportunity to use conversational activities as part of a leadership development or OD intervention. These activities included, for example, large group work using World Café (Brown and Isaacs 2005) and Open Space (Owen 2008) formats.

In reflecting on my experience I was aware that conversation had a place in creating relationships with clients as well as a role in supporting the client's organisation. I became interested in what makes for an effective consultant-client relationship and the potential role of conversation in achieving this. In conversation with consulting colleagues at OPM I became aware that my interest in conversation as a consulting process was shared by some of them. Following approval and sponsorship by the company I began my Doctorate of Professional Studies research and subsequently convened a Co-operative inquiry group with fellow consultants to collectively inquire into this topic.

I again noticed the multiple strands of development triggered by individual and collective inquiry. Not only did individual colleagues report learning about the theory and practice of a construct, in this case conversational consulting, but also the benefits of being part of a collective learning process.

I highlight this to emphasise that there are three primary aims for this research:

- To develop my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively
- To explore the potential of conversational inquiry approaches to support the development of conversational consulting skills amongst a group of management consultants (including myself)
- To combine the learning from both individual and collective strands of research to offer management consultants a framework that defines 'Conversational Consulting' more accurately, describes the practice in greater depth and helps them understand some of the ways in which they can develop the necessary skills to practice confidently and effectively.

There are a range of secondary objectives which will be outlined in subsequent chapters.

The need for research

Aside from a personal interest other influences have convinced me that conversational consulting is an idea whose time is coming and worth therefore researching. Hurley and Brown for example set out a provocative framework they call Conversational Leadership and argue that business leaders of the future will need skills in using conversational processes like World Café and Open Space to maximise organisational effectiveness (2009:2). I ask myself how are they to learn to use these processes and what support may they need from the consulting community to do so?

Concurrent with my own insights and practice Bushe and Marshak (2009) argue that the field of OD is in the process of splitting in two with the emergence of, what they call Dialogic OD. This observation, and the evidence they present to support their argument is of significance to my practice and research because they differentiate between traditional OD practices that focus on diagnosing organisational problems and a conversational or dialogic approach that has the following characteristics:

- 'The change process emphasizes changing the conversations that normally take place in the system.
- The purpose of inquiry, is to surface, legitimate, and/or learn from the variety of perspectives, cultures, and/or narratives in the system.
- The change process results in new images, narratives, texts, and socially constructed realities that affect how people think and act.
- The change process is consistent with traditional organization development values of collaboration, free and informed choice, and capacity building in the client system'. (2009:15).

Aside from some relatively small differences in terminology, which I will explore later, my work and their thinking are fairly closely aligned. What they support is my view that our understanding of how change happens in organisations is itself changing.

The gauntlet is laid down when they say:

‘Because creating enabling conditions for different kinds of conversations to take place seems to be a key differentiator amongst the dialogical practices, this seems like an excellent area for OD scholars to investigate. What are the best enabling conditions? How are they created? What is the OD consultant’s role in creating these?’ (2009:16)

This project is, in part, a response to their call for more research.

Report Style

Writing a research report requires the author to make choices about writing style. Lee (2009) suggests that whilst conventional academic writing aims to be neutral and objective in tone research reports by practitioners in practice contexts ‘necessitates an alternative form of content and writing which includes the first person’ (Lee 2009:169). Hyland helpfully explores this further by suggesting that academic writing is ‘not just about conveying an ideational ‘content’, it is also about the representation of self’ (Hyland 2002:1091). He goes on to suggest that such representation ensures that the voice of the author is clearly heard and aligns them to the communities to which they belong, or aspire to belong. My aim for this report is that it should resonate in particular with those who see themselves as fellow practitioner-inquirers. This is where I aim to position my work.

The use of ‘I’ in academic writing also communicates a degree of authority and confidence. In a report like this one which will draw heavily on the reflections of the inquirer on their own practice, the use of the first person in the text is arguably essential. Without it both authority and authenticity will, to an unacceptable extent, be lost.

Whilst an academic ‘persona’ can be effective in communicating some ideas, I judge that a writing style that blends an academic and reflexive style will be a more effective and honest representation of myself and my research.

Report Structure

The first two chapters set the context and the stance I take as a practitioner-inquirer. In the third I engage in conversation with the literature. The fourth chapter describes my methodological approach and in three major sections outlines the three inquiry activities of which the collective Co-

operative inquiry with OPM consulting colleagues is the central focus. The other two activities are my learning log and a conversation with a client. Also included in these sections is a thematic analysis for each activity with my interpretation. The fifth chapter outlines an emerging framework for practice development building on my inquiry. The remaining chapters describe how my work is shaping my practice and influencing the work of others. I conclude with a reflection on the inquiry experience.

Chapter 2

The Project Context and the Practitioner-Inquirer

Introduction

This chapter provides an outline of the project context and my work as a practitioner-inquirer. The aim of Part 1 is to help the reader become familiar with the role in which I was employed and the type of organisation to which I belonged for the duration of the project (2009-2012). Part 2 outlines the theoretical and practice positions I adopt (and adapt!) as a practitioner-inquirer. I am conscious that some of the terms and constructs to which I refer sometimes require further explanation and a more detailed definition. These will be offered in subsequent chapters of this report.

Part 1 Organisational Context

The Employing Organisation

The Office for Public Management defines itself as an organisation that:

‘Helps public services - across all sectors - to improve outcomes, performance and standards. Since 1989 we've worked with thousands of leaders, managers, policy-makers, professionals, service users and communities to make the best decisions possible and respond to challenges and change. ‘

Which is done by offering:

‘Support in many areas including: research, stakeholder and community engagement, leadership development, executive and team coaching, impact evaluation, cost benefit analysis, social return on investment analysis, and organisation development.’

(OPM 2013)

Originally established by four founding owners/directors in the late nineteen eighties OPM (www.opm.co.uk) grew steadily providing a range of organisational consulting services to the Public Sector until 2010 when the UK Government restrictions on consultancy expenditure forced it to downsize from a company employing a full-time staff of 80 to one employing about 50 people. At its peak in the mid 2000's turnover for the company was approximately £8million. In 20011/12 that figure had reduced to £4.2 million (Duedil 2013). This places it in the SME (Small, Medium Enterprise) category of businesses in the UK according to the EU definition and borderline Small-

Medium according to the 2006 Companies Act (Hansard 2012). It is a limited company originally owned by its founders but has, during 2009-2012, made a transition to a form of employee ownership where each member of staff owns a share in the company for the duration of their employment.

Its offices are located close to King's Cross station in London although consulting staff are expected to travel throughout the UK to work with clients.

The Organisational Culture

Trying to describe organisational culture is fraught with difficulty given, as Schein (1990) points out, the ambiguity of the term 'organisation' let alone the complex and subjective nature of organisational culture. Schein does however offer a helpful definition for the organisational culture construct as:

'(a) a pattern of basic assumptions, (b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, (c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, (d) that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore (e) is to be taught to new members as the (f) correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.'

(Schein 1990: 111)

Reflecting on my experience of OPMs' culture during my seven years with the company (2005-2012) I recall a narrative about social outcomes or benefits. Whatever I, and we did collectively, needed to demonstrate that it was making people's lives better in some way. Rarely was this improvement quantified or made explicit yet it was seen as a fundamental principle that should govern our consulting work. This took priority over discussions about the value of contracts or profit –until the company hit difficult times in 2009/10 when business language began to dominate. Amongst consultants there was also an on-going debate about whether or not it 'added value' to a client.

Similar debates existed around whether or not it was acceptable, or even moral, for the company to provide services to private sector companies (99% of OPM's client base were Public Sector organisations funded by the UK tax-payer). Talking about the values that underpinned our work was considered to be an important part of the way OPM staff were expected to relate to one another, and indeed our clients.

OPM always encouraged a sense of collective effort amongst staff. Whilst as an individual consultant I had my own work targets (expressed mainly in 'billable days', the number of days paid for by clients) there was an expectation that I would work as part of a team supporting colleagues and

generally encouraging a spirit of collaboration. The company supported this by funding team and company away days as well as requiring us all to meet together one day a month. This level of interaction was seen as a way of sharing knowledge as well as building camaraderie.

These brief reflections give a flavour of the environment which those working in OPM sought to maintain and form a backcloth for this project.

Employment role

I joined the company as a full-time employed Fellow (Consultant) in 2005. I was a member of the Health and Social Care team with eight colleagues. Subsequent internal re-organisations and a promotion meant that by the time I left in March 2012 I was a Senior Fellow (Senior Consultant) in the Leadership and Organisation Development Team.

My principal formal responsibilities were to:

- Respond to invitations to tender for consulting work, primarily initially from public sector health and social care organisations, by writing bids that secured consulting projects.
- Project plan and deliver consulting assignments with the client
- Collaborate with other OPM consultants to assist in the delivery of a range of consulting projects across the company
- Actively support the development of OPMs' consulting practice through facilitating learning events, publishing papers and representing OPM to a range of external audiences.

In practice an average working week consisted of two office based days writing responses to bids and preparing work for clients whilst the other three involved on-site work with clients. My work developed a pattern and in an average month of face-face client work I would divide my time approximately as follows:

- 10% 1-1 Executive Coaching work
- 10% Facilitating Action Learning sets
- 10% Organisational Board and Team development
- 30% Delivering Leadership Development workshops
- 10% Large meeting facilitation
- 30% Consulting support to a range of projects (usually this involved a combination of coaching, mentoring, advice giving and group facilitation).

Cheung-Judge and Holbeche (2011) define Organisation Development very broadly as a 'field of knowledge to guide the development of organisation effectiveness, especially during change' (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011:23). Reading their text and the texts of some other notable writers in the field of OD (Beckhard 1969, Schein 1995, Schein 2003, French and Bell 1999, Block 2000) it is I think reasonable to locate my practice whilst at OPM as focussed on Organisation Development. Given a very wide range of definitions in the literature, defining what is and is not OD practice is a contentious issue for some and will be explored further in later chapters (Bushe and Marshak 2009).

Much of this work was delivered in clients premise so significant amounts of travel across the UK were involved.

In 2009 I changed to a part-time (four days a week) contract to facilitate my research work and in 2011/12 I took a one year sabbatical from which I did not return.

Personal Practice

In the introductory chapter I made reference to my professional interest in the construct I call Conversational Consulting. A definition is, and I suspect one amongst a number that will emerge in this project, the intentional use of conversational processes and practices in organisational consultancy work. I have referred to a range of these processes like World Café (Brown 2002) and Open Space (Owen 2008) although I have yet to elaborate on the practices. What I think important to highlight is, that had you been an observer during an average working week at OPM, you will have noticed both the number of conversations I intentionally held with colleagues as well as the offers I made to clients to support their organisational conversations by offering to facilitate these conversational processes.

In my interview prior to joining the company I expressed a wish to become a resource for colleagues in the domain of conversational practice. I continued to hold this intention with the result that I became an internal consultant to colleagues on the application of conversation processes to client work.

For Schein (1999) it is the process of relationship that needs to be at the heart of an effective consulting relationship. I find an echo of this in my own thoughts about conversational consulting. So, on observing me in my day-to day consulting work I hope you would see a relational approach manifesting itself in my attitudes and behaviours. I have little concern with the technical content (e.g. health or social care) of a relationship but focus on the relationship itself.

Organisational sponsorship

As I have already indicated part of my role was to actively support the development of OPM's consulting practice. This included co-facilitating the annual company day in 2006, delivering a half day seminar on the use of conversation in consulting relationships to OPM staff in 2007, providing 1-1 executive coaching to support staff and contributing to the OPM external blog. For their part OPM supported my own development through sponsorship on an accredited executive coaching programme, funding a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers 1962) course and providing regular coaching supervision.

The most significant involvement by OPM in my development, from my perspective, was their support and part financial sponsorship of a major element of this project. In early 2009 I wrote to the OPM Board requesting support for a Doctorate of Professional Studies programme of inquiry that I thought would have a number of benefits for the company including:

- 'Enhanced "leading edge" reputation through associated published articles and conference presentations. I will commit to an active publications and presenting programme and envisage the potential for a new book at the end of the research.
- Creation of more effective approaches to change and development. This will support delivery on both projects (and others) resulting in greater client satisfaction and better use of project resources
- Development and publication of new materials to support the training and development of consultants working for, and with, OPM.
- Modelling to colleagues and clients the benefits of work based learning. In this way I will actively encourage the growth of a learning community amongst consultants and clients
- Development of an evidence base to support this approach to consulting.'

(Cantore 2009: 4)

The case was built upon a number of lower than expected rating in the 2008 OPM Client survey (2008). I argued that my research process and outputs would have a positive impact over time on client experiences and consequently business results. At this stage my research proposal did not include a great deal of detail (it was still in the process of development). However, they agreed to

sponsor my fees for two years and perhaps more importantly give the project formal approval. This enabled using time, both mine and fellow consultants, and meeting rooms for the work which was to be immensely valuable. They set no specific requirements with regard to project outputs or feedback. I am grateful to them for this support without which I think much of this project would not have been possible.

Some Ethical Implications

Given the support of the organisation I am conscious, and was on reflection at the time, of the need to act ethically towards it and indeed towards all parties involved. I explore this further in the next chapter which considers my role and responsibilities as a Practitioner Researcher. However I am, as I write this chapter, aware of the exhortation by Costley and Gibbs (2006) that I should act with care particularly given the expressed trust and generosity of OPM as they sanctioned and supported the research process. This is helpfully summarised in their comment that:

‘.....caring is more than a superficial clarification of one’s actions achieved through a voluntary consent form; it is the reframing of the research project as a mutual activity which has personal consequences other than a research report, and which has its own legitimacy.’ (Costley and Gibbs 2006:94)

There is certainly a consent form signed by OPM granting formal permission but there is, in my thinking, an ethical requirement in my mind to respect the mutual engagement between myself and OPM. This is best enacted by demonstrating, in what I research and write, an attitude of care towards others. This notion of caring is echoed for me in the contracting process between a consultant and client, which after all, is another form of mutual activity in which both parties are intended to gain benefit.

Part 2 Enacting the Role of Practitioner-Inquirer

Choosing my research paradigms

Perhaps the most intellectually stretching and personally developmental of all the experiences involved in the process of doctoral level inquiry has been grappling with understanding the ontological and epistemological positions I bring to both practice and inquiry. I use the plural because when I started reflecting and exploring these constructs I had assumed that I would magically land upon one academically 'legitimate' position that would neatly fit both my research intentions and the examiners. It has taken some time and effort to realise that 'holy grail' will never be achieved and indeed I need to reconcile myself to the reality that I will continually be exploring my understanding of what is the nature of reality and what can be known about it. In my doctoral portfolio and proposal (2010) I reflected in some depth on my philosophical stance and reached the following conclusions about my position in this context. I summarise them here since they still have relevance and contribute to a narrative around my development as a researcher:

- Guba and Lincoln's (1994) construct of inquiry paradigms helped me locate myself on the 'map' of ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches to research. They define a paradigm as:

'A set of basic beliefs that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world" the individuals place in it and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts as, for example cosmologies and theologies do' (1994:107).

Guba and Lincoln go on to suggest that an inquiry paradigm helps define what falls within and outside the limits of legitimate inquiry. I am not sure that I agree with this assertion given it is an expression of power and control rather than an invitation to explore. However I was helped by three questions they pose that help the researcher identify where they are on the paradigm map. These questions are:

1. What is the form and nature of reality and therefore what is there that can be known about it? (The ontological question)
2. What is the relationship between the knower or would be knower and what can be known? (The epistemological question)

3. How can the inquirer or would be knower go about finding out whatever her or she believes can be known? (The methodological question) (1994:108).

Given my inquiry questions focus on how people enact relationships that change their organisational worlds (conversational consulting) I was attracted to what they call the constructivism inquiry paradigm. In this paradigm realities are formed through 'intangible mental constructions' that are socially and experientially based' (Guba and Lincoln 1994:110). The preferred methods will be those where the researcher and the researched interact together to elicit and refine the constructs. This approach fits very well for a practitioner-inquirer who is seeking to develop understanding and practice with fellow consultants. It also interestingly does away with the distinction between ontological and epistemological perspectives since what 'is' and what is known about it are co-constructed socially.

- A neighbouring territory on the Guba and Lincoln map is what they call the Critical Theory inquiry paradigm. To be fair to them they describe this as a 'blanket' term which incorporates alternative paradigms like Marxism, feminism and participatory inquiry. They suggest that there are three sub-strands within this meta-paradigm including post-structuralism, postmodernism and a combining of these two. What was of particular interest to me was their view that what defined all of these categories as different was the 'value-determined nature of inquiry' (1994:109). Findings in this paradigm are, in their view, value mediated.

In my context this means that what brings the practitioner-inquirer together with fellow inquirers is set of values and beliefs particularly around the need for practice and inquiry to have some definite sense of intention to change the world. This resonated both with explicitly value-based position of OPM as a company with its strong commitment to what it calls 'social results' but also the under-pinning values of Organisational Development which sees itself as a set of theories and practices which 'create conditions that honour the inherent need for human growth in the workplace; release human potential; enable individuals to have equal rights to develop their own sense of agency and to promote self-expression'(Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011:23) . I will return to the significance of values in later chapters.

One key observation by Guba and Lincoln (1994) is that methodologically this inquiry paradigm emphasises the necessity of dialogic and dialectical approaches which support the

emergence of transformed understandings about who we are in our historical contexts and, through conversation, enables the researcher and the researched to understand how they might take action to effect change in a hopeful direction. This broadly reflects the perspective of Critical Theory held by Jürgen Habermas and his colleagues of the Frankfurt school of thought who can be said to have understood Critical Theory as a ‘theory that provides a guide for human action, is inherently emancipatory, has a cognitive content and, unlike a scientific theory is self-conscious, self-critical and non-objectifying’ (Macey 2000:75). What appeals to me as a practitioner-inquirer is not only the emancipatory element but the idea that research in this paradigm is not ‘on’ an object, in this case consulting practice, but is research ‘in’ the inside. So I and my colleagues are inside the process rather than being the subjects of an externally imposed process. This is important for a range of reasons not least of which is the sense of equality and involvement it encourages in all of us. This sense of involvement also holds out a reasonable expectation that the research process will lead to something that is personally worthwhile as well as findings that ultimately might influence the wider community of consulting practitioners.

- Both paradigms are reflected in the stance I take as a practitioner-inquirer in this project and I think both can be observed in the research process and the nature of the findings. In a research workshop Annette Fillery-Travis (2010) brought both these paradigms together under the heading of Critical Postmodernism. At the time I reflected that whilst I appreciated the notion of an overlap I also found it helpful to retain the integrity of both and work actively with the inter-play between them.

Whilst these inquiry paradigms were helpful in enabling me to position myself as a researcher in my context there were two other elements to my stance at the outset of this project that are worth mentioning. Firstly the importance I attach personally to my spiritual faith and the theology which underpins it. I hold to the view that there is a personal-infinite God who is creator and sustainer of the universe. All things originate from Him and He reveals what we need to know about the world and the wider universe. He does so particular in the person of Jesus Christ and in the Bible which I believe contains absolute truth about us and our relationship with God. Holding such a view means that I am inherently unhappy with a Cartesian duality that separates mind from body and thereby makes possible a distinction between ontology and theology (Armsby 2008). From my perspective they are inextricable. What I believe about God sets the frame, and is an influencing ‘voice’ for what I understand about reality and how I might understand that reality for myself.

Secondly, and it follows on from faith, is the notion that conversation as a process is more than rational dialogue about ideas but also engages the emotions and spirits or souls of people. I discuss my definition of conversation in a later chapter but it is significantly influenced by the idea of God as a conversing God. For example, the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in conversation with one another as they agree to create Man in the book of Genesis Chapter 1 (International Bible Society 1979). This idea of a conversing God is a repeated theme in the Bible as God speaks to His people and invites them to speak to Him through prayer. In a sense I understand being in conversation as being alive as a human. If I no longer converse then death is not far away. This value I put on conversation places it, in my mind, beyond a process to enable and create change but rather an intrinsic element of being human.

As I reflect on the summary I have just written I am aware that it is both an accurate description of my position, as I understood it, at the start of my doctoral journey in 2009 but is incomplete in the sense that the research project itself has spurred new learning and insights that will shape my perspectives and findings in this report.

Reflecting on research paradigms (2013 update)

A key learning is that whilst crafting my own research paradigm was a demanding process at the outset it is not a once and for all time fixed decision. What appears to have occurred is a continuous conversation between my practice with clients, my own ponderings and the research process. I became aware that my choice of, for example, the Critical Theory research paradigm not only encouraged me to choose a participatory action research method for a major element of the project (more of which in later chapters) but also led me to give much greater active consideration of the values that underpin my practice of Organisational Development (OD). Similarly, selecting the constructionist inquiry paradigm developed in me an interest in how social constructionist schools of thought can potentially be applied to OD practice. It also opened the way for me to consider whether or not it was both possible and appropriate to recast my project as a social constructionist endeavour. I discuss what I understand by the term 'social constructionist' in Chapter 3 but, with the great risk of oversimplification, a working definition for the purposes of this chapter a social constructionist is someone who holds the view that the world we experience, including our knowledge, is the product of our social processes. Such processes not only lead to what we call 'action' but are 'action' in their own right (Nightingale and Cromby 1999).

The question about how to hold a social constructionist stance whilst undertaking, what felt like research on a series of subjects, began to be a pressing concern and led to a mini mid-project 'crisis'.

I include below an excerpt from my learning log which summarises some of my thoughts during this crisis. I do so because I think they both illuminate some of the tensions present in the theoretical dilemmas I have experienced and also demonstrate how my thinking developed through the struggle to deepen my understanding of the role of practitioner-inquirer in my context:

'I have been particularly struck by the realisation that by adopting a social constructionist stance with regard to the idea of conversational consulting and being a practitioner researcher I cannot avoid seeing myself and the work I am doing, even in writing this project report, as a process of social construction. Which explains why locked away in my solitary study attempting to engage with my subject *on my own* can be an unfulfilling and potentially fruitless task. My question now is how can I approach my research questions from within a social constructionist frame rather than looking at them from the outside in what is a positivistic stance and assumes that there is something called conversational consulting 'over there' which I can look at and identify and categorise and then communicate as knowledge to a wider world. This is perhaps a new meaning of 'insider research'? The term is usually applied to practitioners' research within organisations. Here I use it to step inside the frame of my own philosophical position and look out from it' (Cantore 2013:15).

In working with this question I am helped by Caroline Ramsey's work in developing new understandings and practices in Higher Education to help managers learn (a field of practice not too distant from aspects of OD consulting). She, for example, defines 'practice' as 'an emergent, social performance not the considered action of an individual' (un-dated: 2). The implication is that writing about my 'practice' is an oxymoron. It makes more sense to talk of how we acted together to co-create new meaning. Ramsey draws upon the work of Shotter (1994) and Gergen (1997) when suggesting that separating theory from practice is also futile in a constructionist frame. In my world this means I am not applying conversational consulting theory to my practice but my practice is the acting out with other people a co-construction which I, and perhaps others choose to call conversational consulting. In doing so it becomes our experienced reality.

Ramsey then goes on to argue that the consequence of this position is that we need to pay less attention to the meaning of the language but focus more on exploring how the social processes of the practice are performed and themselves invite further action. This resonates strongly with me. It points me in a new direction as I wrestle with how I make sense of the research 'data' I have collected. Rather than looking to categorise the themes in the data and then make meaning or theory I am beginning to think that a way forward in this project is to see the material as representations of social processes. The questions I then can ask of it include:

1. What has gone well in the process?
2. What seems to have enabled that to happen?
3. What appears to be emerging?
4. What resonates with my understanding of consulting relationships?

These questions, still in draft form, bear an uncanny relationship to the form of questions used in the first stage of a process called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). This is a process I practice in my work with individuals and organisations where people are encouraged to share narratives about 'best' moments in the past to collectively agree a future that is better than the present. One assumption is that new socially constructed narratives will emerge through this process that co-creates a new reality (Lewis, Passmore and Cantore 2008). What I want to concentrate on here is the idea that at the heart of practice is a desire to see a future, a better future emerge from social process. A conversational consultant is therefore shaping and co-creating social processes (in this case conversationally based) with others to enable the future to emerge. The notion of crafting here is important since it indicates an intentional and purposeful approach by the consultant rather than a laissez-faire 'lets' see what happens' attitude.

What I conclude is that as a practitioner-inquirer in my context I am:

- Researching 'in' rather than researching 'on'
- Acting or practicing with others rather than alone
- Enabling the future to emerge in both this project and my wider practice
- Working from a position where I understand the past, including all the 'data', helpful to the extent it points up wisdom about crafting social processes.

In the writing of this project I am therefore holding a conversation with the literatures, records of personal reflections and material from shared inquiries with the intention of generating contributions to on-going social processes in and between consultants and clients. The focus is on enabling my performances in the social context in which I work rather than a definitive statement of new theory applicable to all others.

This final comment reflects something of Ramsey's position in her doctoral thesis (2006) and resonates with Weinberg's observation that:

'The practical point, then of doing constructionist studies has very often been to promote a better way of thinking and, more important, living with respect to the worlds we inhabit. Hence, considerations of the objective, essential or universal properties of things have commonly taken a back seat to normative questions how to most valuably or beneficially conceptualise them' (Weinberg cited in Holstein and Gubrium 2008:15).

What Weinberg highlights for me is the link between social constructionist research and critical theory. This is the search for a better way of living. In my context as a practitioner inquirer this is to help my community of practice in both micro form (OPM) and macro form (all organisational change agents) to support change that is better as a process than in the past whilst at the same time co-conceptualising what helping organisational change as a conversational consultant may become in the future. This, for me, is at the heart of enacting the practitioner inquirer role.

My mini 'crisis' resolved, to an extent, as I understood that holding a social constructionist/critical theory stance is possible in the context of this project whilst not necessarily adopting analytical methods that might be labelled as constructionist. For example, the inquiry I have undertaken with colleagues is, as I shall indicate, constructing new realities. Indeed this project report and its wider dissemination is already supporting the construction of new realities amongst the organisational change consulting community. It is becoming part of the flow of conversation.

On a more practical note I had already set the course for my project in my 2010 proposal which was 'signed-off' by the company, the university and agreed by my colleagues. I feel ethically uncomfortable about a revised research plan that significantly differs from that which was carefully negotiated. With practitioner inquiry it is not only my interests that matter but also those of my stakeholders.

Practice in a complex context

Finding your individual stance as a practitioner-inquirer is important but no less important, in my experience, is the process of understanding your relationship to others. This is I think an issue of working with diversity and taking an ethical approach to acknowledging that others hold different, sometimes radically different, ontologies and epistemologies to my own.

In my DP 4561 Portfolio and Proposal, as preparation for this project, I presented an extensive and largely descriptive take on my relations as a practitioner inquirer with a whole range of stakeholders including colleagues, clients the company I worked for and wider communities of practice. Rather than repeating this I want to focus on considering the issues involved in holding the social constructionist stance I adopt when working with this complex web of relationships.

To do this I want to borrow, as a metaphor, the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator (1962). This is a model and process I often use in my consulting practice when working with individuals in a coaching relationship to help people see for themselves their own preferences and how they differ from other people's preferences. Based on Jungian Psychological Type Theory the idea is for individuals to become more aware of how they see the world and make decisions (Jung 1923).

My point is that whilst I have a preference for seeing the world through a social constructionist/critical theory lens other colleagues and clients may view the world through, for example, a positivistic lens where 'an apprehendable reality is assumed to exist driven by immutable natural laws and mechanisms..... the investigator and the investigated "object" are assumed to be independent entities and the investigator to be capable of studying the object without influencing it or being influenced by it'(Guba and Lincoln 1994:110). Alternatively they may hold a variety of positions drawing from different worldview constructs at different times. What I do know is that I hold stances that I allow to bias me in favour of inquiry and practice approaches that are, as far as I can tell at the time, consistent with my preferred particular lens. Others I assume do the same.

If this is the case, which I think it is, then as a practitioner inquirer I am challenged to:

- Respect and learn from the positions of others
- Act ethically by making explicit my own stance, guiding values and assumptions
- Help others to identify their own position preferences
- Develop the capability to move intentionally between different positions and where relevant and helpful adopt stances which are not necessarily my primary preference
- Recognise that there is not right or wrong preferences but each brings its own strengths
- Commit to exploring in depth my own perspectives and applying new learning to practice.
- See positions as fluid and capable of change
- Draw on practices that are not necessarily in accord with my own position but nonetheless can offer help.

What this reflection highlights for me is that being and becoming a practitioner inquirer involves, amongst other activities, holding and working with perceived tensions and differences. I found it helpful to adopt a poetic mind-set and style to try and capture something of what it personally feels like to 'be' and work in this way:

Appreciative and critical at times

Intrigued yet sometimes distant

Conversational but liking silence
Helpful but also needing help
Serving and being served
Holding space for others but wanting to be held
Open at my best but also closed
A listener who wants to speak
A speaker who wants to listen
Abstract and pragmatic
Independent and dependent
Complex and simple
Relational and solo
Faith-full and wilful
Insightful and out-of-sightful
Emotional and dull
Engaged and separated
Collaborative and self-reliant
Wanting to do good and sometimes doing bad
Patient and impatient
Conforming and rebelling
Thoughtful and ignorant
Controlling and letting go
Stefan

Chapter 3

The Professional Practice Context and the Literature.

Introduction

Previous chapters have set out the practice context and aims for the project. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the literature in sufficient depth to generate new perspectives on the first research aim and identify themes that will enhance the quality of data analysis in subsequent chapters.

To recap the aims of this project are to:

- Develop my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively.
- Explore the potential of conversational inquiry approaches to support the development of conversational consulting skills amongst a group of management consultants (including myself).
- Combine the learning from both individual and collective strands of research to offer management consultants a framework that defines 'Conversational Consulting' more accurately, describes the practice in greater depth and helps them understand some of the ways in which they can develop the necessary skills to practice confidently and effectively.

This chapter engages with the literature from the perspective of a work-based inquirer. The literature includes academic research, books and professional journal articles. Such a wide selection reflects the reality of how knowledge and ideas are accessed from published sources by managers and consulting practitioners who tend to scan the environment for anything that seems relevant to an issue rather than confining themselves to one source (Alvarez and Mazza 2002).

The stance chosen in this review reflects my position as a practitioner-inquirer in the context of project work at OPM between 2009 -2012. This does not mean that material published post 2012 will be ignored. It does however mean that the project aims define the scope of this review rather than the literature defining the scope of the project. This approach is appropriate since it reflects the work-based focus of the project.

Some comments about the approach adopted in writing this chapter:

- The style is reflective. It is therefore sometimes more personal and subjective than a more conventional academic literature review.
- Conversing with the literature and texts is integral to all chapters in this report. This means that this chapter may not be a comprehensive account of all the literature. Relevant material will be referenced in subsequent chapters.
- Shulman's observation that a literature review in whatever form, is an opportunity to build on the works of other scholars and in so doing generate new insights is helpful (Shulman 1999). Such generativity has been a primary objective in writing this chapter. The intention is to progress in achieving the first project aim.
- Lyotard's observation about writing rings true and reflects something of the experience of writing this chapter:

‘We write before knowing what to say and how to say it, and in order to find out, if possible.’
(Lyotard 1992:119)

The ‘finding out’ is emphasised, in part, by the frequent use of questions as section headings.

Chapter structure

There are 7 parts to the chapter:

1. The preparatory project literature reviews
2. Engaging with the literature on conversation
3. Exploring the inter-relationship between conversation, social constructionism and organisations
4. Engaging with the literature on consulting
5. Reflections on the literature
6. Preliminary identification of skills needed to practice Conversational Consulting
7. Concluding comments.

Part 1

The preparatory project literature reviews

The project proposal that forms the basis for this report included two short literature reviews (Cantore 2010). The first focussed on the role of conversation in organisational contexts as well as a range of psychological perspectives on conversation in the work place (Te Molder and Potter 2005). Literature concerned with managerial perspectives on workplace conversations (Ford 1999) as well

as literature that linked organisational change and learning with conversation were also reviewed (Brown and Isaacs 1996). The roles of Conversation and Discourse Analysis in researching conversation were considered (Ten Have 2007; Van Dijk 2001).

Given that the aim of this short review was to establish any immediately obvious links between the topic and the literature it became clear that a practitioner research project linking the intentional use of conversation in management consulting relationships was, at the time, a new area for inquiry.

This conclusion was re-confirmed by the second review focussed on the practice of consulting in organisational contexts (Cantore 2010). A high proportion of the academic papers and other materials described typologies of consulting (Alvesson and Johansson 2002). Some attempted to describe consulting practice and associated skills from a practitioner perspective (Schein 1995; Block 2000; Clegg and Kornberger et al. 2004) whilst other literature offered insights about consulting practice based on academic research (Lapsley and Oldfield 2001).

To help plan the project, engagement with the literature during this preparatory stage was not exclusively confined to the topic of conversational consulting. For example, material relating to, participative action research (Bradbury and Reason 2001), work-based learning and research (Raelin 2008), research paradigms (Guba and Lincoln 1994) and qualitative data analysis was also reviewed (Silverman 2006; Braun and Clarke 2006).

What can influence engagement with the literatures in a work-based project?

In a thought-provoking book Evert Gummersson (1999) compares and contrasts the work of academic researchers and management consultants. He argues they have much in common. The management consultant focusses on practice and 'pecks' at theory whilst the researcher 'pecks' at practice and contributes to theory (1999: 10). It is a helpful way of looking at the challenge faced by a practitioner-inquirer who works with both practice and academic perspectives. Gummersson suggests that they both 'peck' in the same field and bring their respective pre-understandings to the way they determine the boundaries of the field. Odman explains pre-understanding as follows:

'In response to frequent or everyday occurrences, individuals have to develop a pre-understanding in order to avoid having to bother themselves with the interpretation of these events. Sense impressions, interpretation, understanding and language merge instantaneously, making it impossible to identify separate phases' (Odman 1979:45).

Gummersson (1999) builds on this concept with his notion of blocked pre-understanding. He suggests that management consultants take knowledge based on their experience and assume it is

directly applicable to the next situation they encounter regardless of its suitability. Researchers demonstrate the same characteristic when they use the same method or paradigm time and time again regardless of whether a more suitable one is available.

This echoes the work of Hebert Simon (1956) who explored the assumptions that management decision-making is based on rational thought processes. Simon (1956) argued that managers, and by implication management consultants, lack the resources, time and energy to reach the best solution but rather make do with what they believe will lead to a satisfactory outcome. This process of satisficing involves using cognitive short-cuts or heuristics to make decisions and is usually referred to as bounded rationality (Simon 1997). More recently Kaufman (1999) has suggested that, contrary to Simon's cognitive perspective, managers unacknowledged emotional responses govern decision-making .

This discussion is relevant because it puts into context the choices made in both planning this project and writing this report. It reflects what might be described as the 'shadow side' of inquiry and practice—that is the unspoken and perhaps slightly embarrassing aspects of inquiry and practice in the real world. Gummerson writes of the relationship between pre-understanding and understanding (or openness to new insights) as being 'influenced by our conscious and unconscious intentionality' (1999:72). In other words, our motives may not be pure and may not always be known to us. I might desire for example, through undertaking research, prestige, applause from colleagues, the ability to charge higher fee rates, much higher profile and promotion etc.

As a practitioner- inquirer I recognise that the decisions, reflected in what follows in this chapter and report, are likely to have been subject to a greater or lesser degree of bias. For example, I have presented my research as developing a framework for Conversational Consultancy. I have not paused to argue a case for or against the existence of it as a concept (although I think I do have a case!). Nonetheless I have come with my pre-understanding and not fully opened myself up to the possibility that it may not actually exist.

What I also take from these insights is that any set of topics chosen to boundary this research process is also likely to reflect bias and pre-understanding. No amount of re-visiting the topics will make it perfect given that its contents and language are drawn from experience rather than a 'pure' or well defined rational source of knowledge. Herbert Simon's (1956) insights about 'satisficing' or making the best choices in the circumstances underline the implications of limited time and resources for a project like this. Whilst it is a temptation to dive deeper into the literature and reflections on practice, basic limitations like time and money mean that there will be a constant

pressure to make implicit and sometimes explicit decisions to include some materials whilst excluding others. These decisions may not always be rational and as Kaufman (1999) suggests they may be based more often on emotion.

What is the approach to engaging with the literature in this chapter?

The preparatory literature reviews were relatively limited in both scope and analysis. Given the issue of bias and pre-understanding combined with the need to make the most of the available resources it is appropriate to recognise that, in a work –based project of this type, there will always be perceived gaps in the range and depth of the literature included. This is well recognised in the literature. The literature on literature reviews suggests that there is often a weakness in their content and construction as well as a failure to fully understand the variety of terms associated with them like ‘review’ or ‘conceptual and theoretical frameworks’ (Rocco and Plakhotnik 2009). Torraco helpfully describes an integrative literature review as:

‘ ... a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated’(Torraco 2005:356).

The author also points out that this form of research is also likely to result in new conceptualisations or frameworks when applied to emerging topics. This is highly relevant to this project which aims to develop a new framework of practice based, in part, on existing theories and concepts. It also highlights that theoretical and conceptual frameworks will need to be referenced and explored both in this chapter and throughout the project report.

Paltridge (2002) agrees with this approach and comments that in a topic based qualitative research project it is reasonable for the literature review to be distributed through the report and not be one confined to one chapter. This chapter therefore maps the terrain but the exploration of literature, concepts and frameworks will also take place throughout the report (Hutchings and Shulman 1999).The suggestion by Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009) that it important to differentiate between conceptual and theoretical frameworks and the notion of a literature review is helpful to bear in mind.

Shulman (1999) talks of literature reviews having the capacity to stimulate generativity by enabling the researcher to build on the scholarship of those who have gone before. This metaphor reflects my

professional practice of building on what has 'gone before' whilst working to generate what is to 'become' in my work.

In summary, the engagement with the literature in this chapter is specifically focussed on:

- Exploring , often in a conversational and reflective style, concepts in the literature that appear to have relevance to the first project aim.
- Synthesising concepts in the literature to offer potential themes that will enhance data analysis.
- Generating concepts, by building on the work of other scholars and practitioners that contribute to the achievement of the first research aim.
- Recognising bias and pre-understanding that will shape the engagement process and final outcomes of this project.
- Making clear the practice and theory stances I adopt in this project.

Part 2 Engaging with the literature on conversation

The focus in this part is engaging with the literature as it relates specifically to conversation in the context of the first project aim which is to develop my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively.

What is conversation?

As indicated in the first chapter my research interest in the role of conversation in the workplace is not recent. Its roots are in a participatory action research project I completed in 2004 (Cantore 2004). The focus of that project centred on the experience of managers in a health care system exploring how they might use conversation as a means to enhance their managerial practice. Whilst my interests have moved on to specifically considering conversation in a consulting context some of my engagement with the literature at that time remains relevant to this project. For example I defined conversation as:

'An experience between two or more people who, through the expression of thoughts and feelings, create of new ideas, perspectives and understandings.

The experience of conversation *will* include:

- A sense of being listened to, and of listening to others.
- An atmosphere of trust and openness.
- A liberty in expressing thoughts and feelings
- A sense, for at least one person, that what is going on has some importance and value.
- Affirmation of your self-value and the value of others.
- An awareness of new perspectives and ideas.
- Knowing that, as a result of conversation, something is different.
- The development of shared meanings and understandings.
- A sense of equality between people.

The experience of conversation *may* include:

- A profound, even life-changing, insight or “aha” moment.
- A release of emotion.
- The sense of being taken to a better place.
- A close sense of unity between participants.
- A decision to make change happen.
- Excitement.
- Sense making at the deepest levels’ (Cantore 2004:11).

This initial definition draws from the formal linguistic definition above, the perspectives of a wide range of authors (Zeldin 1998; Gergen and McNamee 2000; Ellinor and Gerard 1998; Baker, Jensen et al. 2005; Isaacs 2008; Shotter 1994) and my own lived experience of conversation.

Wheatley offers a somewhat simpler definition of conversation:

‘..... where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard and we each listen well’(2009:3).

Whilst Wheatley omits any reference to change in this appealing definition, she later connects conversation with change, albeit the conditions for change:

‘Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change- personal change, community and organisational change’(2009:3).

For the sake of completeness a more traditional, but incomplete, definition is found in the Oxford Dictionary of English:

‘Conversation: a talk, especially an informal one, between two or more people, in which news and ideas are exchanged.’(Pearsall, Hanks et al. 2003: 378)

The origin of the word is from a Latin root via Old French that intends to convey the notion of living among, familiarity, intimacy and turning towards one another. This modern British definition lacks depth and understanding although the Old French root of the word with its recognition of conversation as a form of “turning towards one another” gives a nice poetic twist to what I am seeking to communicate in my more expansive definition.

The essence of conversation is its relational nature and power to potentially create shifts in both understanding and the action that follows. This definition of conversation emphasises conversation as a change process, in and of itself, rather than conversation as human interaction that potentially leads to change. It’s a fine but crucial distinction and contrasts with much organisational consulting where the assumption is often made that conversing with one another is not action but rather the action takes place once the speaking has finished. To summarise, in traditional consulting work the focus is often on helping people to get to a point of committing to action through conversation rather than recognising that the conversation *is* also the change.

Linking ‘change’ with ‘conversation’ in this way originally encouraged my development of the notion ‘conversational consulting’ where the consultants’ role is to help people engage in conversations that change them and their understanding of the world rather than help them plan ‘actions’ or ‘interventions’. This is not to say that ‘action’ in the conventional sense is unimportant in some contexts but conversational consulting does intend to offer an alternative understanding of action as conversation and conversation as action. Adopting this view of conversation also implies quite a different role for the management consultant. Understanding precisely what that role might be, the skills needed to enact it and the means by which they may be developed are questions at the centre of this project.

As I reflect on the variety of definitions the ideas of informality, intimacy and exchange all resonate and continue to be in stark contrast to many of the formal communication approaches which are often the hallmark of organisational cultures I encounter in my consultancy practice across the UK. That is not to say that conversation does not manifest itself in the informal organisational culture, around the water coolers and the staff canteens because it does. However, in my experience, it is an under-acknowledged process of change.

Is there any philosophical support for defining conversation in an organisational context as ‘action’?

As noted in my 2004 research project, a supportive philosophy positioning conversation as a process of change is a social constructionist perspective of the relational world (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In a nutshell the argument is that what people speak about together becomes our shared understanding of reality. The implication is therefore that conversation can play a crucial role in not only *creating* a reality but also continually re-shaping or *re-creating* a shared reality.

Given the importance ascribed in this project to social constructionism I think it helpful to further explore its nature and explain its relevance to my understanding of conversation.

Defining 'social constructionism' is itself a challenge. Lock and Strong take the view that it is 'broad church' but with some 'expansive tenets that hold it together' (2010:6). These include a focus on meaning and understanding as central to human activity with both having their source in social interaction. Furthermore such interactions are embedded in real-time socio-cultural processes like conversation. They point out that most social constructionists tend to reject the notion that people have unique characteristics that can be objectively identified and take the view that people define themselves and act as 'socially constructed participants in their shared lives'(2010:7).

Alongside these somewhat abstract ideas they argue that social constructionists tend to take a critical perspective on what happens in the social realm with a desire to uncover how, often unseen and unspoken, relational politics work and change them to make the world a more just place. The thrust of the argument is that the influence of Karl Marx in modern social constructionist thought cannot be denied. An example of this is Marx's' Theses on Feuerbach (1845) where he develops his view that mans' social being determines individual and collective consciousness.

As an organisational change consultant adopting an Organisation Development (OD) approach this emphasis on collective consciousness resonates. OD comes with a generally accepted value set that includes the idea that OD will support democracy and participation by organisational members and act in a way that encourages equity and fairness (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011) . These can reasonably be interpreted as political attitudes which offer challenge to those who perceive themselves as powerful. This suggests that holding a social constructionist position in relation to organisational power structures is not an entirely neutral position. An extension of this argument is to acknowledge that to encourage, facilitate or host socio-cultural processes like conversation is not a neutral act but one that brings the consultant into the political realm regardless of how they may choose to present the benefits of conversation.

There is value in undertaking a more detailed exploration of social constructionism as it relates to conversation. The work of Edmund Husserl and his contribution to the development of

phenomenology is a helpful starting point. Phenomenology is 'the attempt to describe our experience directly, as it is, separate from its origins and development and from any explanations that might be given by historians, sociologists or psychologists' (Mautner 1999: 464). Of particular relevance is Husserl's notion that there is a unity between the mind and that of which it is conscious. In other words it is not possible to separate out the subject from the object because the idea that you can do that is itself a socially constructed one. When applied to the human experience of conversation participants are both conscious of the other person but also aware that what is happening in the conversation is between them, not 'owned' by one or the other party.

Lock and Strong (2010) suggest that present day social constructionism can be tracked from Husserl through to the more recent work of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Schutz. Schutz is of particular interest given his insight that (paraphrased by Lock and Strong):

'Our bodies are direct expressions of ourselves –our inner lives- to each other, as a given of our human experience of the world. We are not solitary ,doubting, reflective individuals shut off from the inner lives of others (though with language we might construct an image of ourselves as like that): we have a given active grasp of each other's consciousness that informs our own right from the start' (2010:43)

If this is the case then conversation becomes a means by which this consciousness is reinforced and supported through life. Thomas Luckmann collaborated with Schultz and then Peter Berger with whom he originally published in 1966 the influential book 'The Social Construction of Reality' (1966).

Some quotes which give a flavour of their thinking:

'Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world..... The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these' (1966:1).

'Among the multiple realities there is one that presents itself as the reality par excellence. This is the reality of everyday life' (1966:2).

'The reality of everyday life further presents itself to me as an inter-subjective world, a world that I share with others. This inter-subjectivity sharply differentiates everyday life from other realities of which I am conscious. I am alone in the world of my dreams, but I know that the world of everyday life is as real to others as it is to myself. Indeed, I cannot exist in everyday life without continually interacting and communicating with others'(1966:3).

'The most important experience of others takes place in the face-to-face situation, which is the prototypical case of social interaction. All other cases are derivatives of it..... Nevertheless, no other form of social relating can reproduce the plenitude of symptoms of subjectivity present in the face-to-face situation. Only here is the other's subjectivity emphatically "close." All other forms of relating to the other are, in varying degrees, "remote"' (1966:6).

These quotes demonstrate a development in social constructionist thinking from abstract theorising to a more concrete and arguably more understandable set of constructs for, amongst others, those grappling with the theory and practice of OD. They resonate with my own perspective that social constructionism offers practical help to the organisational consultant and should not just be regarded as esoteric theory. What can also be appreciated about Berger and Luckmanns' work is their recognition that being 'close' to another person is a fundamental aspect of inter-subjectivity. This connects with my earlier assertion that conversation, face-face conversation in particular, is an experience of being intimate and it is this intimacy in my view that leads to creativity and the potential for change.

The work of George Herbert Mead is cited by some OD practitioners and theorists as contributing to their thinking (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011; French and Bell 1999; Handy 1981). I am drawn to his assertion that:

'Meaning arises and lies within the field of the relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behaviour of this organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture'(Mead 1934: 76).

In less technical phraseology Mead argues that meaning occurs through the social relationship between people. This chimes with broader social constructionist thinking that meaning occurs between people and is not held by one person alone. Nor indeed can it be objectively verified by a third party. What matters therefore in my understanding of effective OD practice is that organisational 'spaces', or in Meads' terms, 'fields' are created or opened up that enable people to make meaning with one another rather than someone else's meaning being imposed upon them. Bakhtin (1981) makes the point that such meaning making processes are recursive, what is said by one person carries with it meaning that was conveyed by another and reverberates through successive interactions. Each utterance embodies previous ones.

Conversation, in an organisational context, can be viewed through a social constructionist 'lens' as:

- a means by which human realities are constructed (or 'developed' to use a construct more closely connected with Organisation Development).
- one expression of relational politics between individuals and groups (an organisation being one socially constructed context in which this may take place).
- involving our physical presence in the world and our consciousness of it and each other (including our presence in organisations).
- a way in which a desire for a better world (of work) may be voiced and shared.
- an experience in which people share and create ideas not owned by an individual but essentially shared by all.
- a manifestation of the inter-subjectivity, or shared life, of all people (expressed also in collective work efforts).
- a space for meaning making controlled by individuals (rather than having to accept the meanings suggested or imposed by others).

Part 3 Exploring the inter-relationship between conversation, social constructionism and organisations

What is the relationship between 'conversation' and 'organisation'?

There is a body of literature which locates the notion of 'organisation' in a social constructionist frame. For example Brown et al (2005), drawing on the work of key constructionist thinkers Berger and Luckmann (1966) contend that organisations are 'Organizations are constructed through acts of languaging located in social processes' and that 'Organizations are pluralistic and polyphonic accomplishments in which multiple and diverse understandings and language practices occur simultaneously and sequentially' (2005:3). The focus of their research in the Laskarina travel company was on the role played by narrative in shaping identities and maintaining power structures. They comment in their research conclusions that 'These narratives are important means of stimulating reflexive conversations that promote shared understandings from which processes of organization emerge' (2005: 17). This insight places conversation (and narratives) at the heart of both what makes an organisation an organisation but also implies that organising is a continuous process of change.

Ford (1999) focuses on conversation and asserts that 'Not only are conversations the process through which we construct reality, but they are also the product of that construction: conversations become the reality'. He goes on to argue that 'Within a conversational context, organizations can be

understood as networks of conversations constituting a variety of first and second-order realities. That is, organizations are networks of conversations rather than have networks of conversations. Conversations are and provide the very texture of organizations' (Ford 1999: 485). It is a stance with which I align myself in this project. Change in organisations from this perspective is not something that 'happens' but rather is the consequence, according to Ford, of a 'network of conversations where realities are continually being constructed, producing and managing change becomes a matter of shifting conversations' (1999: 488). Earlier work by Ford and colleagues (1995) suggest that there are four types of conversation that support conversational change:

1. Initiative
2. Understanding
3. Performance
4. Closure.

Whilst this structure has some appeal I remain to be convinced that it is possible to manage conversations across all four categories in sequential order as they suggest should be possible. It does however offer an interesting question about the amenability of conversation to being managed and who has, or can take the power, to manage it?

Shaw (2002) takes a perspective with which I have greater sympathy, when she argues that if 'organising is understood essentially as a conversational process, an inescapably self-organising process of participating in the spontaneous emergence of continuity and change, then we need a rather different way of thinking about any kind of organisational practice that focusses on change' (2002:11). What particularly resonates for me is the perspective that 'organising', a verb, rather than 'the organisation', a noun takes centre stage. Conversation is in my view an on-going process in organisational contexts as is organising. The term 'the organisation' implies an entity that is fixed when in fact it is a social construction still in the process of being constructed and re-constructed through conversational processes.

Social constructionism and optimism about the future of organisations

Social constructionist thinking carries an implicit optimistic assumption, partly grounded in its Marxist influences, that conversation can create a collective future reality that is different, and hopefully better, than the past. This means that it has influenced and subsequently been adopted by, for example, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an under-pinning theory. AI is a set of practices and processes that aims to encourage people in organisational and other social contexts, to build collectively through multiple conversations a better future based on a deep understanding of the

best of their past experiences (Lewis, Passmore and Cantore 2008). Similar but more subtle influences can be noted in the participative values espoused by Organisational Development practitioners. These reflect a confidence that by adopting an OD approach better organisational futures will become a reality (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011). It is unsurprising therefore that the role conversation can play in organisational development is of interest to OD practitioners and academics.

This brief discussion has underlined the intimate relationship in social constructionist thought between conversation and organisation. There are other dimensions of organisation that also are amenable to interpretation through a constructionist lens including structure, culture and power which will be considered later in this chapter (Jabri 2012).

[A theological footnote

There is a theological perspective on conversation that influences my thinking and practice. In Genesis 2 of the Judeo-Christian bible we read that ‘the Lord God said “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper for him” (1979:5). This text encourages us to consider the importance of being in relationship to others because it has the potential to both help us deal with the human difficulty of being alone and help to engage in life and work.

In the gospel of John in the New Testament we read of Jesus being described in the following terms ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (1979:1063). This text gives a flavour of a theological argument that God is in conversation with the world through his Son, the Word, and that this is a creative relationship. Space precludes a more detailed exploration of this theme although it has a bearing on my own personal understanding of social constructionism.]

Part 4 Engaging with the literature on consulting

What is consulting?

My working definition in this project focuses on consulting as a contracted, helping relationship in a business or organisational context. This reflects to an extent Scheins’ (2009) view that consulting is a form of helping relationship. His perspective is that the helper can fulfil a number of core helping roles:

1. The Expert Resource Role

This is the more conventionally accepted role in a management consulting relationship. The consultant is perceived to offer the client information or an expert service which currently is unavailable to the client. This reflects the generally understood role of the consultant (Pearsall and Hanks et al. 2003). The consultant is assumed to hold information that will help make a particular situation better if applied by the client correctly. The assumption that contracting a consultant will help is built upon a set of beliefs by the client that they have correctly diagnosed their needs and have accurately assessed the capability and knowledge base of the consultant.

2. The Doctor Role

Schein (2009) suggests that this is an extension of the Expert Role. The expectation is that the consultant will be able to diagnose and subsequently prescribe, or even take, actions the client should take. It is clear that in this type of role power is handed over to the consultant either intentionally or by the helplessness of the client who appears to be in need of rescuing. In organisational consulting this, Schein argues, is a very risky role to assume. Aside from whether an outsider looking into an organisation can properly diagnose what is going on, it is far from certain that the client will take the consultants prescription. The dependency by the client on the consultant also potentially creates a dynamic that may not help the client sustain changes by themselves in the longer term.

3. The Process Consultant Role.

Schein is most well-known amongst Organisational Development consultants for his development of the Process Consultant role in the literature so it is unsurprising that he identifies it as the most useful role, particularly at the start of a relationship (Schein 1995; Schein 1999). By paying attention to what he calls the communication process the consultant can help create an environment where the client will trust more and therefore reveal more about what is actually happening from his or her perspective. Trust is built in this way and Schein argues that inter-personal trust is essential to an effective helping relationship.

At the heart of this approach is the belief that the client needs to be encouraged to remain pro-active and continue to own the problem for themselves rather than handing it over to the consultant. What is particularly of interest is Schein's assertion that the consultant in this role should take the stance of 'humble inquiry' (Schein 2009: 62). The implication is that inquiry by the consultant is fundamental to the establishment of the helping relationship.

Scheins' typology is helpful for a number of reasons. Firstly, it highlights the expectations of clients in a consulting relationship rather than just considering the consultants perspective-always a difficult balance. Secondly, it explores a number of roles that a consultant may play, and need to play, in order to secure a working relationship. In doing so it draws attention to the complexity and drama of the relationship. This introduces a new metaphor to help understand the consulting relationship. Thirdly, it resonates strongly with personal experience and provides a depth of insight often lacking in more technical descriptions of consulting practice which tend to focus on skills rather than attitudes. Fourthly, it focuses on the relational aspects of consulting relationship with inter-personal trust and a sense of shared power at its heart. This helpful links with the earlier definition of what people might experience in the course of a conversation. Finally, Scheins' exhortation to undertake 'humble inquiry' as integral to the relationship links through to my interest in inquiry as a vehicle for change in organisations and collective inquiry as a means of developing consulting skills.

If consulting is about helping then what is it, in organisational development contexts, actually helping people to do?

The following quotation is a useful starting point in responding to this question:

'Consistent with humanistic and democratic values, organization development believes that change efforts should be client-centered, not practitioner-centered. This expands on humanistic and democratic values and assumptions and asserts that human systems are capable of self-initiated change and development when provided with appropriate processes and supportive conditions. *The role of the OD practitioner is therefore to partner with the client system in self-directed change efforts operating from a third-party change agent role.* In carrying out this role, the practitioner uses knowledge and skills about how social systems function and change in order to support, educate, facilitate, and guide the client system in its work. The role of the practitioner in client-centered consulting is neither to impose nor enforce an unwanted change agenda on the client system nor to furnish "expert" answers to the client's issues'(Marshak 2006: 17).

The italics highlight the observation by Marshak that the focus of the role is about self-directed change and that the consultants reason for being employed is to partner in that change. The change itself is focused not just on the organisation but the whole of the client system, which can include customers and stakeholders in the broadest sense. The aspect of system change that the OD consultant is primarily concerned with is the social system (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011).

There are some important aspects of organisation development consulting highlighted by Marshaks' perspective. Firstly, the role of a consultant as a partner. This complements Schein's three roles given that it strengthens the sense of equality to be aspired to in the consultant-client relationship. The image is of standing shoulder to shoulder with a client to achieve transparency about agendas and needs. A commonly voiced experience is that clients rarely expressly acknowledge consultants as a partner during the course of a relationship.

It is worth noting the confusion in the language around *organisational* consulting and changing the client *system*. Which is it the consultant is to be concerned with –the organisation or the system or both? From experience the consultants' contract is with the contracting awarding organisation whilst project briefs tend to include systemic issues that go beyond organisational boundaries. This ambiguity and the difficulty in defining exactly who the consultant is intended to help can prompt, a degree of anxiety for both parties. The client is investing organisational resources in the change programme therefore wants the focus to be on the organisation in terms of time and effort. The client system goes beyond the organisations and change in the wider stakeholder system may have much better long terms benefits for the clients organisation. However rarely do clients see themselves as part of a wider system to the extent that they are willing to invest in changing that system.

Marshaks' definition reflects a purist perspective on consulting relationships. His use of the term 'third party' encourages the thought that it is possible for someone to be a third party in a social system. Arguably from the first point of contact a consultant is already part of the social system. It may not at the outset be a very significant element but, nonetheless, they have entered the system.

The language the consultant and the client use in their relationship starts to construct experiences and perceptions of roles and relationships. The implication of Marshaks' perspective is that OD consulting should ideally be conducted by someone who is external to the system and to an extent remains so. I think this quite traditional perspective carries with it a number of assumptions including a belief that an 'outsider' is far more able to see what needs to change (a diagnostic approach?) as well as achieve more as an agent (or irritant!) of change than someone from within the organisation. This indicates that any theory of OD consulting adopted by a practitioner or inquirer is probably closely connected to the assumptions they carry about how change happens in organisational contexts.

This point is reinforced by Marshaks' view that there is knowledge the consultant brings about how social systems work that can guide it and help educate its members. This is arguable if the

consultants' perspective is that the social system itself knows how to function given its context and therefore has the knowledge in its members to re-create itself. If this is the case then the role of the consultant is to help the system surface existing knowledge in order for it to learn and co-construct a new system.

If an OD practitioner chooses to be primarily concerned with supporting change in a client's social system what existing frameworks can inform their practice?

Arguably the whole body of OD literature offers multiple frameworks, or lenses, through which to perceive the social system and then act upon, or with, it. One example is Kurt Lewin (1947) in the 1940's with research into group dynamics. Others include Douglas McGregor (1960) and group dynamic theory in organisational contexts, Richard Beckhard (1969) and enabling culture change, Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (1950) and principles of general systems theory and Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn (1966) who applied them to organisational dynamics. This is an abbreviated list to give an indication of focus of the literature. Cheung-Judge and Holbeche offer a helpful typology of OD theories which they categorise under five headings:

1. Systems theory
2. Action Research theory
3. Change theories: Field theory, Group Dynamics and three-step Model of Change
4. Social Constructionism: Appreciative Inquiry
5. Complexity theories (2011: 28).

They acknowledge the diversity of this list and suggest that each OD practitioner should deepen their understanding of each domain. This is of course a worthwhile aspiration but, for a range of reasons, I, and I suspect other practitioners, carry with us bias and pre-understanding that leans us towards some domains and away from others. As a result practitioners invest time and energy in espousing some theories and less in others.

A weakness in this list is that it does not acknowledge the difference between espoused theory and theory-in-use (Argyris and Schon 1974). This is important because of a tension in OD practice between choosing the role of helper or expert in change. In their thinking a consultant may espouse the helper role whilst also wanting to demonstrate mastery of theory with a client to gain credibility and build trust. This tension is easier to handle if the consultant practices offering to undertake an organisational diagnosis followed by a set of interventions. This is instead of a more social constructionist stance where the consultant sees themselves as an enabler of sense-making and

change at all stages in their contact and interaction with the client. The first approach gives plenty of opportunity to demonstrate what Schein (2009) calls the expert role as the consultant sets out their expertise as part of the planning the diagnostic phase whilst using the second approach the consultant stands back and looks to see and feel what emerges from the opening conversations before then planning action together with client. In theory this means less display of expert knowledge and more immediate relational work. This is an example of one tension consultants need to learn to manage.

In the first chapter reference was made to a debate about the future practice of OD that has developed during the last four years. This debate was in part originally prompted by the publication of Bushe and Marshak's (2009) seminal paper 'Re-visioning OD: Diagnostic and Dialogic Premises and Patterns of Practice'. Both are respected OD academics and consultants and argued that what was being experienced in the practice of OD was a 'bifurcation' of traditional diagnostic approaches to OD practice and a new 'dialogic' set of approaches. These approaches were, in their view, under-represented in the academic literature because they emerged from practice and were rarely published in respected journals with supporting theoretical groundings. A counter-argument is that no such bifurcation is taking place but rather the continuing development of OD within the spirit and values of its early theorists and practitioners. Indeed to create such a dichotomy is to ignore the reality that OD practitioners can, and often do, work along a spectrum of practice drawing theory and practices which support the need of the client at that point in time (Cox 2009; Bartunek and Woodman 2010; Hutton and Liefoghe 2011).

Providing a neat definition of Dialogic OD is a challenge. Bushe and Marshak describe it variously as a paradigm in which:

- 'The change process emphasizes changing the conversations that normally take place in the system.
- The purpose of inquiry is to surface, legitimate, and/or learn from the variety of perspectives, cultures, and/or narratives in the system.
- The change process results in new images, narratives, texts, and socially constructed realities that affect how people think and act.
- The change process is consistent with traditional organization development values of collaboration, free and informed choice, and capacity building in the client system'.

(2009:15)

This attempt at a definition comes close to matching the earlier summary of how conversation in an organisational context can be viewed through a social constructionist 'lens'. The conclusion I draw is that the theory and practices of Dialogic OD are a practical expression of some social constructionist frameworks applied to organisational change.

Are there any other relevant social constructionist perspectives that can contribute OD theory?

It is important to note that social constructionism does not focus solely on the part played by conversation. Other strands of thought within the field also have the potential to make a contribution to inter-connect with the notion of conversational consulting.

For example the work of Erving Goffman (1959) the sociologist who explored how people, in his view, 'stage manage' their interactions in everyday life. Lock and Strong (2010) suggest that there are three inter-related themes in Goffman's writing : performing social relations, frames and talk (2010:204). Goffman argues that in performing social relations people deliberately adopt different selves that fit with the social context they experience. This is in part a response to the behaviours of others and enables people to fit within the accepted behaviours of the particular context.

The idea of 'frames' had a particular social meaning for Goffman. People he perceived, in order to relate, need some shared definition and purpose which helps organise their involvement with one another. Of particular relevance is Goffman's perspective on the role of talk which, he saw as helping create the frame in which roles may be played. He observed that prior to 'talk' there may be a series of non-verbal gestures which help confirm to each person the social conventions that fit with the context (Goffman 1959).

This brief summary does not do full justice to the intricacies of Goffman's work but resonate strongly. For example, if I meet a client at their office I am usually asked to take a seat and wait. In accepting that I will wait and sit I am signalling that I understand the nuances of this 'frame'. The client comes out to meet me and welcomes me with a formal handshake, another important social signal and action. We then engage in social talk about the journey, the weather and other seemingly irrelevant topics. Such talk however is a prelude to a more formal business conversation.

Goffman's perspectives prompt a number of questions about the roles played by consultants and clients and how conversation, fits or does not fit with the social 'frame'. Maybe, for some clients, conversation does not fit their expectation of the social context. They want to explain what they need and ask the consultant to accept this and respond without either challenge or exploratory dialogue. So a conversational consultant brings their own set of understandings, pre-understandings and biases about nature of the interaction whilst the client potentially brings another. In working

with colleagues I have noted sometimes quite marked differences between how I and how they approach establishing a client relationship at the outset.

A conclusion of relevance to this project is to note that conversation operates in a social context and not solely in the dynamic of one-one relationships. This sociological dimension opens up new areas for inquiry and reflection. A sociological perspective suggests that meaning can also be shaped by, and in, the social context of our interactions, of which conversation can be just one element. I further develop this critique of taking an overly conversationally focused take on social constructionism towards the end of this chapter.

Continuing this theme Anthony Giddens is known for his sociological and political writings and is said to have influenced the development of an ideological basis for 'New Labour' during the 1990's. He has suggested the notion of 'structuration' which is the view that 'people through their interactions create the larger social structures that govern their lives' (Lock and Strong 2010: 215). Giddens' argument is that human thought and action is contextually shaped by and, at the same time, is actively shaping the context through routines or normative structures. The implication is that 'The Organisation' is a part of our social context that impacts our thinking about the world and, at the same time, is a construct that we can, and indeed actively do, shape and change. This is helpful in that it challenges theorists and practitioners to re-consider our understanding of 'The Organisation' as a fixed entity. Instead, we can open ourselves, and others including clients, to the possibility that the routine way of viewing the 'The Organisation' is more flexible and amenable to change than prevailing narratives tend to suggest. At the same time we can helpfully acknowledge that 'The Organisation' has also influenced the way we see it. In other-words 'The Organisation' is a socially constructed entity subject to collective definition and re-definition.

Of interest to this project is the earlier work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault and, in particular, his exploration of how present forms of knowledge emerge. He suggests such forms, are found in anonymous emergent frameworks and practices of discourse (Mautner 1999). Later Foucault is said to have seen discourse as located in a wider context of non-discursive practices where power is used to discipline individuals. In this way people become subjects and are required to behave in particular ways that are considered acceptable. In his later years he saw power as something that always involved resistance and that a key aspect of power in social contexts is the desire by those with power to get people to accept who they should be. Resistance is, in part, the struggle to refuse an imposed identity.

Whilst the subject of power is one to which I will return, the notion of discourse, particularly organisational discourse, is of growing interest to organisational theorists. Grant and Marshak define discourse 'as a set of interrelated texts that, along with the related practices of text production, dissemination, and consumption, brings an object or idea into being' (2011:208). To summarise their argument:

- Discourses are both integral to and constructive of organisational dynamics and change.
- Discourses are created and supported via socially constructive processes that involve the negotiation of meaning among different organizational stakeholders with different views and interests.
- Dominant discourses are seen to "rule in" certain ways of talking about a particular phenomenon that are deemed as acceptable, legitimate, and intelligible while also "ruling out," limiting, or otherwise restricting the way key actors talk about or conduct themselves in relation to the phenomenon.
- Demonstrating the role of power in establishing or challenging prevailing discourses is important to understanding organisational change.
- Discourses are embodied in texts, which come in a wide variety of genres, including written documents, speech acts, pictures, and symbols.
- Discourses do not exist or have meaning independent of context, even as they also create context.
- Organisational discourses and their related practices of consumption, production, and distribution comprise of sets of interrelated texts that can react to draw in and transform other discourses.

(adapted from 2011: 208-209)

It is of interest to reflect on how their argument applies generic social constructionist insights into the specific context of this project. What I find particularly helpful is both their definition of conversation and its relationship to discourse. Conversation is defined as:

'A set of texts that are produced as part of a dialogue among two or more people and that are linked together both temporally and rhetorically' (2011:209).

And:

'... conversations exist in a recursive relationship in which existing discourses provide resources to actors who engage in conversations that in turn produce, reproduce, and transform those discourses' (2011:209).

Grant and Marshaks' explicit overarching theory, which incorporates conversation as one text alongside symbols, pictures, written documents and speech, is that:

'Discourse is constructive and shapes behaviour by establishing, reinforcing, and also challenging the prevailing premises and schemas that guide how organizational actors interpret experience. Therefore, changing the existing dominant discourses will support or lead to organizational and behavioural change' (2011:213).

In an earlier paper the authors discuss what they call the emerging 'New OD' (which they now refer to as Dialogic OD) and how their studies of organisational discourse provide theoretical support for practices of OD that are based around social constructionist principles (2008). In particular they highlighted new thinking about organisational change, power and discourse and the importance of context. A challenge they posed to practitioners of any form of OD was to recognise and work with power in organisational contexts. They argued that the underlying values of OD tended to encourage practitioners to assume that everyone in an organisation has an altruistic concern for the organisation to succeed for the common good. This was misguided in their view and led to ineffective change work by OD specialists who wore 'rose coloured spectacles' that hide obvious power discourses. On reflection I wonder if it is possible to hold both views as paradoxes or polarities (Johnson 1992). Can organisational discourse continually move between dominance of the power discourse and the collective, equal voice discourse or is the power discourse always all-pervading and dominant?

[What I find interesting is that this project is part of a discourse about the nature of organisational change. It is 'in the flow' of what is happening and is affected by engagement with other 'texts' and also seeks to shape and change the discourse. I note the fact that the project aspires to develop a framework which is a construct straight out of Foucault's thinking about how knowledge emerges in the form of frameworks. I note that in doing so I can have power to include and exclude from the framework. This in itself will shape old discourses and perhaps create new ones.]

What criticisms of social constructionism are helpful in developing a framework for conversational consulting?

From what has been written so far it may be possible to conclude that social constructionist constructs in themselves are sufficient to support the practice of conversational consulting. Cromby

and Nightingale (1999) suggest that they may not be. Specifically they argue that three constructs, embodiment, materiality and power are relevant to any application of social constructionism. Firstly, our physical bodies play a role in who we are and how we are with one another the world. These physical limitations as well as our mental ones shape our engagement in conversations. Our bodies themselves, by our presence in a room, speak into and shape conversation in ways that we are often unaware. Secondly, materiality creates constraints and opportunities for us as human beings. Our conversations are, they say, rooted in a real material world. We cannot get away from the material elements that surround us. Thirdly, they suggest that both embodiment and materiality are intertwined in power. Our bodies may be attacked and materials may be withheld from us in a way that demonstrates we have less power than others. Power, they argue, is a construct which divides social constructionists. Some believe that power is a social construct whilst others like Foucault say it shapes discourse.

Danziger (1997) elaborates this argument when he distinguishes between what he calls 'light' and 'dark' versions of social constructionism. The light version proposes that power is embedded in the discourse and open to shaping and re-shaping by conversation. The 'dark' version adopts Foucault's position and proposes that power relationships influence or dictate the discourse that gains dominance or is suppressed.

In conversational consulting power is often encountered in its various forms seeking to shape conversation by, for example, dictating what questions will be the focus of a conversation or who is or is not to be invited to an event. So yes the 'dark' version has some resonance. However the 'light' version also has validity. Power relationships can be upturned through conversation. So it may be possible to hold the view that both can be true. A possible implication is that working with organisational change the consultant should be prepared to work with both 'light' and 'dark' and specifically the action of the movement between the two positions.

Another criticism of social constructionism is its failure to develop a fully explored theory about the 'self'. Nightingale and Cromby (1999) suggest that social constructionism focus on the 'social' neglects the lived out experience of the individual such that personal experiences become 'invisible'. This links to the notion that we have bodies and what happens to our bodies combined with our material circumstances also have value in and of themselves. The conclusion I reach is that within the different modes of social construction lie a diverse range of core beliefs about the nature of reality and the human experience in particular. In the 'light' mode with which I have most affinity in

my organisational change practice, the social constructionist position takes centre stage. At the same time in my lived experience, embodied individuals do influence and are influenced by power. Expressed another way, I, as a person experience a world that is external from my 'self' that is both tangible and also socially constructed with my active collaboration.

In espousing social constructionism as an under-pinning philosophy the conversational consulting practitioner should be aware of this range of beliefs and equip themselves to move amongst them. Such flexibility may well be one of the defining characteristics of practice.

Part 5 Reflections on the literature

In this part I choose to step back from close mental engagement with the literature and take a more reflective and reflexive stance to explore emergent themes, questions, complexities and possible contradictions. Engaging with the literature has been not only an 'academic' exercise but, given this is a Doctorate of Professional Studies it has also been a professional practice experience. The space I now create offers me the opportunity to weave the two together. I like Gillie Bolton's observation:

'Reflection and reflexivity critique anything taken for granted. We need to walk away from things to gain perspective. Why? how? what? who? where? and when? need to be asked of everything, constantly'(Bolton 2010: 48).

She also encourages me to see reflection as 'a state of mind and an on-going constituent of practice' and a way of bringing 'things into the open'(2010: 3). Likewise her perspective on reflexivity challenges me to consider some of the ethical dimensions of my practice. She talks, for example, of the process of reflexivity as a way of enabling me to 'stand outside the self to examine how, seemingly unwittingly, we are involved in creating social or professional structures counter to our espoused values....we become aware of how our own behaviour is complicit in forming organisational practices which, for example, marginalise groups or exclude individuals' (2010: xix).

This approach connects with the aspiration I held at the start of my engagement with the literature that it would be a generative process building on past scholarship (Shulman 1999). In my experience reflection, reflexivity and generativity (the emergence of new thinking and emotions) are intimately interwoven.

The following are my reflections in no particular order:

- The literature on bias and pre-understanding at the start of this review opened my eyes to the high levels of bias I carry around with regard to the idea of 'conversational consulting'. I tend to view my practice and the questions/problems present to me through this particular lens. I have a tendency to offer clients conversational consulting as the only possible way forward. It is the domain of both my greatest sense of competence as well as one that resonates with my values.
- I can be quite rigid in my own definition of what is or is not involved in a 'real' conversation in an organisational context. The literature on organisational discourse challenged me to think of conversation as but one way in which a discourse is developed. Texts and symbols, talk and language all have a contribution to make alongside conversation. So, rather than focussing solely on conversation as a means to create change, attention to the broader elements of discourse alongside conversation may offer more effective help to clients
- The richness of the ideas contained in social constructionism surprised me. They highlighted for me that taking a social constructionist approach to organisational change can mean adopting a range of approaches of which supporting organisational conversations is but one. This means that practice can encompass a range of skills beyond hosting conversations. It suggests therefore new areas of learning and practice to be explored.
- I am struck by the confusion and ambiguity in some the terms that are used in field. For example Organisational Development literature tends to focus on a set of reasonably well defined methods that are intended to be applied to organisations, in collaboration with clients, by OD consultants in a planned manner led by the top of the organisation. It carries a set of values alongside the belief that such an intervention will in itself make change happen. New or Dialogic OD, whilst described as a bifurcation from conventional OD (Bushe and Marshak 2009) still broadly sees itself as working within the value set of OD. What is markedly different is it's espousal of participative design and willingness to support emergent change. It also tends to have less interest in diagnosing what happened in the past and greater pre-occupation with what might emerge in the future.

Organisational Change is also term that appears in practice and the literature. My sense is that Organisational Change approaches can encompass OD methods but, in practice, include more operational re-design processes with a higher level of top-down control. It is

less influenced by OD values and contains a broader church of change practitioners. Change Management is yet another term that appears regularly and adds to the confusing picture.

One thing seems clear to me is that Organisation Development tends to limit itself, in either its new or old forms to considering development in organisation contexts. This was confirmed to me in recent (April 2013) personal correspondence with Gervase Bushe and Robert Marshak who, in response to a question about the limits of the definition of Dialogic OD for a new book in which I will be a collaborating author, were categorical in their assertion that :

‘We are not going to attempt to address community or societal change. The book is about organizational change. Dialogic OD is being used by societal change agents and social change examples can be used to illustrate organizational issues but we acknowledge that successful social change practice is sufficiently different from organizational change practices to warrant a separate treatment’ (2013:1).

Interestingly they acknowledge that Dialogic OD has relevance outside organisations but argue that there is something very different about both. On what grounds do they make this assertion? It is not clear. My own sense is that the term ‘organisation’ is difficult especially as new forms of organising emerge. These can be global networked organisations or local ones whose complex supply chains may make it difficult to detect where one organisation stops and another begins. My impression of social constructionist literature is that it generally does not confine itself to bounded entities like organisations but rather emphasises more social systems of relating that connect people across what are socially constructed boundaries.

This extended reflection sparks questions about ‘conversational consulting’ including:

- Does the phrase ‘conversational consulting’ confuse or clarify? Would using ‘Dialogic Consulting’ help? (Trying to explain what I offer to clients as a consultant remains a difficulty that I have yet to fully overcome)
- Where does conversational consulting fit in a discourse about organisational change that is clearly very active?

- Is conversation really the focus of the construct I am calling conversational consulting or is it a metaphor for broader social constructionist approaches to change?
 - Does the term 'consulting' narrow or widen the relevance of conversational approaches to more broader systemic approaches to change?
 - What does the ambiguity and intricacy in the language tell us about the field of professional practice?
 - Will it be helpful to revise the term 'conversational consulting' to help clarity and transparency for clients and their organisations?
 - Is social constructionism something upon which to base consulting practice or is it itself a social construction that points to more broader and perhaps more complex understandings of how we create our social realities?
- I found myself unsettled by the discussion on power. I prefer to approach clients believing the best about them and assuming that I am working with them largely outside organisational power dynamics. In practice I think I am impacted by power and respond to clients accordingly. My experience is that clients in leadership roles see conversational approaches as potentially impacting on their power and either accept the risk or reject a conversational approach. I like to think that my stance with clients supports the engagement of the majority in change that affects them and so would judge myself to be operating to high ethical standards. In practice clients and I often shape the questions that act as the focus for the work and so arguably are giving an impression of participation whilst acting differently. This I judge to be a weaker ethical stance (For the purposes of this discussion I use Nancy-Jane Lees' definition of ethics 'A set of rules or guidelines which influence behaviour on a societal and individual basis. They underpin notions of what is right or wrong and are derived from the norms and values shared within societies' (Lee 2009:144).
 - Is working with conversation really inclusive of all or does it exclude some? This is an ethical question that my engagement with the literature has sparked. I think a verbal relational process will inevitably exclude those for whom relating is complex and difficult. It may exclude those who prefer to listen and reflect rather than speak. Those people who have physical disabilities (hearing and speaking issues) may also find conversation problematic. There may also be cross-cultural issues and power dynamics in conversational processes that serve to exclude or hinder conversation in organisational contexts. In an organisational world that increasingly relies on electronic forms of communication for implementing change what of those who are not able to meet for face-face conversations because of

distance or other practical reasons. How do conversational approaches include, or exclude people in these circumstances?

These ethical issues prompt questions both for organisations and consultants about how to work effectively to achieve maximum involvement in the discourse if not the conversations themselves.

- Having just completed teaching a 6 week OD module (May 2013) as part of a MSc. degree in Human Resource Management I have become very conscious that teaching and engaging with social constructionist writings and constructs is not always easy for teacher or for students. That is also my experience when trying to explain it to clients. Explaining more conventional OD approaches is more straightforward. This does suggest that some people may be excluded from working with social constructionism because of language and overly complex constructs. Ethically this means the practitioner needs to consider how to adopt learning processes which enable participation as well as clarifying language and ideas. In OD consulting practice, whilst there are no ethical standards formally set down for practitioners Cheung-Judge and Holbeche contend that some practice guidelines are informally held by many OD consultants. Those that are specifically relevant to working with, and explaining social constructionist approaches are the:

- Expectation that consultant work collaboratively with clients and jointly choose interventions
- Role of helper rather than 'guru' implying that consultants will also explain approaches rather than instruct the client
- Commitment of the consultant to lifelong learning and supporting the learning processes of the client

(Adapted from Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011: 20)

Taking this reflexive and reflective stance has opened up new avenues of thought and potential inquiry. It has also enabled me to begin to shift in how I think about the notion of conversational consulting at both theoretical and practice levels. Reflecting on the ethical implications of taking a conversational approach to organisational change offers challenges to my practice that I will need to take into account as I progress.

Part 6 Understanding the skills needed to practice Conversational Consulting

This part focuses on the second aspect of my first project aim:

Project Aim 1: Develop my understanding of conversational consulting and *the skills I need to practice it effectively*.

I will draw from the literature review and my reflections to outline an initial schema of skills that potentially enable conversational consulting to be effectively practiced. These will be refined as research data is analysed in subsequent parts of this report. There are therefore a number of caveats that apply:

- This is not a complete list of all the required skills. It is a work in progress.
- I have not attributed any ranking to the skills.
- I have not attempted a classification of the skills.
- The skills chosen also inevitably reflect to an extent some of my own practitioner biases and the various lenses through which I survey the consulting landscape.
- A degree of repetition and overlap can be expected given the inter-relationships between different theoretical positions.

The definition of 'skill' I will use is 'the ability to do something well' (Pearsall and Hanks et al. 2003: 1658). The word 'competence' is often used interchangeably in the literature and is defined as 'the ability to do something successfully' (2003: 352). For example, Peter Block (2000) writes of technical, inter-personal and consulting skills whilst Cheung-Judge and Holbeche (2011) refer to six categories of OD competences including conceptual, ethics and values, technical, process, self-awareness and self- confidence.

Given the social constructionist underpinnings of the conversational consulting construct it is worth recognising that when referring to 'skills' or 'competences' I am referring to attributes and activities that are themselves socially constructed. It is helpful to apply Berger and Luckmanns' idea of embodiment in this context. They argue that:

'Because they are historical products of human activity, all socially constructed universes change and the change is brought about by the concrete actions of human beings....reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always *embodied*, that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality' (1966: 134).

So, if I follow this argument, I can argue that skills in a social context are socially constructed concepts that when practiced contribute to the process of shaping reality.

Potential Conversational Consulting Concepts and Skills

Concept	Associated skill(s)
Pre-understanding (Odman 1985)	Awareness of personal knowledge and assumptions about the relevance of that knowledge to each consulting assignment.
Bounded Rationality (Simon 1982)	Ability to recognise that consulting actions may be often involve taking short-cuts based on past experience and client (and personal) constraints.
Emotions (Kaufman 1999)	Ability to recognise the impact of emotions on decisions by client and self.
Conversation (Cantore 2004; Lewis, Passmore and Cantore 2008)	Understand the range of definitions and personal experiences of conversations combined with an ability to explain and clarify to clients their own understanding. Able to explore with the client their understanding of conversation in a work context.
Meaning (Lock and Strong 2010)	Sense, hear and see how people make meaning between each another. Understand the way in which self makes meaning in relation to others. Create spaces in which people together can make meaning.
Values (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011)	Understand the values that underpin practice and have an awareness of how personal values manifest themselves in practice.
Inter-subjectivity (Berger and Luckmann 1966)	Maintain conscious awareness of how others communicate and impact on self as well as how

	self-impacts on others. Enable face-face experiences in a manner which encourages a sense of intimacy.
Future orientation (Lewis, Passmore and Cantore 2008)	Use language and concepts which encourage a sense of optimism about the future.
Organisation Development (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011)	Understand the range of OD constructs and develop skills to offer a range of change processes to clients based on accurate diagnosis and planned interventions.
Performing Social Relations (Goffman 1959)	Maintain awareness of the roles being performed by self and others in every social context. Use strategies that enable clients to see the impact of roles in their contexts and make new choices.
Social context (Goffman 1959)	Facilitate changes in social contexts in a way that enables changes in meaning.
Consulting role types (Schein 1999)	Understand typologies of consulting and work with and between types to meet client needs.
Helping (Schein 2009)	Adopt behaviours that enable helping when appropriate.
Inquiry (Schein 1999; Lewis, Passmore and Cantore 2008)	Understand and apply approaches to individual and collective inquiry that support trusting relationships and encourage development of self and organisations.
Partnering (Marshak 2006)	Ability to use inter-personal skills that create a sense of partnership between client and consultant.
Change agency (Marshak 2006)	Develop understanding of what change agency involves and how it can be offered in a range of consulting contexts.
System thinking (Von Bertalanffy 1950)	Understand the connectivity between elements of systems and develop skills that enable

	consulting activities which develop system development .
Espoused theory and theory-in-use (Argyris and Schon 1974)	Use self-awareness skills to understand contradictions between theory and practice.
Dialogic Organisation Development (Bushe and Marshak 2009; Marshak and Bushe et al. 2013)	Understand and apply the principles and practices of Dialogic OD in appropriate client contexts. Specifically this involves developing skills in working with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -narratives -conversation -emergence -generative images -participative design and implementation of change processes.
Structuration (Lock and Strong 2010)	Understand how social structures like organisations can be shaped and changed through the interactions between people.
Discourse (Mautner 1999)	Apply skills in identifying emergent frameworks and discourses that have a bearing on organisational clients and self.
Organisational Discourse (Grant and Marshak 2011)	Apply skills which support the development of change discourses in specific organisational contexts.
Polarity Management (Johnson 1992)	Understand and apply approaches to change that use both/and concepts rather than either/or mind-sets.
Embodiment, Materiality and Power (Nightingale and Cromby 1999)	Ability to skilfully engage with the reality of the physical world as well as power dynamics in offering effective consulting
Light and Dark Social Constructionism (Danziger 1997)	Develop understanding about the differences between the types and then apply this knowledge in consulting relationships.
Reflective and Reflexive practice (Bolton 2010)	Apply skills in reflection and reflexivity to

	continually develop consulting practice.
Ethics (Lee 2009)	Develop approaches to ethical consulting practice using reflection, reflexivity and feedback from clients.
Learning (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011)	Use approaches to learning that build the capacity of consultants and clients to use conversational consulting approaches.

Reflections on Conversational Consulting concepts and skills:

- By considering the construct of conversational consulting through the wider lens of social constructionism I note the potential opportunity to move from a focus on conversation as a process to support change to social constructionism as the basis for a range of consulting practices. Some of these, but certainly not all, are contained in the current definition of Dialogic OD.
- This then gives an opportunity to either re-shape and 'grow' the construct of Dialogic OD (which uses social constructionism as its primary under-pinning philosophy) or create a new construct that enables social constructionist thought free reign in shaping approaches to change (and not solely in organisational contexts).
- There are skills that consultants can use to enact social constructionism in a range of contexts.
- There are overlaps between skills and the theories underpinning them that are worth further exploration.
- I am surprised by the richness of the possibilities that have emerged from this exploration.

Part 7 Concluding comments

The intention of this chapter was to generate new insights into the construct of 'Conversational Consulting' to part achieve the first project aim:

1. Develop my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively.

This has been achieved by:

- Recognising that 'Conversational Consulting' sits with Dialogic Organisation Development in a broader discourse about social constructionist approaches to change.
- Identifying that Social Constructionism contains a wide range of perspectives about how social reality is constructed and is not solely focussed on conversation as *the* approach.
- Noting that these perspectives can be considered to have a set of associated skills that enable them to be useful in a consulting context.
- Understanding some of the ethical implications of practicing conversational consulting.
- Using critiques of Social Constructionism to deepen understanding of the complexity of adopting this philosophical stance in practice.
- Reflecting on the literature in some depth to open up new avenues for both theoretical and practice inquiry.

The potential themes emerging from this exploration of the literature for the thematic analysis of the research data collected during this project are:

- The referencing of social constructionist ideas and skills by consultants when they describe their practice.
- The referencing of conversation specifically.
- Descriptions of the process of learning consulting practices, including conversation, that use social constructionist ideas as their implicit or explicit basis.
- Examples of critiques of socialist constructionist ideas and approaches.
- Ethical dilemmas expressed by consultants and clients.

Chapter 4

Project Methods and Activities

Introduction

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first gives an overview of the three inquiry elements and the common approach to thematic analysis. The subsequent three sections outline the approaches, describe the experience and summarise the output from my thematic analysis of the material.

Section 1

Overview

The aim of the section is to prepare the ground for a discussion in the third section that draws on my conversation with the literature and the inquiry findings, about what a framework for conversational consulting, and its' development by practitioners, might look like.

Recap

Given the ground already covered in this report it is helpful to recap some of the key elements that form the basis of this inquiry. Firstly the research title and aims:

Title: A practitioner inquiry project to develop an emerging framework for *conversational consulting* through personal and collaborative inquiry and practice.

(Working Definition of Conversational Consulting: A contracted, helping relationship through which people skilled and knowledgeable in conversation as a change process work with clients to create conversations that make a positive difference to businesses/organisations.)

Aims:

- Develop my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively.
- Explore the potential of conversational inquiry approaches to support the development of conversational consulting skills amongst a group of management consultants (including myself).

- Combine the learning from both individual and collective strands of research to offer management consultants an emerging framework that defines ‘Conversational Consulting’ more accurately, describes the practice in greater depth and helps them understand some of the ways in which they can develop the necessary skills to practice confidently and effectively.

Secondly, my context for this inquiry as an Organisational and Leadership Development consultant employed by a company called the Office for Public Management. Thirdly, my social constructionist perspective on how reality is co-created in organisational contexts. At the start of this inquiry my focus was on the nature and role of conversation as a process that enabled the construction of reality. Through my engagement with the literature my interest has broadened to include a potential range of consulting practices implied in constructionist literatures. These however remain secondary in my thinking at this stage and do not overtly feature in the analysis of the material I gathered in my inquiry activities.

Finally, my ontological and epistemological stance draws upon what Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe as Constructivist and Critical Theory research paradigm. I locate myself in the overlap between the two whilst also holding the view that both positions are subsumed within a social constructionist and particularly a conversational frame. Working with such apparent paradox enables me, at least to my own intellectual satisfaction, to conduct inquiry into experiences whilst acknowledging that what forms the research process and ‘data’, including my own sense of self as an inquirer, is ultimately all socially constructed and is part of a broader process of on-going reality co-creation within a wider system. This blend of perspectives means that my choice of research method/s must:

- Recognise and support the values that I carry as both an inquirer and as an OD practitioner
- Enable others to participate in the inquiry process
- Support any inquiry paradoxes
- Use conversation and other processes to create new realities
- Be flexible enough to themselves be shaped by inquiry process.

In addition methods need to be practical, time-efficient, engaging and affordable to undertake within the limitations of a commercial context both for myself as a consultant, my colleagues and the company we work for.

Summary of Inquiry Activities

Using the criteria outlined above three inquiry projects were planned and implemented to achieve my inquiry aims. The first forms the core of this project whilst the other two are smaller in scale and add complementary perspectives:

1. A co-operative inquiry with a group of six OPM management consultants (including myself as co-inquirer) with a focus on developing our understanding and practice of Conversational Consulting. This ran as a process from December 2010-October 2011 and included 6 taped and transcribed group meetings.
2. Personal learning logs written during the period September 2009-Oct 2011
3. A conversation with a client undertaken in September 2012 exploring the nature and practice of conversational consulting.

Each of these will be outlined in greater detail in the next three sections alongside a thematic analysis of the research material.

Approach to Analysis

Given that all three inquiry projects produced written material, either directly or via transcription, choices needed to be made about how this 'data' would be handled. For the sake of consistency I decided the same analytical approach across all three. To achieve my aim of offering a framework for practice and development I concluded that an analysis of themes would be most relevant. In the context of this report I consider a framework to be 'a basic structure underlying a system, concept or text' (Pearsall and Hanks et al. 2003: 685). Since I am not aspiring to develop a detailed all-encompassing pattern for how conversational consulting should be used in all circumstances a process like thematic analysis will offer a way of interpreting the data in a way that makes it useful for understanding what emerged in this particular set of inquiries. Since thematic analysis is applied to all three projects I will now outline the approach taken to working with the material.

Thematic Analysis

More broadly qualitative analysis is 'a process of reviewing, synthesizing and interpreting data to describe and explain the phenomena or social worlds being studied' (Fossey and Harvey et al. 2002: 728). This definition gives a flavour of the process a researcher engages in when working with material resulting from research activities. It is not an abstract exercise but one in which the researcher interacts or dialogues with the material to make sense of it through the lens they bring to

the project. Specifically in the case of thematic analysis it is a 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises your data set in rich detail. However, it also often goes further than this and interprets various aspects of the research topic'. (Braun and Clarke 2006: 6). The authors of this definition argue that it is a 'poorly demarcated rarely acknowledged yet widely used qualitative analytic method' (2006: 2). One reason I have chosen thematic analysis is that it is an approach that can be used across a range of methods and epistemological positions. It does not confine the researcher to a specific theoretical position. This is especially relevant given the paradoxes and tensions that exist in the research paradigms within which I choose to work.

A theme as defined by Braun and Clarke 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set' (2006: 10). Defining what is important and if it amounts to a theme within the data rests with the judgement of the researcher.

The process used in the thematic analysis is as follows:

1. I read and then re-read the transcribed material or self-authored documents. In the case of the co-operative inquiry material I listened to the recordings of the six meetings whilst reading the material. This enabled me to make corrections to the transcriptions and re-connect with the emotions that accompanied the group conversations.
2. I developed a set of codes using my inquiry topic and aims as the source material upon which all the individual codes are based. This deductive approach contrasts with an inductive approach which starts with the data and then explores the themes that emerge. The aims and objectives included in this exercise are:

Title: A practitioner inquiry project to develop an emerging framework for *conversational consulting* through personal and collaborative inquiry and practice.

(Working Definition of Conversational Consulting: A contracted, helping relationship through which people skilled and knowledgeable in conversation as a change process work with clients to create conversations that make a positive difference to businesses/organisations.)

Inquiry aims:

1. Develop my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively.

2. Explore the potential of conversational inquiry approaches to support the development of conversational consulting skills amongst a group of management consultants (including myself).
3. Combine the learning from both individual and collective strands of research to offer management consultants a framework that defines 'Conversational Consulting' more accurately, describes the practice in greater depth and helps them understand some of the ways in which they can develop the necessary skills to practice confidently and effectively.

The table below lists the individual codes, indicates the link with my inquiry aims and offers my interpretation of each code.

Code	Interpretation
<i>Understanding Conversational consulting (Aim 1)</i>	
1. Defining conversational consulting	Insights that explore and open up what this phrase means both in terms of practice and as an abstract construct
2. Contracting with the client	Descriptions of experiences where conversation is perceived to have impacted on how the initial relationship with the client started and developed
3. Helping the client	The inquirers intuitive sense that their conversational approach benefited the client. This may or may not have been confirmed by the client
4. Conversation as an organisational change process	Either explicit or implicit illustrations of how conversation changed either relationships or meanings or understandings
<i>Developing skills in Conversational consulting (Aim 1)</i>	
5. Development of conversational consulting skills	Description of skills or aptitudes that have appeared to developed through the inquiry process
6. Naming and describing skills	Skills specifically identified as relating to

	conversational consulting
7. Development of confidence in Conversational consulting	Narratives in which inquirers either explicitly or implicitly indicate that their confidence in using conversational consulting skills has developed over time
8. Perceived improvement in consulting effectiveness	Judgements of inquirers in relation to how clients experienced the effectiveness (as defined by inquirers) change over time
<i>The value of Co-operative Inquiry (relevant to the first project only)(Aim 2)</i>	
9. The benefits of co-operative inquiry as a vehicle for personal and/or professional development	References by co-inquirers to the impact of the inquiry on their own development-either professionally or personally
10. The experience of co-operative inquiry	Narratives which relate the co-inquirers experience of participating in the inquiry
11. The development of inquiry skills by participants	Comments or examples which show how participants have developed skills associated with inquiry. This includes forming inquiry questions, reflection, being present to others and supporting them in inquiry processes
12 Impact of co-operative inquiry on OPM as a consulting organisation	References by inquirers to how they perceive the work they are doing in the inquiry process is making a difference to the work of the company
12b The perceived impact of OPM on the inquiry process (<i>this code was added during the course of data analysis</i>)	Comments from inquirers about how they perceived the company impacted on their experience of the inquiry process
13 Impact on self of leading the co-operative inquiry process	Reflections by me on the impact of leading the inquiry process

3. Using the above coding schema I explored the data looking for related material. I adopted the 'Comment' feature on the Word computer package to code each relevant element.
4. I collated all the material belonging to each code into separate documents and then reviewed how the codes and the material allocated to them formed specific themes in their own right.
5. The next step was to look for patterns and interpret them as themes that appeared to relate to my research aims. I did this separately for each project.
6. I then finalised themes and wrote my thematic analysis as an integral aspect of each section in this chapter.

A note about the written form of the analysis

I am aware of a balance to be struck in the written presentation of a thematic analysis. For the reader there is need for clarity whilst for the inquirer there is a desire to remain true to the words of self and fellow inquirers. I am conscious that at times these may to an extent be incompatible. I have therefore adopted the following principles in deciding how to incorporate examples from the thematic analysis into the interpretive text:

- Examples will be direct quotes as transcribed from the raw data. The implication is that, at times, the quote may not be completely clear to the reader. This approach however does respect the speaker and also communicates some of the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the nature of the subject and inquiry process. A paraphrasing of quotes will add another level of unwarranted interpretation.
- The examples will illustrate a theme and be the best available.
- Examples will be preceded and followed by appropriate interpretive comments.
- No individual names will be indicated against an example. This reflects a social constructionist perspective on conversation where together we are creating our relational realities.
- Examples are included at a point in the text where they are considered relevant rather than in the sequence in which they were spoken.

Next steps

The following three sections describe the inquiry methods, processes and analysis of findings for each inquiry activity.

Section 2

Co-operative inquiry with consulting colleagues at the Office for Public Management Ltd (OPM)

Introduction

This section begins by describing the inquiry method and locating it in the research literature. The reasons for its use in this project are then outlined. What follows is a description of the application of this method amongst a group of consultants at the Office for Public Management (OPM). The transcripts of the inquiry meetings have been subject to thematic analysis and identified themes are reported. The section concludes with some reflections on my learning from the process.

Co-operative inquiry

Co-operative inquiry is said to belong to what Reason and Bradbury describe as ‘a family of practices of living inquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways , to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing’ (Reason and Bradbury 2008: 1). These practices are often called Action Research in the literature and by researchers. The origins of action research methods are usually ascribed to the work of Kurt Lewin (1946), a social science researcher. He talked about such research as a series, or spiral, of steps that included planning, taking action and then finding out about what happened as a result of the action. It is worth noting that Kurt Lewin is also cited by many as a founding intellect of Organisational Development (Cheung-Judge and Holbeche 2011; Burnes 2007; Burnes 2004; Schein 1996). The strands between action research and the development of OD are tightly interwoven. One of the reasons relevant to this inquiry is the set of values that often accompany both. These values are reflected in this definition of action research:

‘Action research is a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection , theory and practice in participation with others in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities ‘ (Reason and Bradbury 2008: 4).

Ideas of participation, humanness, improvement and change feature heavily in the OD literature. Talk to any group of OD consultants and it is not long before these become evident in the

conversation and often with great passion. Arguably both action research and OD, as they have been historically conceived and described, are part of a shared, almost revolutionary discourse, about bringing to pass a new and better world for people to live and work in.

Action research differs from more traditional objectivist approaches to research in that it unashamedly makes explicit its values and emphasises action within a context to deliberately change it rather than seeking to present a representation of it as it stands.

The research and theoretical paradigms that chose to adopt action research as a process include Critical Theory, Phenomenology and Social Constructionism. Given its relatively young age action research is continually developing as a field and includes for example, Appreciative Inquiry, Action Learning and Participatory community-based research. In a review of the field by Bob Dick (2009) my published contribution to action research was acknowledged (Lewis, Passmore and Cantore 2008). It is worth noting that the diversity of what can be called 'action research' can lead to confusion and the use of multiple terms to describe what appears to be the same approach e.g. participatory action research, collaborative inquiry and co-operative inquiry.

Co-operative inquiry is a specific action research process developed by John Heron and Peter Reason (Reason 1999; Bradbury and Reason 2008; Heron and Reason 1997; Heron 1996). They describe it as:

A way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself in order to-

- Understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things.
- Learn how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better.

Everyone in a co-operative inquiry group:

- Has a say in what questions are addressed;
- Contributes to thinking about how to explore questions;
- Gets involved in the activity that is being explored;
- Has a say in whatever conclusions the inquiry may reach.

In this form of research the split between researcher and subjects is done away with. All involved act as co-researchers and as co-subjects. Co-operative inquiry groups are engaged in cycles of action and reflection that are intended to follow a set pattern:

Phase 1

Co-researchers meet to talk about interests and concerns, agree the focus of the inquiry, and develop a set of questions to explore. They agree to undertake some action. Procedures are agreed by which they will observe and record their own and each other's experiences.

Phase 2

The group apply their agreed actions to their everyday life and work. They initiate their actions and record the outcomes of their own and each other's behaviour. They may simply watch to see what happens and develop a better understanding of their experience.

Phase 3

This is described as the 'touchstone' of the inquiry method. At this point co-researchers become fully immersed in their experience. They become more open to what is going on and they may begin to see their experience in new ways. They may find themselves exploring new insights and they may become so absorbed that they lose awareness that they are part of an inquiry group. It is in this phase that new practical skills or understandings may emerge for the researcher. Reason sees this experience of immersion in the subject as a distinct phase in the process of inquiry. In practice, I think there is an overlap between Phases 2 and 3, which may be difficult to clearly delineate.

Phase 4

Co-researchers come together to consider their original questions in the light of their experience. As a result, they may change their questions, they may reject them and pose new ones. They may choose to change the focus of their original inquiry and the group may choose to change its inquiry procedures—the forms of action and ways of gathering data—in the light of experience of the first cycle.

The group then starts and completes a number of cycles. Results are collated and distribution agreed at points in the process agreed by the group.

Co-operative inquiry seeks to support the generation of four types of knowledge:

- Experiential = knowing through direct face-to-face encounter with another person or object. Almost impossible to put into words.
- Presentational = knowing that emerges from experiential knowing and expresses the knowledge using words and imagery

- Propositional = knowing about something through ideas and theories
- Practical = knowing how to do something, a skill or a knack.

(Adapted from Heron 1996)

Forms of Co-operative inquiry

Heron and Reason (1997) identify different forms of co-operative inquiry:

- A Same Role inquiry is one in which co-inquirers all have the same role such as health visitor or doctor and are researching aspects of their practice within that role.
- A Reciprocal role inquiry involves co-inquirers who interact within a role of equal status.
- A Counterpartal role inquiry is one in which co-inquirers come from a variety of professions and the inquiry is about the practitioner/client relationship.
- A Mixed Role inquiry is one that includes different kinds of practitioner.

Further distinction depends upon where the action phase is focused:

- Inside inquiries are those in which all the action phases occur in the same place within the whole group - In other words we look at the dynamics and conversation that takes place within our own group.
- An outside inquiry is about what goes on in group members working and/or personal lives. The group come together for the reflection phases to share data, make sense of it, revise their thinking and in light of all of this plan the next action phase.

They also distinguish between inquiries that have *open* or *closed* boundaries. In the case of a *closed* boundary inquiry co-inquirers are concerned entirely with what is going on within between the inquirers, and are not included as part of the inquiry interaction between inquirers and others in the wider world. *Open* boundary inquiries do include such interaction as part of the action phases of the inquiry. The authors identify two complementary and inter-dependant inquiry cultures, the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*. An effective inquiry will have elements of both cultures even when the emphasis is tilted towards one pole rather than the other. *Apollonian* takes a more rational linear systematic controlling and explicit approach to the process of cycling between reflection and action. Each reflection phase is used to reflect on data from the last action phase and to apply this thinking in planning the next action phase. *Dionysian* takes a more imaginal expressive spiralling

approach to the interplay between making sense and action. A more fundamental cultural distinction is whether an inquiry is *informative* or *transformative*. An informative inquiry is likely to describe a topic and come forward with some propositions about the nature of the subject whilst a transformative approach will emphasise the practical knowing and new skills acquired by participants. It is possible for an inquiry to aim to be both informative and transformative and this can be built into the design. It is this combined approach I proposed to colleagues at the outset of our work together (adapted from Cantore 2004; Bradbury and Reason 2008; Reason 1999).

Co-operative inquiry in its various forms reflects the typical form of action research processes which can be depicted as following a cyclical process of planning, acting, developing, reflecting and then moving onto the next cycle (Mertler 2011).

Why select Co-operative inquiry for this inquiry?

There are a number of reasons why, as initiating inquirer I chose to offer this action research approach to colleagues at OPM.

1. Personal experience and preferences

I used Co-operative inquiry as the basis for my Masters research into the role of conversation in the workplace (Cantore 2004). Through this learning process I learned how to adopt and adapt it in a number of contexts. I developed confidence in it and my own abilities to offer it to professionals in a work context. This past learning meant that setting up an inquiry could be done more efficiently and with less uncertainty about its outcomes. Furthermore I resonate with the values espoused by Co-operative inquiry particularly in relation to equality and shared leadership between participants. This is easier to write than enact and there is always a tension between the initiating researcher and colleagues around how such shared leadership will be manifest in practice. Nonetheless the pressure to encourage equal voices and contribution is, I have found, a healthy one.

2. Conversational style

Given that my research focuses on Conversational Consulting I was keen to adopt an approach like Co-operative inquiry that uses conversation as a key process. Reason and Heron never make this explicit in their descriptions of the process; however, I believe it is implicit and hold the view that without conversation as a routine practice an inquiry will never succeed. Co-operative Inquiry can act as a 'container' for conversations and in their more recent work Reason and Heron make reference to other approaches to hosting conversations within the context of a Co-operative Inquiry (Bradbury and Reason 2008; Baldwin 2009). Other authors have highlighted the links between action

research and conversation. Baker et al. for example comment that 'both action research and conversational learning are built on premises of increasing participation, continuous learning, and holistic change toward more humane behaviors' (Baker and Jensen et al. 2005: 424). This builds on their notion of conversational learning. Feldman (1999) takes a slightly different stance arguing that conversation within a collaborative research process can be viewed as a research method in its own right. Shotter (2010) develops his own dialogically structured action research practice. All these developments in theory and practice highlight the growing recognition of the importance of the potential role conversation can play in action research. This was therefore an opportunity to mirror the research aims in the chosen research methods.

3. Paradigmatic flexibility

In Guba and Lincoln's (1994) guide to competing inquiry paradigms, Action Research is located within the Critical Theory paradigm. In comparing Critical Theory and Constructivism (related to Constructionism but more individually focussed they observe that 'it is their epistemological positions that most differentiate Critical Theory and Constructivism' (1994:111). They go on to argue that such differences cannot be ignored but have practical implications for inquiry approaches. I agree but suggest that with developments in thinking about social constructionism it is possible to see Co-operative inquiry as a vehicle for the co-construction of new realities between co-researchers engaged in inquiry. The overlap between a Critical Theory and a Social Constructionist epistemological position is arguably a fluid place with the potential for inquirers to move between them, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. This perspective is supported by Ken and Mary Gergen who talk of the 'vital and significant kinship across these domains' and describe an on-going process of dialogic convergences between what they call the critical movement, the literary/rhetorical movement and the social movement (Bradbury and Reason 2008:160). Other evidence to support my contention of fluidity is the inclusion of several chapters on Appreciative Inquiry (a social constructionist oriented change process) in the most recent edition of the Sage Handbook of Action Research (Bradbury and Reason 2008). Such a perception of fluidity enables me to use Co-operative inquiry as a means to both support the taking of 'action' in the sense that it will be understood by most consulting practitioners whilst encouraging the conditions for new realities to emerge.

4. Practitioner interest and practicalities

Given the diary commitments and relative uncertainties in a commercial consulting environment it was important to offer an inquiry approach that is perceived as relatively straight-forward but

intriguing whilst also offering personal development opportunities and the potential to collaborate with colleagues. As initiating researcher I needed to be able to encourage colleagues to commit to a year-long research process requiring time and energy on their part. Co-operative Inquiry can be explained in relatively simple terms although some of its constructs can seem abstract and even pretentious (Apollonian and Dionysian research cultures are I think one example). Furthermore, I needed to be sure that I could commit to the work required to support the process. The availability of suitable meeting rooms at OPM and the support of someone to help co-ordinate diaries was also a consideration.

5. Ethical considerations

The offer I made to OPM in exchange for their financial and corporate support for the research into Conversational Consulting was that the involvement of colleagues in the process would ultimately lead to changes and improvement in consulting practice that would have benefits for the company. Securing colleagues involvement in a Co-operative inquiry in which I had confidence meant that I could make such an offer to the board of the company in good faith. I was transparent with OPM about how I thought this was likely to take place. This from my perspective was transparent and an ethical way of contracting with the company.

Co-operative inquiry lays great emphasis on all inquirers having an equal say in how they are going to participate in the inquiry and how their findings are going to be shared between them. This level of empowerment in the inquiry process means that the issue of ethical behaviour does not rest solely with the initiating inquirer but is itself a collective responsibility.

6. Research focus

Perhaps most importantly I chose Co-operative inquiry because it offered the opportunity to inquire into my second inquiry aim:

Explore the potential of conversational inquiry approaches to support the development of conversational consulting skills amongst a group of management consultants (including myself).

Jean McNiff (1995) succinctly summarises the value of Action Research in a professional development context when she comments that 'Support for professional development through action research builds on a model of learning, where practitioners are challenged and helped to find new ways of doing things. The emphasis is on practice rather than subject knowledge. The route is personal enquiry (What do I do?) rather than others' advice (What do you think I should do?)' (McNiff 1995: 22). Not only did I think we were likely to develop through the reflective practice

encouraged by Co-operative inquiry but also come to understand a great deal more about the process of developing as consulting practitioners through inquiry.

The Inquiry process at OPM

The process included the following steps:

1. Securing the support from OPM for undertaking a Professional Doctorate using experiences as an employed consultant as the basis for research. Board approved principle and funding for the first year (February 2009).
2. Informal conversations with peer colleagues about the possibility of undertaking a co-operative inquiry (January – July 2010).
3. Email invitation sent to all 75 (approx.) employed staff inviting them to consider expressing an interest in participating in an inquiry process (July 2010). My own initial inquiry questions were shared as part of this process:

What is conversational consulting (a concept that I am still developing) and how can it contribute to excellent outcomes for clients?

What does it mean for me to practice conversational consulting and how can I develop my skills?

What can I learn through working with colleagues and clients about the nature and impact of working with conversation as a process?

4. Two hour long preliminary meetings were held to gauge interest and explore possible questions/issues people might wish to bring to an inquiry process (6th December 2010 and 11th January 2011). Eight people in total (all management consultants including one Director of the company) attended the meetings of whom five agreed to join in establishing an inquiry process. Participants were all consultants working in the Leadership and Organisation Development group within the company and included three men and two women.
5. Six formal Co-operative inquiry meetings took place at OPM company premises totalling 14 hours of inquiry conversations:

Date	Number attending	Length of meeting (hours)
11 th February 2011	5	2
15 th April 2011	4	2
3 rd June 2011	6	2
29 th July 2011	5	2.5
12 th October 2011	5	2.5
3 rd February 2012	5	3

6. Meetings were all recorded and transcribed to enable thematic analysis.
7. The analysis has been shared with all co-operative inquiry group members.

Conversations in the Meetings

What follows is a technical analysis of meeting transcripts. I am conscious that this has the potential to lose the flavour of the exchanges between participants. As one early reviewer of a previous version of this report pointed out the absence of tangible conversations in the report is, to an extent, ironic given the focus on conversations. Our meetings were full of lively interactions and often humour and emotion. To help convey a feeling for our times together Appendix A includes a copy of a full, un-annotated transcript of the meeting on the 3rd June 2011. A sample of a few paragraphs alone would not do full justice to the richness and depth of our conversing. I also recognise that the process of thematic analysis, whilst having many advantages, can omit the nuances of inter-personal interactions which are so fundamental to the co-creativity of conversation.

Thematic Analysis

The introduction to this section set out the process and codes I have used in the thematic analysis which follows. As I prepare to report I feel the need to acknowledge the challenge of holding the tensions and complexities involved in this stage of my project. Firstly I have been a co-inquirer in the process, so what is recorded and analysed in part belongs to me and reflects my wisdom and my biases. Circumstances mean that I am working with the material on my own. This means that I will infer meanings on and from the text which may or may not have been intended when the words were originally spoken. Given that I hold a social constructionist position in relation to meaning and reality construction between people, it is a challenge to hold that in tension when taking 'a view from a distance' of the meanings explored collectively in the inquiry process.

I also recognise that time and inquiry has moved on. My own understanding and practices of what is or is not involved in a construct I have called Conversational Consulting have themselves changed. These shifts inevitably must affect the interpretation I place upon learning undertaken in the past. Furthermore the Co-operative process was always intended to support both learning about the constructs, support practice, build collegial relationships, impact on the effectiveness of individuals and the company and develop a mind-set amongst participants oriented towards inquiry. Such a range of aims means, that of necessity, some depth and richness will be lost.

Braun and Clarke offer the challenge that 'as thematic analysis is a flexible method, you need to be clear and explicit about what you are doing and what you say you are doing needs to match up with what you actually do' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 195). I have explicitly:

- Used my draft definition of Conversational Consulting and my three research aims as the basis for a set of codes
- I have applied these codes to the set of six Co-operative inquiry meeting transcriptions
- Whilst holding a social constructionist stance on what occurred in the meetings I am also adopting a Critical Theory stance in offering an interpretation of the themes. By this I mean that what is recounted by fellow co-inquirers I accept as 'real' and, given that I and my values are interlinked with them in our shared experiences, the findings in this report can be said to be 'value mediated' (Guba and Lincoln 1994: 110). This will not preclude me from concurrently taking, what Braun and Clarke (2006) call analysis at a latent level. Such an approach enables me to reflect and comment upon what I perceive to be underlying ideas and conceptualisations that shed light on my inquiry aims. Such comments also have a more constructionist flavour. I acknowledge that this is not necessarily straightforward but suits both my research aims and epistemological stance.
- I understand myself to be in conversation with the material and so the reported themes are also shaped by my responses, values and biases.

The output of this process is set of themes, analytical and reflective comments and quotes illustrating each theme and sub-theme. This document can be found in Appendix A together with an example of a meeting transcript with my annotations.

Conversation with the themes

Given the practice orientation of this project I have chosen to adopt a practitioner stance in relation to engaging with the themes. It also seems appropriate to take a conversational approach using

inquiry questions related to my inquiry aims as a means of exploring the richness of the material.

The two inquiry aims relevant to the co-operative inquiry are:

- To develop my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively.
- To explore the potential of conversational inquiry approaches to support the development of conversational consulting skills amongst a group of management consultants (including myself).

Since the material on which this analysis is based originates from a Co-operative inquiry I have not identified individuals associated with each example by name. I do however label quotes with an initial (A, B, C, D, E and F) to indicate the individuals associated with each remark. I have kept the colloquial phrasing unchanged to retain a sense of authenticity.

Aim 1

An obvious question that stands out for me is:

What understandings about the practice of conversational consulting stand out amongst the themes?

Interestingly the material does not offer a succinct one sentence definition of conversational consulting. What is present however are a range of intriguing insights into practice:

‘Yeah because conversational consulting seems to me to partly be about surfacing what is seen as reality isn’t it?’(A)

There is then something about the practice that helps people gain new insight into the reality they are constructing. To enable this to happen some inquirers observed that ‘by holding a space something will emerge’ (F) and the need to ‘create space for a different conversation’ (E). The notion of creating and holding spaces for people is a recurring theme. How do we create and hold spaces is a question that follows. One co-inquirer linked the task of holding space with the consultant demonstrating vulnerability, ‘Share some of that vulnerability with people and that creates that space into which they can come because if we are representing ourselves as the great expert it makes it quite scary place for anyone to come’(B). The challenge this offers me as a practitioner is how to shed the role of expert in relation to the client if such a thing is possible. This also begs the question about how roles get re-defined and why exactly might a client engage you. How I then play

my part in the co-construction of the perception of roles in the client –consultant relationship becomes quite a critical aspect of working in this way.

A helpful sub-theme that speaks into this challenge is the idea that the consultant contracts with themselves even before develop a relationship with the client ‘Something about contracting that is going on for me—contracts with many different parties and what contract do I have with myself?’ (F).This highlights the need for a consultant to maintain an inner conversation that enables them to understand the role they are playing. For one inquirer this opened up a question about ‘Who is the ultimate client—there is something bigger that goes you know beyond that who and what are we serving?’ (D).This question opens up the inquiry way beyond the narrow confines of a one-to-one relationship with a client and connects back to the consultants’ values, worldview and understanding of self in relation to others.

This importance of the consultants own sense of self is echoed by the inquirer who commented that ‘It’s mainly about how we stay connected with ourselves which also includes our own feelings makes us more able to stay connected to others’ (A).The implication is that in the practice of conversational consulting how we are with ourselves is of particularly relevant. This point is reinforced for me by the following example: ‘The possibilities of client relationships building by the way that you are and you conduct yourself’ (B).

A key theme appears to be a sense that working as a conversational consultant involves handling a great deal of uncertainty. I have already alluded to the uncertainties sparked by questions of who we are in relation to clients but they go further. There is uncertainty about the boundary between professional and personal roles ‘what do people actually want from us—do they want to know me they like part of this relationship to know me rather than my ideas?’ (F). Clients are not just clients but they are also people, ‘it isn’t just I think I give them the space to be human to be seen and heard as people to an extent that they don’t always get inside the organisation—we listen to them we help them as people as well as clients’ (D). This opens up an interesting question about the whether or not conversational consulting can be confined to the work domain or whether it legitimately is also concerned with the broader spectrum of people development?

Further uncertainty relates to some inquirers difficulty in understanding what difference they have made for the client:

‘They began to see it differently but that just seems to go out the window when the more dominant narrative just takes the floor again’ (E).

‘And some magic happens in there and there is some relationship, there is some way of understanding, a mutual understanding a learning contract whatever you call it goes on there’(B).

The idea of ‘magic’ underscores for me the perceived inherent unpredictability for some of practicing conversational consulting. There is not a clear recipe so what can seem to happen when things go well is perceived as a surprise to the inquirer.

A question that follows is *‘Did we as co-inquirers think that using conversation in our consulting practice made a difference for clients?’*

One inquirer thought that ‘perhaps part of the conversational process is helping people to connect with their feelings’ (A). Another saw the approach as ‘helping others find their inquiry question is an important part of what I see from the central role of what I do’(C). There were tales of perceived impact ‘had some really good experiences in the workshops—being in tune with people—people have got something out of what I have done’ (E) and ‘What it showed us is that if you create the right environment and get the right people in to have the conversations they need and the conversations do move them’ (A).

One person reported that they ‘did a team coaching with a council and that was like going out on a plank—it was fantastic—just talking about what they wanted to talk about—found connections between them and what they were thinking and also between me and them and what I was thinking—really miles away from how I would have worked five years ago—’(E). Another said that a group they worked with ‘have moved –that group has moved –they say they leave with more energy they resented listening to boring presentations to turn that into space where people created energy for themselves—now you can have a conversation with them because they have seen something that has changed’(C). For one inquirer an insight was the connection between conversation, energy and learning ‘we are likely to...more likely to find ourselves in the space where we connect with the learning energy and develop learning energy amongst others’ (D).

Perhaps an example that summarises a number of the insights about impact is:

‘What its’ showed us is that if you create the right environment and get the right people in to have the conversations they need, the conversations do move them on’

So what are the skills that co-inquirers identified as relevant to the practice of conversational consulting?

Implicit in co-inquirers observations about the practice of conversational consulting were a number of assumptions about the skills that may be helpful. Examples include the ability to hold internal

dialogues 'I do want to have a conversation with myself but I don't really necessarily know how to handle it. And part of being involved in this is to learn how to do that for me'(C).

Caring for self and enabling helpful boundaries were also perceived as important by some 'this is the job that there ought to be some boundaries around' (D)and 'we need to find ways we don't kill ourselves -burn ourselves out emotionally working with people who have to deal with these things'(A).

Developing listening skills that enable consultants to spot themes in conversation seems relevant, 'what I've heard is that I become attuned with themes in conversations—'(B), as is being emotionally self-aware 'what emotion are we experiencing in the body and making choices about emotions and what we do with it'(F). Perhaps a more subtle skill is the ability to encounter people with ourselves, 'Conversational consulting is not just another model with six steps but encountering people with ourselves-proactive and reactive '(D) and 'being in tune with people'(C).

The ability to reflect was perceived by one inquirer to be related to the quality of conversational space they, and possibly the client, were able to create:

'The quality of the space for reflection is the same as the quality of space for conversation' (F).

Aim 2

The focus of this aim is on the relevance of the co-operative inquiry process to the development of conversational consulting skills amongst a group of practitioners.

The question that I begin with is *'What did co-inquirers comment upon with regard to the development of their own skills through the period of inquiry?'*

I hesitate to make a definite link between co-operative inquiry and the development of skills. I do not think the transcripts provide the sort of evidence that some researchers would perhaps look for to confirm a link. What I can offer are some helpful examples of co-inquirers own observations about their experiences.

A recurring theme is the awareness that 'I'm suddenly tuning in to how much I know' (E). Several also spoke of greater levels of confidence 'each time I have run a workshop I have reflected more—have a stronger sense of myself in the room than I have had before —a more greater sense of what I can achieve in my work and more confidence—being more in the moment with whatever is going on' (B). This inquirer also found a developed sense of self in their work with others. I think this links

with some of the earlier examples where inquirers found that working conversationally opened up some powerful questions about life purpose and meaning.

Some inquirers spoke of being able to make more intentional choices in practice 'And it really struck me that I had choices to make as I entered that space about what conversation I was going to sort of inaugurate and pick up....' (E).

The notion that consulting involved a degree of risk featured in a number of examples. Whilst not strictly a skill the ability to step into a risky space was considered an area of learning 'In the last afternoon we had an interesting conversation about what they need to do—it felt courageous—when I take a risk and do something more connected with people' (C) and 'I don't think I'm risk averse but I am—confidence has grown a lot since the last session—I didn't really lack it before' (B).

How do the skills of working in a co-operative inquiry group contribute to the skills needed to practice as a conversational consultant?

There appears to be some overlap between co-operative inquiry processes, the skills needed to operate within an inquiry, and the development of skills needed for conversational consulting. For example 'that actually it is those spaces [the co-operative inquiry group meetings] that really help us do the growing that we need to do and develop in our confidence and in our resolution in a sense that this is the right way to go. So there is no other space where this kind of stuff happens anywhere in the intensity that it does here' (D). The implication is that the inquiry process is a form of incubator and a place to reflect on what is happening 'use this space to helicopter up a bit slightly more detached way if that makes sense' (B).

Other examples such as 'I just wanted to add that this space for me has been qualitatively different to other space' (A) and 'So it changed my questions so it's beginning to have an impact on me getting me to think which is exactly I guess where I want to be...' (C) reflect aspects of conversational consulting. The first aspect is the co-creating of a conversational space with the client and the second the development of new questions.

The inquiry themes prompt another question which relates to the context of the inquiry. *What is the perceived impact of the inquiry on inquirers sense of their relationship with their employing organisation?*

A couple of examples suggest that participating in the inquiry was a form of liberation from perceived organisational constraints, even a rebellion 'but I want to be able to hold my head up and if questioned, so it's my time, I'm doing this for me, in my time with my resources and my energy

and my commitment' (B) and 'it's do something I've chosen to do' (D). One example sees the inquiry as a potential stimulus for change, 'I'm kind of reflecting now on so what that mean for here because just being able to create a space for an inquiry itself is quite an intentional act in the culture of OPM' (A). An aspect of this is a change in perception between inquiry group members about their status 'because you know we found this work we've done together very powerful and I have that sense of equal-ness between us' (E). Another example asked about how the inquiry process might be used across the company, 'But what we can do is to recognize the process is very important so how can you replicate the process?' (A).

Given that OPM was undertaking a re-structuring and down-sizing there were examples of inquirers bringing their concerns to the inquiry, ' because I don't know it was quite a stressful time in the organisation and a lot of anger and feeling this is a place to bring this stuff' (C).

Reflections

Stepping back from the thematic analysis I observe a number of elements in relation to my research aims:

1. Defining terms and coming to a shared understanding of what is or is not conversational consulting is something inquiry group members gave little, if any, attention to.
2. Inquiring into their own sense of self, purpose and feelings towards work activities was stimulating and from their comments, useful.
3. Anxiety about the nature of consulting and their relationships with clients featured strongly across the themes.
4. Consulting practice and life continued as the group met. Often group check-ins would extend to include recent client and life experiences.
5. Co-inquirers reported growing levels of confidence in how they saw themselves fulfilling consulting tasks in relation to others.
6. Such growing confidence also related, for some, in 'pushing back' the organisation to assert their own self-determination particularly with regard to professional development.
7. The construct of conversational or learning spaces referred to in a number of themes opens up questions about what are such spaces, how do you know when you have them and what conditions enable them to emerge?

There are a few specific observations worth making about the Co-operative inquiry process itself:

1. Inquirers commented upon the intensity and valued nature of the space created by the process.
2. There is a complex inter-play it seems between the nature of the inquiry process and the subject of inquiry. I tend to regard co-operative inquiry as a form of conversational inquiry. This is the way in which I deliberately introduced it to colleagues at the outset. There is in fact nothing in the literature which suggests that the work of the group need necessarily be conversational in practice although there is strong inference that it is likely to be.
3. The quality of relationships between participants noticeably deepened over the 12 month. The examples demonstrate high levels of trust within the inquiry group and a willingness to be vulnerable with colleagues. Again, these reflect some of the issues emerging for participants around the inquiry subject.
4. Did the inquiry process support the development of conversational consulting skills? The answer I think is yes in this context for these individuals and to varying extents. There is undoubtedly a sense from the themes of a collective shift as well as indicators of individual development. It is unclear how the discourse within OPM shifted as a result of the inquiry although as ever from where I stand I can only see and hear a small 'slice' of the multiple discourses impacting on and being shaped by the organising and conversing of individuals working for OPM.

Section 3

Personal Learning Log

Introduction

This section begins by describing the inquiry method and locating it in the research literature. The reasons for its use in this project are then outlined. The contents of the learning log have been subject to thematic analysis using the coding approach outlined at the start of this chapter. The remainder of this section explores the analysis with the aim of gaining insight that will contribute to my first research aim:

Developing my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively.

Personal Learning Log

One definition of a learning log is that it is 'a tightly focused academic journal that is created as the student becomes knowledgeable on an individually assigned topic' (Baker 2003: 11). Another perspective is offered by Friesner and Hart, 'A learning log is a vehicle that is used to assess learning from experience' (2005:117). This second definition is probably more helpful in that it incorporates the constructs of learning and experience. Jarvis draws the two together quite neatly in defining learning as 'the process of creating and transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, senses and beliefs' (Jarvis 1999: 40). Barclay cites Schön (1983), Kolb (1984) and Honey and Mumford (1989), when she argues that 'Reflection is a key element in the learning process. It converts informal and perhaps accidental opportunities into efficient learning' (1996: 29). Whilst each of these authors offer different emphases in their models of learning all suggest that reflection is a key aspect of learning from experience. Furthermore, a number propose that the reflective learning log is one means by which such learning can be mediated.

One definition of a learning log that draws the strands together suggests that it is 'a means of recording and reflecting on experiential learning, thus improving the learning process. It is a flexible method which recognizes that learning is a personal, individual process' (Barclay 1996: 30). Bolton defines reflection as 'learning and developing through examining what we think happened on any occasion and how we think others perceived the event and us, opening our practice to scrutiny by others, and studying data and texts from the wider sphere' (2010: 13).

So where does the notion of a personal learning log sit for me? I chose the written learning log as a process to support my personal reflection during this project because:

- I find writing a helpful means by which to order my thoughts.
- The discipline of entering material into a log helps motivate me continue inquiring.
- As I write I also reflect and this process often stimulates new learning or insight.
- Given the project is focused on conversational consulting I find writing in the log a means of holding a conversation with my own ideas. The log then becomes a record to which I can return and pick up the conversation from where I left off.
- The process of reflection a learning log encourages in me acts as a bridge between my experience and my sense-making.
- A learning log can offer another perspective on the experience of inquiry and is in itself a piece of 'data'.

Space precludes a more in-depth exploration of the value of reflective learning logs. However I do think there are limitations to the process particularly if the inquirer holds a social constructionist stance with regard to the nature of knowledge. By reifying my own 'learning' through individual reflection and recording I can fail to fully appreciate how that 'learning' is a reflection of wider discourses which in turn shape my own reflections. I can fall into a trap of believing that all my own learning is 'new' and comes solely from my own self-determined life experiences. Interesting questions emerge about the quality of the learning process. This is, in part, why I chose co-operative inquiry as the core inquiry process for this project. It enables collective reflection through its cycles. The learning log is therefore a supplementary inquiry process.

Personal Learning Log as a Research Method

Friesner and Hart conclude, after completing an in-depth analysis of Marketing Managers logs that 'learning logs can be used as a research method. They collect data from reflection, learning and experience' (2005: 122). The caveat they add to this is that in their view 'they are a suitable research method where research objectives or problems relate to personal experiences *in the absence of the researcher*' (my italics). They align the method with the an interpretivistic perspective where the researcher seeks to interpret the narratives in the data to understand more about the person and what actually happened to them. The assumption, in contrast to a constructionist perspective, is that there is a reality being communicated that they can step aside from to examine logically. For

the purpose of this inquiry I am in part adopting this approach as I look at the material, code it and then offer a form of analysis. I, of course, recognise that I am not an 'absent researcher'. I approach the material in the log as a practitioner looking for insights into practice-in this case my own. I also continue to hold a social constructionist stance recognising that the meanings I attach to the themes are constructed through the discourses of which I have and continue to be, a part of.

Bannister (2005) draws attention to the filters through which any person reflecting on an experience applies to what he calls the facts of the experience. He identifies no less than ten filters: perceptual, contextual, linguistic, memory, sequence, personality, agenda, cognitive, methodological, and selection. It is a helpful insight given that as an inquirer I have both gathered *and* offered a form of interpretation. For this reason both sets of authors recommend caution when drawing conclusions from the application of the method. This supports my argument that the learning log is a supplement, a different perspective or voice in the wider discourse of which my project is a part of.

Process

I kept a learning log during the period September 2009-Oct 2011. Entries to this written record had the following characteristics:

- Variable in length from a few sentences to half a page.
- Written as soon as practicable after an event I perceived to be an important learning opportunity.
- Exploratory in nature usually incorporating some questions for further inquiry/reflection.
- Connected either to consulting practice or my experience as co-initiator of the co-operative inquiry. Very occasionally there would be entries made after an experience in my non-work life.
- Unstructured in format.
- Variable intervals between entries.
- Kept confidential.
- Looked at once every couple of months to identify potential new learning and informally track personal development.

An excerpt from the log together with a thematic analysis of its contents can be found in Appendix B.

Thematic Analysis

The process I used to undertake a thematic analysis was exactly the same as that used for the co-operative inquiry process and outlined in Section 1 of this chapter. I used the same codes, given they originated in my inquiry aims, apart from codes 9-13 which specifically referred to co-operative inquiry. To aid consistency in analysis I transferred coded items from the log to the master theme sheets. This enabled me to have an overview of the examples across all three inquiry activities.

Conversation with the themes

The research aim specifically relevant to my personal learning log is:

To develop my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively

However, given that the log covers the period of the co-operative inquiry it is also possible that a thematic analysis will be connected with the second research aim:

To explore the potential of conversational inquiry approaches to support the development of conversational consulting skills amongst a group of management consultants (including myself)

As I read the whole analysis I am conscious that the question I often appear most concerned with is: 'What is the nature of conversational consulting and how do I choose to practice it?' A pattern within the data suggests that I re-frame conversational consulting as hosting conversations, 'I tend to refer to myself as a host of conversations and the act of physically serving someone encourages them to incline towards you---to be attentive and open to contact'.

So what does this look like in practice? 'so at its simplest what we need to offer is help for people to network, connect, converse, innovate with others, engage deeply'. The theme also indicates that this activity is for two key purposes. Firstly the expression of leadership, 'I think it is probably not possible to disconnect the notion of conversation from leadership' and secondly to support change, 'my sense is that a conversational approach to consulting will offer support and encouragement to these emergent approaches to change'. So, conversational consulting rather than being an abstract construct has, at least in my mind, a particular set of purposes.

I note that I tend to view the practice as a relatively low-key one. A pattern in the data indicates that conversational consulting can be viewed as an umbrella term that includes a range of consulting

activities and processes resulting in outcomes that are often more subtle and less visible than some forms of consulting, 'No noise and no loud brash trumpets but rather marked yet at times subtle shifts in behaviour and attitude'.

Being so close to the practice I was reminded that there are potential misunderstandings and alternative definitions, 'I asked her to explain what she understood by the term "conversational consulting" and the focus of her reply was on consulting people over an issue to gain their insights'. I have a preference to hold back from defining the practice but take from this that I do carry a definition with me and have an expectation that others automatically understand what I am about! This is an interesting prompt to consider how I as a practitioner communicate what I have to offer clients using language and ideas that make sense to them. This seems critical given a theme in the data that highlights the importance of a close relationship, 'In my ideal consulting relationship I recognise that I am looking for mutual positive engagement. Without it, it seems as though creativity is stifled and I become guarded in the conversation' and 'what does it mean to connect? How do I know I am in connection? How do we know we are in connection?' Interestingly, whilst many of the themes focus on the need to help the client, this one highlights the needs I have as a consultant, and a person, to connect. I can't escape the implication that my own attachment to the construct of conversational consulting is in part driven by the belief that it has the potential to meet some of my own needs.

The pattern in the data points to a number of interesting questions which focus on the purpose of the consultant/client relationship. The reflective nature of the questions suggests that part of the consulting practice involves 'holding' questions in relation to the client and your relationship with them, 'What questions open up a space for learning and what attitudes need to enable that space to become of value? To me and to us?' This links in with my sense that the practice is to an extent about stimulating inquiry amongst groups of people. The themes continue to connect this notion of inquiry with change as an underpinning assumption in my practice, '....and I mentioned the possibility of developing a community of practice and using Participative Inquiry approaches to engage one another in research. L responded well to this and I found myself exploring in my mind how this inquiry or research approach could both be an integral part of my own research but also offer development for others.'

A recurring theme in the log is an interest in the skills and attitudes I need to fulfil the role of a conversational consultant. Opportunism is one, 'Opportunism I think figures largely in consulting work, we look for work where we can find it and then seek to use each opportunity for greatest impact and learning'. Others include 'to be attentive and open to contact', 'co-create (with the

client) development opportunities which help people learn for themselves', maintaining a sense of expectation, 'I am excited at what there is to be discovered' and handling the anxiety consulting provokes in me 'I still feel anxiety about the challenges ahead'.

Although not a strong theme I noted that I have begun to learn how to interpret feedback from clients more accurately. Eliciting feedback seems like a skill to be further developed.

My role in initiating and leading the co-operative inquiry process does figure as a theme. The focus is on the tensions I experience between my roles as an employee of OPM, initiating inquirer and practicing consultant with clients 'As I write this I need to acknowledge the range of roles I sense I have:

- First and foremost I am an employee of OPM working in this way because of their permission and active support.
- I am a consultant with clients whose "material" will be part of my research and reflections.'

Reflections

Stepping back from the thematic analysis I observe a number of elements in relation to my inquiry aims:

1. The practice of conversational consulting has become, to an extent, bound up with my own sense of self.
2. Rather than conversational consulting being fully flexible in its potential applications there is a dual focus on leadership development and change that I had not fully noticed before.
3. Consulting practice itself could be considered an expression of leadership and a catalyst for change.
4. The details of what 'hosting conversations' actually look like is of relatively little interest compared with the questions about building client relationships and skills that maintain them
5. Working with multiple roles and handling the anxiety it can provoke is an aspect of practice which I previously under-estimated.

Section 4

Practice Example

Introduction

This section describes a specific consulting relationship and its' context. Using material developed in conversation with the client following a number of consulting activities a thematic analysis is interpreted. The aim of this process is to bring the voice and perceptions of the client into the inquiry frame. In doing so the intention is that a richer multi-dimensional picture of conversational consulting practice can be painted. This in turn will add to the depth of understanding and clarity in the closing chapters of this project report.

The source material has been published in the OD Practitioner –The Journal of the Organisation Development Network in November 2012 (Cantore and Hick 2012). The article has been peer-reviewed prior to publication. A copy of the article can be found in Appendix C together with the analysis of themes. Since names and places relating to this mutually developed and agreed material are in the public arena, having been sanctioned by the school chair of governors, no attempt has been made to anonymise this example. Permission has been sought and granted by the client who has also agreed the thematic analysis.

Context of the consulting relationship

I first met Wendy Hick, the client, at a workshop I presented at the University of East London in the summer of 2011. The topic was how to use Appreciative Inquiry to support organisational change (Lewis, Passmore and Cantore 2008). We exchanged business cards after she had told me her background as a school head teacher. We agreed that it would be nice to work together if a suitable project came up.

In February 2012 I received an email from her explaining that she had just been 'parachuted' into a school that had just been place in 'special measures' by Ofsted, the schools inspectorate. She felt that the approaches I had outlined at the workshop she had attended would be very helpful to her and school and invited me to becoming a consulting partner. I agreed.

The following excerpt from the published article summarises the school context:

'Manorfield Primary School is larger than the average primary school and is located in the East End of London UK. The number of pupils is increasing as the school moves to having three classes in each year group. There are approximately 650 pupils at present. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is very high. The largest ethnic group is of Bangladeshi heritage and the next largest group White British. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is more than twice the national average. The proportion of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs is also higher than the national average. Most of these difficulties relate to speech, language and communication needs. The school meets the current 'floor' standard set by the government for pupils' performance (60 per cent of the children reaching a basic level in English and Math's at age 11, and where children make below average progress between seven and 11)' (Cantore and Hick 2012:5).

The consulting assignment

The brief from Wendy was to develop, with her, a staff development day that, by its nature and processes, marked a break from the past and signal to the 80+ staff of a move to a more involving, empowering coaching culture. The day was scheduled for the 20th April 2012. Wendy and I began our consulting relationship by holding a face-face meeting at the school in early March followed by a series of telephone conversations and email exchanges. One 'output' was to be a schedule for the development day incorporating a range of conversational activities including an Appreciative Inquiry process. I subsequently co-facilitated half the day with Wendy.

Using a conversational approach to reflect on experience

I met Wendy in May 2012 to review the day and to discuss possible next steps. As we conversed I began to appreciate both the quality of the consultant-client relationship I perceived we had developed and the work we had accomplished. I suggested that we might like to 'write-up' up the experience with a view to publishing it as an example of conversational approaches to change. I also indicated that such material would potentially be of value to my own inquiry project. At around the same time, I had been invited by Professor Gervase Bushe of Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, to contribute examples of Dialogic OD to a research database he was developing. I proposed to Wendy that our article might also fit his brief.

Given our mutual interest in conversation I suggested to Wendy that we might explore our experiences through a written conversation. I offered an initial list of questions which we agreed and each of us then wrote our version of events. I acted as editor and collated the elements into an

article formatted as a conversation. Following minor grammatical and linguistic amendments this record of our experience was published. In the spirit of giving voice to the client I made no amendments to Wendy's contribution.

Thematic Analysis

The process I used to undertake a thematic analysis was exactly the same as that used for the co-operative inquiry process and outlined in Section 1 of this chapter. I used the same codes apart from codes 9-13 which specifically referred to Co-operative inquiry. To aid consistency in analysis and interpretation I transferred coded items from the article to the master theme sheets. This enabled me to have an overview of the examples across all three inquiry activities. The stance I take in interpreting the material is as a consulting practitioner driven by the question what can I do to improve my practice in order to better serve the client?

Conversation with the themes

The research aim specifically relevant to this practice example is:

To develop my understanding of conversational consulting and the skills I need to practice it effectively

Putting inquiry at the heart of conversational consulting practice seems very important, 'The use of questions to promote conversation was absolutely key and Stefan used questioning and active listening techniques with me also to best understand what my aims were for developing the staff'. I note the helpfulness of listening as a pre-requisite to forming questions. It is also interesting to see how this process appears to help the client clarify what it is that they want to achieve. Conversation with the client therefore seems to have a clarifying and focussing role for both parties.

One feature of the data is the perception that approaches to client relationships have a similarity with the experience of consulting with groups, 'For me, a dialogic approach means hosting both one-one conversations with clients as well as group or organisation-wide conversations helped along by processes like World Café (Brown and Isaacs 2005) and Open Space (Owen 2008)'. It suggests that separating the two is not easy. The inference is that consistency of approach when working one-one or with groups is a feature of conversational consulting.

I think that Wendy was a very receptive client, 'You get it with your mind and your heart and there was never a need for me to struggle to explain what we might be attempting to do.' As I reflect on this I am struck that she engaged with the ideas, the development day and with the article. The

sense I make of this that there was a sense of inquiry about her work which prompted an interest in anything that supported such inquiry. An inquiry mind-set was apparent. This is substantiated for me by her reflection on work experiences, 'You spoke of previous experiences in changing attitudes and behaviours of staff at one of your previous schools and how you found that a very rewarding experience'. This prompts a question about this type of consulting which may need to shift from a focus on a process like conversation to inquiry. Will inquiry resonate more with clients in the first instance? If so, is majoring on conversation in the sales pitch with a client that constructive? Put more bluntly –are clients that bothered about the process of change –or is their interest more around what will make a difference to organisational performance? Is it possible to generalise?

A recurring theme was the willingness of Wendy to stick with the uncertainty of a conversational change process. 'Indeed, I really found your willingness Wendy, to stay with the uncertainty about what might emerge as really exciting.' She has summarised broadly what she wanted the outcome of the change process to be and was prepared to live with the uncertainty of what might emerge from one element. Arguably, this made Wendy a very collaborative client and one that could retain a view of the bigger picture 'It was important that I set the scene for the conversational approach with the staff from the outset of my Headship there.' Her emergent approach to change also had a track-record 'The development of the coaching culture at Kobi Nazrul (a previous school) was organic in its nature. I didn't originally set out to use this particular approach. I did, however, set out with the intention to build a solutions focused team who incorporated open questions and active listening into their approach'.

A couple of examples suggest that the role of the consultant can also encompass a degree of leadership towards the client, 'An important factor for me in our initial discussions was discussing and mulling over ideas and Stefan guiding me with framing the most important questions to ask 'and 'I had not heard of this approach before and it fitted well with my own style of delivering training.' Whilst the construct of hosting conversations can suggest that the consultant stands back and allows others to lead, these examples indicate that the consultant can, in certain contexts, also offer leadership.

There is difference of perspective in the themes that is striking in some respects. I as the consultant placed a priority on the quality and potential longevity of the relationship with Wendy, 'There was sense you had that we were on the same wavelength in our approach to leading change' and 'you also signalled that you saw this as a long term project rather than a one off assignment and that also opened up new possibilities in my mind.' Wendy on the other hand appears more interested in the utility of the relationship in her context, 'the planning of the questions was fundamental. The

structure of the day was important as it allowed for flexibility if staff needed to have longer conversations' and 'I had not heard of this approach before and it fitted well with my own style of delivering training.' This suggests that whilst I might be intrigued by the process of consulting, a client has a different lens through which they are looking at our relationship. One that tends towards the practicalities of what the works looks and feels like, 'You did not attend the morning session Stefan, but when you arrived you 'fitted into' co-hosting the session seamlessly. I feel this was due, in part, to the fact that we had planned the session so well together'.

Outcomes from Wendy's perspective included staff empowerment , 'The staff felt truly empowered by the day and commented on the fact that they had never had the opportunity to talk and interact with each like this before' and 'This important day has set the scene for developing the conversational practice at the school and is always part of staff training. Developing the school as a coaching school is becoming part of the reality'.

As a practitioner inquirer the work with Wendy confirmed the value of some of the core practices I see as essential to practice. The spirit of service, 'by weaving Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with conversational processes I sense new opportunities to be of service to people', listening well 'This deep listening was fundamental to developing a sense of what might be useful to offer you', the role of questions , 'The planning of the questions was fundamental', client relationship, 'There was sense you had that we were on the same wavelength in our approach to leading change' and working with aspirations and values 'emotions, gut instincts, past narratives, longings for a better future and a passion to further develop ourselves and those around us all contributed to the liveliness in conversation we both enjoyed with one another and in some strange way infected those we worked with'.

(As a postscript I recently received a note from Wendy advising me that the school, following its latest visit from inspectors in July 2013 had been awarded an 'Outstanding' status.)

Reflections

Stepping back from the thematic analysis I observe a number of elements in relation to my research aims:

1. Whilst I might hold a view about the practice of conversational consulting and the skills needed it is clear that the client may hold a different view. Surfacing their expectations seems important. I note particularly the desire on the part of the client to demonstrate practicality in delivering specific outputs.

2. Similarly there may be a different understanding of valued outcomes. These may not emerge until some way through the consulting process.
3. There are some core skills and mind-sets that enable conversational processes.
4. It maybe that conversation is not the defining feature of this practice. The analysis suggests that a commitment to inquiry as a change paradigm may be just as important, if not more so, at different points in the consulting relationship.
5. The opportunity for me to demonstrate my skills relies to a considerable extent on the willingness and preparedness of the client to work in this way. Consulting is evidently a co-created social process where meanings and practices are shaped collaboratively.

Chapter 5

An Emerging Framework for Practice and Development

Introduction

This chapter addresses my third inquiry aim for this project:

To combine the learning from both individual and collective strands of inquiry to offer management consultants an emerging framework that defines 'Conversational Consulting' more accurately, describes the practice in greater depth and helps them understand some of the ways in which they can develop the necessary skills to practice confidently and effectively.

The definition of framework I will use is 'a basic structure underlying a system, concept or text' (Pearsall and Hanks et al. 2003:685) and for practice 'the actual application or use of an idea, belief or method, as opposed to theories relating to it' (2003: 1382).

Whilst these definitions appear neat I am conscious that, in my own constructionist frame of reference, separating out 'theory' from 'practice' is in part a play with words. Both I think weave together in the conversation that creates our reality. Having said that think it worth, at this stage, identifying both. Management consultants I sense often perceive themselves to be practical and pragmatic. They want to get on and 'deliver' for the client and not spend time playing with concepts and theories that take time and effort to grasp. The difficulty is that such 'delivery' comes from a set of theories and assumptions which go un-recognised by the practitioner. One consequence of this is that similar patterns of practice are repeated and repeated regardless of their effectiveness in the context to which they are applied. This framework for practice challenges all practitioners to give time and space to exploring their values and underlying beliefs.

The stance I am taking as I offer this framework is shaped by:

- A focus on what I have learned through this inquiry process about my own practice. As a consequence I note that my framework may not be viewed as generally applicable to all management consultants.
- A belief that inquiry is an on-going feature of practice and therefore what I offer today is not necessarily what I might offer tomorrow. A framework, at least in my thinking, indicates a structure that stands the test of time. In this case I offer the structure as a starting point for

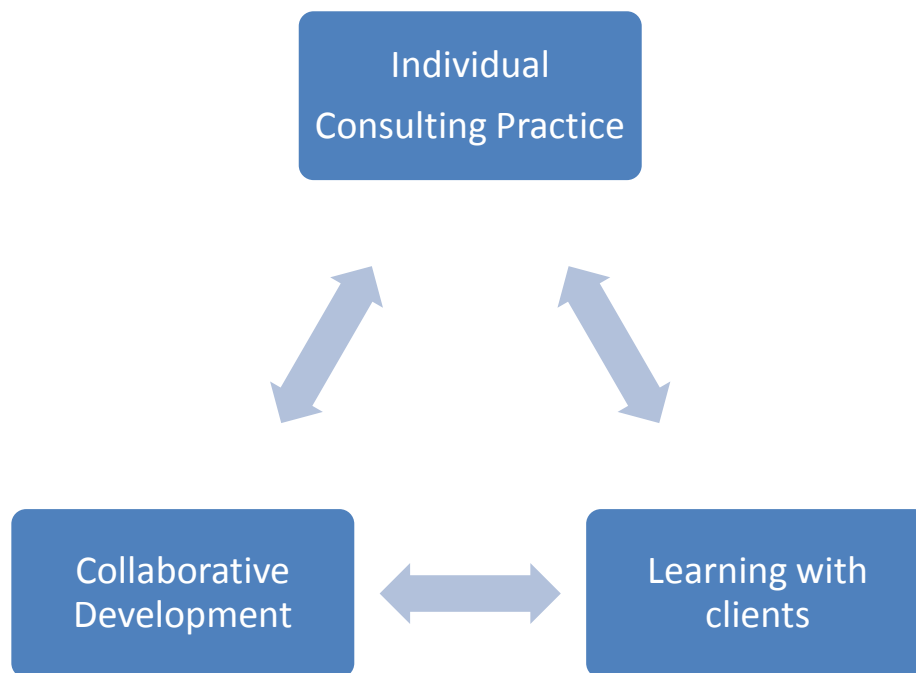
others to develop their own. What matters is not what framework I might carry but the one each person either consciously or unconsciously adopts.

- Imperfection given that I will omit that which I once thought important and include that which may be much less so. My position as an inquirer/practitioner means I cannot separate myself from my own biases and multiple lenses through which I perceive the world. As a result what I consider emergent, like this framework, others may see as incomplete.
- Acknowledgment that linguistically there is a struggle in an emerging field to adequately express what is meant. Changes in language I find often seem to lag behind change in mind-sets and practice. This means that at times words used in a framework like this do not necessarily mean what I intend them to mean.

Framework

Stepping back from the individual themes it is clear to me that there are three apparent meta-themes each of which are inter-related. This clarity comes from both the content of the thematic analysis but also from recognising the broad structure I chose to put around the project from the outset. Experience and intuition pointed me to the need to inquire into all three domains. However without the inquiry process I do not think the richness and inter-relatedness of the meta-themes would have become apparent. Alongside, of course, sits the social constructionist process that has shifted collective and individual understanding of practice, and continues to do so.

The first meta-theme focuses on the individual practitioner, their skills and practice development. The relevant sub-themes are rich in personal experience and reflection. However, such insights are not all about solitary experiences, many also involve inter-actions and conversations with clients and fellow practitioners. The second meta-theme, collaborative development, acknowledges the development opportunities offered through intentional, conversationally enacted relationships with fellow practitioners. Again this meta-theme does not stand alone but draws upon individual experiences and client relationships. My inquiry suggests that a framework like Co-operative inquiry has the potential for amplifying the shared learning between colleagues. The third meta-theme reflects the potential for client–consultant relationships and conversations to offer valuable learning that can then also be taken up by individuals and groups of practitioners. The diagram below represents the meta-themes and the arrows indicate that each element interacts with the other. For want of a better word, this is a framework to underpin the concept of developing conversational consulting practice and knowledge.



Relevance to Practitioner Development

As a practitioner, frameworks like this often provoke a question about relevance and practicality. What is the relevance to who I am and how I do my work? The following tables offer some suggestions. The themes, and to an extent the activities, are drawn from the across all the project elements. Some are obviously linked to the project whilst others are more tenuously connected and perhaps more directly informed by my practitioner experience. Again, as with framework itself, I am very cautious about the claims I make. Perhaps it is fairer to say that these activities directly speak to my own practitioner development interests. In a very real sense they form a personal development agenda for me to follow through. They offer a spur to further inquiry in my engagement with self, colleagues and clients. Other practitioners may find some or all irrelevant although I hope they resonate and stimulate conversation amongst members of my community about the nature of practice development.

Suggestions for Individual Consulting Practice

Themes	Recommended Activities
Understanding self and others worldviews.	<p>Engage with philosophical literature.</p> <p>Take time to step back and reflect on assumptions.</p> <p>Be aware of the language used by self and others.</p>
Recognise personal needs that you are looking to meet in consulting relationships.	Keep a reflective log and note feelings.
Develop your own understanding of social constructionist theory as it applies to your organisations and systems.	Broad reading of social constructionist literature and making personal application to practice.
Develop an understanding of the practice and skills associated with hosting conversations.	<p>Build competence in listening deeply and accurately.</p> <p>Learn how to frame questions that generate energy and commitment to inquiry.</p> <p>Learn and practice frameworks within which people can hold conversations.</p>
Working with ambiguity.	Understand your reactions to uncertainty and learn how to handle personal anxiety.
Maintain an active interest in personal inquiry into practice.	Develop questions routinely that shape your own inquiry/reflection into practice.
Maintain sensitivity to the broader discourses within which your relationships with clients are located.	Take time to listen beyond the word and topics for clues to the broader context in which the client understands his or her world.
Develop skills in process consulting practices.	Identify courses/learning programmes if needed and available.

	Search out clients who may benefit from a process consulting approach.
Work with clients who are open to conversational consulting approaches.	Network and identify potential assignments which might benefit from a conversational consulting approach.
Maintain a commitment to professional development.	Search out opportunities to develop skills and new mind-sets. Link with colleagues who also wish to develop practice. Undertake relevant development programmes.
Develop and continually refine your personal framework for practice.	Set aside reflective and conversational spaces to engage with your learning and identify how your practice may develop further.

Suggestions for Collaborative Development

Themes	Recommended Activities
Use collaborative development with peers to experience what it feels like for you to be hosted in a conversational space.	Encourage the adopting of conversational process in groups of which you are a member.
Practice vulnerability and honesty.	Create helpful boundaries for collegial group work.
Develop skills in contracting for development.	Adopt and adapt collaborative frameworks that encourage you to contract with others.
Use a peer group to explore how best to connect with clients and maintain that connection over time.	Spend time with peers reflecting on the quality of the relationship in the group and how that changes over time.
Practice handling ambiguous inter-personal	Maintain a learning log to reflect on how you

boundaries and anxiety.	handled such issues in the context of a peer group.
Practice stepping back from group processes and identify the discourses of which the group is a part.	Test out with group members your perception of discourses.
Encourage the sharing of positive consulting experiences to build awareness of existing wisdom and skills .The aim is to both learn from them and encourage confidence in each other.	Allocate time in groups to share positive consulting experiences and to inquire into why they occurred.
Use organisational experiences (if in employment) to explore the power dynamics that exist in organisational contexts.	Share with peers the impact you perceive the employment relationship has on your development as a practitioner.

Suggestions for learning with clients

Themes	Recommended Activities
Use deep listening and open questions to sense the readiness and willingness of the client to perceive the relationship you have with them as offering potential for shared learning.	Make opportunity in contracting conversations for free flowing conversation about client needs and aspirations form themselves and their organisation.
Explore with the client their past positive learning experiences.	Consider replicating such experiences in some form within the constraints of the project.
Link outcomes of the project with learning.	Maintain a focus on project outcomes in client conversations whilst incorporating opportunities to reflect on project experiences.
Aim to work with clients who share your values and approach to emergent change.	Network and get to know your 'market'. Use contacts from clients with whom you have successfully applied conversational approaches.
Deliver on specific project outputs to build	Use delivery as an opportunity to open up the

relationship and credibility with the client.	conversation about lessons learned from the process
Deliberately contract for learning at the outset of a consulting relationship for learning.	Explain to the client why specifically you wish to contract for learning. Explain your perception of benefits for client and what you hope to get out of it.
Find opportunities, with permissions, to share/publish learning from your work.	Write articles/blog entries outlining learning and describing the relationship with the client. Encourage and support the client to write.

What do the arrows signify?

As indicated previously they are intended to show that each element of the framework needs to interact with the others. That is fine although it feels somewhat unspecific. My own view is that the arrows represent the spirit and practice of inquiry. It is this energy, stirring up inquiry individually and collectively, that creates a developmental dynamic. Without it each element will, I think, become inward focussed. Inquiry has the potential to breaks us out from our introspection and open us up to professional and organisational development. This of course opens up a whole new set of questions around how we might co-create energy for inquiry as individuals, collaborators and clients connected as we are in a socially constructed network of relationships.

Re-defining Conversational Consulting

The original working definition I offered was:

A contracted, helping relationship through which people skilled and knowledgeable in conversation as a change process work with clients to create conversations that make a positive difference to businesses/organisations.

At one level I think this definition continues to serve a purpose. Given the prevailing discourse in the field around the notion of Dialogic Organisation Development (Bushe and Marshak 2009) I might consider no longer talking about conversational consulting and instead referring to dialogic consulting. This might lead me on towards definitions with slightly more academic resonances:

A contracted, helping relationship through which consultants able to work with dialogic processes in a social constructionist paradigm collaborate with clients to inquire and co-create emerging collective futures.

Or:

A contracted inquiry relationship, by which client and consultant learn, how to enable the social construction of new organisational and system realities, through dialogic processes.

All three definitions have their merits. I think the process of defining and re-defining will continue although I predict I will never land on a final version. That is a feature of being engaged in a discourse that is wide-ranging and in flux. There is something for me about learning to rest with the uncertainty surrounding such a construct which will allow new shared meanings to emerge.

Questions for further inquiry

This project opens up a number of questions which I think are deserving of further inquiry:

- What attitudes and mind-sets enable and sustain a spirit of inquiry in consulting practice? For myself? With other practitioners? With clients?
- What will my consulting practice look and feel like for myself and clients if I choose increasingly to operate out of a social constructionist paradigm?
- How can the practice of Co-operative inquiry contribute to professional development in a range of contexts?
- How can the impact of conversational consulting be captured and represented?
- What can I do to use this project as a means to stimulate further inquiry in myself and others?

Chapter 6

Contributing to the Field

Introduction

This chapter describes how my work in undertaking this inquiry is contributing to the field of practice and knowledge in the domains of management consulting, leadership, change management and academia. There are overlaps and, of course, there may be a range of other contexts affected by my work which are unknown to me at this time. I note that the type of influence may range from prompting reflection in a practitioner to encouraging a new approach to major change project. Given that this project has supported the development of a number of consulting colleagues through their participation in Co-operative inquiry I hope and trust that their influence, in their spheres of work, will multiply the contribution many fold. That, after all is one of the reasons for undertaking a participatory action research project.

Of course, one on-going contribution I make is through my continuing involvement in consulting. The inquiry process has changed me and in turn this will impact on those I work with. I will reflect on this in more detail in the next chapter. Another contribution is through my academic work as Senior Teaching Fellow in Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management at the University of Southampton.

However, whilst all of these are evidence of engagement with the field I am conscious that I am in the flow of a conversation that is beginning to re-construct how we understand ourselves in the context of organising and effecting change. This is social constructionism at work.

What follows are outputs that I cite examples of contributions to the field and wider conversations.

Books

1. Lewis, S., Passmore, J., and Cantore, S. (2008) *Appreciative Inquiry for Change Management*. London: Kogan Page.

In this collaborative effort I contributed to widening the focus of this book the topic to include conversational approaches to change. I wrote published chapters on practicing as a conversational consultant.

2. Cantore, S. and Passmore J. (2012) *Top Business Psychology Models*. London: Kogan Page Ltd.

Whilst the majority of chapters focus on psychology topics I incorporated a number that outline conversational approaches to change. The rights of this book have been sold to publishers in China and South Korea.

3. Cantore, S. and Cooperrider, D. (2013) '*Positive Psychology and Appreciative Inquiry: The contribution of the literature to an understanding of the nature and process of Change in Organisations*' in H. Skipton et al. (eds.) *The Psychology of Leadership, Change and Organizational Development*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

I led the writing of this peer-reviewed book chapter with a leading world authority on an aspect of change leadership (Appreciative Inquiry). I incorporated references to a growing interest in conversational approaches to change.

4. I am currently (September 2013) contributing to the early planning of a book to be targeted at students of conversational or dialogic OD. It is intended to be the first in the world that combines the latest thinking and examples of practice and will be a major contribution to the field. Professor Gervase Bushe is leading the editorial team.

Articles

1. Cantore, S. and Hick, W. (2012) Dialogic OD in Practice: Conversational Approaches to Change in a UK Primary School. *OD Practitioner* 45 (1), 5-10
2. Cantore, S. (2012) How has AI shaped my research? A case study. *International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry* 14 (4), 56-59.
3. Cantore, S. (2013) 'Compassion is an OD issue.' *NHS Employers*
<http://www.nhsemployers.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/Compassion%20is%20an%20OD%20Issue%20-%20NHS%20Employers%20Do%20OD.pdf> [Accessed 18 September 2013]

4. Cantore, S. (2013) 'Changing Organisational Cultures :A matter of life and death' *Association of Business Psychologists* <http://theabp.org.uk/news/changing-organisational-culture-a-matter-of-life-and-death.aspx> [Accessed 18th September 2013]

The above articles cover a range of potential audiences and each seeks to communicate the value of using conversation as a process in organisational and system change.

Conference presentations

1. Cantore, S. (2012) Scaling up the capacity of the consulting community to practice conversational approaches to development - emerging lessons from work-based appreciative inquiry. *World Appreciative Inquiry Conference: Belgium*.
2. Cantore, S. (2013) Doing more effective organisational change with less pain! Getting to grips with the theory and practicalities of Dialogic OD. *Association of Business Psychologists Annual Conference: Berkshire*.

Academic Practice

1. Designed and launched a PG Certificate OD and Facilitation in summer 2013. This incorporates a set of modules that help learners compare and contrast dialogic and diagnostic OD.
2. Designed and delivered a Masters module in OD which incorporates significant classroom time devoted to conversational approaches to change (Summer 2012 on-going).
3. Re-designed 1st year undergraduate modules to incorporate teaching on dialogic OD.
4. Applied to the Higher Education Academy in September 2013 for a departmental grant of £30,000 to support a co-operative inquiry programme of activities amongst staff and students in the OB/HRM group of the School of Management.
5. In discussion with the University Director of HR about how participatory action research methods might contribute to university academic leadership programmes.

Consulting practice

Alongside the above my consulting practice showcases to clients conversational approaches to change where this is relevant to their needs. The type of activities may include workshop presentations, leadership coaching and change projects.

Chapter 7

Reflections and Impact on Practice

Introduction

This closing chapter is an opportunity to stand back from the inquiry process and reflect on the learning from the project experience. I also take this opportunity to consider the impact the project has had on my professional practice.

Reflections on the project experience

To do justice to the experience I would probably end up writing a document the size of this report! What follows therefore can only partially reflect the breadth and depth of learning this project has offered me. Specific highlights have included:

- Conversing in depth with literature of which I had been previously only vaguely aware. Giving myself the time to read and engage with ideas through the lens of my practice and inquiry enabled me to spot new opportunities to apply the thoughts and experiences of others to my own questions. In doing so I also became acutely aware of the biases that I carry with me. I note that in the course of the project I have replaced old biases with new ones! This process also challenged me to reflect on the rigour with which I engage. I recognise in me, what seems to be a characteristic of some other consultants, a tendency to take what I perceive to be the 'big idea' and not spend time understanding the paradigm and context in which the idea emerged.
- Recognising that inquiry can be an expression of personal leadership. Participatory action research is not something to be undertaken without significant efforts in influencing colleagues, organisational leaders and sometimes academic colleagues. It involves stepping out into spaces which are sometimes welcoming but often uncertain, and at times, hostile. It also involves enabling change through inquiry which inevitably means you end up working with power dynamics. At times this project has required courage, tenacity, vision and focus –all of which are expressions of leadership.
- Understanding that a project of this type involves a degree of sacrifice. Holidays have been spent in front of the Personal Computer, social opportunities foregone and quite fundamental career choices made to enable completion. I now recognise that any form of inquiry/research comes with a price for the inquirer that is not always obvious at the start.

In part, this is because the process of inquiry changes the inquirer. I am not the same person I was when I started the project.

- Realising that however neat and tidy my inquiry plans might be, as I open them up to the 'real-world' they change and are shaped by a range of forces. This is all the more the case when working with Co-operative inquiry. A basic premise is that co-inquirers take ownership of the process for themselves. This happened and as a consequence my needs for process had to sit alongside the needs/wishes of others. Learning how to work with this was a not inconsiderable learning curve. Inquiry is a messy business.

Impact on my professional practice

The impact of the project on my professional practice has been, and continues to be, wide-ranging.

The following are some examples to illustrate this:

- Work with clients as a consultant now tends to explicitly recognise that both of us (and the wider system) is engaged in an inquiry. I am more confident in offering inquiry processes as a means to enact change. I also now link change and inquiry with leadership development. The three have become in my mind closely linked and I suggest to clients that this may become the case for them too.
- I recognise in my thinking an inclination to noting how language and conversations are continually shaping social realities. In my relationships with clients I apply this to the type of questions I offer and the observations I make on how I am making sense of their context. I think this gives an added richness to the quality of my work.
- I now actively search out clients with whom I can work in a partnering relationship rather than those only interested in me as a change catalyst.
- 18 months ago I chose to take up a full-time role in academia. This move has in part been prompted by the project since it enables me to continue to explore the themes I have identified in greater depth. Thankfully my contract enables me to continue to practice as a consultant.
- Whilst I sense I have deepened my conversation consulting expertise and practice I recognise that I have also developed skills in enabling participatory action research processes. I have, for example, recently (September 2013) submitted a bid to the Higher Education Academy with a view to conducting a shared inquiry amongst the staff and students of the Southampton Management School.
- My practice repertoire has now extended to include book writing, publishing professional articles and book chapters and presenting at professional conferences. These activities are

largely a consequence of the skills, knowledge and confidence that this project has fostered in me.

End

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