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## Knowing Ourselves as Teacher Educators: joint self-study through electronic mail

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**ABSTRACT** This article is the third in a series of joint self-studies of teacher educators. The enthusiasm and energy created by the first two enquiries led Pam Lomax, Moyra Evans and Zoe Parker to invite Jack Whitehead, who had been a sceptical onlooker and 'critical friend' into the third collaboration. Because the authors were located in three different geographical regions, they planned to use email as the main channel for communications. It is the story of this journey that is the focus of the present article. The authors did not even succeed in reaching agreement about the focus for their collaborative work. They failed to reach agreement on almost all the important issues. It was only the shame of having to admit this failure that pushed them to analyse their data and, in doing that, they came to see its potential to explain some of the complexities of using email as a medium of communication for collaborative self-study. The enquiry provides a critical assessment of the use of electronic mail within collaborative self-study, and critical insight into the tensions and dilemmas of collaboration as a strategy for self-study.

This article describes an unsuccessful attempt to engage in joint self-study. It was intended as the third of a series, in which the first two had been aimed at developing a method of joint self-study within specific contexts. An important focus of the third study was to be our work together in facilitating the continuing education of teachers and, particularly, how we could share the process of this at an international conference to which we had committed ourselves to make a joint presentation. Our substantive focus was intended to direct us to examine what we meant by working together to support

teacher researchers, and to explore the action we took to improve our understanding and our practice in relation to this. It is important that the reader understands that the joint self-study method is distinct from the partnership and collaboration that was to be the focus of the study, and from the form of our intended communication. Because we were located in three different geographical regions, we planned to use electronic mail, a medium that we hoped could capture the process of our reflexive and dialectical critique (Winter, 1989) as we worked to improve our practice supporting teacher researchers.

The dilemmas and tensions highlighted by the research are largely unresolved and the three helpful comments of the anonymous colleague who refereed the first version of this article have brought to the surface once again the negative feelings that led to us abandoning the project and writing this article. One of the comments that can be addressed is the referee's discomfort with 'the unproblematic 'we' that writes the article, given that the article is concerned with the problematising of 'we' as a collaborative group'. Although the task of editing the material was done by Pam, she drew as far as possible upon the words of her colleagues to construct the text that 'we' subsequently agreed to own. This highlights one successful outcome of the research that was not recognised in the original article – that we have jointly been able to agree an account of the research that we are willing to make public.

### Background to the Study

Lomax & Evans began to engage in joint self-study from 1994–95 (Lomax & Evans, 1996). Their aim was to explore some of the issues that underpinned their successful collaboration in developing, implementing and getting postgraduate accreditation for school-based practitioner research at Denbigh School (Evans, 1996a). Pam was interested in exploring the use of memory work, particularly how transcripts of tape-recorded data could be used subsequently to focus memory work (Haug et al, 1987; Crawford et al, 1992; Schratz & Schratz-Hadwich, 1995). Moyra was interested in writing 'stories' derived from the memory work to explore sensitive issues about the meanings and relationships embedded in the original data (Clandinin, 1992; Carter, 1993; Convery, 1993; Evans, 1996b). Moyra and Pam had clear ground rules for this work, starting with two texts that were individually chosen, challenging each other on the chosen text, tape recording and transcribing the memory work session, sharing the individual writing that emerged (Moyra wrote a fictionalised story) and agreeing the final article. The issues they agreed to publish were to do with Moyra's interest in the differentiated relationships between school and university, and within school; and Pam's interest in the logical and ethical difficulty of using teachers practice as evidence of her own success as a teacher educator. Both these issues were seen by Moyra and Pam to expose their vulnerability, but both agreed that the risk entailed was worth taking.

This research was well received by colleagues from the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) attending Pam & Moyra's session at the 1995 AERA meeting in San Francisco and encouraged them to develop the method further. The opportunity for doing this was created when Moyra and Pam become joint tutors to a group of teachers undertaking an action research project for the final year of an MA. This second enquiry (Lomax et al, 1997, 1998) differed from the first, in that Pam and Moyra wrote a poem and a story about their initial reactions to the students specifically to focus a memory work session. Other data collected during the year long project included tape recordings of teaching sessions, records of how students felt at various stages of the course, written reflections by the tutors on specific sessions and extended written comments by the tutors on the dissertations submitted by the students. Zoe, a third tutor in the team was invited to join this collaboration soon after it began. This second study was more 'sensitive' than the first because the students and their thoughts were included. Ethical issues were frequently discussed; data was shared with the students; openness and transparency were at the top of the agenda. An interim paper, based on the early stages of the research, and focusing on the issues of transparency and vulnerability in relation to inviting students to participate in their tutors' self-study, was presented to the Kingston Hill Action Research Group. Comments from the group (including Jack) were integrated into the text and the paper was presented at the 1996 AERA Conference in New York. Again, the work provoked a great deal of interest from S-STEP colleagues, particularly Jack, who was keenly supportive of the work because it seemed to have relevance to his own idea of living educational theory (Whitehead, 1993). As a result, the four of us began to discuss the possibility of engaging in collaborative self-study.

### The Significance of Self-Study

The significance of self-study has been highlighted by Zeichner (1998) who has said that 'The birth of the self study in the teacher education movement around 1990 has been probably the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher education research'. Yet, the concept of self-study is a broad one, ranging from a reflective investigation of ones own teaching, often highly informal, to one approaching formal research with all the priorities and concerns that implies (Barnes, 1998). Within the educational action research approach that the four of us favour, self-study is about doing research that leads to claims supported by evidence that can be validated and is contextualised within an imperative to improve practice (McNiff et al, 1996). The characteristics of this approach include the centrality of the 'I'; the use of personal values as yardsticks for judging practice; the importance of collaboration through different forms of educative relation; the possibility of developing personal living educational theories; and the possibility of making individual contributions to an epistemology/epistemologies of practice (Lomax et al, 1996). This approach is congruent with Hamilton &

Pinnegar's (1998) identification of openness, collaboration and reframing as the main features of self-study.

Jack points out that he was instrumental in introducing Pam, Moyra and Zoe to S-STEP, of which he was one of the founding members. Jack's interest is in the way that educational action researchers can contribute to the reconstruction of educational theories from self-studies of their own professional learning as they ask, answer and research questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'. He points to the *Teacher Education Quarterly*, which devoted a special issue to Self-Study and Living Educational Theory (Pinnegar & Russell, 1995), and to the living theory Dissertations and Theses on his action research homepage at <<http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw>> as examples of what he means by self-study.

However, the work of S-STEP is eclectic and many of its members do not work within the 'living theory' tradition as can be seen from the diversity of papers in the edited collection of papers from the 1996 Herstmonceaux Castle Conference (Hamilton, 1998), the 1998 Herstmonceaux Castle Conference Proceedings (Cole & Finley, 1998) and publications from other 'founder' members (Russell & Munby, 1992; Russell & Korthagan, 1995; Loughran & Northfield, 1996).

Pam, Moyra and Zoe have developed their particular contribution in terms of a 'joint' self-study approach, which they believed could make an original contribution to the existing literature on self-study. Their idea of joint self-study was one in which they intended to jointly address the issues arising from their shared practice, but one in which they expected their individual perspectives and interests to be affirmed. Pam is interested in the 'methodology' of action research, particularly how teachers 'represent' their action research (Lomax, 1994a,b, 1998); Moyra has pioneered the use of 'fictionalised story' as a means of personal and professional development and as a way of representing action research (Evans, 1997, 1998); Zoe uses the idea of an 'auto/biography of learning' as a form in which teachers can represent an edited version of their lives which focuses on the articulation and explanation of what it means for them to learn (Parker, 1998; Lomax & Parker, 1995).

The third self-study had its inception at the 1996 AERA Conference. At that time plans were being made for the first Herstmonceaux Castle S-STEP Conference to be held in August 1996, and the four of us determined to make a presentation about our practice supporting teachers' research from a joint self-study approach. We intended to use email to share and critique each others ideas, and we intended to base our paper on a description and explanation of the process, through which we helped each other to improve our individual practices. The use of electronic mail was seen to have a number of advantages. It has the potential to distance the enquirer from his/her self in order to enhance group reflection on sensitive issues. It has the potential to make time to think, to help the responder to consider carefully before replying and to change the form of words to get nearer to the heart of what one is trying to say. Other people's views can be obtained

concurrently, so people don't have to take turns. Taking turns often means that the speakers respond to the last point raised, rather than add their own views on what others have already explored. At the beginning of this research we were all excited at the prospect of using email for our joint self-study and believed that it could bridge the gap created by different location and separate professional lives.

The present article is based on an analysis of our email communicators between April and July 1996. The emails show that we were unable to agree a starting point for joint self-study and by August 1996 we had nothing new to present at the Conference. We failed to reach agreement on almost all the important issues. Jack presented his own ideas at the Castle, and Pam, Moyra and Zoe presented an account of their second joint self-study. It was Pam who subsequently analysed the early email data; and in doing that we have come to see the potential of our data to explain some of the complexities of joint self-study and the role of email. The present account has been agreed by all of us and we use the shared pronoun intentionally. Below we present a number of issues that emerged from the analysis of a series of emails that were sent and received by different combinations of the group from April 1996 up until we met to discuss progress in August 1996. The research did not stop at this point, but subsequent emails show the relationship of the group deteriorating to the extent that none of us were emotionally capable of continuing the analysis. Once, we agreed to abandon this joint self-study, relationships have mended, and we are eager to work together as critical friends and partners, but so far not as a group of four.

We present this article because we think that it raises serious issues about collaborative work that are rarely raised. Looking back at the emails, it is possible to see a maze of issues around which we could construct several papers and to identify persistent issues that weave in and out of different conversations. Below Pam has summarised the main issues that emerged from an analysis of the data and presented glimpses from the journey that led us to agree that these were major issues.

### The Issues

1. We failed to find a concrete focus. There was a shared concern. There is no questioning our commitment to a purpose and that purpose was to improve our practice as teacher educators through joint self-study. We were used to working together and enjoyed our collaborative work. We were all involved in the Kingston Hill Action Research Network, which we believe aspires to Hargreaves (1995, p. 153) idea of creating 'a collective professional confidence' through developing 'the situated certainties of collective professional wisdom among particular communities of teachers'. E-mail as the means of our communication offered enormous opportunity to share reflections, offer support and critique and learn from each other. The extract from our taped conversation in August 1996 (reproduced towards the end of the article) shows our enthusiasm and energy towards the goal of improving our practice as teacher educators through joint self-study, although the

subsequent analysis of the email data suggests that we did not share agreement on what it meant. The email data shows that we did not find a focus.

2. We did not question our understanding of self-study. We did not see the need to distinguish the joint self-study method from the collaborative practices and partnerships that were intended as the focus for our study. Our historic relationships with each other interfered in our relation as a group of four researchers, and we did not keep our joint self-study practice separate from the emotions raised in our collaborations and partnerships. Discussion and agendas already underway before the group decided to engage in joint self-study got in the way of establishing our *modus operandi*. We did not separate what belonged outside the research from what had a proper place within the research because we did not establish agreed ground rules for joint self-study.

3. We did not question how far joint self-study relies on the nature and composition of the collaborating group. The first self-study had been a partnership. The second self-study included a third person in an existing partnership and this seemed to enrich rather than complicate the research. We expected the same for the email research. We expected it to build upon and extend the method and focus of the joint self-study. There was a lot going for the collaboration – a history of collaborative work, a shared perspective on action research, common values – but it failed. Certainly the dynamics of our collaboration was different in this third collaborative self-study from the first two. We are unsure how far this was due to the dilemmas and tensions of inviting a fourth person, male, into an existing collaborative partnership of three women, whether the group became too large to function efficiently, or whether the mode of communication, email, was to blame.

### The Data

Table I is a summary of the emails that were used for the analysis that follows. Pam drafted this account from an analysis of data from her own archive, and we recognise that there are gaps and inaccuracies.

SELF-STUDY THROUGH EMAIL

**AUTHORS - PLEASE SUPPLY A CLEAN COPY OF TABLE I  
PRINTED OUT ON A SINGLE SHEET OF A4 PAPER THAT  
CAN BE USED AS ARTWORK**

Note: Arrows show direction of the email.

Table I. LEGEND?????????

### The Narrative of a Collaborative Journey: the first leg

Our failure to agree a focus for our collaborative self-study was not due to any dearth of ideas from individuals in the group. It was due to us (as a group) not taking up any of the ideas that were offered.

#### 1. Moyra's story

*After returning from AEA, New York 1996, Moyra wrote a story titled: In which Robert T. Smith grapples with a new idea and comes home from the Conference with some questions which disturb his equanimity. Her reason for writing the story was to present a variety of issues to do with self-study on which she hoped we would focus our collaborative work. Pam acknowledged receiving the story at the end of April: Thanks for your story. I have got it and did manage to download it. I haven't read it yet. Is it for Zoe also? (960426.08). Zoe responded at length to the story almost one month later, saying: Pam told me that Moyra had written a story about AERA, a little while ago. Then Moyra mentioned it too, today I read it at last. (960530.122). Moyra mentions the story again in the missing email (960707.m) almost three months later, in the context of her suggestion for our joint paper for AERA 1997. She writes: We need to explain our position on action research and how what we do is different from the action research of Robert T. Smith, for example ... I think our email correspondence is further data over a period of time, which also brings Jack into the scene (showing how difficult it is for him to 'enter our house', once it is built), and my story of Robert T. Smith is also data which we could use, and has been referred to in our correspondence ... I agree with Pam that Jack seems to be answering from his own agenda. But I have been dismayed that Jack hadn't answered me at all ...*

Moyra's continuing reference to her story suggests that it remained important to her agenda. Why, then, did Zoe receive the story so late? Why is there no response to Zoe's long email. At one time or other we probably all shared Zoe's feelings: 'We are all such selfish inward looking folk, ready to talk and think about ourselves and the meanings we favour and reluctant to



give time o excavating the meanings others offer' (960500.m2). When did Jack receive the story? In his response to Moyra's dismay at him not responding, Jack says: 'Part of the problem of the delay in my response reaching you was that my emails got returned! Another was the length of your letter' (960708.09). The technology itself, at least to start with, was limited for all of us. Email was an infrequently used channel of communication for Zoe and Moyra and they experienced a number of technical difficulties as they began to make more use of it. Zoe's response to Moyra's story as been forwarded by Pam, suggesting there were difficulties there. Moyra says: 'To all of you – I find it difficult to respond to all the emails which I read on Friday morning, because on looking at them more carefully, I realise that I cannot have been sent some (or one) of them' (960707.21). However, were these the main reasons for not taking up the agendas suggested by individuals? Could it be that the listeners were waiting to be led further and that those putting forward the ideas did not lead on? Was it a lack of care in listening; a lack of care for the other who was therefore unheard? Was it that the ideas had no appeal to those listening? Is the point that Zoe makes in response to Moyra's story significant: 'How much should we keep trying as teachers, or as friends to get messages through which don't appear to be of interest to our audience?' (960530.122).

## *2. Collaborating on a Symposium for the Castle*

*Early in May Jack outlined his ideas for collaborating on a symposium for the Castle.*

*JW>PL: ... What I'm thinking is that if we can find a way of saying a claim that we think is really significant and then referring people to the evidence on our homepages, we could really focus attention, at the Conference, on understanding our contribution to educational research, its theory, methodologies and forms of representation. (960502.100)*

*Pam wrote the proposal based on the ideas in bold italics and incorporating the current work of the five of us who were to present the symposium. Jack was to send the proposal to S-STEP. Two weeks later Jack had another idea:*

*JW>PL: I submitted the proposal we agreed. But it does lend itself to be presented as a response to Ardra's questions which would allow us to engage in some collaborative action research and to invite the rest of the participants to debate with us . (960514.201)*

*This was followed next day by a short paper: Towards an Epistemology of Practice, by Ben Cunningham, Moyra Evans, Pam Lomax, Zoe Parker and Jack Whitehead. The paper included Ardra's question, a celebratory paragraph about each of us and an*

*invitation to the audience to engage with us in moving our enquiry forward by responding to our work on <<http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw>>. (960515.131)*

*PL>ALL: My immediate response is that I do not want to locate our original proposals within Ardra's suggestions, but I would like to use her question in order to validate our work ... We will have the added challenge of seeing if we can do this collaboratively, because there are five of us presenting at the castle ... I am sending this draft to the others ... (960500.m1)*

*The debate about what should be included hotted up. Jack's text had included the statement: We would like to engage with you in co-creating a different form of epistemology for educational researchers, an epistemology of practice. Pam was not happy with this.*

*Pam: I am not sure that it is co-creating as we have already gone a long way in developing our ideas about epistemology. For example the chapter in ... (Lomax, Whitehead & Evans, 1996) and the paper ... presented at AERA (Lomax & Parker, 1996). These papers make ... explicit ... ideas that we (you and I) have worked on together for some time. We have ... presented them together at the UCET Seminar and with Moyra at the BEMAS Conference ... Are you really saying that you want to co-create something new? Or are you really saying that you would like the audience to work with us to test out whether their own self-studies can fit within our conception of an epistemology of practice?*

*Zoe: Perhaps rather than co-creating ... this specific task and paper is a new venture, or a new version of an ongoing quest for ways of working better together and ways of understanding better what we each and together mean by an epistemology of practice ... In this joint paper, unless all its authors speak out for their own meaning, how on earth can we honestly ask the audience to join us in creating meaning? (960500.m2)*

*The conversation continued but there is no record in Pam's archive until 30 May (10 days later):*

*PL>JW: The paper seems a bit narcissistic. Personally I don't think it is worth resuscitating all this. Ardra's question can be used much more critically by us to question our own position rather than saying it is a good question because it applies to others who have rejected our work Do I make sense? I guess you wont think so. (960530.112)*

*And one hour later the same day:*

*JW>PL: Help, help, help. Boy, have I got a problem. I hate not meeting deadlines! How do I get out, round, through this one. Here it is. I want to send the attached file to the Castle people because I cant see a way of getting our joint piece together in the next few days ... (960604.121)*

Jack says he hated not meeting he deadlines, but showed less concern for his collaborators. Was this because of frustration? Moyra did not contribute to discussion on his paper, perhaps because she was still awaiting an answer to hers. Pam was very critical of the paper because it did not seem to be located in the work they had already done together. Zoe was trying hard not to antagonise anyone and not getting much response to what she wrote. Was this an example of an individual agenda that did not provide the opportunity for others in the group to share in its ownership; of Jack riding rough shod over the others in order to get his own agenda through? Or was it that we failed to recognise the importance of 'old' agendas and 'histories' that prevented us from forging something new, as Zoe infers above? At times we could not be sure if the current issue represented a new debate for us all or rehearsed old ground for some. Perhaps if we had started with a 'memory work' session or each written a story about our view of our relationship and shared it, this would not have happened. Why is it that we do not use the techniques that we insist our students use and to what cost?

### *3. Old Agendas and Historic Talk*

*Pam: ... you do not seem to want to find out what those people really meant ... instead you seem to want to reinterpret it for them so that it fits your model ... you then congratulated them for being so clever. This could seem patronising!*

*Jack: I see that I am insisting that each individual ... has their own educational theory which guides their actions. I do congratulate individuals ... who produce their own living theories, partly because I see I have helped them in a way they acknowledge, and partly because I see they have celebrated their own uniqueness ... Do you feel patronised by my responses to you and your work? How do you feel about my responses to you and your work? I know you have said that I don't seem to take your work seriously. Yet I use it with each of my students in a way which shows that they have taken it seriously.*

*Pam: ... When I send you papers I do not get any real engagement. I get a part on the back ... or I get the impression you would rather I did something different from what I am doing. (960429.18)*

The email above belonged to Pam and Jack rather than the group, yet it was also significant to the relationships of the group, and shows how earlier issues can impinge on what comes later and get incorporated without each of us realising or agreeing. We were to come to realise the mass and complexity of our individual relationships with each other as the research progressed. The email above flags up two issues. The first concerns Pam feeling marginalised by Jack, and her difficulty in getting this across. On other occasion she writes: 'In your recent response to ARLIST why did you not give a plug to the Quality book? At least it includes the work of teachers striving to improve their own practice. I was disappointed and puzzled' (060704.08). The second issue concerns perceptions from the other three that Jack was unwilling to address issues, unless they were framed within his own language and world view. For example, in an email containing ideas about how each of us could contribute to the Castle presentation, Pam suggests that Jack, 'explain why he finds it so difficult to collaborate with our work, explain why he cannot create a link with his own interests except as a 'critical parent' (960626.13). Zoe says: 'I sometimes feel Jack is giving different people the same response ... This could be seen as formulaic and ignoring individuals' particular needs (960704.155). Moyra writes: 'Jack, you come up with almost expected answers to our questions ... You do not seem to translate our jumble of meanings into your own area of interest. You seem to be secure in your own enquiry. There does not seem uncertainty in your enquiry, only certainty that you will fight to get your/our work onto the political agenda. How does this constitute an enquiry?' (960707.21).

#### *4. The issue of Jack as a collaborator*

*PL>JW: ... I sent the paper yesterday ... Have you read it? You say its nice to see we (Z, M & P) are working together. What about the bits I incorporated from you? Do you not think that the 'we' might have a bit of 'you' n it or do you have difficulty putting your 'I' into our 'we' ... I feel you do not have any ownership in our work but rather take a paternal interest in it ... What is your view. (960624.093)*

*ME>PL/ZP: I've read Jack's questions, and wonder if he is asking too much from one paper, to make explicit for instance where he says about story influencing our practice ... Perhaps we could trace the influence of story on our practice - maybe for AERA? Where could Jack fit into this? What do you mean about him being a 'critical parent' - is this where he fits into our development of story within self-study? (960703.05)*

*PL>ME/ZP: He really annoys me sometimes. He was not interested in how we had dealt with his questions, raised previously. He seems to always nit pick new ones. That's why I called him a critical parent, it was a criticism of his role ... I don't think he could*

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*fit into this. But he does not need to fit into all our work. I thought he wanted to fit in by looking at his own practice. But he only responds to ours ... (960704-.092)*

*ME>PL/ZP: The whole area of you saying he finds it difficult to collaborative with our work itself needs exploration – how are we helping him into our work? How far is our work, once constructed as a paper, closed to anyone else entering it? Don't we need to start again with Jack as a full partner rather than as an after thought? (960703.05)*

*JW>ALL: Pam has sent me your letter of 4th July. I would really enjoy participating fully in your enquiries both to help you move your enquiries forward and for you to help me with mine and for us to develop a collaborative enquiry together. From the letter of the 4th July I feel you, Moyra, trying to find a way of including me in the developing conversation. Pam's words feel very different ... I'm fascinated by your developing partnerships between Kingston and Schools as you encourage more teachers to adopt an action research approach to professional development. I'd like to join any enquiry into the growth of these partnerships. I'm fascinated by Zoe's PhD programme and want to help her 'fly free' in creating an autobiography of her own learning which can be legitimated in the Academy. I'm working at supporting Pam in sustaining and extending the action research programmes at Kingston and at developing an epistemology of practice by explicating the educational standards which can be used to test the validity of individuals' claims to know their own educational development. ... I'm also interested in overcoming tensions in relationships which get in the way of creative contributions to research and practice. I'm thinking of the emotional blocks which people can develop when someone violates the other's space or sense of integrity. There is a balance to be struck ... (960704.132)*

*PL>ALL: Personally I like straight talking because otherwise I find it difficult to know what people mean. I share Jack's concern for the integrity of what people are doing and the need to respect it. This is a two edged sword. Jack, I found your response to how you are going to help us three rather patronising because it was framed within your agenda. I found your request for us to help you interesting but I am not sure about how much energy I want to put into promoting what you want to promote. (960704.135)*

*JW>ALL: My own understanding is that it is Moyra's agenda to support action research approaches to professional development*

around Denbigh School, in partnership with you at Kingston. The fact that this movement owes something to earlier work with Kevin Eames seems to me to offer cause for celebration. I wonder if Moyra experiences my note as 'patronising'. My understanding of my support for your work at Kingston was that it was part of your agenda for me to come support the work. It is also part of my agenda to promote this kind of work so I'm not sure how it is 'framed within my agenda', when the contract of support was framed by you ... I wonder if Zoe experiences my note as 'patronising'. I always feel Zoe to be her own person who I try to work within 'flying free' of patronising influences. If either Moyra or Zoe responds by saying that they did not find my response patronising, I wonder if this will modify your response which identifies your feelings of being patronising with 'us three'. (960704.143)

ZP>ALL: I am getting sorely confused as to who is responding to what here. I can't see the I for the we's. I don't find Jack (or his note) patronising, nor does Pam say that I do ... I think that, hard though this collaboration is proving to be, we should persevere ... I think that we need to be able to say what we want to for ourselves and decide individually which things we want to challenge or thank the others for. (960704.155)

ME>ALL: ... I am surprised that the use of the word (patronising) can evoke so heated a response ... why did she (Pam) use it in the first place? Unless she meant to stimulate a more passionate response than she thought she's get otherwise? Zoe says that Jack's comments are not patronising, and Jack asks what I think. I see them as not satisfying my wish for Jack to shift his ground a bit. But maybe this is all to do with us responding from our own agendas. Does this mean that we can't collaborate? What does collaboration mean to each of us? It's beginning to raise questions in me that I'd never thought of before. Maybe collaboration has got something to do with shifting away from our own agendas, and sharing other people's? Is Pam, in her comments about being patronising, trying to get Jack to 'fly free' of where he is grounded?

JW>ALL: I am also interested in overcoming tensions in relationships which get in the way of creative contributions to research and practice. I'm thinking of the emotional blocks which people can develop when someone violates the other's space or sense of integrity. There is a balance to be struck between creative and destructive tension. This is how I'm feeling at the moment. I have individual letters from all three of you. Moyra's letters are

*always inviting. Zoe's letters a joy. Pam's letters stimulating and energising. Then, when I get your joint correspondence the tone and feelings change dramatically. If you look at the 4th July letter I think you will understand my tension of holding together both feelings of inclusion and exclusion. When you look at the letter again, feel it from my point of view. I have always enjoyed working with you but there is a 'feeling' in this letter, which I don't feel close to as a welcoming invitation to collaborative with you. (960704.132)*

Zoe pinpointed an important omission: we had not agreed ground rules, and the result was misunderstanding and distrust. We had no rules to establish when an issue was ended. None of us were used to sharing email communications in a group and it took us a long time to get into this habit. None of us found it natural to address communication to three others or to have a conversation with one, while the other two listened in. The emails are punctuated by *deja-vu* where one of us makes a response to a conversation that has been closed by others who have already moved to something else. Failing to sort out the technology and technique of using email was not only annoying and frustrating, but was responsible for some very bad patches in our relations. Our failure to sort out the ground rules meant that at times, as individuals, we felt marginalised and excluded by the thought of the others 'ganging up' or having conversations behind our backs. Zoe puts this clearly: 'I think we should be careful that all our self-study messages go to all four of us always. Conversations we hold aside from that should never be seen as talking behind each others' backs. We have to be able to have our individual relationships as well as this joint/group relationship' (960704.155). Perhaps this was the reason for Jack's over reaction to being called patronising and his rationalisation in terms of being able to work with each of us but not us all together. It is significant that Pam could call him patronising in a private email between the two of them (see old agendas and historic talk), but not in an email between the four of us. Was this because we did not find it easy to separate the private from the public?

*5. From a Conversation in August*

*Z: Jack, you said you like working with us and get some energy or power or force that you can take out to your other enterprises.*

*P: It might be that you should be exploring that energy.*

*Z: What I think would make a very interesting enquiry is if we understood more about what the power bit is and I think we are powerful ...*

—  
*M: Are you frightened of moving into an enquiry of that nature? In case you lose your...*

*J: I don't think it's fear; I think it's a genuine recognition of some of the risks involved and destroying some of the creative energy which comes from the group – I think we all recognise – I mean it's life affirming, it's bloody great.*

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*P: I think much of the work you see doesn't show the struggle that individuals have in coming to a new meaning between them. Now wouldn't it be lovely to show that – how we could actually produce a new meaning through our struggle – our own individual interests.*

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*J: That's the area that really fascinates me, Why, when I go to Kingston, that would normally finish me off through working so intensely ... and yet when I leave, I'm on a high even though I'm knackered.*

*P: I feel like that.*

*M: I do, yes ... is it the teachers, or is it the work that we're doing?*

*P: Well it's to do with that work isn't it?*

*Z: It's to do with building a research culture, that's one of the things it's to do with.*

*P: It's to do with doing teaching, which I think I do when I ...*

*J: The buzz that I get is when I see that we can have worked with a certain individual, and you can feel a move forward that is being made ...*

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*Z: I'm interested in how the group relationship is going to evolve – I don't have a specific question or anything – I know that I want to go on working in this group and I'm interested that Jack is joining it, just the dynamics and that are interesting.*

*P: He's not joining the group because he's always been a member of the group, what he's doing is engaging in the research – we've been a group for quite a while haven't we, but it's the joining in the research that makes a difference, and can I say something, when you started talking you brought your old agenda in and Moyra reacted to it. And actually Moyra brings her old agenda in actually, you bring in the feelings and the emotional part of it.*



*M: Well, I think we all do.*

*P: We all do and maybe that's something to have a think about.*

*J: I really respect what you call our old agendas – they're still living, they're very important.*

*P: Maybe, but in a way they get in the way of seeing what is going to happen because they've got a control around it – if we're going to explore what's happening, document it, discuss it, look at it, all the things we get our students to do, then in a way we've got to put those old agendas on the side and bring them back later ... to test them out.*

*J: That I like, could I just give you an example of what I would see – as my life's project, not as an old agenda ... I don't think it's a case of the old agenda gets in the way.*

*P: No, but these are macro agendas ... And we know that larger agenda, its not all a shared agenda, and maybe we can leave it to the side a bit, because I think what we're doing would contribute to your work there, as it would contribute to Moyra's ideas about feelings and emotions, but they don't have to be the thing being looked at ...*

*M: One of the things that the email flagged up was the difficulty in understanding what we each meant by what we were saying, and the power differential between us ...*

## Conclusions

### *Issue 1*

Zeichner (1998) sees self-study as part of 'the new scholarship of teacher education' where 'more and more of the research about teacher education is being conducted by those who actually do the work of teacher education'. Zeichner's emphasis on 'the work of teacher education' as the purpose of teacher educators' self-study highlights the deficit of our own unsuccessful research, where we never reached a focus on questions concerning our educational relationships and influence with our students.

This is one area that distinguishes the email project from the two pieces of research that Pam and Moyra, and Pam, Moyra and Zoe had undertaken in response to their growing interest in developing joint self-study as part of their action research repertoire. Their idea of joint self-study was clearly focused on joint work – Moyra and Pam's partnership

in getting accreditation for teachers' school-based research in the first study, and Pam, Moyra and Zoe's team teaching in the second. These studies addressed both the relationships of the researchers to their students and each other, and the educational context itself.

In the third study we did not find a joint focus that we could all address equally as teacher educators. Was this because our individual practice was too different and self-study demands we focus on our own practice? None of our individual practices and partnerships were shared by all the group. Could they ever be? It seems likely that effective self-study needs a concrete focus and, where joint self-study takes place, the focus needs to be a shared practice, if not a joint practice. This raises questions about the nature of joint practice and whether it is possible where individuals occupy positions of differential power, such as those occupied by individuals in our group. As Moyra said at the end, 'one of the things that the email flagged up was the difficulty in understanding what we each meant by what we were saying, and the power differential between us ...'.

Did our medium of communication exacerbate this? Could it be the very nature of email, with its propensity for encouraging us to change the words to get nearer to the heart of what we mean, that is more alienating than face to face conversation? Whether the communication medium itself deters practical action in favour of argument is an interesting, but unanswered question.

### *Issue 2*

The lack of specific focus for our joint self-study was compounded by a lack of discussion about what we meant by joint self-study. It was a huge mistake not to explore how we wanted to collaborate at the start of the research. We did not ask ourselves how collaboration could be useful in self-study or what collaboration meant to each of us. We did not distinguish joint self-study as a mechanism for achieving our action research ends from collaboration as practical action towards a shared goal. We did not establish agreed ground rules for either collaboration or for using email as a channel of communication.

Our failure to establish ground rules for collaboration, such as those established in the first two self-studies, led us into territory that all of us found difficult to explore. This has raised ethical and practical questions that focus on boundary, and have not been addressed in this article because they relate to data subsequent to August 1996 that we have not shared because of the resentment, irritation and sadness it causes us all. We did not find it easy to separate what belonged outside the collaboration from what had a proper place within the collaboration. Everything became included. Pam blamed this on old agendas that 'get in the way of seeing what is going to happen because they've got a control around it - if we're going to explore what's happening, document it, discuss it, look at it, all the things we get our students to do, then in a way we've got to put those old agendas on the side' (6 August, tape).

The email data shows that much of the time was spent in individuals trying to negotiate the form that joint self-study should take to include their own. Where we did not get our own way we were destructive of a group approach. As individuals we blamed each other for this state of affairs, and because we lacked a shared understanding of the nature of a joint self-study, we were unable to help each other over the hurdles. Perhaps because we operated through email, we paid too little attention to how the group process could support a shared task or to the individual skills needed to make that process work. It seemed that at times we did not listen or failed to show that we had listened, so that individuals who felt unheard or unheeded became less motivated to collaborate; agendas were introduced by individuals without providing sufficient incentive or opportunity for others to share in their ownership; the person with the idea did not always provide sufficient leadership to carry the idea forward. We did not consider at the time whether we had a shared understanding of what self-study might mean or whether it was possible to move it from the specific interests of an individual to become a shared activity.

Email, as the means of communication compounded these problems, although it was not the main cause of them. Because we were not expert in the use of email, we failed to label the communications to do with the agreed self-study and these became mixed with other messages. There were no boundaries and we found it difficult to separate our private conversations and individual support for each other from a joint self-study focus. The technology itself was limited and did not always work. Messages got lost. Long emails were tedious to deal with in the context of a busy professional life where there seemed to be other more pressing issues; we had different times of the day and week when we used the channel for communicating about the research. Email was also limiting because we did not know how to work effectively with it. Messages intended for all were received by some leading to hurt and distrust. Lack of ground rules meant that we did not always distinguish private communications from communications that were intended to be shared by all. Establishing an agreed procedure for using email was an important omission in our research.

### *Issue 3*

In engaging in a joint self-study of our practice, we each (Pam, Moyra, Zoe and Jack) expected that we would be able to draw upon the frames of reference and the theoretical interests that constitute our own, distinct contributions to educational action research – particularly as we have always found these to be congruent. However, the data shows that at times our practice was in conflict with this value position. We do agree that the integrity of all our work is important and we believe that how we recognise that in each other is a key part of collaborative endeavour. We would all say that each of our areas of work should command equal interest and respect. However, although we can agree in principle, we did not seem to agree about what this meant in practice. The domination of one agenda in a relationship

can mean another agenda is not heard or thought of as important. The email data put this issue in sharp relief, with silences being as significant as messages.

Certainly, the dynamic of our collaboration was different in this third collaborative self-study from the first two. We are unsure whether this was due to the dilemmas and tensions of inviting a fourth person, male, into an existing collaborative partnership of three women or whether we began to address issues that had not been raised before. Yet, looking at two of the three joint/collaborative self-studies reported alongside our own second self-study in the recent book by Hamilton (1998) it is interesting that the collaborative study conducted by three women (LaBoskey et al, 1998) does not highlight discord while the joint self-study conducted by the mixed gender group (Conle et al, 1998) refers to the tensions of group enquiry in the title of the article. We are not sure whether the changed gender balance of our group was significant, but the existing partnership had already been the focus of joint self-study, and a relationship of trust had been established that enabled the three women to publish research findings that exposed some of their vulnerabilities as teachers and learners without inhibiting their wish to continue.

The fourth person became a member of the group because he had a close collaborative relationship with the other three; he was intrigued by the energy with which the other three reported their research findings; and because he himself was becoming increasingly interested in the affective dimensions of educative relationships. Yet, although it was clear that the enthusiasm and energy created by the first two enquiries intrigued Jack, t Moyra, Pam and Zoe, he did not appear to engage seriously with their ideas. Pam has experienced Jack's lack of engagement in relation to her interest in methodology, Moyra has experienced it in relation to her use of story, Zoe has experienced it in terms of her focus on autobiography. Although Jack was clearly committed and interested in the idea of developing partnership and collaboration, he seemed ill at ease with the idea of joint self-study as a method. For example, in the taped conversation Moyra says, 'Are you frightened of moving into an enquiry of that nature? In case you lose your ...' and Jack replies, 'I don't think it's fear; I think its a genuine recognition of some of the risks involved and destroying some of the creative energy ...' (6 August, tape).

In retrospect, it can be seen that Jack was not on the inside of the 'connected' form of relationship that had allowed the others to expose some of their vulnerabilities, while respecting each others unspoken wish for silence in relation to others. Whether this is an issue to do with gender or due to the fact that the three women were located in the same institutional context and Jack in another, we cannot agree upon. What seems clear is that Jack's notion of collaborative self-study was at odds with the others notion of joint self-study. Jack points out that he had worked with Pam in supporting action research at Kingston and Bath Universities from 1985 (Lomax & Whitehead, 1998). Since 1993 he had provided support for students and supervisors of action research at Kingston under a consultancy agreement

with Bath. He had been an external supervisor for Moyra's PhD programme, working with Pam, who was the Director of Study for both Moyra's and Zoe's PhD programmes. Jack's view is that although it is rewarding to work with each of the others separately, the dynamics created by a group of four left him with resentment, irritation and sadness.

Did the fact of the email communication itself exasperate differences between us? In using email, as with any written comment, the meaning can be misinterpreted and the speaker is not on hand to clarify, so there is an onus on the communicator to make the message as clear as possible in the first place. This did not always happen. There were many ideas that were proffered, but ignored by some or all of us, so that individuals became angry and less motivated to argue through their ideas. This was partly, but not wholly to do with the technology of email available at the time, which was limited, did not always work and with which we were not all equally familiar. A more likely reason for the lack of progress was that communication by email follows a similar pattern to all communication and depends for success on interpersonal skills or agreed intentions that were lacking in our instance. Do we lack these skills in our normal interaction? Does using email give us more time to feel offended by the other's lack of concern? Does email allow too much reflection on the word, and not enough access to the intention that is often transmitted by body language rather than by the word.

Issues of collaboration in action research have been debated before (Somekh, 1994), but to study ourselves jointly as a research project and through email, is a new venture. The problematic of language and meaning in collaborative self-study has been an issue running through our communications. The tape recorded discussion in August 1996 shows a much more positive face to face relationship between members of the group than is revealed by the email data up to that point. Was this because email presents the minute detail of what people actually said over time – and there is little escape from that – so that the final analysis is made from a more complete record than is possible in most other research. Did the email give a 'truer' picture than the tape recorder?

Alternatively, is it more to do with the dynamic of the email communication? Is it because email is so divorced from the softening influence of body language? Is it because we cannot see the effect our email has on the other and, therefore, we cannot modify the impression we make to one more suitable to the weightiness of the matter in hand? Is it that we are much more circumspect with what we say than what we write or do we pay less attention to what we hear than what we read? Is looking back over our email records a more destructive force than personal reflection unaided by such minutely recorded text? If this is the case, does email compound emotional responses that are more likely to be dissipated in face to face relationships? Is it possible that the type of communication that Belenky and her colleagues (1986) speak about, which they attribute particularly to women's ways of knowing, was inhibited in the email we shared? Could it be that email does not allow for a 'connected' relationship and leads us all (men

and women) to respond to and from a more logical-rational position than we are used to doing? These are important areas for future research.

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