Establishing a Co-operative Inquiry Group: The Perspective of a "First-Time" Inquirer

Kate Louise McArdle[1]

This paper gives a detailed account of the activities I engaged in when *establishing* a co-operative inquiry (CI) group of 12 young women managers. I feel this "beginning" stage is not (well) documented. I acutely felt the gap this left in my understanding of how inquiries of this nature emerge and the shape they take, when setting out to inquire in this way for the first time. I believe voice and language are key throughout this early stage and here I evidence the choices I made in relation to both of these. Reflecting on these choices enabled me to understand my developing focus on process as well as the many "why?" and "how?" questions, which emerge at this early stage—an understanding which I believe is central to enriching both our "experience of" and our "talking about" our practice as inquirers.

KEY WORDS: Co-operative inquiry; facilitation; young women managers; voice.

1. INTRODUCTION

I'm 25 years old. I'm a woman. And this is my story of making a space for my Ph.D. inquiry in a large multinational organization (referred to as XYZ). I believe this "getting started" phase is not only worthy of, but also in need of focused attention. This need is due to accounts of CI seeming to jump from "getting access," to "what we did" – even John Heron's seminal text jumps from a theoretical discussion of CI as method, to issues the caller of the inquiry should consider at the "launch meeting," (Heron, 1996). We need to fill the gaps in our reporting of "establishing the group" to enable us to be more choice-full in our decisions in this key phase.

I, therefore, detail each of my key stages in establishing a CI group of "young women in management" (those who joined XYZ following graduation and who have been in the company for no more than 3 years). I begin in August 2000, with

[1] School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY, England. Fax: +44 1225 826 473. E-mail: mnpklm@bath.ac.uk

obtaining access to XYZ. I then cover two sponsor meetings, raising awareness of my research inside XYZ and two introductory sessions. I then draw to a close in January 2001 when the CI group was formed. I inquire into the decision of two women not to join the inquiry group and discuss the energy which shapes my process. Throughout, I reflect on the choices I made and I pay attention to why I noticed what I noticed. Language and voice are central to my discussion.

2. MAKING A PROPOSAL

"I was aware that (co-operative inquiry) could evoke anxiety with its lack of structure, excitement with its open-endedness, and uncertainty with its unpre-dictability regarding specifically desired outcomes," (Traylen, 1994).

In August 2000, I sent research proposals, my CV, and covering letter to several multinational organizations requesting access for my Ph.D. research (young women in management – a CI). The way these documents were presented was an important choice-point. I used plain, as opposed to headed paper. I introduced myself, as opposed to including a letter my male supervisor had offered to write. Headed paper felt too much like one organization speaking to another, and a letter from my supervisor sounded as though a professional man in one organization was speaking, on behalf of a woman, to another (probably) professional man in another organization. I was determined from the very beginning that my voice would not be lost. I needed a company to work with for my research and I felt as though I was taking a risk by not using the obvious power bases I had available to me. I felt as though the companies I approached would be more likely to be interested if I had done so. But I also knew this was my research and I felt a very strong need to own it.

So, I opted for my own voice, giving brief, bullet-pointed descriptions of:

- *The need for this inquiry*; very little is understood about the experiences of young women in management and very few attempts have been made to link feminist inquiry with action research.
- *CI process*: I outlined the core principles of action and reflection, collab-oration, and different ways of knowing. I also suggested how this would work in terms of time frame (meeting for half a day, once every four weeks, for ten months).

I followed this with a lengthy discussion of "benefits which may be derived from the study," for both the company and for the individuals involved. I devoted the majority of the proposal to these benefits as 2 years previously I had run some research at XYZ as part of my undergraduate degree course. This had shaped my understanding of where they attached value and placed importance – the focus was clearly on outcomes, not process. As I was approaching similar companies, I considered, they may all have a similar focus. I honored my voice by not tying the

inquiry down to a particular focus while also giving XYZ something to imagine it tied to – a feeling for what inquiry of this nature can achieve.

I had to balance a desire for access with the risk of being "too honest" and risking my proposal being rejected. I did not want my voice to disintegrate into being "a noise, saying what is expected, speaking to the organizational creed" (Martin, as quoted by Maguire, 2000), but I also did not want to encourage the anxiety Traylen (1994) above speaks of. I was struck at how silenced I felt in presenting myself on paper, how unincluded I would be in the decision of whether to meet. The proposals were posted and I waited. It was the end of August.

3. GETTING ACCESS

XYZ invited me to a meeting on September 7th at Head Office (HO). I was excited and relieved at the same time. I was aware from the previous work I had done with XYZ, that my proposed inquiry was not a process they were familiar with. They typically ran one day workshops focused on answers to assumed questions. This inquiry would begin through self-selection and spend time exploring what the questions were. I had framed the inquiry as an invitation to explore the experience of being a young woman in XYZ. I noticed how keen I was to establish this difference.

At the meeting on September 7th I met my now senior sponsor. Jon is male, 33, and is in the second highest of six management levels. I had decided that we ought not to try to fit each other. The inquiry had to be "bought into" on my terms – its shape had to stay intact. I felt it was right not to make the process or the outcomes sound concrete – I had to let him know he was buying into uncertainty.

The meeting mainly focused on Jon. He gave me a lot of background on XYZ and his views on the current workshops they run. I made notes as he spoke, particularly on the current workshop structures. I then fed back on what I saw as the value in these structures and then discussed the value in working with a CI structure and how this could work better or differently. Many positive comments were made throughout our 3-hour meeting. The opportunity to hear "the unheard story, from the inside" caused considerable interest and excitement.

I was invited back 2 weeks later to meet with Jon and Anna. Jon is Anna's boss. Anna is about 2 years older than me and had just been given responsibility for promoting women's interests at the HO site. The meeting focused more on me and my feelings about what we may be able to do together. The two areas I had to defend the most were: the duration of the inquiry and the invitation to "explore experience" as opposed to exploring a fixed topic. I was determined that neither of these elements would change. It felt good not to be silent or malleable. I left the meeting with two sponsors [senior (Jon) and junior (Anna)]. I promised to set up the group and run the inquiry. They promised full access and a sizable budget. I did not promise to generate any bulky reports or guarantee

any outcomes. Getting access so quickly and what I felt was on my terms felt fantastic.

Jon requested I compile a document to "sell" Bath University "higher up the chain" to indicate that he had made a "good choice in a partner institution." My voice had won access for my Ph.D. inquiry. I was now happy to let the organizations "talk." I entered the tables of statistics and quotations about the standing of the university onto several sheets of headed paper. This was one of the early indications of the type of information XYZ value. The document was well received.

4. FIRST CONTACT

At the end of October, I took part in a day celebrating "diversity" within XYZ. I was given half of a stand promoting women's interests. I covered it with bright yellow posters asking questions such as; "What is it like to be a twenty-something woman in XYZ?" "Does gender matter?" I littered the entire floor with bright orange flyers, which asked the same questions, gave the date of an introductory session, and my contact details. I was expected to remain on the stand, but I had little interest in being interrogated or speaking to people who were not in the age bracket of my inquiry. I needed to use my voice in the right kind of conversations. I wondered around talking to people who looked as if they were in my "target audience." We sat on couches, drank coffee, shared stories about my research and their work, and exchanged contact details. I spoke to about thirty young women and left the session with nine registered to attend the introductory session in December. I felt bolstered by their interest. My research began to feel real and important to the people who mattered.

5. AN INVITATION

Anna promised that "someone in Human Resources" would compile an e-mail list of all the eligible women in XYZ in the south of England, so I could invite them to an introductory at HO session on December 8th. The whole of November passed by and no e-mail list appeared. This taught me a valuable lesson. A combination of working outside an organization and being young and inexperienced placed me along way down the priority list. I *respected* this (I did not expect to be top of the list), *lived* with how it made me feel (frustrated and unimportant), and *managed* it (I offered my help and gently asked where the e-mail list was). I then had to scare my self by telling Anna that time was getting so tight that I had to have the list. I traveled to HO and compiled a list of 180 eligible women in one afternoon.

Speaking with power from what I experienced as an unpowerful position was not easy. I wanted to keep Anna on "my side," but I needed to balance this with making her realize that I would not let my inquiry schedule slide. Defending my inquiry is important to me. Not personalizing the issues is sometimes difficult – it

would have been very easy to blame Anna here, and part of me did for a while. But I also realized that my inquiry was just one small thing in her life, not the one huge thing it was in mine.

The invitation e-mail was sent only one week before the introductory session on December 8th, which was far from ideal. However, twenty-six registered to attend and I was overjoyed. I e-mailed my research proposal and prereading; "One page introduction to co-operative inquiry," (http://zeus.sirt.pisa.it/icci/cionepag. htm), and "A layperson's guide to co-operative inquiry," (http://www.voyager.co. nz/~jheron/ cishortg.htm). I adapted the text to increase its accessibility, for example; "In Phase 4 . . . the co-researchers reassemble to share the experiential data" became "After 4 weeks have passed, we'll reassemble to share the experiential data." *I* wanted to speak through the literature and speaking of "we" rather than "the co-researchers" had a sense of "we could do this together, you and me." I expected that most would not have time to read it.

6. MEETING EACH OTHER

The introductory session on December 8th was scheduled for 2 hours – the first hour was for discussion, the second for a buffet lunch to encourage informal discussion and "meeting." Timing is important, in terms both of how long sessions last and getting people to attend in the first place. Perhaps this is different for inquirers who work within the organization where the inquiry will be held – they may have status, power, and friends. For someone outside of the organization, a short "taster session" is less commitment for everyone involved. My experience suggests that a free lunch had a couple of hours out of the office is more "do-able" than the half-day session theory may suggest we aim for (Heron, 1996).

I had several goals for the session:

(1) Model how we could work together (structures and processes);
(2) make space to meet each other;
(3) discuss basic methodology and the research proposal;
(4) share our feelings about why this could be interesting.

I had no desire to structure formal plans of work. I wanted everyone to get a feel for how working together might be – to enable them to consider whether it might be for them.

I arrived to find a beautiful conference room filled with large wooden tables arranged in a square, on top of which, at regularly spaced intervals, were a mixture of mineral waters, glasses arranged in diamond shapes, and small dishes of mints on paper doilies. The side table was laden with the hardware involved in serving tea (eleven different varieties), coffee, and biscuits.

I wanted a circle of chairs. I phoned Facilities to remove the tables. Two big men in overalls arrived and called Catering to come and move the mints and water.

A woman arrived, dressed in a black and white uniform with a bow around her neck and an apron around her waist. I helped her move the water and the mints. She rearranged my random depositings into diamond shapes, with all the labels pointing in the same direction. The men removed the tables and put the chairs back in a square. Then they all left and I was alone again. I wheeled the huge plush chairs into a circle and wondered what the women would think when they arrived. Would they be as bemused by what I had created, as I had been by what I'd seen when I'd arrived?

The meeting was scheduled for 11 AM and people started to arrive at about 5 minutes to. I welcomed everyone as they arrived and saw them noticing the circle of chairs and the "no tables." The structure seemed symbolic of the unnormalness of what I was going to propose we join each other in doing and it helped me to communicate this nonverbally.

Very few people knew each other. I felt we were "together" for the first time. I decided to start the session just after five-past eleven, when about half of those expected had arrived. I had to listen to two voices. One said I should wait until everyone had arrived so we could "start properly," and the other, that I did not want people to think that my timings were open to neglect, now or in the future. I let the group know what I was going to do and why and enlisted their help in moving all of the spare chairs out of the circle. We all pulled our chairs in closer together and we began.

I opened by saying hello and welcoming everyone to the session. I did not thank them. I wanted to establish an "us," not to suggest indebtedness. I stated briefly that I was excited about the session and what may happen, then suggested we do a round of the circle to "warm our voices up" – saying hello and letting each other know why we were here. Again, I was trying to pay attention to voice. I wanted everyone to feel that they were part of what was happening and valued in their contribution to it, very early on. Throughout the "round," the remaining people who had signed up for the session arrived and space was made for them.

The reasons for "being here" were varied, for example, "curiosity," "to network," "there's nothing like this in XYZ for women," "sounds exciting," "I have things I need to talk about." I noticed myself liking the open-mindedness of many of the responses. They sounded very similar. I reflected back on the e-mail invitation. Had something I had said, or the way I had said it, been heard positively by a particular type of woman?

I noticed who differed from the "open-mindedness" of the majority of the group in their response. This difference was marked by the structuredness of their expectations. Jane persisted in directing questions to and asking for responses from *only* me, focusing on "what is the business benefit of this work?" I heard what she said and I imagined around what she was not actually saying. I heard "I need to know the end result so *I can feel safe* in being here." I felt I was stuck. She wanted to hear the "benefit," before she could get involved in the discussion most of the

group were having. But I felt that it was only through discussion that the group could come to understand how this space could be "useful" to them and, therefore, to XYZ.

I responded with several "business benefits" and shared my ideas on using this space creatively together to help understand this more. Even so, Jane continued to focus on me and I wondered why. She was not asking questions in an "interested" way. I felt as though she wanted to compete with me. Each of her interventions seemed to sap the energy from the group – the animated chatter would cease, faces would become more serious, bodies would sit back in their chairs. There was no desire to be involved in responding to her questions, even when I openly invited such involvement.

A large part of the role I planned to take was to help the noticing of process, but I chose not to raise my questions around what was happening with the group. I felt that further engaging them in noticing this would take us off track and it was not how I wanted them to remember our first time together. I felt that I had tried hard to engage with the questions asked of me and to help Jane involve, and be involved with, the group. She seemed to not be making any steps to meet me. I lost my desire to engage with her. And it felt okay. Paying attention to her voice meant silencing a lot of others. I felt that those with energy should be able to wallow in it for a while, undisturbed.

This wallowing took the form of losing themselves in storytelling and listening. They seemed to be enjoying the unstructured nature of the process, finding commonalities through their stories and beginning to see whom they liked and enjoyed being with. They were energetically involved with each other – they were animated, leaning toward each other, asking questions, and putting forward ideas.

Throughout our discussion I asked methodological questions, such as, "This is how CI works theoretically. How do you see this way of working being useful to you?," "How are we using this space now?, How does that feel for you?." I tried to do this softly. I had no desire to "indoctrinate" anyone on the methodology (Heron, 1996), but rather to help them to see, through the process we were engaged in, how I thought this way of working made sense.

I shared my thoughts about how some questions/challenges opened our space/us up, and how some shut it/us down. I commented on what I heard us saying and what effect I saw that having, with no explicit judgment. I asked everyone to think about their choices in relation to working in a collaborative way. We discussed the type of questions we were asking and I introduced the idea of appreciative inquiry (Co-operrider *et al.*, 2000) as up to this point questions had been predominantly negative. The notion of "the questions we ask as being fateful" (Ludema *et al.*, 2000) was eagerly picked up by the group.

At the end of the session, I suggested we meet 5 days later on December 13th to keep our motivation going over the Christmas holiday. This seemed to make sense to everyone and twenty-six identical palm tops rapidly clattered into action.

The enthusiasm to meet again made me feel really good. I felt "this matters." I felt like something worthwhile was going to happen.

Lunch was served. Some people grabbed food and drifted off. The rest of us formed two, small, circularly seated groups and chatted while we ate. I switched groups between courses. I had (what now seem bizarre) thoughts of one group feeling I was not interested in them if I spent the whole of lunch with the other group, and of each group perhaps feeling that they needed to accommodate me as a "non-XYZ person" if I stayed with them for the entire time. Having been "facilitated" before myself, I knew I had felt good when the facilitator had come to say "hi," but like I was "still working" when they were there. I based my actions on these remembered feelings and just hoped I did okay. I knew was still a facilitator at this point, despite my plans for this to change over time to one of co-inquirer/facilitator.

People began to disperse. Some said thanks and commented on looking forward to the next session; others said bye, while some just disappeared. As I got ready to leave, I felt I knew whom I would be seeing again. This feeling came from seeing their different levels of attention when we were together. Some eyes had sparkled. Some eyes drifted. Some bodies physically positioned themselves away from me. Unless you see some eyes sparkle in the group I believe you ought to stop what you are doing and suggest that everyone else does too. Notice the nonsparkling. If you feel you can, inquire into it. Despite asking questions, during our session, such as "how are we all doing with this?" or "is this making sense?" and regardless of the response of gently nodding heads from the nonsparklers, I knew they were not with me.

The following 5 days, in the build up to the next session, was when I first began to build relationships with the potential group members. I e-mailed everyone with some thoughts on the first session, some thoughts about the second, and invited comment. I attached the same readings as previously and reminded those who had not read them that doing so would ensure that "we will all be at the same place in our understanding." I e-mailed again the day before the second session with a reminder of timing and venue and said I looked forward to seeing them again. And I did. Fourteen people had confirmed their attendance to the second session.

7. MEETING AGAIN

The session was a half-day, 8.30 AM – 12.00 PM with lunch and sixteen of us met. Again, the chairs were in a circle and we each took a turn to speak, this time saying hello and "anything else we wanted to share with everyone," at my suggestion. This invitation was well responded to. We went around the group and three hangovers were confessed to, due to a department Christmas party the night before. We shared some laughter and all used our voices.

We spent the first hour in the large group exploring their "important themes" such as; gender and power, role models, expectations upon "joining" XYZ, and working practices. I helped with "noticing" of process and methodological input. After an hour of discussion, I suggested we move into four small groups so we could capture the themes and the small groups continued in the animated fashion of the larger one. They disseminated the themes and added issues surrounding them.

Before the process of feeding back to the large group began, I asked several questions; "Why are we feeding back? What are your and our responsibilities as you feedback?" The initial response was blank faces and silence. The eventual discussion raised some apparently fundamental, although as yet unvoiced hopes, for example, "When I feed back I'd like people to give me all of their attention and really listen." Through this voicing, I heard a very clear rationale of what our responsibilities as "listeners" were and, as a result, felt more responsible for "listening well." I felt our process was being paid attention to purposefully. We were giving meaning in a meaningful way. The groups fed back around the above themes, not only stating them, but also why they were important, which involved the relating of experiences.

We ended with an agreement that the time until the January 30th session would be an "exploratory" cycle, rather than taking one if the themes discussed and working solely with that. We talked about "today's session as being an 'awareness-raising' one" and the coming 6 weeks as time to mull over, digest, and notice more awarely. I encouraged an already present sense of not wanting to rush the process. I believe, in order for our questions to be meaningful, we have to give ourselves time to find them and give them space to grow.

The relationship between our process and time was becoming clearer to the group. They were there, inside the room, working with the process and each other, seeing from the inside that "this takes time." I juxtaposed this understanding with Anna's, my junior sponsor. She continually wanted to talk about goals and end benefits with me and I continually explained that we needed time. Anna, however, was on the outside; she did not have the felt experience to help her understand what I said, but I felt she had to appreciate and *respect* the process needs. I decided I should reexplain the process we had agreed with each other in September.

8. A NEW YEAR

The year began with twelve women confirming their attendance at the January 30th session and two deciding not to join the group. I inquired into the "not joining" and learned a lot about these decisions and my self as an inquirer.

Helen e-mailed me to say that she would "not be joining the group due to my workload and new projects I'm about to take on." The group had not yet detailed the business benefits of the inquiry, something Helen had really wanted to do.

She had not given this as a reason and I wondered why. Was she *politely* opting out as opposed to saying what she really felt? Whatever her reason, I wondered how she felt about not joining the group. I e-mailed her with my thoughts. I invited her to respond, but also said that I would fully understand her not doing so. I wished her well and thanked her for her involvement. I received no reply.

I felt like I had done the right thing. I had inquired in a positive way, into something which interested me. I had not "forced" a response. And not getting one felt okay. I'd not learned anything additional about Helen's reasoning for not joining, but I had learned that I could actively engage in wanting to learn from such moments, which was valuable in itself.

A week later Gemma e-mailed to say that she "would not be taking part." She gave no reason. I chose to persist in wanting to learn about "deciding not to join," so I e-mailed her. I said I would "really appreciate a response." I suggested that by replying with her story of how she experienced the group, we may *both* learn something of how/why needs are met/not met in groups and what the high/low points were. I said I looked forward to hearing from her. I voiced an *expectation* that she would reply. I remembered how the voicing of expectations had effected the way we all listened in the feedback session, how powerful it had been, but how gentle it had seemed at the time. I hoped I achieved the same here.

Gemma responded 3 days later. Her e-mail reminded me of the contrast between the culture of XYZ and the space we were beginning to create in the group. Below is an extract from her message.

> Half a day every month represents 2.5% of my time and I have a maximum of 5% of my time to dedicate to "people/organization projects." I have now taken the decision to use that 5% to develop my training skills (to become a trainer) and my recruiting skills.
> E-mail correspondence, January 26th, 2001

I felt effective in pursuing the issue and learning from it. Judi Marshall's concept of knowing when to persist and when to desist is key here (Marshall, 1999). It helped me to think safely around what I was doing both in pushing for a response and in not chasing one. The notion of persisting helped me to see that sometimes when issues are important to us, we need not let them pass.

9. AS WE ARE

It is the end of January 2001. The group has now "closed." We decided that while people may opt out, no one new can join at this stage. This is for several reasons, not least of which is that we need to progress and build on learning, as opposed to continually revisiting the basics. We are beginning to get to know each other and we have a sense of wanting to protect this, to let relationships build.

This "closing" involved e-mails being sent to others who had been interested in being involved, but who had not attended so far. I told them that the group did

not have space for them now, thanked them for their interest, and offered to keep in touch with our progress and perhaps involve them in later stages. Three have welcomed this offer.

Thus, we are a group of twelve, with several others on the fringes. Now we know "who" we are, we have a name; "YoWiM" (Young Women in Management). We range in age from 22 to 29 years, with 2 Ph.D.'s, 1 Ph.D. in progress, and 9 Batchelors. We are 2 Asian, 9 English, 1 Indian, 1 Scottish, and we are spread between 2 XYZ sites, 5 XYZ functions, and Bath University. We are using co-operative inquiry to help us explore how young women work within XYZ and what their experience is. I'm exploring how I can inquire in a collaborative manner. We are coauthoring a document to track "our practice in our group," in order that we may share our perceptions and learn from the practices that work best for us. Our time together is tape-recorded and transcribed. Extracts, which I have been asked to select, are shared between us. We'll be working together until October 2001. We are excited about what we are doing.

10. REFLECTIONS ON PROCESS—THE BEGINNING IS IMPORTANT UNTIL AFTER THE END

As earlier stated, my purpose in writing is to relate "the beginning" and to share my story of the choices I made. My account, up to this point, was written during this period of "doing" – September to January 2001. It is now June 2001 and I was wondering what *remains* important? I share the longevity of certain processes here because they reinforce my belief that the "beginning" fundamentally shapes what follows – how we embed our inquiry shapes the way we operate across the personal/organizational boundary. Most are related to "energy," as the energy involved in my practice can sometimes seem immense and it can be unclear "where my energy goes." Naming these processes means I can attribute value to them and keep them open to change rather than becoming stuck in "feeling tired" or "wondering why I spend time doing certain things." The fact that my energy is so dispersed (expended on many different people and processes) yet so focused (only used in the service of my inquiry and its participants) makes Wadsworth's idea of the facilitator as "energy worker" very relevant for me (Wadsworth, 2000). The constant noticing of energies, personal and organizational, and my response to them remains important to date. Three areas seem worthy of noting in detail.

First, my inquiry process has caused me to pay attention to a variety of (often uncomfortable) feelings and biases, which I had previously chosen to silence. I continue to learn how to share these feelings with a carefully screened audience – people who I trust, who I can speak with honestly and be heard. Peter, Judi, and Sandy deserve my unreserved thanks. Enabling my "other voices" be heard helps me to respect my own energies in this process – something I believe is key. Getting the process of "being able to speak and being listened to" underway at

the very beginning has enabled the voicing of this to naturally be part of what I do and how I take care of myself. It also seems to let those with whom I talk inquire safely with me as they know that doing so is okay – we seem to have a mutual expectation that there is nothing we can not ask about. Which is wonderful.

The second element is also related to taking care of myself but also our group. My "natural rhythms" dictate that I am much "better" at being attentive to process in the morning, so the group at XYZ runs from 9 AM until 12.30 PM. I like to have a quiet, *unrushed* hour and half when I arrive on site at XYZ. I use the first hour to set up the room with visual stimulus – posters, pictures we have drawn, flip charted ideas for "today's session," recording kit, and art kit. Spare time to deal with any unforeseen issues, like not having enough chairs and problems with recording kit (that do appear out of nowhere!) is also good. The last half an hour is time to breakfast, calmly think, and prepare myself to focus on "us." Part of noticing these rhythms, "when I'm better at this," is about not wanting things to slip past me. I think this is tangled up with a notion of wanting to "do this right." I'm coming to understand that a lot probably does slip past me, but this is not all "bad." Doing research with people means doing research as a person. And we can not see everything.

The third element spreads a little wider. It is about taking care of how I naturally value relationship, how I want XYZ to see me, and how the relationship between the two affects the space in which the inquiry is placed. The focus here is, therefore, on people "outside" of the group. I choose to spend time with them face to face – *creating* relationships which would otherwise not exist, except for perhaps via e-mail. I book meeting rooms at XYZ by meeting with the "facilities" staff. I flip through my senior sponsor's photographs of his daughter and I inquire how she is. I discuss menus with the catering staff and ask them what they think is best. I spend a lot of time talking to a lot of people as I believe our inquiry can be supported in a lot of ways – often intangible ones. The kind of relationship building detailed above would, from what I have understood of XYZ, be seen from an organizational perspective as unimportant and unnecessary – something it's members would not be encouraged to do or valued in doing. Building these relationships feels neither unimportant nor unnecessary and it spreads outward the valuing of inquiry-in-relationship held in our group.

11. THE BEGINNING

My aim here has been to tell my story of what happened at "the beginning" and how it felt for me. It is here with all of its muddle. Perhaps you would do things very differently. Perhaps there are things we would do the same way. This is not important. The point for me here is that we need to share our stories of the beginning. I have said that voice is central for me. Therefore, I should "speak my

inquiry out," not silence it. I welcome conversation on this paper and related issues and look forward to the stories.

REFERENCES

Co-operrider, D. L., Sorensen, P. F., Jr., Whitney, D., and Yaeger, T. F. (ed.). (2000): *Appreciative Inquiry; Rethinking Human Organization Towards a Positive Theory of Change*, Stipes Publishing, Illinois.

Heron, J. (1996). *Co-operative Inquiry*, Sage, London.

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting Smart*: *Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern*, Routlege, New York, p. 150.

Ludema, J. D., Co-operrider, D. L., and Barrett, F. J. (2000). Appreciative inquiry: The power of the unconditional positive question. In Reason, P., and Bradbury, H. (eds.), *Handbook of Action Research*, Sage, London, pp. 189–199.

Marshall, J. (1999). Living life as inquiry. *Systemic Practice Action Res.*, **12**(2), 155–171.

Maguire, P. (2000). Uneven ground: Feminisms and action research. In Reason, P., and Bradbury, H. (eds.), *Handbook of Action Research*, Sage, London, pp. 59–69.

Traylen, H. (1994). Confronting hidden agendas: Co-operative inquiry with health visitors. In Reason, P. (ed.), *Participation in Human Inquiry*, Sage, London.

Wadsworth, Y. (2000). The mirror, the magnifying glass, the compass and the map: Facilitating participatory action research. In Reason, P., and Bradbury, H. (eds.), *Handbook of Action Research*, Sage, London, pp. 420–432.

http://zeus.sirt.pisa.it/icci/cionepag.htm

http://www.voyager.co.nz/~jheron/cishortg.htm