

CHAPTER SIX

WORKING WITH MANAGERS AT SCHOOL

This story was presented to the Curriculum Group on March 17th 1993, as a means of evaluating our inservice training programmes for the year April 1992 - March 1993. The Curriculum Group consisted of the managers of the school, Heads of Department, Heads of Year, Deputy Heads and Headteacher. I decided to write this story as a result of my discussion with Peter on 'The Canterbury Tales' (Chapter 5) because I wanted it to raise the issues which I had hoped Harriet would address, but which I did not feel happy with giving her in the form of the original story.

'Just tell me what to do!' was an amalgam of many people, events and issues, following up from 'The Canterbury Tales' It was a story I was particularly pleased with as I was able to explore some of the real dilemmas facing me and I have identified these through footnotes in the version of the story which I shall include here. I felt pleased that I had coped with the ethical issues inherent in writing the story, and thought that,

- (a) no-one could identify themselves in the story as each person was a mixture of different people and experiences
- (b) I had managed to say what I wanted to say without accusing any one person of poor practice (except perhaps Vera, who was an amalgam of people)
- (c) I had included a list of characters at the start of the story, so that readers would know how many people they needed to cope with, and what their roles were
- (d) I had asked permission of anyone who might have been able to identify themselves or an event concerning them, and had their agreement to be included
- (e) I was able to explore some critical issues in the story, and I thereby hoped to gain some insight from the discussions which would follow. The particular issues were
 - (i) the management approach of team leaders
 - (ii) ownership of developments in their curriculum areas
 - (iii) team leaders' crises of confidence over INSET provisions and the decisions they had made

- (iv) should team leaders be telling their teams what to do, in spite of the need to give ownership of developments to the team?
- (v) how did we know whether our INSET resulted in the improvement in the quality of learning for children?
- (vi) should team leaders be using INSET time to help 'failing teachers'?
- (vii) should we be differentiating teachers' learning?
- (viii) what should team leaders do with colleagues who just wouldn't co-operate in INSET approaches?

I had decided on a female lead part mainly because many of the managers are men and I need to generate a balance of male/female if I can, although I knew that I would not experience sexist responses. It is more a matter of role modelling - of making sure that there is a gender balance in the issues under consideration.

Much of my thinking at the time is expressed by Adele. I consciously created her to carry and present the major problems with which I was concerned at the time. In particular, I had been worrying about the use of in-service time to enable colleagues to work through problems and to come up with their own solutions, rather than just being told what to do. I was convinced of the case for this, but I was not sure that, if confronted, I could argue my case strongly and logically. I was particularly delighted with the story of the calculator, as this happened to me at just the time when I was struggling to account for how people learned, and how we could apply our knowledge of learning when devising inservice training programmes.

I made minor amendments to my story, and the following is the final version. Because it wasn't based on individuals or specific events, no-one has suggested that I change any part of it, nor has anyone questioned the 'reality' of the story. Presumably it wasn't seen in the same light as 'The Canterbury Tales', and the many different interpretations my colleagues have made will have been acceptable! You should note that, in the footnotes, E stands for a diary event, and D is for a dilemma which was troubling me at the time.

Just tell me what to do!

This story is based on many different people in the school, although only seven characters actually appear. Where comments or situations can be traced to individuals, permission has been obtained from those people to print the anecdotes. If you haven't been asked, you should assume that there is nothing in the story which is directly attributable to you, neither was there any intention that you should think any of the characters was you! They are all amalgams of ideas, situations and people.

The story is an attempt to look at evaluation creatively; it is an attempt to open discussion on the dilemmas which confront us, as leaders of teams, in negotiating, planning, delivering and evaluating our inservice programmes.

<u>Dramatis personae;</u>	Adele	a team leader
	Liz	a deputy team leader
	Vera	a member of a team
	Joseph	leader of another team
	Justine	a teacher (status irrelevant)
	Fran	a maths teacher
	Maria	another maths teacher

The school was divided into managers and managed, although everybody fell into both categories. The managers managed their teams of tutors, subject teachers, tutor groups or classes, whilst all the managers were managed by their respective team leader. Some of the managers preferred to share their managing role in a collaborative style¹, involving their teams in collectively thinking through and deciding upon courses of action; others preferred to adopt a leadership style which exerted more control over the activities of their team members. But they all knew that, 'at the end of the day,' they were answerable to the Head if their teams failed to deliver the goods.

Adele worked on the principle that she wanted to provide opportunities for personal growth for the members of her team. She had got to know each of them well. She felt she knew their strengths and weaknesses and was often to be found thinking creatively about how to support them in their all-round professional development.

¹ On the one hand, some team leaders were keen to adopt a 'teacher centred approach' to INSET and to enable teachers to take some control of their learning, but on the other hand, some team leaders felt that, because they were accountable to the Head for what happened within their teams, they needed to retain greater control over the activities and the discussion.

² Vera was a constant thorn in her side, particularly when she had been trying to get the department to focus on equality of opportunity in their schemes of work. Vera sat through Adele's carefully planned INSET sessions contributing very little, apart from volunteering to do the cover which the department was sometimes asked to do at that time.

One day Adele worked with Liz to set up an activity which they both thought would be directly relevant for use in the classroom. Vera didn't want to take part³.

"I've got some books to mark," she said. "You don't need me, do you?"

"Yes" replied Adele, surprised and somewhat dismayed by the question. "I want all of the team to have experienced this activity before planning their Year 8 lessons."

"Well," said Vera, "I can't understand why you don't just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it. After all that's your job - and if you can't tell me, then send me on a course so that someone else can! Look at the amount of time we waste trying to work things out for ourselves - surely someone - somewhere - must have the answers."

"There aren't answers," replied Adele, "Only different ways of doing things. And someone else's way may not suit our way of working. We have to sort things out for ourselves!"

Adele did her best not to be unduly influenced by this outburst and carried on with the game, but the atmosphere was tense. By the end, however, most of the team could see some relevant application to their work in the classroom, but their commitment to the task was considerably upset by Vera, who deliberately obstructed⁴ the activity whenever she got the chance to do so.⁵

Adele wasn't happy at this turn of events, as up till now, Vera had - more or less - kept her disgruntlement to herself. She wasn't sure how to deal with the matter. She decided to talk to a colleague about it, and outlined the problem to Joseph. What did he think? How did he use his INSET time?

⁶ "Well," said Joseph, "There isn't the time in the day to be trying to gain commitment. I'd just tell them - do this, do that - then they can go off and get on with something else."

² On the one hand, heads of teams might want to give responsibility to team members and hope it was taken up for further professional development, but on the other hand, there were teachers who deliberately blocked such efforts of their team leaders and claimed to want to be much more directed.

³ Nicole's story, October 21st 1992 - Action Research Group

⁴ Team leaders expected team members to undertake INSET activities with some enthusiasm, as they felt they had been well planned, but on the other hand, when disaffection showed clearly, team leaders worried that their approach was a contributory factor, and questioned whether they had structured and presented the INSET effectively.

⁵ HOY, Sex education INSET, May 7th 1992

⁶ Team leaders believed in teachers being involved in INSET and owning their development but was there a place for 'telling' teachers what to do in the interests of time management?

After all, they're not going to do what you dream up for INSET in their classrooms are they? So they might as well get on with the marking."

"Why wouldn't they use the ideas in their classrooms? It's certainly a waste of time if they don't - but how do you know that?" asked Adele.

"I don't. It was just a sweeping generalisation - for which I'm well known!! But, seriously, I was chatting to Vera the other day, and it did seem rather a lengthy process to get at a different way of doing things. Why can't you just tell them - do it like this?"

"Do you like to be told - do this? Does that make you want to do it?"

"Look," replied Joseph, "I may not particularly want to do it, but I know I've got to, so I'd prefer to be told - then I don't need to spend time thinking about it⁷. My biggest problem is no-one can tell me, so I have to think it all out for myself. When I've done that, I tell my department and they complain they don't like my interpretations and ideas. But they've just got to get on and make the changes work, because that's what the government is saying to us."⁸ "But how can you be sure that what you tell your team of teachers improves the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom?" asked Adele.

"Oh, I haven't got time to worry about that! At least they're doing what I tell them!" replied Joseph and disappeared off towards the Leisure Centre.

Justine had been eavesdropping on this conversation.

"What about you, Adele? Can you be sure that the things you do in your inservice sessions actually improve the quality of children's learning?" she asked⁹.

"Yes, I think so" said Adele, "I can see activities taking place which otherwise wouldn't have done; I can see that in classrooms which have adopted the 'student centred' approach to learning, children seem more involved."¹⁰

"But what about the classrooms where children's behaviour is unsatisfactory - how is what you're doing improving children's learning there?"

"Well, isn't that up to individual teachers to solve?" asked Adele. "The children can't benefit from any kind of teachers' inservice work if they're not behaving themselves properly."¹¹

⁷ June 17th, Diary, Eloise's feedback.

⁸ It is possible to see a teacher doing what he or she has been told to do in the classroom, but how do we know whether this results in improved quality of learning for children?

⁹ Peter and Kate discussion, January 2nd 1993

¹⁰ A change can be fully understood and 'owned' by the teacher but does this mean that there will be an improvement in the quality of pupils' learning and how can we know that this is the case?

¹¹ INSET is organised to help teachers learn so that levels of pupils' achievements rise, but should team leaders use INSET time to support the few teachers who have difficulties in controlling pupil behaviour?

Adele wasn't sure about this - yes, the children wouldn't benefit if they were misbehaving, but - was it a matter for individual teachers to solve? She wondered what Justine thought, but she didn't seem to give her an answer! Instead, she replied,

"Have you thought about structuring your inservice so that each teacher in your team can negotiate his or her own learning¹² - at the right level - 'teacher centred' - in other words! Aren't they all at different stages in their development?"

"Yes, of course they are, but how on earth can I do that? And in any event, they've all got to teach the same content - so surely they can all benefit from the same inservice?"

Adele had had enough of all these unanswered questions, so she went off for some relaxation. She came across her friends in the maths department, and interrupted them as they marked their mock exams.

"Oh, God!" exclaimed Fran¹³, "Just look at this! Oh how could they? How could they?"

Adele hadn't heard such anguish in school before!

"What ever have they done?" she asked.

"It's just too awful! You'd think I hadn't taught them anything at all. Just look at this - diagrams of all these different shapes, - quadrilaterals, pentagons, hexagons, octagons and so on. And the question says - quite simply - name these shapes. And what has this child put as an answer? Eric, Sarah, Elizabeth, and Jonathan. Oh, God, wherever will we be in the league table this year?"

When the mirth had died down, Maria claimed that she didn't feel up to even looking at her exam scripts.

"As I walked round the exam hall yesterday, I could see some really easy questions they were getting wrong - like that one on how many hours would it take to get from London to Northampton and the answer was 2.3333333 on the calculator, so they'd put 2 hours and 33 minutes."

"Yes, I had some of those," said Fran. "I just put in very cross letters, IT'S NOT, next to them. After all, that's something I'd taught them just recently - shown them the calculator button and everything."

"But some of mine didn't even take a calculator in with them!" moaned Maria. "You'd think they would take advantage of every little bit of help they could have."

"What calculator button is that?" asked Adele.

"Oh, this one," replied Maria, and did a rapid demonstration of the use of the sexagesimal - decimal conversion key. "You see, instead of 2.3333333 hrs it becomes 2 hours, 20 minutes and no seconds. Clever isn't it?"

Adele was confused.

"Let me try it," she demanded. "What did you say I've got to do?"

¹² We try to differentiate children's learning in the classroom, but do we recognise any need to differentiate teachers' learning?

¹³ Conversation in maths department, January 7th 1993

Maria went through it again.
Of course, thought Adele as she tried it out, simple isn't it,
when you know what you're doing!

"Why don't you just tell me what to do and I'll do it?" Vera's
words were reverberating around her mind. Was it that easy?

Adele had been momentarily quite confused when Maria had raced
through that explanation of the calculator key - first of all,
she had to get onto Maria's wavelength, and there was a moment
of panic when she had thought, 'I might not understand what
she's getting at' - then she did it - keyed in the numbers and
pressed the button and it came up with an answer - but then she
had to grapple with what it meant to her.

¹⁴ How did it link with her previous knowledge? What connections
could she make with it? Why did it work? Where did it fit in
the Great Scheme of Things? How could she apply it to future
problems? Once all of that had rushed round her brain, she then
felt she 'knew' it. She knew it because she had been able to
hook the information she'd been given into what she already
knew, and she could then store it away until it was needed
again.

It wasn't just a matter of being told. She had to actively
construct her knowledge from the information she'd been given.
She went home and practised on her calculator so that she
wouldn't forget it! She knew it would come in useful sometime.

Adele had made up her mind. The issue of teacher behaviour
changing in the classroom was far more complex than the use of
the decimal conversion key on the calculator, but the principle
of searching through the mind for a previous experience,
knowledge or skill to attach the new information to was one of
fundamental importance. She had convinced herself that she
could justify her reasons for games, activities, discussions,
and even role plays, when Vera next said to her "Tell me!"

Adele would tell her of the need to explore and evaluate the
information, and to do that in the security and challenge of a
supportive professional group. But if, then, Vera continued to
be obstructive, Adele would tell her what to do next.¹⁵

"OK - you go and do the cover, and let us get on with it!"

¹⁴ Paper presented at Kingston Research Centre for Public Sector Management entitled "Fictional
Critical Writing as a Method for Educational Research" October 28th 199, M M Evans.

¹⁵ There are good reasons for encouraging teachers to 'own' their learning, but if they're insistent that
the process is a waste of time, and argument and experience do not change their views, should the team
leader persist in trying to reach them, or should he or she abandon them to their fate

Using the story with the Curriculum Group

I gave the story to the group on March 17th and asked permission of them to record the meeting. After a brief introduction about reflective practice and the process of evaluating the work we have done over the year, I asked my colleagues to talk about the story:

"I thought the story might be a useful starting point, because you can treat it as a story; there is no need to analyse who is what - as I've said to you, the people in the story could be anybody, could be a mixture of people and certainly that's how they were intended to be, but there are certain issues which are common to all of us and the interesting thing is how we deal with them, and how we're going to move what we are doing forward as a result of confronting some of those dilemmas that are in the story. What I'd like you to do is to get into small groups and I'll give you a sheet which might give you a starting position, but you don't need to stick to these - if you find other things which are raised by the story then please go ahead, but the questions I've asked here are, what issues are raised by the story? Can you relate these to any of your own INSET experiences this year? How have you dealt with these or other issues? Do you think you've been successful? What evidence do you have for your thoughts on this?.....What implications are there for your continuing professional development work....."

(Transcribed from tape 42, 17.3.93)

Following the discussion in groups, there was a feedback session which I recorded, and I made notes of what was said, rather than transcribing the tape. I circulated everyone with the notes so that they had time to read them before the next meeting, which was intended as a follow up session. I have included all the notes I made in my archived materials, as I think they are too lengthy to be reproduced here.

My reflections on using 'Just Tell me What to do!'

a) As a Catalyst for Discussion

The Curriculum Group come together infrequently, and it is difficult to get a common agenda which they all value. So I was particularly pleased when several of the group commented favourably upon the meetings afterwards, having seen them as an opportunity for some management training. In listening to the tapes, I have also been pleased to see how the style of the meeting has changed from how it was two or so years ago, to allow much more discussion than previously.

In the discussion on the story, several management issues were raised, which involved the group in sharing strategies for managing people. The transcript of the discussion, (archived, from tape 45) on March 29th 1993, which was a follow-up meeting, shows that the following topics were touched upon:

- developing 'ownership' of changes by all participants
- planning INSET carefully - being well organised
- valuing members of one's team, and letting them know this
- knowing their strengths
- being prepared to challenge their thinking
- being confident as the leader
- deriving support from each other - talking to each other
- working together when dealing with team members
- having different expectations of team members according to their experiences and capabilities
- differentiating INSET for the team

In addition, some members of the group felt sufficiently secure within it to disclose their feelings about difficult issues - the 'difficult interview' (as they chose to call it), and the self doubt caused by obstreperous colleagues. I was a little surprised to find that no-one picked up the question about whether we should review and maybe change what we are doing on account of negative feedback from some team members. They took that instead as a cue for being self confident, bearing in mind that they would already have prepared themselves well for the INSET session.

In looking at the indicators for success of our INSET programmes, I noticed that only two immediately concerned children; these were - observing changes in pupils' conduct, motivation and levels of learning; and increased support for their learning, as in the school diary, which has featured high on our PSHE INSET programme, particularly to help children review their learning.

In contrast, there were ten indicators of success for teachers! I was disappointed that there seemed so few indicators for children's improvements, but as the participants of these meetings were all team leaders, perhaps their focus was more on the teachers' learning. If so, I think this certainly has some advantages. It is often said that there can be no curriculum development without staff development - I do not think there can be any improvement in the quality of children's learning if teachers are not engaged in a process of change as well. The group thought that indicators of success in teachers' learning would include

- change in teaching styles
- teachers being enthusiastic, and owning their development
- using assessment procedures - and the Record of Achievement
- using strategies discussed in INSET meetings
- increased awareness of issues of importance

and I think it could be argued that, if these are happening, then changes - hopefully improvements - in the quality of children's educational experiences should be inevitable.

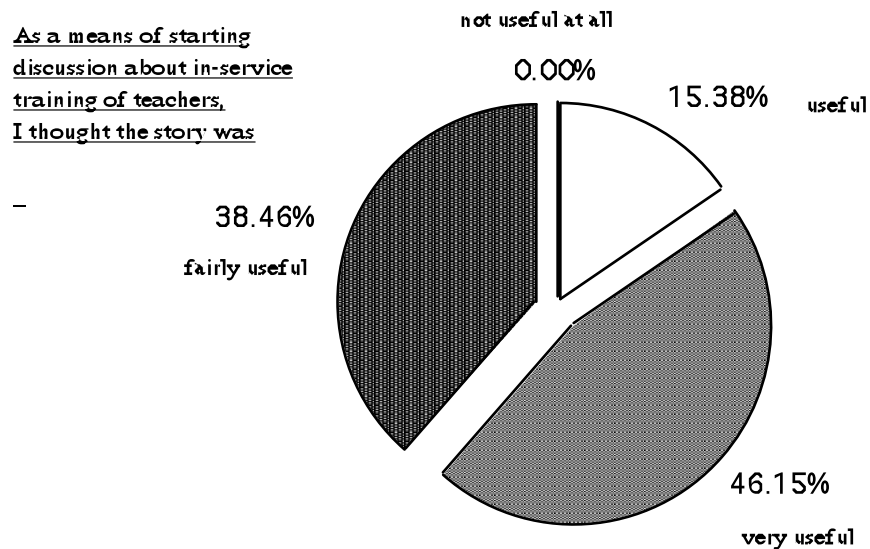
Overall, the outcome on the reluctant participant issue was that the team needs to be well managed throughout -not just on inservice occasions - and that teachers need to be involved as much as possible in the planning and development of INSET so that they can take ownership of what is happening, and feel some control of it. Perhaps surprisingly, Joseph's management style did not seem to be favoured - in fact it was hardly discussed at all. Joseph was the one who believed in telling his colleagues what they had to do, rather than letting them work it out for themselves!

b) on the appropriateness of the story.

I think the evidence of the tapes is that the participants were able to use the story to good effect in their discussions. It was interesting to see that, even in the open meeting, as opposed to the small group discussions, people were still referring to Vera and Adele, rather than 'coming out of' the story, and I think this made it easier for them to speak freely. I was very disappointed that much of the story was ignored - or at least, not explored, and I think that could possibly have been caused by lack of time. Or put another way, there was far too much in the story for the two sessions which we could spare for it. I think we could probably have used a story of that length for a whole day's management INSET, but another time, a shorter story, which can be read quickly, would be an improvement for a one/two hour session, in which the scope of the topic, rather than its depth, could be explored.

As I wanted to know what the participants thought about the idea of using the story to trigger discussion, I devised a questionnaire for each of them to complete (currently held in my archives). Thirty nine percent found the story fairly useful, while forty six percent found it very useful. Less than 16 percent rated it as 'useful' and no-one claimed it was not useful at all. *Figure 6.1* shows what the participants thought about the usefulness of the story.

Figure 6.1

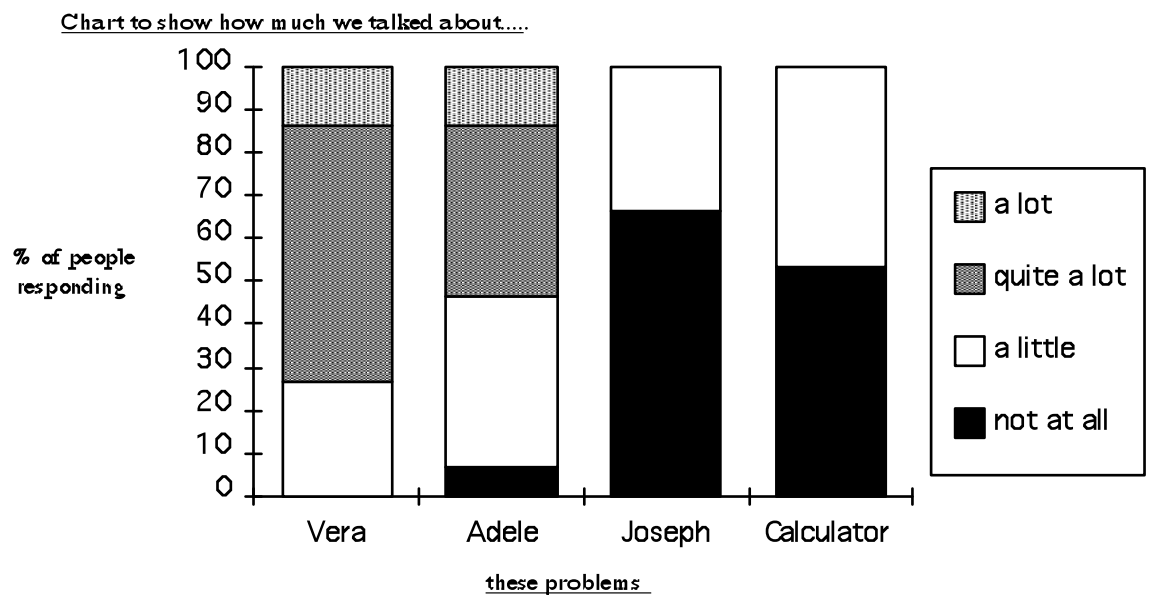


I was able to ascertain that much of the small group discussions had been about issues concerning Vera and Adele, and there was much less talking on Joseph and the calculator problem. The calculator issue - which I had thought illustrated so clearly how people learn, and particularly how experiencing learning helps people to understand and remember concepts, was my biggest disappointment. I had thought it was completely integral to the story, and without it, there seemed to be a major portion missing. I had been stuck for days on how I could illustrate the constructivist approach to learning and it had been absolute luck that such a good example presented itself! I had been trying to illustrate the problem Eloise had of needing to 'find somewhere to put' her learning, but, as George had said, she couldn't attach it to any previous understanding so she couldn't make sense of it.

I am sure that many people didn't rate the calculator story in the same way that I did. I am puzzled about why - was it too obtuse, or too simplistic, or something else? I didn't have the opportunity to ask them if they could enlighten me on the matter!

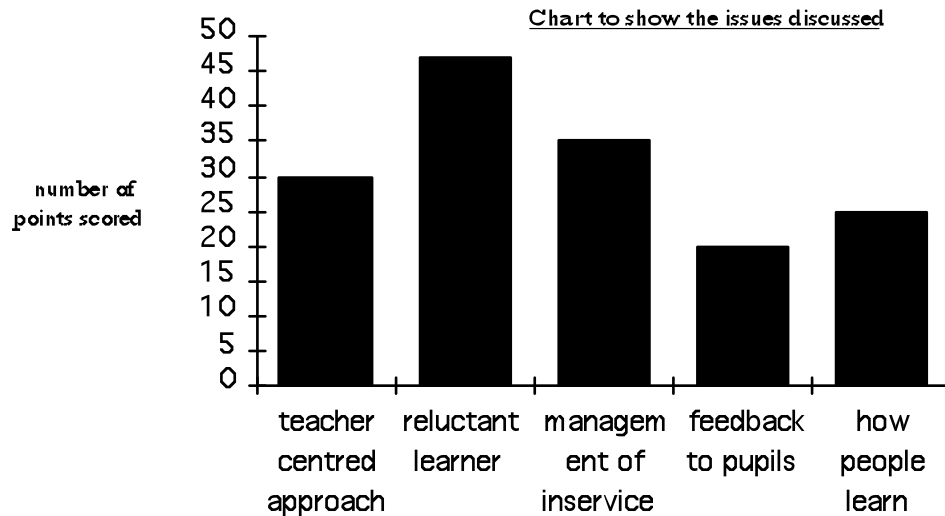
Figure 6.2 shows the responses in the questionnaire to how much Vera's problematic behaviour, Adele's management style, Joseph's management style and the calculator problem were talked about in the small group discussions.

Figure 6.2



Finally, *figure 6.3* shows the major issues talked about arising from the story. 'The reluctant learner in inservice sessions' features prominently, followed reasonably closely by 'the management of inservice training by team leaders'. I was disappointed that 'how people learn' didn't rank more highly, as I thought it was central to the debate! 'Teacher centred approaches to classroom learning' and 'the importance of feedback to pupils as a learning strategy' were - in my view - largely red herrings to this discussion, and yet they received a similar number of votes to 'how people learn'!

Figure 6.3



How has this helped my understanding of the use of story?

I wrote 'Just tell me what to do' as a case study based on my experiences with department A, and as a means for stimulating discussion, I found it most effective. By the time I wrote the story, I had moved on considerably in my thinking as a result of the analysis of 'The Canterbury Tales', and the debate I

wanted to open was the one about how teachers learn best, and are we right to put our inservice training 'eggs' into the basket of teacher centred, active learning? I was exploring my view of teacher managers - that good teacher managers treat their practice as problematic rather than straightforward and that the constructivist approach to learning is consistent with this view - that people need to question the how, what and why of their practice or learning. This was my own story, despite the fact I introduced it to the Curriculum Group as lots of people's stories! 'A story,' said Carter (1993:9) 'is a theory of something. What we tell and how we tell it is a revelation of what we believe.' Smith (1981) also said that 'no narrative version can be independent of a particular teller and occasion of telling and therefore,....we may assume that every narrative version has been constructed in accord with some set of principles or interests.'

So perhaps the argument about reality would have more purpose if it were, instead, a search for the theory behind the story - not so much, is this a true story? - with all the attendant problems about whose truth deserves elevation to a privileged status of being more true than others, but what is the author conveying of what she believes? And since writing the story involves an act of exploration of what the author thinks before and as she writes, fitting her data together so that her story achieves coherence, the story itself will have been constructed in a such a way as to be consistent with the belief and value systems of the players in the scene, as interpreted by the author. Carter (1993:9) stated that stories are 'products of a fundamentally interpretive process that is shaped by the moralistic impulses of the author and by narrative forces or requirements.'

In writing a case study about teachers' learning, I was anxious for the group to explore our collective views of the issues. One of the great advantages of 'Just tell me what to do!' was that it fitted the school in which it was read and discussed - the readers could relate to it because it reflected the school culture. But also, by discussing it as an 'in-house' group of leading professionals, we could talk about strategies which would work in the school and which would give strength to us in putting them into practice. Perhaps it was an opportunity for the group to 'own' its future development?

However, using a story such as 'Just tell me what to do!', with its multiplicities of meanings, in a case study, introduces the possibility that each participant could interpret it differently, and this points to the need for discussion of the issues, in order to clarify interpretations. The ambiguities in stories trigger such discussion but, as Carter (1993:10) says, 'they can confuse and frustrate novices (or presumably experienced teachers as well?), who *lack the situated frames within which such stories are interpretable at all....* If I look again at what the Curriculum Group did not discuss - 'how people learn' and 'the calculator problem', I wonder whether they could have lacked the 'situated frames' from which they might have interpreted this part of the story. On the other hand, it may have been that, because it was my story, these were particular interests of mine and, had another member of the group written the story, other priorities would have taken precedence.

I am left thinking that, presenting a group with a case study derived from current practice and tensions is very useful for the purposes of dialectical analysis, but I wonder whether the person who gets the most out of it is the author?

A Biographical Account - The Square Table

In developing my work with teachers, I was changing my leadership style. My intention was for the team for whom I had a major responsibility, the Heads of Year and their deputies, to become more fully involved in discussions of issues, in planning what we needed to do and how to go about it, in believing that their voice was important and was heard, and in creating a collaborative culture in which we depended on each other and contributed to the management of the school in a real way.

I recorded a series of lengthy meetings we had over the period of about a year (April, 1992 - February 1993), in which we planned an INSET day, in February 1993, for the staff, which was designed to build team relationships. The more I became involved with transcribing tapes, the closer I was getting to using the tapes to compose a story of a transcribed tape-recorded meeting. I began this style of narrative with the Heads of Year meetings.

I used the tape recordings of meetings to write what I have called a 'biographical account', which was based on taped discussions, edited sparingly in an attempt to reproduce the conversations as close to 'reality' as possible, but cutting out the repetitions, ums, and meaningless babble of simultaneous voices. I sometimes summarised what was said, if I felt that nothing was lost to the meaning by so doing; and I added my thoughts and feelings about what was happening. My intention was to fill in the detail which is missing from transcripts in order to make the account understandable by any reader - not just those who have been a part of the discussion. I wanted to explore this as a method as I had collected so many tapes of meetings, and when I began to transcribe them, I felt that the transcripts did not tell the whole story - nuances of meaning and feelings were lost, together with body language and support from other members of the group. However, I knew I would come up against the question, is this a true account? and also, whose truth is it? so I determined to give the stories back to the team eventually for them to read and comment upon. This proved to be more difficult than I had thought possible!

There was a series of four accounts, 'A Resounding Hush', 'The Square Table', 'Through the Looking Glass' and 'How Daniel tried to escape from the Lions' Den!' which I have in my archived materials. But, in order to give an example of a biographical account, which not only shows the construction of a story, but also of the development of the team at the same time, I shall include extracts from 'The Square Table' in this text. It tells of a meeting of Heads of Year and me, audiotaped on October 15th, 1992 (tape 7). Those present were: Barry, Sebastian, Lindsey, Caroline, Nigel and Kate (who is me). In this version, all these names are fictional, in order to preserve anonymity.

The meeting was concerned with planning for our INSET day, when we wanted to address the issue of getting to know the strengths of team members in order to develop the team - teambuilding, we called it.

I shall now explain how I came to put the story together. In order to do this, I have decided to use different fonts, italics and plain, and bold type face. The background text linking conversations and describing the physical characteristics of the situation are in *New York font, in italics, in keeping with all*

the other stories I have included in this thesis. Kate's interpretations, feelings and thoughts are in Monaco plain font. Any speech is recorded in Times font, **and summaries of what was said is in Monaco, but bold.**

The square table

Today's meeting was in a low ceilinged, rectangular room, - still and quiet and cut off from anything else. No sounds obtruded to disturb their concentration and there were no views from the windows. It was as if they were isolated completely from the rest of humanity, from their busy roles, from any connections they had with the outside world. The focus was entirely on themselves.

They began by sitting round the table, but as the session got underway, they spread to the outer periphery of the room. All except for Barry. He took centre stage, unmoving and happy. He had found something which he enjoyed doing. Sebastian and Nigel were at opposite corners of the room, marking out their territory by pacing around, sometimes breaking into the inner circle where Barry sat, but more often outside it, keeping in their own space - it rather depended on the point they were making. Kate and Lindsey were diagonally opposite, while Caroline etched out a place for herself between Kate and Sebastian. However you looked at it, Barry was centre stage - seeing what was in front of him - he wanted to get on with the task, and could see no good reason for the debate. The challenge was an exciting one, and might provide insights into how they all functioned.

Kate had brought this task for them to do. It was an activity in looking at their strengths, but could then develop into peer group perceptions of each other, if they decided to take it further - that was what the debate was all about. Before the debate, they did the first part of the activity; they left the table with their envelopes full of cards and settled themselves into a more private place - the corners of the room. A silence descended as they each grappled with the qualities which they thought they could claim were theirs. Thoughtful, businesslike, thorough and methodical, flexible and open minded - how would they each describe themselves? They were a bit unsure

where this might lead - would they have to share their views on themselves with everyone else?

"The next stage," *said Kate*, "Is for us to decide how we want to proceed from here. You've often said that you don't know the strengths of each other, and I thought this might give us the opportunity to test whether this is really the case - in any event, it is an activity designed to help us understand each other a bit better, and to help build the team. I thought we could get into twos and look at the strengths of two others in the group - the idea being for us to see how our own perceptions of ourselves match with everyone else's."

There was some discussion whilst everyone tried to get their minds around this idea. It became clear to Kate that Caroline was nervous of committing herself to it and that Lindsey was apprehensive. But Barry was very keen to get started.

"I think this is a really good activity," *he said*. "After all, as a team, we ought to be able to say what we think to each other. There's too much hiding what we really think, which we cover by being polite and not really saying what we would like to say. And we're a good team, so why can't we just get on with it? I don't mind what anybody says about me!"

Kate listened **while they each expressed their feelings about whether they should do the activity.** She could see a huge risk with allowing it to proceed - after all, this was supposed to be a team building session, and yet she could see that it had the potential to blow them apart! But, as she listened to their discussion, she felt that this was also a part of learning about each other, and that she needed to give them space to explore their thinking.

"I'm not sure," *said Sebastian eventually*, "Could we find a different way to do this?"

There were two sticking points - one was owning the labels they might distribute to their colleagues, and the other was, how threatening was this exercise to some of the team? They began to try solving these problems, - different ways of doing the task were suggested; in twos and each person build up a profile of the other's strengths; delivering the cards describing the strengths to each person's place; sitting around the table and giving each other the cards and so on. Barry was getting impatient.

"I can't see what the problem is" *he said* "We have decided on our own strengths, now all we have to do is to see whether other people think the same - and it's not likely to be threatening - after all we are talking about our strengths, not our weaknesses."

"But if we aren't given a particular card, it might be seen as a weakness" *said Lindsey.*

"Yes," *said Sebastian,* "And I would like to keep some control over what is happening - I want to keep it in a safe and controlled situation."

"It's interesting," *said Nigel,* "I'm feeling we're wanting to deal with the positive, but, somehow, we've managed to twist it into something negative so - if I don't get given all my positive qualities, then that's a negative!"

"But it is" *said Lindsey and Sebastian at the same time.*

"If you think you're thoughtful, and nobody says you are, then that's negative" *said Lindsey,* supported by Caroline and Sebastian agreeing with her.

"*But is that saying something about you,*" *said Nigel,* "Or is it saying something about the team?"

"Oh I don't know," *said Sebastian,* "It might say a lot about you, and it might be something that you don't want to or can't cope with at that particular time, wherever you are along the continuum of personal development."

The only reason why these explanations are necessary is because this is a record of research and I want the reader to be clear as to which part of the story is rigorously collected data - the tape recording of the meeting - and which parts are my additions after the event. I think it is now possible for me to step

outside my intervention into the story and allow it to proceed without changes in font and style. But as it is a lengthy account, I have edited it.

The Square Table.....

"Whatever, it's bound to make you feel uncomfortable," said Lindsey.

"Any reflections on your personal qualities that's outside of you, can be a hundred times more threatening than the personal reflection which goes on by comparing one set of cards with another - I can look at that, and I could be worried about it, but if we ended up talking about it, and exposing that further, that could be more threatening," said Sebastian.

"O K" replied Nigel, "I'm still worried about the preoccupation with the aspects of negativeness. It seemed like a process that was going to allow enlightenment, and it was actually dealing with very positive things, but it sounds as if it's in the past now."

Barry agreed.

"But" said Sebastian, "I offered an alternative, which would have given us the positive things, but I can't see any way of getting round - 'I haven't got my thoughtful!'"s

There's a slight easing of the tension as everybody laughs.

Kate listened carefully to this debate. She felt a need to protect those who were not saying much. Eventually she thought that, provided everyone could retain control over their self disclosures, they could probably cope with the activity. She interrupted the debate.

"It's almost time for supper and we haven't started yet! I'm going to put a time limit on this discussion, interesting though it is, because I think the general feeling is that we do want to do it, but that we may open up something that we can't control. So we need to look at some controls on it, and we need to then be able to move from where we are now - forward,- so let us get on with this - we want to do it, we're going to do it. Let's have the control in making the giving of strengths anonymous, then if we decide that we can have a discussion, we can start owning things if we wish to. Perhaps, if we were to have a maximum of three strengths, that might help because then we could assume that just because we didn't get the 'thoughtful', it doesn't mean we're not thoughtful, it might do, but doesn't have to mean that - so what do you think about that as an idea?"

Further discussion on the practicalities of this. Eventually it was decided to select three strengths for each person, so everyone would receive fifteen cards.

At last! Silence descended - everyone in their own space. Interruptions - how should we do this? Are you doing that? Eventually - done. The last set of cards is delivered, just like Christmas. Turn them over - read them! Exclamations - "Oh good!" "Oh, why didn't I get a 'Businesslike' - I'm sure I am." "I feel good - I'm glad we did it!" Back to the table - safe, - yes they can sit next to each other again.

"Well I think the interesting thing from my point of view" said Barry "I'll start off, shall I? The interesting thing is that I agree with all these! But - what's low tolerance of uncertainty? I didn't understand that one!"

Nigel fills in the full expression 'low tolerance of uncertainty, disorder and ambiguity' - much discussion all at the same time - is it negative? No surely not, it's the same as impatience with waffle.

Caroline says "It actually turns it around saying that you like -"

Barry interrupts "You like to be precise - well I do. In fact that's what it says here, I don't mind any of these, I've got 'impatience with waffle', 'happy to have a go', 'low tolerance for uncertainty', which is the same as impatience with waffle because I am, very, we know that, 'keen to test things out in practice', 'practical and down to earth, realistic', I got five for that - 'business like' - I got three - I think that's a very fair assessment, I'll buy you all a drink!"

Laughter all round!

"Actually out of my own, I got all of them, apart from low tolerance etc, and I didn't pick that one because I didn't understand it! Other than that they're all off my own list."

"Good isn't it?" Kate says.

"Yes, mutual stroking!" says Barry

There is a pause. Will someone volunteer to be next? Yes, Caroline seems keen to speak.

"As I said, I'm feeling good - now. I think that the ones that didn't turn up, I'm not telling myself, Oh God - other people don't think I'm like that! I have said I think I'm happy to be exposed to new situations, - I didn't mean happy in one sense, and very much tonight we're seeing that I'm not happy in one sense but I'm prepared to be exposed and to go for it, so that was how I was interpreting that, but probably other people wouldn't have interpreted it in the same way, so I can tell myself that I still feel that about myself, although other people might not have said it. I didn't say that I was rational and objective, I'm not sure that I am, but I've got two people who think that, and that's nice that anybody thinks that. I got three 'flexible and open minded', which I had said about myself; 'thoughtful', I'm not sure if I've got the same interpretation - would somebody like to own 'thoughtful' for me?"

Much later in the evening!

"What about just considering us as a team, and how well we actually think we do know each other? From what we've done, does this indicate to you that perhaps we do?" asked Kate.

"Well, I'm beginning to wonder if this isn't a negative side of my character now! said Barry, laughing. "I'm quite surprised, actually, - well it means that my colleagues do know me."

"I think we probably do know each other well," said Lindsey, "but I still think there's been an awful lot to be gained from having gone through this exercise. One of the things you said at the beginning was, that we weren't sure that we knew each

other, and I wasn't sure that that was quite the case - we haven't ever really talked about the strengths and weaknesses in quite the way we have tonight, and I think it's been important to exchange views and not just sit back and say Oh well we've worked together for a long time so we know each other well."

Nigel said, "I think there was something about being in a situation of noticing the most obvious strengths about somebody, - only being able to notice the most obvious ones - but if everybody thought that, it is very nice to know that everyone thought these were the top three strengths I present to people."

The evening came to a close with the team discussing how they could apply this activity to the INSET day they were planning.

Kate drove away, thinking through the discussions. This was the first time this team had faced each other with such personal issues, - what was the outcome? Was it a greater sharing of trust between members? A greater understanding of what team members want for themselves? More openness between each other? Greater support because they understand each other better? More cohesiveness of the team?

What did the members of the team learn about each other that was not revealed through the statements? How will they adapt their behaviour according to what they have learned? What do they think about the development of the team?

Kate was uneasy. She spent much of the following weekend thinking about the evening's discussion. What had they learnt? Had it been worthwhile?

So four days later, she found herself asking them, "What do you think you've learnt as a result of last Thursday's meeting?"

There were some safe responses.

"I've learnt a bit more about me" said Nigel.

"I think I need to be a better mixture of action man and thinking about what I need to do", said Barry.

"That was the first time we had ever talked about our own development," said Lyndsey. "Up till now we have always been concerned about the development of other members of staff - it was different because this time it was about ourselves."

Then it was Caroline's turn.

"I came away with an understanding of other people's strengths," she said, "But I was exceedingly nervous of doing the activity at the start. I was afraid of me confronting me. I was worried about what might have been revealed."

She talked a little further about her feelings. Then suddenly she turned to Barry and said,

"You made me very angry, because you wouldn't recognise my feelings. You made me feel as if I was outside the team, and guilty because I was not worthy of being a member of it. I went home and thought I need to tell Barry that, or he'll never know."

Barry faced her and his surprise was very evident.

"What do you mean?" he asked, "I only wanted to get on with the activity. I didn't mean to upset anyone."

"No." replied Caroline, "But don't you see that in going on about the team and how a good team should be able to do this, and I couldn't do it, - this put me outside the team, and made me feel awful. It wasn't a matter of being a good team - it was down to being the people we are. I find it really hard to talk about myself - I just panic, and can't communicate. But I know I've made a huge step forward in being able to talk to you like this. I felt such joy - there's no other way to describe it - about the cards I got. And as a result of doing the activity, I feel I can say this to you - I feel safe within the group to do so."

Barry looked uncomfortable. The conversation moved on. Nigel remarked that the women had not participated much in the discussion. Kate was aware of this; what was the cause of this? Were they being defensive - taking up time and space? Is there a male/female issue in the group - or is it that individual members have differing levels of confidence, and their gender is irrelevant?

The discussion eventually drew to a close.

Strengths and weaknesses - how easily we talk of the need to know these! Self assessment sessions with children - how do the children feel? Have we ever really considered the difficulties they might encounter with this activity? Can our colleagues cope with it on their INSET session? How are we going to make it safe for them? Does it need to be safe?

Where does what we have learned take us? What changes will occur as a result of our reflections?

I had intended to give back the story to the participants - that was top of my priority list in terms of adhering to the ethics I had set up for myself. I was somewhat worried about the slight altercation between Barry and Caroline at the end, but had decided that this could have been one of the learning experiences for all of us if either of them - or anyone else - picked it up as an issue. In the event, I had copies of the completed story (the quartet!) ready for a further meeting at which we were to review our progress as a team, but in keeping with my new approach to leadership, when it became plain to me that one, and possibly two, members of the group did not want to read the story - or did not want to spend the time then at that particular meeting reading it- I shelved it! After all, I cannot force people to read my - or our - stories. I was disappointed at the time, and I know that three other members of the team were as well, because they said as much, but eventually I was able to give it to the three members who wanted to read it, and we had individual discussions about it.

'The Square Table' marked both the development of my leadership style in encouraging greater participation from the team and also the development of my use of data for writing a story about our experiences. But in addition, what we did in building our team was useful in the building of other teams within the school. An example of this was recorded by one of the heads of year, Coletta (1995), when she worked with her tutor team. She encountered a problem with one teacher who refused to take part, and she wrote this up in the form of a fictionalised story (Coletta, op cit,;23-31), but evaluations from the rest of the team of ten were very positive, as the following example shows:

'We had a very good discussion after the first activity; got to know each other better; opened up and realised how difficult such an activity must be for the students; however, we expect them to know themselves and identify their qualities easily. I enjoyed this session. I was interested to see what qualities others gave me and whether their choices matched mine and if they didn't, why. I also realised that I didn't know the others very well at all. I became aware of the difficulty of knowing/identifying yourself and preparing the pupils well for such activities.' (Coletta, 1995:appendix 10).

Students who took part in the activity at a later date also enjoyed it, saying:

'I thought it was really good and it made me realise what people thought about me. It gave me a chance to see what I really thought about people in my form. It was really good fun going round putting down the different cards; The only frustrating bit was that there wasn't enough cards so we had to write our own, but over all it was really good.' (Amy, 9.2.94, in Coletta 1995, appendix 9).

'I thought the finding out game we played in the last tutorial was a good idea. It was fun to do and it made me learn about other people's thoughts. I learnt a lot about what people thought about me. They thought I was very cheerful. I got 15 cheerfals. I also learnt that people thought that I was very un-reliable and that I don't care about other people which I think is not true. I would like to do this again to see if I have improved my cheerfals and un-reliable ness.' (Dean 9.2.94, in Coletta 1995, appendix 9).