

CHAPTER ONE

The Researcher's Tale

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For a number of years, whilst working as a lecturer in Sociology at both Further and Higher Education levels, I became interested in what happened when people 'returned-to-learn'. So many students, on completion of a course, would say 'I feel different',/ 'I wish I'd known that before',/ 'This has really changed me' – that I wondered what was *really* going on in the classroom. My curiosity became the foundation for my doctoral thesis on *Higher Education and Personal change in Prisoners* (1997) – a teaching/learning and research experience that was to prove fairly unique in the history of prisoner education in the UK.

What became apparent however, as I embarked upon this somewhat lonely road, was that conducting the research was not going to be easy. In fact, it became, as most dedicated researchers will know, a lengthy, time-consuming learning process for myself, and so, this chapter will focus on the reality of conducting research with maximum security prisoners about their experiences of studying at degree level whilst serving their sentences. My research was carried out over a period of five years whilst lecturing on degree level Sociology and Social Policy on a project which began in 1989 between the University of Leeds and a maximum security dispersal prison. The project ran until funding for the Course – from the Prison Service – was withdrawn in August 1998. I was involved with the 'Leeds Course', as it became known, as lecturer and researcher between 1993 and 1998, examining the idea that attendance on education courses and especially Higher Education courses whilst imprisoned, could somehow lead to 'changes' in offending behaviour.

The research took the form of a classroom ethnography, documenting 'classroom talk' and analysing the learning experiences of groups of male prisoners, learning together as a form of social interaction (Reuss, 1997). I was interested in examining exactly how these 'changes' occurred, if indeed they did occur and what the implications would be for penal practice, particularly as the types of programmes being introduced to prison regimes at the time of the study focused primarily on

addressing offending behaviour, sometimes, it seemed, at the expense of more traditional education courses which prisoners *chose* to attend whilst doing time. My interest stemmed from ideas that education programmes undertaken whilst in prison *may* be rehabilitative, but what was unclear was *how* the potential for a possible change in offending behaviour might occur.

However, before I begin to describe some aspects of my own experiences of conducting research in a prison, I believe that it has to be acknowledged that there are over 60,000 people in prisons in the UK of whom a small percentage have access to education at any level whilst serving their sentences. They are in fact the ‘real’ specialists whose experiences of prison education programmes are far more telling than anything studied or written by prison civilian staff, uniformed staff or those ‘academic tourists’ who visit prisons for a short period of time. By contrast, my own research became a ‘five year stretch’ during which I gained a fairly unique view of life inside, working with the people who are *actually* imprisoned, who live, breathe and experience imprisonment over periods of time which may stretch from months to multiple life-sentences ; people like Ted who I met in prison, who has spent most of the last thirty years inside, like Lawrence too who will be way beyond retirement age when he gets out – both now in their fifties, ‘classic examples’ (and I know they will not object to my saying so) of our ageing prison population.

With the exception of prison autobiographies, rarely have ‘research insiders’ written about what they did *and how they did it* when it comes to prison research. By ‘research insiders’ I refer to those who, like myself, spent all day, four days per week working with the same group of prisoners over a number of years. Those ‘academic tourists’ referred to earlier are in a sense ‘research outsiders’, who visit prisons and are funded to conduct research for short periods of time. Such research contracts may well be shaped and influenced by a particular political ideology and/or agenda thus ensuring that the researcher has less of an opportunity to ‘tell a tale-from-the-field’. This is why anyone wanting a detailed ‘picture’ of prison life simply has to keep going back inside, short of actually living in the place. Unfortunately, those who do, tend to wish on occasion that they did not have to keep returning to an environment not renowned for its propensity to welcome. However, as someone who did manage to survive the rigours of conducting research in a prison over a relatively long period

of time, it seems that it would be useful to share some of those research experiences for those thinking of pursuing a similar course.

Most recent studies conducted in prisons cannot claim to be the definitive account of prison life in the twentieth century, and certainly any studies which are conducted on education in prisons provide only a 'snapshot' of one part of the experience of imprisonment – for *some* prisoners *some* of the time. Describing any aspect of prison life is a complex undertaking; similarly, a good prison classroom ethnography could incorporate the widely differing perspectives of those who transgress society's norms, those who enforce those norms and those who study and work with the transgressors, but in depicting something of the reality of classroom research within a prison, what should emerge is a more *realistic* account of the experiences of the researcher and those with whom she is working.

An account of the actual experience of conducting research in a maximum security prison education department provides a 'tale' from a fairly remote 'field' so this chapter will endeavour to describe what happens when you decide to conduct research involving prisoners and education programmes in that particular setting. Most people are aware that one way of finding things out about the world is to simply go out there and ask other people questions - which sounds relatively easy. If you try and do this in a maximum security dispersal prison to find out whether 'doing' a degree course in sociology brings about any kind of 'change' in prisoners, then things are not going to be that straightforward.

What I hope to show in *The Researcher's Tale* is the importance of involving *prisoners as people* in an in-depth and sensitive research programme which would have borne little or no fruit without their consent, co-operation, expertise and specialist knowledge of an environment which, for the most part, remains unseen, barely acknowledged and preferably not thought about or reflected upon by most of us. The first section of this chapter will therefore discuss some of the experiences of gaining access to a prison.

The second section will consider some of the methodological techniques employed to cope with researching a most sensitive area of social life – i.e. the long-term

imprisonment of individuals by other individuals. What ever method is chosen by a prison researcher, it will be rigorously scrutinised by penal practitioners, academics and not least, by the prison authorities concerned as issues of security will always take precedence over the researcher's 'unique contribution to knowledge'. My choice of the ethnographic approach does not imply the 'rightness' of this particular method for conducting research into prisoner education, nor does it imply that the outcomes will be absolutely valid, rational, objective or even value-free. As a result of involving the prisoner-students themselves with the research, discussions on validity and the consequences of respondent validation are included as a means of casting a realist (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) interpretation on the study.

Thirdly, the issue of generaliseability has to be addressed – to what extent do the findings transfer to other classrooms within the prison system and how far does the fieldwork present a picture of the reality of prison classroom practice? This is because conducting fieldwork in a prison education department produces findings which may be assessed and considered by a diverse group of practitioners and policy-makers. These concerns form the final section of *The Researcher's Tale*.

ACCESS TO THE PRISON – A 'WAY-IN' TO THE RESEARCH

Classroom ethnographers often find themselves attempting to explain that which is intangible, elusive or even obscure because they often *teach* the people who, in other research studies, might be loosely described as 'research subjects' or 'respondents'. In most classroom ethnographies, the subjects are pupils, students or teachers themselves and the status attached to those labels may colour the research findings. In my own classroom ethnography, the research 'subjects' were first and foremost and in the eyes of most people, serious criminals serving long sentences in an English maximum security dispersal prison.

Conducting research within a prison context means dealing with the kind of distractions that give hardened research practitioners nightmares: Can I do that? Should I say this? Will it cause trouble if...? As a prison researcher you may well find yourself working with *one* small group of prisoners 'selected' by those in authority in

one prison. The prison may be a single sex prison, it may be, as in my own study, a maximum security dispersal, which means that there is a very real likelihood that your research respondents will ‘disappear’ overnight because they have been ‘shipped out’ as a matter of security. You will not know where they have gone to and there will be little opportunity to follow up any work you may have started with them. The whole range of carefully premeditated methodological strategies and designs disappear one by one in such a context, but you still have your hypothesis, your classroom and your working relationship with a small core of students who, hopefully, will know exactly what your research is all about.

I had visited the prison once only prior to commencing work as a prison lecturer/researcher, after having been ‘cleared’ for security purposes. This in itself can be a daunting prospect for the keen researcher who may suddenly begin to imagine all manner of skeletons in cupboards. I regarded my first visit as essential in order to meet the students and give them some indication as to why I was about to spend, initially, the next three to four years ‘inside’ and had consciously chosen to do so. It turned out to be a five year ‘stretch’. Prisons become obsessive places. The group of male students with whom I would be working were part of an already established programme of Higher Education within the prison, so I was fortunate in that it was relatively easy to join the course as an additional tutor and draw on my own previous experiences of teaching mature students over several years. This made access easier than it might have been.

On that first visit, the men asked me any questions they wished – about myself, about the research, my reasons for ‘being there’, the things I would teach. The idea was to maintain open working relationships, again in an environment not necessarily reputed for having the best of relationships between service provider and client. It seemed important to avoid a situation where the men would feel anxious about the research and so we discussed the outline of the study and my reasons for wanting to carry it out.

To attempt to describe what actually took place in the classroom on each single teaching day is an impossibility. The most one can hope to achieve on that score is to provide a physical description of the prison classroom with its barred window (the

prison was built in the late 1980's), single blackboard propped against the reinforced glass corridor window – 'to stop the nosey bastard officers from spying on us' – as one student intimated, twelve chairs and tables, partitioned beige walls between the classrooms, three filing cabinets, teacher's desk and bright green alarm bell marked No. 9 placed strategically on the wall – 'in case of trouble'. The amount of class contact time was substantial and so the rapport which developed with the prisoner-students became in itself a 'way-in' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; 82).

The compartmentalised social world of the prisoner – and it is a social world despite stereotypical views to the contrary, is not an easy world to become accustomed to. Perhaps the most telling description of this world comes from one who inhabits it twenty-four hours a day. As with all good descriptions, the following is a highly personal account which provides a wider context for my own research, telling us a little of the prison regime beyond the classroom walls in the Education Block:

'After tea in the evenings the jail becomes a veritable minefield. Screws shouting to each other, doors banging, Brixton Blasters at full volume, blokes who have drunk too much "hooch", who are approaching on a collision course with such endearments as "Aveyergorrafagmate" (Please do you have a cigarette), and the inevitable nutter with a head full of heroin and serious attitude problems. This prevails until 8p.m., when everyone gets locked up

Once locked up for the night, decisions have to be made ...what needs doing and in what order it will be done. Typically this would include letter to the wife, Leeds essay and readings, legal work on court cases pending, listen to the news on the radio, washing, cups of tea from the thermos flask ...all this has to be done against the usual background of the ubiquitous Ghetto Blasters, blokes hammering on their doors for the attention of the night watchman (who is probably watching TV and cannot hear the cell alarm bell) ...or some poor enlightened soul telling the world a mile away that Jesus still loves him (even though his neighbours don't) ...

Weekends are much the same as weekdays ...without the benefit of the peaceful interlude in the Education Department ...

In addition to the foregoing, time has to be found for changing library books, showers, canteen, cooking the occasional meal, visits, standing in queues for everything ...and running around like a blue-arsed fly to remedy the numerous cock-ups that can be taken for granted on a regular basis ...

The fabric of a prison, be it Victorian or modern, is insignificant, it is merely a repository ...a place where people interact with others.

At the top of this hierarchy is the Number 1 Governor ...usually a timid little man who shuffles papers for his lords and masters in Whitehall, ...beneath the Number 1 are the junior grades ...and beneath these the screws proper. The Bananas ...yellow, bent and inclined to hang around in bunches. These are the true “governors” of a jail. If they are basically decent, it is a good jail. If they are bastards ...be prepared for the worst.

Finally there are the prisoners themselves ...fools, misfits, drunks, drug addicts, miscreants ...plus whatever offence they may be in for ...penny pinchers at one extreme, paedophiles at the other.

Mix all these ingredients together in a concrete repository ...and you have a British jail.’ (Ted, 1995).

To attempt to ‘fit into’ this world is a time consuming process, because mistrust and suspicion frequently underpin any form of social interaction. One of the first things I had to do was explain to the men why I was there and who I was working for because they asked. The fact that my work was not dependent on Home Office funding contributed in no small measure to gaining access, in the sense that the prisoners did not feel that they were being scrutinised.

What became important was to build on and develop the positive relationships which were formed as part of the ‘way-in’. I believed that a high level of ‘subject involvement’ would be the most successful in providing the evidence to build a more complete understanding of the experience of studying degree level material whilst imprisoned. The men were invited to read any sections of the research that they

wished; their involvement was grounded in trust; an important consideration when researching in a prison. With hindsight, I still believe this to be the case. Interpreting the classroom context, the interactions, analysing the complex human processes of understanding information and knowledge and comprehending how individuals distil it all into the structure of personality, meant 'getting to know' the men well and simultaneously abandoning any preconceived ideas I might have had about prisoners or the crimes they may have committed. There would be many who would 'drift' in and out of the course but always a solid core of students committed to their studies and aware of the research. There were, however, those 'on education' who would not join the course *because* research was being undertaken on the grounds that they believed it to be 'something to do with the Home Office' which it was not. As previously stated this fact in itself became one of the methodological strengths of the research.

I explained to the men that I would be analysing their conversations, their 'talk' in the classroom. They were intrigued as to how this would be done. I explained that I would not be taping the conversations because this presented firstly, a practical problem in terms of prison security and also made demands on the availability of the tape-recorder each day when other teachers needed it. Tape-recording also made some of the men feel uncomfortable and inhibited in their learning or more general classroom behaviour. I simply wrote down what had occurred in some of the sessions and documented the discussions which took place focusing on the subject-matter of sociology. The men became accustomed to my 'scribbling', as they described it, whilst they 'talked'. I worked with complete blocks of conversations in order to convey more of a sense of context than would be possible with pages of transcription symbols, rather than transcribe each and every conversation.

The following 'classroom conversation' – as the 'bits' of data became known – illustrates the kind of discussion that was looked at throughout my research. This particular example was used to show that student-teacher interaction in a prison setting is complex because it involves more than simply passing on new knowledge. It is about 'openness' or trust between teacher and student for one thing, especially with regard to what is being said in the classroom context. The men were discussing what

was current Conservative Government policy with regard to family responsibility and child delinquency:

A: I believe it should be partly the State and partly the Family who has responsibility. You see, you can educate the kids at Nursery schools when they're very young.

B: But that doesn't mean anything, it's gotta be down to the individual...

A: You see I've worked with young kids in Belfast, on the estate, they get into joy-riding, stealing electrical goods and so on. Then what happens? They bring the police back to the estate, we don't want that; we, the community should deal with it. We try and explain this to the kids, but then it's coming up to Christmas say, and they've no money and they want things for presents and so on. In some ways you can't blame them.

Anne: Do you think adults have a moral responsibility – as parents – towards ensuring their kids don't do these things?

B: You can't – never mind the New Right and what they say. If you have a kid on the streets in London making five grand a day from selling crack, that, for a kid from an inner city area, is more than he might get in a year, so you can't just take that away from him. What alternative can you give him? What is there? There's got to be something else to replace that, he's not going to give it up that easily. It's about money and survival.

What this brief example also shows is that the men would 'disclose' knowledge in the course of classroom conversations which they might not have done in other circumstances – not that this is in any sense incriminatory – it simply highlights the fact that, in the context of learning on this kind of course, a student's own life experiences are full of social comment. That social comment, in a prison setting, offers insights into a world that most people might choose to ignore, but it is no less valid for that. An obvious comparison can be made with adult students in adult

educational settings who also 'use' memory and the recalling of personal life experiences to enhance their learning and make sense of their world.

Researchers have to sometimes concede that they mentally become part of the 'world' being studied and so the prison researcher's dilemma becomes grounded in the question 'Am I truly a part of the world I study?' This cannot be answered with the desired candour of the 'total participant'. To have been truly a part of the world of a maximum security prison would quite simply have meant being there twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week – and serving a five to thirty-five year 'stretch'. As both researcher *and* teacher, becoming 'accustomed' to the closed, highly regulated prison environment where some people are detained indefinitely due to the nature of their alleged offence, takes a while. It presents the kind of challenge that places unconsidered and occasionally unheard of demands upon both teacher/researcher and prisoner/student. The demands of both the prison (for the researcher/teacher) and imprisonment (for the prisoners) underpin subsequent research relationships which are also social relationships, which in turn shape the research itself and hence the degree of respondent involvement.

Those relationships, ideally, are also based on perceiving prisoners as people because the cultural 'baggage' associated with the label of prisoner/criminal/offender can be as damaging to the research project as any other factors which may affect the validity of the work. The quality and quantity of information received from the men in my own study would not have been forthcoming at all had there been the slightest attempt to deny them their individuality, autonomy and humanity – a vital component when it comes to gaining 'access' to the prisoner's world.

A mutual working relationship was built up with prisoners throughout the period of the research which in some respects contrasted with the differing attitudes of prison officers towards those imprisoned, some of whom believed that they worked with 'the dangerous garbage of society', as one officer informed me. Adapting to these contradictory attitudes and perceptions means that diplomacy plays a key role in prison research. Being diplomatic becomes second nature as you satisfy both the demands of the prison and the demands of your students. Diplomacy above all, if conducting a case study with prisoners, means spending time talking to your

respondents about your research. It means for example, explaining why you are writing certain things down, asking if there are any objections to the inclusion of particular remarks, making judgements about certain statements in terms of their 'sincerity', veracity or degree of potential to cause offence or be misconstrued. It also means 'removing' data if someone asks you to, either for reasons of security or peace of mind. Diplomacy and being tactful are therefore crucial tools for the prison researcher. Together with trust, they form the basis of wider access and positive research relationships.

Other useful tools, as I discovered, were flexibility, adaptability and empathy which helped create an informal, facilitative learning atmosphere that countered the negativity experienced elsewhere in the prison. 'In here, Anne, you can just be yourself', was a sentiment frequently expressed about the classroom. Access to prisoners can be construed in a number of ways. Not only has the actual physical difficulty of gaining entry to a prison to be considered, i.e. facing the 'gate' each morning, removing items from pockets, removing shoes, outer clothing etc., but there is also the difficulty of building up sufficient trust to form the positive research relationships already mentioned. Perhaps a brief example illustrates the point. Some men would literally become bored either with discussing research matters or the subject-matter under discussion and would leave the class for 'association' (meeting with other prisoners from other classes whilst down on education). This would not be tolerated or expected in a 'standard' educational setting. In prison, it was the norm – depending on which prison officers were on duty.

Tact again plays an important role. The 'blankers-off' as one member of the group christened these prisoners, often had more important things to think about, were 'newcomers' to the prison or group and felt insecure, or, realistically speaking were too busy dealing with drug problems or even drug dealing/dealers. Disruption and interruption were characteristic of prison routine and awareness of this in the classroom was also essential. It formed the context of the study as did awareness of group dynamics. Murderers, terrorists, armed robbers and 'drug barons' do not necessarily agree on all things and the 'way-in' can close up very rapidly if people do not 'gel' as a group in any research setting. If some 'class-mates' vacated the

classroom, this was as much respected, by other class members, as noted or commented upon.

It rapidly became clear that the prisoners had 'knowledge' about their own setting which I did not share. This, as it would in all kinds of similar research studies, shifted the power-balance in their favour according to which 'role' was being played, i.e. teacher/researcher, prisoner/student/respondent. Often the men would 'talk' and I would 'listen', a 'mirror-image' of the (stereo)typical student/teacher relationship. There would invariably be a few moments of unease in the classroom as new parameters of behaviour or new 'role-sets' (Merton, 1957) became established. As Willis states, 'The ethnographic account ..., records a crucial level of experience...' (1993;94) and awareness of how research relationships impact upon research forms as much a part of that 'crucial level of experience' as does the subject-matter being investigated. The flexibility, adaptability and empathy mentioned above were grounded in diplomacy, tact and trust to the extent that 'listening' to individual prisoners discussing their life experiences either against a background of sociological knowledge or simply 'just talking' provided a unique experience in itself.

The prisoner-students in my study were said to 'weave' their learning processes together into a synthesis of outcomes which had a potentiality for 'change' (Reuss, 1997). It seemed to make sense that I too, was involved in a form of weaving together the teaching and researching experiences and practices into a fuller or broader account of what actually takes place in a prison classroom in order to 'flesh out' the actual research. This provides a realistic account and makes others aware of the circumstances of the research (Pawson and Tilley, 1997;xiv). It also shows that building up a 'working' set of research relationships alongside a 'working' set of teaching relationships is important because one set has a 'knock-on' effect on the other. The two sets of relationships have to be worked in tandem, they form the totality of the classroom interactions and are continuously developing throughout any research period. In the interests of maintaining positive working relationships with the prisoners, I would abide by their requests not to discuss research matters if officers entered the room. As Diesing observes, the task of the field work researcher:

... is to become part of the community or group he is studying. This task imposes an essential requirement of permissiveness on the researcher; he must make himself acceptable, allow himself to be socialised, accept the point of view and ideology of his hosts. (1972; 144).

Field relations were an important consideration in my study where the 'messages' which were 'passed' to the prisoners via clothing, spoken language, body language, personal demeanour and so on were of great significance – metaphorically speaking. In a prison context they can mean the difference between obtaining vast amounts of data or none at all:

Impressions of the researcher that pose an obstacle to access must be avoided or countered as far as possible, while those that facilitate it must be encouraged, within the limits set by ethical considerations. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; 78).

Acceptable relationships with the group had to be maintained, not least as a female researcher conducting research in an all male prison. Dress, demeanour, adoption of language codes and particular types of behaviour all become additional tools in the ethnographer's resource bank. If the researcher in prison 'gets it wrong', the whole project can be jeopardised on a number of levels, from simply gaining security clearance, to prisoners refusing to join the class. In such a setting, impression management counts for a great deal. The choice of 'what to wear for work' takes on a whole new significance when working in a prison as was pointed out to me by other education staff and prisoners when I wore a short skirt!

Issues of gender neutrality must be considered by those wishing to conduct research in prisons but only because the research process is inevitably coloured by the adoption of stereotypical male and female roles – rightly or wrongly as a strategy for survival in a prison setting. The reason for this is because the work is being undertaken in a setting where role-playing as a strategy for survival is honed to a fine art by penal practitioners, prisoners and civilian staff alike. It becomes a form of 'normalising' one's behaviour and the adoption of particular roles offsets the symbolic representation of the total institution of the prison. The roles both normalise and

regulate the social situations and experiences which individuals create there. From a realistic perspective, being a female researcher in an all male prison not 'working for the authorities' did ensure a willingness on the part of respondents to co-operate. I would however, be loathe to consider that I had presented myself to the prisoner-students as a '...socially acceptable incompetent...' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; 85).

Self-presentation is a sensitive issue for the prison researcher impacting upon matters of subjectivity and objectivity and compounded by gender relations. Empathy with the prisoner can mean the difference between gaining results or not and throughout my own fieldwork it became apparent that interaction *was* coloured by gender relations which simply became part of the reality of the classroom experience. This in turn became an essential dimension of the research relationship contributing to the 'way-in'. It is extremely difficult under the circumstances of this kind of research, for the researcher to remain 'neutral'.

Understanding the culture of the participants in prison ethnographies is another crucial aspect of any research to be undertaken there. Assuming the prior existence of a prison (sub)culture can be dangerous though because, if nothing else, it encourages the development of even more stereotypical ideas about those who have allegedly offended. However, that is not to say that such a culture does not 'exist' in the minds and hearts of those sentenced and the sentencers. It quite patently does; just as cultural attitudes, beliefs, customs and ideals pervade wider society so too, do they characterise prison communities.

I quickly had to 'learn' the maximum security prison culture from the perspective of the prisoners; a culture which has a long 'history' both written and oral (Bryans and Wilson, 1998; Boyle, 1977; Muncie and McLaughlin, 1996; Cavadino and Dignan, 1997; Morgan, 1999) which shapes and re-shapes interaction within the prison. It was in my interests to do so to produce results and build up a close rapport but one which hopefully did not deteriorate into 'over-rapport' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; 98-104). Achieving a balance between insider-outsider relationships or 'familiarity' and 'strangeness', in order to maintain validity contributes to the pattern of research rather than detracts from it. 'Going native' in a maximum security dispersal prison is

perhaps not the best recommended approach; equally the adoption of a ‘marginal position’ and the maintenance of that position is not easy in such an environment. Balancing the many roles and subjective feelings about imprisonment, long sentences, punishment, justice and injustice with the more objective task of conducting research was something of which I became acutely conscious, for not only does a prison contain individuals – in every sense of the word – it is a place of work for many others who firmly believe that they are simply doing a job.

There are observable and highly visible differences in the distribution of power between individuals within a prison. The prejudices, hostilities, tensions and stigmatisations which exist between groups and individuals have become the fabric of the prison itself and as such are definitive of it. The prison researcher has to adopt specific strategies for dealing with the divisions, inequalities and sometimes injustices which stem from them. As such the strategies and techniques adopted shape the research itself.

METHODOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES

What are the techniques that one can hope to employ both to facilitate and develop research into a realistic account of what takes place in a prison classroom? It seemed to me that there were three important things to consider:

- ‘ice-breaking’;
- whether the research was ‘contaminated by sympathy’;
- the role of the respondent in the research or ‘respondent validation’.

‘Ice-breaking’

As I began my research, I was acutely aware of how difficult it would be to maintain the equilibrium between a ‘detached’ account and a highly ‘subjective’ tale from the field. The issue of validity posed quite a problem initially but the extent to which ‘bias’ or ‘contamination’ would be present in the research findings, was addressed by taking the view that the methods I used would add a dimension to the work in

reproducing and creating the reality of classroom practice. Again working the teaching and research relationships in tandem, presenting the research findings back to the men produced positive ‘feedback’ on what had occurred in the classroom. Their knowledgeability, their expertise in relation to the situation they were in proved to be invaluable in fleshing out the context of the research. It also added humour and humanity to, what at times, appeared to be a very ‘de-human’ environment.

Reading the first ‘instalment’ of the research to the first group of prisoner-students with whom I worked was the most difficult aspect of the entire research project – akin to ‘stealing souls’ or the absolute embarrassment of hearing oneself speak for the first time on a tape-recorder. I wondered at the time, how many prison researchers had ever felt more ‘criminal’ than their respondents. They were quiet, anticipatory, a little tense and I was under the spotlight. Would they approve? Had I recounted things accurately? Would they really feel embarrassed? The only voice I could hear was Tony’s, from three months earlier:

Everything you do and say is written down in here.

Then Dudley broke the ice, giggled and said:

That sounds really posh, man. It don’t sound like us...but that’s O.K

And the research relationship survived.

Research ‘ice-breaking’ is not easy, but worth the effort in a prison context. Throughout the study, as I gave sections of the work to the men to read, their reactions varied from humour, ‘Eh, Allan, you were going on a bit there’ – to the more poignant ‘I really miss Darren, you know, he brought a spark into the group, even if I didn’t always agree with him. Reading that through has brought it back as if it were yesterday. I wonder where he is now?’ ‘Bloody Winston Green, the bastards,’ came the reply.

Reading or going through one's research with one's respondents is reminiscent of the account Willis provides of how his research role was seen by the 'Hammertown Lads' after they had read his early drafts:

Bill: The bits about us were simple enough.

John: It's the bits in between.

Joey: Well, I started to read it, I started at the very beginning, y'know I was gonna read as much as I could, then I just packed it in, just started readin' the parts about us and then little bits in the middle.

Spanksy: The parts what you wrote about us, I read those, but it was, y'know, the parts what actually were actually describing the book like I didn't... (Willis; 1993; 195)

If the men requested that an item be removed because it was of a 'sensitive' nature, then the request would be complied with, as previously stated, keeping the proceedings as 'democratic' as was possible and helping to develop the project into one of open involvement and interaction between researcher and 'researched'.

This was evidenced by the fact that when the whole of the first chapter of the research was read by the men involved with the study, they were highly critical in that they felt that much more ought to be said about the prison, and could be said, from their perspective. Despite this, they agreed it was the best thing they had read about prisons. They were anxious to ensure, for example, that I had the exact and accurate times of the daily regime and movements, and there was considerable debate about the different regimes on different wings until consensus was reached. This kind of 'detail' mattered a great deal, in that it had to convey a 'sense' of the place. Similarly, when looking at 'the prisoners language', there were so many regional variations, that a great deal of time had to be spent working through and refining the definitions that characterised 'prison talk'.

Overall however, responses to my research differed according to the following criteria:

- a) their concerns for myself as researcher in such an environment,
- b) embarrassment – i.e. ‘Did I really say that?’
- c) any possible ‘knock-on’ effects from the research in terms of their sentence duration, self- preservation and survival within the prison system,
- d) facing up to their own situation, as research of this nature confronts the individual with the ‘truth’ of their position and life-experiences; in a prison environment, many inmates will ‘deny’ this in order to ‘survive’.

These responses highlighted a further dimension of conducting prison research which neither myself nor the men had thought about, i.e. the ‘sensitivity’ of reading the work in terms of its personal effect on both parties. Not so much ‘sensitive’ because we were in a prison and were constantly aware of security matters, but it was more a deeper sensitivity which grew towards the situation of imprisonment as a means of punishment and towards the implications of criticising penal policy and practice. In this respect the men’s concerns for me as researcher were quite marked, particularly where any criticism of regimes was either explicitly or implicitly made. They would say, ‘Can you say that? Watch yourself – you know what the system is like, don’t you go losing your job ‘cos of us’.

The responses of each man were coloured by his own interpretations of what had been written, particularly if named in a classroom conversation. Ted, for example, would often say, ‘Is that what I said?’ and Allan would add, ‘Yes, come on Ted, you know you did!’ Others would say, ‘It’s a good job only you hear us saying these things – we hope!’, then light heartedly dismissed with, ‘Wait till she’s famous, then everybody will know what you said’.

Facing up to their situation of imprisonment was something which the men had to do with not a little courage and honesty when they chose to be involved with the research project. In a sense they had to be made aware that this would happen from the start – confronting prisoners with work which describes ‘their’ prison, ‘their’ imprisonment, its routine, its practices and in particular discussing elements of research which, in

this instance concerned personal change, is no easy task. As a prison researcher, I was aware of a degree of contradiction and tension with this aspect of the work which deepened as the work progressed, but then dissipated as I learned (from the men themselves) that ‘going soft’ on prisoners does not achieve anything.

Being realistic about imprisonment by balancing one’s involvement and detachment (Elias, 1987) achieves more positive results; what the men responded to in my research, was respect for each of them as an individual. If anyone did not wish to be present in the classroom when research matters were being discussed, then that choice was respected. If things were tense in the prison and the men were ‘up tight’, the research was simply left alone. Alternatively, if the men started to discuss research spontaneously, then teaching was discarded and we had a ‘research session’. The different responses and the reasons for them, were important and had to be ‘managed’ for work to proceed.

Where the level of respondent involvement is high as it was in my work as a prison ethnographer, what has to be learned and dealt with is the fact that ‘prisoner paranoia’ runs high and is very infectious. However, this dissipates over time too, as ultimately, one accepts that a higher authority will probably decide what may or may not be included in the research anyway. The success or failure of ‘ice-breaking’ highlights only one dilemma for those choosing to undertake prison research – ice-breaking is only one ‘tool’ in the prison researcher’s tool kit, and as all successful robbers tell me, ‘You have to go properly tooled-up, Anne’.

‘Contaminated by Sympathy?’

As Cohen and Taylor (1972,180) pointed out after conducting research in Durham prison, when a researcher enters a ‘deviant’s’ environment, any work produced is often assumed, by those who take the time to scrutinise it, to be tainted by bias. The researcher needs to be aware that the ‘weaving’ and ‘interweaving’ of interactions between the researcher and researched is not something that can be lightly dismissed as ‘bias’. Efforts have to be made to find the links and connections which bind people together in social situations. Just as Cohen and Taylor ‘walked into the wing each week for over three years’, finding it ‘difficult not to feel sympathy with the

prisoners' situation' (1972,181), I too felt that my involvement with the prisoner-students and my account of classroom practices could be open to criticism in terms of researcher bias.

'Taking sides' when conducting research, particularly with those designated 'offenders', presents its own peculiar set of problems, often best described as 'moral dilemmas'. I felt that one way of resolving the issue was to have recourse to empathy rather than sympathy. The individual moralities and courses of action taken by prisoners, prior to imprisonment and even whilst imprisoned, have to be 'overlooked'. They cannot and perhaps should not, be judged by the researcher, for judgement has already been made at the moment of sentencing. A degree of 'moral distancing' has to take place. The empathy arises from awareness of any human qualities and mutual respect between researcher and researched, and from both parties being fully aware of each other's capabilities as human beings. Empathy can also develop if a researcher in prison *listens* to the prisoner.

In addition, the researcher who also teaches cannot fail to notice that some kind of 'transformation' may be occurring in students throughout the teaching and learning process. Any commentary on this, as part of the research process may well be misinterpreted as bias. Education courses in prisons create a potentially favourable 'climate' for the students who attend them, a climate in which there is plenty of room for personal growth. Commenting on the positive outcomes of that process does not amount to bias in favour of prisoners; although it may be interpreted as such by those with a more cynical approach.

'Contamination by sympathy' can be also avoided if the 'discovery and depiction' (Becker,1963,168) of what occurs in a prison classroom is portrayed in such a way that it is seen as contributing to existing literature on crime and deviance in a positive manner. Much of this literature seems devoid of 'people'; not only does exclusion and marginalisation dog offenders once sentenced, there seems to be little remembrance of the social networks in which they are embedded and are capable of creating and re-creating anew – whether in prison or beyond release. Becker reminds the researcher of the difficulties of the task:

It is not easy to study deviants. Because they are regarded as outsiders by the rest of society and because they themselves tend to regard the rest of society as outsiders, the student who would discover the facts about deviance has a substantial barrier to climb before he will be allowed to see the things he needs to see. (1963,168).

Ethnography in general creates *and* reproduces reality. It is about more than ‘discovering the facts’ for it reproduces the reality of a world which is meaningful to those who inhabit it. Imprisonment is certainly a ‘meaningful’ experience to prisoners, but that ‘meaningfulness’ can be either positive or negative for individual prisoners. Undoubtedly for many, it tends to be negative and one of the more interesting aspects of having conducted research in a prison is the fact that when others realise that your research describes *something positive* that can occur to people whilst in prison, then it seems to stand at odds with the stereotypical view of prisons as ‘nasty’ places where the last thing you do is acquire degree level qualifications. The ethnographic researcher in prison may have to face criticism of her work for no other reason than, in ‘reproducing reality’, it depicts people – who are supposed to be ‘being punished’ – actually ‘enjoying’ the social activity of learning. It seems that anyone who contributes to such a process must be biased in favour of the wrong-doer; but such assumptions are misplaced. Prison classroom ethnographies where teaching and researching go hand-in-hand invariably contain detailed documentation of prison life and prison classroom practice. This means that there are both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ tales to tell about what goes on in prisons and about what constitutes an ‘effective’ programme of learning within a prison environment. As yet, there is no law in place which states that learning is a crime and that it should not be enjoyed.

Research findings from the prison classroom should define prisoners as people *and not solely as prisoners*. It does not automatically follow that bias will colour those findings because what the researcher does is simply obtain, in Becker’s words, ‘...an accurate and complete account of what deviants do’, (1963, 170) – at least what they ‘do’ in the prison classroom.

The conducting of a prison classroom ethnography *does* mean ‘gaining the confidence of those one studies’, spending months building up research relationships, working out how best to ‘gain access’ and committing oneself to research over a fairly long

period of time. It means making ‘moral shifts’, challenging many moralities, accepting that one might have acquired certain kinds of ‘new’ knowledge that was not consciously sought – for example, robbing a bank is *never* quite tackled as depicted in the movies! The prison classroom ethnography must be taken *for what it is*. It is not a tale of moral condemnation on the actions of individual prisoners. They have already been judged by their peers at the moment of sentencing. A prison classroom ethnography is an account of meaningful interaction between individuals in a highly regulated environment; the appeal to validity lies in the depiction of the reality of the experience for those involved. As Becker indicates:

If we study the processes involved in deviance, then, we must take the viewpoint of at least one of the groups involved, either of those who are treated as deviant or of those who label others as deviant. (1963,173).

The research I conducted attempted to ‘...capture the perspectives of ... participants’ (Becker, 1963), either with respect for their views on prisons or with regard for their interpretations of the outcomes of learning, but my analysis moved beyond Becker’s approach of seeing the world from the ‘viewpoint of the deviant or labeller’, because it examined the context, mechanisms and outcomes from the perspective of researcher / respondent / teacher / student / prisoner. The capturing of perspectives and viewpoints in a prison classroom where students were engaged in the task of evaluating and assessing the perspectives and viewpoints of others (through studying sociology) is a multi-dimensional process. One of the dimensions of that process in my own work was the realisation that my viewpoint became firmly embedded in the prisoner’s own critique of imprisonment; I therefore had to ‘learn’ to be both ‘involved’ and ‘detached’ – ‘contaminated and uncontaminated’ in my approach.

Respondent Validation – A Building Block?

A full understanding of *prisoner* education can only be achieved by asking the prisoner – as student – what perceptions s/he had of the experience of learning the subject in question. Hence there has to be a focus on subject-matter being taught, classroom interaction, issues relating to the way in which the prisoner sees

him/herself and ultimately on learning outcomes – if there is indeed to be any assessment of what constitutes a successful programme of education in a prison.

The depiction of classroom practice has to be ‘fleshed out’ and this was done by showing the ‘research subjects’ the accounts I collected of their learning processes and experiences. Their comments contributed towards a more holistic view of those learning processes which, in turn, balanced my own. As a form of respondent validation, this lessened any perceived ‘contamination’ – by sympathy or otherwise, simply because the participants too had knowledge *of the context* (in this case the prison classroom), that I did not possess.

In a prison, it is undoubtedly the case that one’s students will have access to what Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) describe as ‘information networks ... more powerful than those accessible to the ethnographer’. These have to be drawn on despite the criticism that one’s research ‘subjects’ will only be concerned with personal interest and may be over-anxious to re-interpret anything that the researcher may present. This is a falsely naïve view. As Hammersley and Atkinson indicate, respondents react to research in ways which are inevitably ‘...coloured by their social position and their perceptions of the research act ...’ (1983, 197).

Suffice it to say that most people in prison are *acutely* aware of their social position and much can be gained from their insight and reactions to other people’s interpretations of their situation. This forms yet a further dimension to the interactive research process and lends itself well to the conducting of research in a prison environment.

In my own research, as the work progressed, the men would pick up on different group dynamics as revealed in conversations, different memories of other events taking place within the prison and different emphases placed by each other on the same basic subject-matter. Frequently their remarks would run along the lines of ‘Oh yes, I remember when we did that,’ or ‘That was a bloody good rant we had then,’ or ‘That was just before so-and-so got moved’ or ‘We were doing that before the riot.’ Such comments reinforce the claims that the experience of learning can be meaningful

because it is located and embedded in a much wider social and interactive context. It does not occur in isolation from other experiences and events.

The expertise of both respondent and researcher when combined, contribute to the findings of the research. The contributions of the prisoners as students to my own research lay in the extent to which they accepted or agreed with my claims. Those who had been present in the group for longer periods of time, were better able to do this than those who were ‘new’ to the course and ‘new’ to the prison because their level of ‘expertise’ was greater – both in terms of the course, the research and in assimilating the prison culture.

The ‘final product’ of the research, however, rests with the researcher. It cannot rest with the respondents because the ‘flow of (research) understanding’ (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, 166), comes to an end as the research nears completion. In short, the researcher who presents final drafts to her subjects finds that the response is more likely to be as follows: ‘It sounds really hard, I don’t really understand it’, ‘It looks really good, it sounds like the books we have to read’. Flattering though this may be to the researcher, it again reinforces the claim that respondent validation is more to do with the fact that their views are a *part* of the research method, they form a ‘building-block’ (Reuss, 1997) towards putting together a more complete and realistic picture of the research. The end product, does remain ‘distanced’ from the respondents – it moves beyond their involvement and their concerns.

However, in ‘showing’ one’s research findings to one’s research subjects, it does mean that there is more than one set of data available because this kind of ‘feedback’ ensures that the original data is not taken at ‘face value’, although this would be highly unlikely for anyone conducting research in a prison environment. It also has to be remembered that the researcher’s interpretations of what happens in a prison classroom will not necessarily coincide with the prisoner-student’s. There is a degree of ‘selection’ attached to the process which is inevitable when observations are being carried out (Bloor, 1987) – respondents do organise their worlds differently from researchers, but it can be said that a certain amount of ‘self-recognition’ is also taking place. The entire research process is therefore meaningful to both parties as active

participants engaged in the construction of social reality and its validity is assured as such.

My own research was not 'controlled' or 'manipulated' by outsiders as stated earlier, a fact which was to become something of an issue for Cohen and Taylor writing approximately thirty years ago (1972). In the time which has elapsed since they conducted their research, not that much has changed in terms of psychological survival for those serving long sentences and their work is permeated with the kind of psychological stories with which anyone working with long-term prisoners is all too familiar. There is a hint of pessimism in their understanding and analyses of the effects of such sentences on those who receive them and in their depiction of survival. It depicts a kind of human tragedy on a vast and much misunderstood scale. Beneath the angst encountered in a prison and the perceived amorality, the basic human interactions are grounded in the *social* and by focusing on some of those interactions in the classroom from a researcher's point of view, it can be shown that there is also present, in the prison, a degree of mutuality and reciprocity which can be drawn upon and which moves beyond the pessimism of 'nothing works' in prisons.

GENERALISEABILITY

As a final assessment of having conducted ethnographic research in a prison environment, the remaining question I had to address centred on whether or not the findings of the study and the concepts explored were readily transferable to other educational programmes in prison settings. My findings seemed to indicate that a course of Higher Education in prison could bring about change or transformation in prisoner-students who assimilated the course material in a complex process of learning and social interaction which is 'woven', or synthesised into their life-experience. Elements of this process are retained by individual prisoners through time and become embedded in their conscience, if interpreted as *meaningful*. The learning process thus acquires the *potential* to influence or direct post-release behaviour. The learning is also, for some prisoners, a process of empowerment. (Reuss, 1997)

Not all prisoner-students *have* to study degree level sociology for this to take place and potentially affect post-release behaviour. *What is of significance is to explore the actual context in which those unique processes are embedded and through which prisoners mediate their learning experiences.* If those experiences are, or have been interpreted as worthwhile, then the potential exists for personal development and possibly a change in offending behaviour. (Reuss, 1999, 117).

The most significant question underpinning my research was undoubtedly ‘To what extent do people care about change in prisoners?’; i.e. in the sense that prisoners may ‘change’ their offending behaviour, or ‘stop’ it altogether as a result of attending some educational course whilst imprisoned. The extent to which a prison classroom ethnography can throw light on this is difficult to assess because the question masks the real issues for some within penal policy and practice who are far more concerned with the kind of evaluation that focuses on whether or not ‘prison works’ as an effective form of deterrence in a much more general sense.

It has to be acknowledged that the ‘desire’ of each prisoner to ‘change’ is subjectively motivated irrespective of what anyone else may desire of offenders as a whole. To some extent, therein lies the problem because prisoners are frequently perceived as a homogeneous group rather than as individual people with individual tastes, preferences and life-styles, whose commonality lies *only* in their incarceration. With this in mind, then it can be said that findings from my own study which show that learning processes within a prison classroom have significance and can potentially affect post-release behaviour, *are* transferable to other courses and other educational programmes within prisons. As stated above, if researchers investigate the actual context of learning in prisons and focus on the structures, interactions and interdependencies which weave together on courses to form observable phenomena, then the reality of prison classroom practice can be better understood and the way paved for more appropriate and effective regimes.

The complexity of each prisoner’s ‘life-course’, the memories, ideas and existing knowledge streams brought to each class meeting can only be hinted at; future life beyond prison remains uncertain and unknowable and so the focus of the classroom ethnography has to remain on the *potential* of each learning experience to assist

prisoner-students in defining their situation in relation to wider social contexts and networks that bind people together. Learning in any context is not simply a uni-directional, linear process, despite the fact that it is useful to construct such a 'temporal sequence'. This is merely a useful 'device', an analytical tool, to show that prisoners cannot and should not be seen as *temporally* constrained within the prison. There has been a life prior to imprisonment and for all but a small minority, there will be one beyond.

CONCLUSION

To enter a maximum security prison and conduct research may not be something to which most people aspire. To have done so as a 'research-insider' provided me with a unique opportunity to describe a relatively little-known 'world' and yet one which is still central to the understanding of punishment in a modern society. Whilst my research does not furnish details of every single aspect of prison life, it depicts the minutiae of classroom practice and offers an approach to understanding the potential capacity of education in a prison setting to re-invest offenders with some measure of social and cultural capital when they may otherwise have none. Furthermore, in describing *The Researcher's Tale*, others may be provided with an insight into how best to approach a prison setting, research it and survive the experience.

There are complex ethical issues to consider for any researcher engaged in this kind of work, issues which have to be confronted on both a personal and public level. Evaluations and assessments of one's approach are ever present, and sometimes the question of whether it is all worthwhile is more than apparent, meaning the research, the education of offenders, the imprisonment of offenders and so on, because sadly, there is always the issue of whether anyone else really cares about what happens to those who are imprisoned.

Observing those 'we study' does not seem to be the most politically correct of approaches in this day and age, but the classic studies of interaction in the classroom (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Keddie, 1971; Willis, 1977) stand as testament to the importance of simply being aware of 'what goes on' in a classroom between student, teacher, institution and home (Entwhistle, 1987). 'What goes on' in a prison

classroom is, of course, so intimately bound up with questions of rehabilitation and recidivism that there is a tendency on the part of practitioners to overlook the prisoner and what s/he gets from the experience as a *person* and as an *individual learner*. It is also worth remembering that most people have a fairly negative attitude towards the prison population; the prisoner is seen as the ‘other’, the ‘outsider’, someone who is taken ‘out’ of society and who certainly does not ‘belong’ in it. The exclusion and marginalisation of those who have offended and been imprisoned is a well known fact, but it perhaps has to be acknowledged that:

The need to learn the culture of those we are studying is most obvious in the case of societies other than our own. Here, not only may we not know *why* people do what they do, often we do not even know *what* they are doing. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; 7)

The sad truth is that for most people, ‘studying’ the prisoner as the ‘other’, as a member of a ‘society other than our own’ is exactly what many prison researchers do in order to ‘make sense’ of behaviour perceived as ‘abnormal’ What is often overlooked is the fact that prisons are culturally acceptable institutions ‘containing’ people who are not culturally acceptable. This poses something of a problem when prisoners have to ‘rejoin’ society, because they are not seen as ‘people’.

At the risk of being labelled ‘con-lover’ – and one has to be realistic here – the well-being of those imprisoned *should* be of concern to a wider public, in much the same way as the well-being of victims of crime. The programmes and activities which prisoners are expected to attend are now focused on addressing offending behaviour at the expense of traditional education programmes which have also been shown to have considerable benefits for the prisoner (Duguid, 1997; Davidson, 1995; Flynn & Price, 1995; Reuss, 1997; West, 1997; Williford, 1994; Woolf, 1991). Researchers should be given every opportunity to develop methods of understanding what ‘goes on’ in prison classrooms because prisoner education is not to be lightly dismissed as something that simply keeps inmates ‘occupied’ for a few hours each day. It offers, potentially, a ‘way forward’ whilst doing time and it is hoped that this chapter has given some indication of one approach to studying how that process occurs.

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