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Exploring Vulnerability and Risk in an Action Research Writing Group: A Cooperative Inquiry


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Exploring Experiences of Vulnerability and Risk in an Action Research Writing Group: A Cooperative Inquiry

Introduction

Academics engaging in conversations with one another about what they are researching and how they create theory takes many forms, from informal chats over coffee (Hansen and Madsen, 2019) to more formalized writing groups (Johnson, Roitman, Morgan and MacLeod, 2017; Hernaus and Černe, 2021). In the latter format, groups of academics meet with the aim of supporting one another in the writing and publishing venture and to improve the quality and rate of their member's academic publications so demanded in today's competitive world of university and school rankings and necessary for promotion and tenure. This article focuses on a writing group of action researchers who adopted a cooperative inquiry approach in response to one member's comment about feeling vulnerable in risking bringing one's work-in-progress to the group and in giving feedback to colleagues. Consistent with a cooperative inquiry approach, each group member became both a co-researcher and a co-subject in the inquiry (Heron 1996; Reason, 1999). Two research questions were framed. a) How might we explore our experience of vulnerability and risk within the group so as to improve the group's working and our own individual writing and publishing? b) How might our learning be of value to other writing groups? The article is structured as follows. First, the context of the evolution of the group is introduced, followed by a description of the theory and practice of cooperative inquiry. In keeping with the methodology of cooperative inquiry underpinned by an extended epistemology, the article is grounded in attending to members' first person and second person voice by sharing individual experiences through presentation

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3 of shared reflections, so as to offer a third-person contribution to the practical knowing of
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5 exploring risk and vulnerability in a writing group.
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10 **Context**

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12 At the annual action research colloquium in Dublin in 2016, suggestions were floated about
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14 as to how to continue the learning from the colloquium process. Groups were formed around
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16 specific topics, notably a doctoral support group and a writing group. Four of us agreed to
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18 form a collaborative inquiry group to help each of us develop our individual action research
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20 work for publication. The inspiration emerged from a desire to continue and progress our
21
22 action research conversations by way of concrete academic output. It was grounded in our
23
24 common experience of being action researchers which has participation as one of its core
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26 tenets (Bradbury 2015). The original writing group comprised four members from various
27
28 academic institutions, disciplines (nursing, midwifery, organization studies) and
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30 backgrounds, but our shared connection was that we were all engaged in higher education
31
32 and possessed a commitment to action research. (One member went on extended leave after a
33
34 year and another person joined the group, adding tourism as a fourth discipline to the
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36 disciplines represented). The setting for our meetings was a coffee shop, where we could
37
38 meet every 6-8 weeks, and where each one of us in turn brought an action research paper in-
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40 progress to the group for critique and discussion. A draft paper was circulated by the author
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42 in advance of our meeting, accompanied by a covering sheet which stated the intended
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44 audience/journal, stage of writing, the main hypothesis and the areas on which feedback was
45
46 being sought. The recipients would focus on two questions in response:
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- 53 1. What do you like most about this paper?
- 54 2. What suggestions do you have for its improvement?
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3 Fundamental to our meetings was a process of first 'checking in' with each other. This is a
4 collegial practice, supported by our working relationships and friendships over many years
5 and our deep respect and regard for one another. Once we had checked in, we shared our
6 responses to the paper for review. We answered the first question in turn, followed by
7 answering the second question. Since our meetings began, we each have presented two
8 papers a year and these vary from short ideas and conceptual beginnings to advanced drafts
9 ready for submission for publication. Over the four years of the group, we agree that this
10 writing and sharing process has resulted in practical and tangible outcomes, by way of
11 progressing articles to a suitable level for publication acceptance, but also, our 'coming
12 together' has a knock-on effect for each of us through confidence building in our writing and
13 by learning with and from each other.
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31 At a meeting in April 2018, in a discussion of one paper, its author commented that it would
32 be a high risk in her organisation to follow a particular line. A discussion followed as to how
33 publication of our respective work may be somewhat 'risky'. We concluded that perceptions
34 of risk in our writings and in our writing group had emerged for each of us at some point or
35 another, but because the concept of risk is so highly contextualised and personal, our feelings
36 were difficult to articulate at times. Our discussion revealed that forming conclusions and
37 responses to 'risk' was quite challenging, and as this was an issue felt by each of us, we
38 agreed that the issue warranted further exploration. A shift of focus emerged. While the
39 stimulating issue was the perceived risk in publishing accounts of action research projects,
40 the emergent issue was our experience of the sense of vulnerability and risk both in
41 presenting our work to one another and in giving feedback to and receiving feedback from
42 one another. Accordingly, we decided to engage in cooperative inquiry on our experience of
43 risk and feeling vulnerable in our writing group.
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5 We formalised ourselves as a cooperative inquiry group to explore our experience of feeling
6 vulnerable in the group and taking risks in participating. We framed two research questions.
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8 How might we explore our experience of vulnerability and risk in the group so as to improve
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10 the group's working and our own individual writing and publishing? How might our learning
11
12 be of value to other writing groups? We designed a cooperative inquiry process where,
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14 following each meeting, we reflected on feeling vulnerable and on taking risks in that
15
16 particular meeting and shared them in advance of our next meeting. At the next meeting we
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18 discussed the reflections by asking each other questions and by drawing out emerging ideas.
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26 This decision marked a shift in the group's focus. Hitherto, we had been a collaborative
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28 inquiry groups whose task was to discuss the working drafts presented by each of us so as to
29
30 help the author take it to publication (Shani and Coghlan, 2021). By adopting a cooperative
31
32 inquiry approach the focus shifted to the experience of the person and to the process of the
33
34 group. We now introduce the theory and practice of cooperative inquiry.
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40 **Cooperative inquiry**

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42 Cooperative inquiry is a modality within the broad family of action research approaches
43
44 (Coghlan, 2010). As action research, its focus is on generating practical outcomes and
45
46 knowledge, which distinguishes it from other reflective approaches. Heron and Reason define
47
48 cooperative inquiry 'as a form of second- person action research in which all participants
49
50 work together in an inquiry group as co-researchers and co-subjects' (2008: 366). In
51
52 cooperative inquiry, participants research a topic through their own experience of it in order
53
54 to understand their world, to make sense of some aspect of their life and develop new and
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56 creative ways of looking at things and to learn how to act to change things they might want to
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3 change and find out how to do things better. The generative insight for understanding
4 cooperative inquiry is how each person is a) a *co-subject* in the experience phases by their
5 individual experiences being the subject of the inquiry and b) a *co-researcher* in the
6 reflection phases by participating in shared inquiry through sharing experiences, questioning
7 and drawing out individual and shared learning,
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18 Published accounts of cooperative inquiry have ranged across a variety of fields and
19 experiences such as faculty women in a university (Treleaven, 1994), being a health visitor
20 (Traylen, 1994), setting up a cooperative inquiry group (McArdle, 2002), education for
21 sustainable development (Summers and Turner, 2011), organizational leadership (Reitz,
22 2015), engaging in transformative teaching practices (Napan et. al 2017), examining health
23 related policy (Casey et al., 2019), childbirth and spirituality (Crowther et al, 2021),
24 exploring the experience of the authentic self from a psychological perspective (Sohmer,
25 2020), nursing research (Magee, Bramble and Stanley, 2020) and developing participative
26 leadership in the US and in Uganda (Howard, Ospina and Yorks, 2021). While there are
27 published accounts of writing groups (Emerson, MacKay, MacKay and Funnell, 2006,
28 Winter and Badley, 2007; Sheridan, O'Sullivan, Fisher, Dunne and Beck, 2019) we are
29 unaware of a writing group consciously utilising cooperative inquiry to research their
30 experience.
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51 What is involved in being a co-researcher and a co-subject? To be a researcher or inquirer is
52 to engage in the fundamentals of human knowing. The structure of human knowing has been
53 described as a three-step heuristic process: experience, understanding, and judgement
54 (Dewey, 1938; Lonergan, 1992; Cronin, 2017). First, we have experiences, both experiences
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3 of sense (what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch) and experiences of consciousness (what
4 we think, feel, imagine, remember and so on). We ask questions about our experience. What
5 was that noise? What is happening? What does this mean? We receive an insight (an answer,
6 an act of understanding), which may or may not be correct or accurate. We follow that insight
7 up by further questioning, reflecting and weighing up the evidence to determine whether or
8 not the insight fits the evidence (judgement). When we desire to take action, we make
9 judgements of value and make decisions on what we judge to be worthwhile or of value, we
10 then plan and take action accordingly.
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25 While insights are common and we have thousands of them every day, they are not always
26 correct; or to be more accurate, they do not always fit the evidence. This should precipitate
27 reflection on the question: does our insight fit the evidence? The shift in attention turns to an
28 inquiry for accuracy, sureness and certainty of understanding. We then move to a new level
29 of the cognitional process, where we marshal and weigh evidence and assess its sufficiency.
30 We may frame the judgement conditionally i.e. if the conditions have been fulfilled. There
31 may be conflicting judgements and we may have to weigh the evidence and choose between
32 them. Through judgement we can use terms like ‘certain’, ‘accurate’, ‘likely’, ‘unlikely’ and
33 ‘true’. If we do not think that we have sufficient evidence to assert that our insight fits the
34 evidence, then we may postpone judgment, or make a provisional judgment which we may
35 choose to correct later if we have more or other evidence. In short, when we attend to our
36 process of knowing, what Lonergan (1992) calls ‘self-appropriation’ and Gearty and Marshall
37 (2021) refer to as ‘living life as inquiry’ we are inquiring into our activities as subjects. The
38 call to self-appropriation and living life as inquiry is a call to reflection on lived experience.
39 ‘Experience’ here is more than mere sensation; as consciousness it is patterned and oriented
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3 in different ways depending on different contexts, not only in an individualistic rationalistic
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5 manner but also out of a contextual embeddedness.
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10 Several further points need to be made. First, our knowing process is always fragile
11
12 (Kahneman, 2011). We often don't pay attention or question what is going on around us. Our
13
14 interpretations of data may be superficial and our judgements flawed. We are shaped by the
15
16 limitations and biases of our age, gender, culture and education. Second, the domains in
17
18 which knowing occurs are multiple and varied. In the realm of theoretical knowing, insights
19
20 and judgement may be directed to patterns of scientific and technical data. In the realm of
21
22 aesthetics, insights are grasped through patterns of colour, shape or form in art, in rhythms
23
24 and harmonies in music and in language expressing human experience in literature. We
25
26 obtain insights into human relationships through words and gestures as we engage with other
27
28 people in relational settings. We come to understand the political dynamics of our socially
29
30 constructed world and how other's experiences shape that construction. Our conscious living
31
32 is polymorphic, involving biological, aesthetic, dramatic, and intellectual patterns and the
33
34 patterning of experience is variable and conditioned by our biographies and collective
35
36 history. Third, we have to attend to the social dynamics of knowing, which introduces the
37
38 cooperative dynamics of co-inquiry. When we engage in social interaction, the insights of
39
40 individuals are heard and questioned in the light of the insights of others. Then conversation
41
42 ensues so that shared understanding may be developed and negotiated. This may succeed; or
43
44 it may not and in this case, no shared understanding results. The fourth point to note is that
45
46 the processing of insights takes place in the present tense. While the experience in question
47
48 may have occurred in the past, the questioning and reception of insight occurs in the present.
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50 Hence, it is imperative to be attentive to how we are questioning and processing insight in the
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52 here-and-now so that we do not fall victim to bias, defensive reasoning, or various forms of
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3 cognitive distortions.
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10 Knowing how we know, i.e. being aware that knowing comprises operations of experience,
11 understanding and judgment, is crucial in cooperative inquiry. Co-inquiry into what
12 participants have experienced, into how they have understood their experience, and into how
13 they have made judgements, is a fruitful approach (Coghlan, 2018). At the heart of
14 cooperative inquiry is articulation by the participants of what they have experienced, how
15 they have come to interpret these experiences and make value judgements, how they have
16 weighed options in making concrete choices, and how they have decided what action to take.
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28 [Figure 1 here]
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33 Figure 1 captures the central process of cooperative inquiry. When members of a cooperative
34 inquiry engage as co-subjects, they bring to the encounter what they have experienced, how
35 they have understood, how they have weighed evidence, come to judgement, made decisions,
36 and taken action. As co-researchers, each participant engages in co-inquiry into each other's
37 knowing. As these operations are invariant in all human knowing, they provide the basis for
38 productive shared inquiry. As Kane (2014) argues, the benefit of this approach is that it
39 situates inquiry within ordinary human knowing. It situates participants non-hierarchically
40 with other inquirers. It provides a touchstone from which inquiry can proceed collaboratively.
41 As she notes "a cognitional structure within which each inquirer operates differently makes
42 collaborative inquiry possible" (Kane, 2014: 129).
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3 The validity of cooperative inquiry lies in the engagement in different forms of knowing,
4 what Heron (1996) calls the extended epistemology, that encompasses experiential,
5 presentational, propositional and practical knowing. In the context of participating in a
6 writing group: these forms of knowing are outlined below
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- 11
12 • *Experiential knowing* is through the direct face-to-face encounter with each other
13 and encountering realities around us on how it is to feel psychologically safe in
14 the face of vulnerability and risk.
15
- 16 • *Presentational knowing* is what he refers to as the forms of expression through
17 language, images and the arts. We used stories/storytelling to express and to make
18 sense of our ideas and experiences.
19
- 20 • *Propositional knowing* is what we know through our studies, theories and ideas. In
21 the group's engagement we drew on our respective disciplinary literatures to help
22 us frame our topics and to support our thinking, and to offer a contribution.
23
- 24 • *Practical knowing* is knowing 'how to' and is the outcome of cooperative inquiry,
25 as it is in all action research. In this case, the desired practical knowing is how to
26 work with vulnerability and risk in our writing group and offer practical
27 knowledge to other writing groups.
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42 Reason (1999: 211) concludes

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44 In cooperative inquiry we say that knowing will be more valid—richer,
45 deeper, more true to life and more useful—if these four ways of knowing are
46 congruent with each other; if our knowing is grounded in our experience,
47 expressed through our stories and images, understood through ideas which
48 make sense to us, and expressed in worthwhile action in our lives.
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56 This quote from Reason captures the essence of our cooperative group process where our
57 individual first-person experience, reflected on in our second-person sharing and inquiry led
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3 to a more open writing group process and third-person practical knowledge for other writing
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5 groups.
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10 **Methodology: The process of cooperative inquiry**

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13 Adopting a cooperative inquiry approach in our writing group provided an integrated action
14 research initiative. It engaged each of us in first- person inquiry/practice as individually, we
15 worked on our respective papers and as we experienced risk and vulnerability in our own
16 personal way. It was, however, in our second person inquiry/practice that we explored our
17 experience of vulnerability and risk as co-subjects and co-researchers and engaged in
18 different forms of knowing. It also had resonances for third-person inquiry/practice as to
19 how we conceptualised risk and offered some insights into our learnings and how we
20 explored and dealt with risk and vulnerability in sharing our writing. Indeed, writing this
21 article in itself is a cooperative journey into the notion of risk and aims to be a third-person
22 contribution for interested readers who themselves are members of writing groups.
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45 [Table 1 about here]

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Reason (1999) sets out the process of cooperative inquiry. These are outlined in Table 1,
along with the methodological details of the steps we took in our cooperative inquiry on risk
and vulnerability in a writing group. As stated above, we formalised ourselves as a
cooperative inquiry group to explore our experience of vulnerability and risk in the group so
as to improve the group's working and our own individual writing and publishing. As in our
design, following each meeting, we wrote reflections on our experience of vulnerability and
risk in that meeting and circulated them in advance of the next meeting. In this way we

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3 provided a structure for each of our first-person voices to be heard and for the second-person
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5 cooperative inquiry into our experience of vulnerability and risk as co-researchers and co-
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7 subjects. In doing so, we attended to the different forms of knowing as we exchanged
8
9 experiences (presentational), discussed research and theory (propositional) in order to
10
11 improve both our own writing and the group's process (practical).
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18 Adopting a cooperative inquiry approach meant that each co-researcher engaged in repetitive
19
20 cycles of dialogue and reflection to question individual and collective assumptions about risk
21
22 and to uncover and share new insights. Initial discussions were informed by propositional
23
24 knowledge, but also had aspects of presentational knowing as we struggled to find ways to
25
26 best articulate our reflections on risk to each other. The struggle was mostly because of the
27
28 intensity of the topic and feelings that discussion provoked and so, we resorted to storytelling
29
30 and describing practical examples of our experiences of perceived risk. We agreed to note
31
32 our observations and reflections individually in writing (first person inquiry) as soon as
33
34 possible after each meeting and when we met, our reflections offered a platform to
35
36 problematise the nuances and subtleties of risk and our descriptions of it. Reason (2002)
37
38 suggests that the process of cooperative inquiry prompts co-researchers to notice whether
39
40 practical experience differs or conforms to propositional knowledge of the concept of inquiry.
41
42 This we found to be true. As our face-to-face meetings and discussions progressed
43
44 (experiential knowing), each with cycles of reflection and action (noting our observations and
45
46 reflections), it became clear that our practical knowing of risk had moved from the concept
47
48 we had first articulated. We had initially theorised risk as negative but noticed in our
49
50 discussions that our ideas about risk had changed. We now identified that risk was
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52 potentially positive because naming risk had made us less fearful and had enabled us to push
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54 beyond preconceived boundaries in our writing and publications. Describing and interpreting
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3 these subtleties has resulted in our cooperative inquiry process completing the circle to return
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5 to a propositional knowledge stance by developing a new lens/perspective on risk.
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10 With insights from over two years of reflections we are now exploring what has emerged
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12 from reflecting on vulnerability and risk as we experience it and as it emerges while we
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14 present and feedback on our written work. We provide quotes from these reflections so as to
15
16 provide authentic first-person and second-person voice.
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23 **Exploring our experience of vulnerability and risk through cooperative inquiry**

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25 The experience of feeling vulnerable surfaced initially as a concern about how each of us
26
27 would publish accounts of action research projects. This is highlighted in the first-person
28
29 voice of one group member:
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33 *I presented a paper on an organisation development (OD) project where, due to the nature of*
34
35 *the research, the participants might be identifiable to readers. While writing the paper I had*
36
37 *focused on outcomes and essentially had written a draft of a case study paper on an OD*
38
39 *research project, without considering other options. Feedback from the group highlighted*
40
41 *that if I focused on the process of bringing people together, obstacles, struggling with culture*
42
43 *and other difficulties this would constitute research in (rather than on) OD, which potentially*
44
45 *could be a more interesting and richer paper. However, this approach triggered disquiet and*
46
47 *discomfort for me. Articulating that sense of disquiet and reflecting on it in the moment*
48
49 *within the context of co-inquiring with the rest of the group, I realised that the feeling came*
50
51 *from a sense of vulnerability as I started to think about who could be negatively impacted*
52
53 *and how that negative impact might manifest itself. I articulated a fear that the approach*
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3 *could be personally and professionally risky for co-authors, who, although the OD project*
4 *had not been a particularly contentious one, would be writing about their organisation.*
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8 In our second-person discussion, we identified with this individual's reflection and decided to
9 shift our attention from the potential risks associated with publishing an account of action
10 research to the risk that each of us felt we were taking in presenting work-in-progress and
11 giving and receiving feedback within the group. This was the experience and subject that
12 engaged us as a topic for cooperative inquiry where we would be both co-researchers and co-
13 subjects. Consequently, we decided to bring a cooperative inquiry approach to our experience
14 of vulnerability and risk and become co-researchers in exploring our experience and
15 addressing emergent issues. .
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27 As co-subjects, giving voice to our respective experiences is foundational and so in this
28 section we give voice to one another as we engaged in our inquiry. Several themes emerged:
29 those to do with risk of presenting a paper, those to do with the interpersonal dynamics of
30 giving and receiving feedback, and those to do with managing risk within the group.
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39 ***Different senses of vulnerability and risk depending on the stage of the paper being***
40 ***presented.***
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43 On an occasion when a paper was at a very preliminary stage or was a sketch of an idea, the
44 presenter reflected:
45
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47 *Prior to the meeting, my concern was that the research and writing draft was not primarily*
48 *action research. I was a little anxious about how the group would feel about this, but I was*
49 *encouraged by my belief that the research is an opportunity to address important questions*
50 *and I was hopeful that the group would be okay with that. As always, I experienced everyone*
51 *as being supportive as they offered constructive feedback. I did not feel too much 'risk' in*
52 *presenting the paper per se, because it is an early draft, and to my mind, the content and*
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3 *process described are not particularly controversial. I was not revealing too much of myself;*
4 *rather, this was about thinking through initial ideas and thoughts, and the research 'findings'*
5 *or voices of others. Had I brought it to the table as more defined, along with my interpretations,*
6 *I would have felt more 'at risk'. I found the meeting and feedback very helpful and thought*
7 *provoking, but I'm realising now that the more risk I take in presenting my work and presenting*
8 *aspects of myself, the more I learn. So, for me, risk is probably a central aspect of the learning*
9 *process and of what we do.*

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22 On reviewing the same paper another group member reflected

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24 *As it was a very early draft I read the situation as us engaging with the author as to the*
25 *paper's basic purpose, intended contribution and methodology. I inferred the risk as being*
26 *relatively low as it was clear from the first responses that the topic is of value in itself (as*
27 *well as to the presenter) and is worth pursuing. As we were discussing a raw draft the*
28 *conversation was more about where to go next and what to do more than with what the draft*
29 *said. In providing my responses I felt less vulnerable with offering my feedback than on*
30 *other occasions where we had discussed a more complete draft. I felt comfortable in my*
31 *intuitive orientation as to how the paper might be developed.*

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45 Another group member describes the effect that engaging in discussion on this same early
46 draft had on her own perceptions of risk:

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49 *I presented a very early draft of a paper to the group. I had never shared a draft of a piece of*
50 *writing with anyone at such an early stage before as I would have felt vulnerable and*
51 *therefore, considered it too risky. However, the previous month, another group member had*
52 *shared a very early draft and the resulting discussion was a particularly rich one. That*
53 *experience to prompted me to share a piece of writing that I was not particularly happy with*
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3 *as I realised that this was not as risky an act as I had imagined. This was a new experience*
4
5 *for me and a rewarding one because of the support and safety within the group.*
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10 On another occasion a member reflected

11
12 *What I remember was that in advance of the meeting I had felt frustrated with the paper as I*
13 *read it as a loose collection of ideas without focus. I struggled with what to say and how to*
14 *say it. But the author was clear that it was a collection of loose ideas and that she needed the*
15 *group to help her develop a focus and frame a possible paper out of the various ideas and*
16 *points. That helped me and my reflection is something about how we can manage risk by*
17 *saying what we are regarding a draft, framing that in a current draft under discussion and*
18 *what we want from the discussion.*
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31 On an occasion where a paper was in a more advanced state, a member reflected:

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33 *I brought a paper to the group that I had worked on intermittently for over a year when I had*
34 *managed to carve out little pieces of time to write. Because the process had gone on for a*
35 *while, I was getting a little bored with it, had lost focus and was 'stuck', so hoped that the*
36 *group would feedback that my draft was nearly for submission. Feedback from the group on*
37 *the paper highlighted that I still had a long way to go with it in terms of theoretical*
38 *contribution, which I had a sense of, but had hoped otherwise. The experience highlighted the*
39 *risk in presenting a paper in an advanced state, as the outcome may be that one has to*
40 *reframe one's thinking and significantly rewrite a paper. Nevertheless, the experience was*
41 *still a positive one as questions from the group on the theoretical framework facilitated me to*
42 *explore my ideas from a different perspective which helped 'unstick' my thinking.*
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3 These first-person voices provide instances of how the stage of a draft was important in the
4 perception of the risk involved in presenting it to the group. We associated less risk and
5 vulnerability with presenting an earlier draft because we felt less invested in the writing.
6
7 Similarly, we felt less vulnerable giving feedback on a draft identified by the writer as an
8 early draft. Later drafts were felt as being more risky to present and to feedback on because
9
10 of the investment of resources that were involved in producing them. Nevertheless, although
11
12 early drafts invoked some rich discussions, there were benefits to presenting later drafts as
13
14 the discussion and feedback and the resultant engagement with redrafting the piece of work,
15
16 often led to greater learning.
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Level of confidence and risk in presenting the paper

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27 On an occasion where one of the group was attempting a new way of writing, that presenter
28
29 noted
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31

32
33 *While I saw the content of the chapter as fairly straightforward, what I felt was very risky*
34
35 *was my approach. By adopting an experiential approach, I was attempting to construct a*
36
37 *learning experience for readers by drawing them incrementally into a series of steps through*
38
39 *which I intended to demystify any mystique about action research while at the same time*
40
41 *offering solid theory and practice. I was very unsure about this approach and felt I was*
42
43 *taking a big risk in trying to write in a new way. My question for the meeting was, does it*
44
45 *work? Of course, I got great support from the group on this question as well as useful*
46
47 *feedback on what was missing and how to improve the chapter. So, my fears were allayed*
48
49 *and I have confidence to pursue the approach in the chapter.*
50
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54 This member's felt vulnerability in offering an experiment with a different form of writing
55
56 was assuaged as the group responded to the draft.
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3 In this section we have provided the first-person voices of members around feeling
4 vulnerable and taking a risk in what they were presenting to the writing group. It can be seen
5
6 from these voices that while the stage of the paper being presented was of concern to
7
8 presenters in advance of the meetings and the group process allayed that concern, it did not
9
10 affect the working of the group.
11
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17 ***The interpersonal dynamics of giving and receiving feedback***

18
19 A further experience, namely giving and receiving feedback was identified as a particular
20
21 area where members felt vulnerable and felt they were taking risks.
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24
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26 One member reflected

27
28 *In my role as reviewer/group member, my early experiences within the writing group were*
29
30 *underpinned by a sense of being an ‘imposter’. The group includes a member who is widely*
31
32 *published considered a seminal author in his field and three different disciplines are*
33
34 *represented within the group. I therefore questioned the value of my feedback and wondered*
35
36 *whether I had the propositional knowing to provide ‘expert’ feedback. Additionally, at the*
37
38 *beginning, feeding back felt risky as it brought with it a fear of unintentionally undermining*
39
40 *or hurting others.*
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47 Another reflected in in a similar vein

48
49 *For me, the risk lies more in offering feedback than seeking/receiving feedback, for the*
50
51 *following reasons:*
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53

- 54 1. *The possibility of subjecting the writer to what might be viewed as criticism (never the*
55
56 *intention) – this manifests in my need to continuously ‘check in’.*
57
58
59
60

- 1
2
3 2. *Exposing my potential lack of knowledge and a lack of confidence. This is not usually*
4 *about the substantive topic, because I can tell myself that I am not an expert in the*
5 *content area of that paper but more about methodology and any lack of*
6 *awareness/insight I might bring.*
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15 All four group members felt that giving feedback was risky. There was a tension inherent in
16 deciphering from a feedback-provider's perspective whether the feedback would be
17 considered constructive or critical with the potential to cause distress to others. Giving
18 feedback also evoked a sense of vulnerability related to exposing one's own perceptions of
19 weakness. There was also risk associated with the process of receiving feedback.
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29 ***Managing risk within the group***

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31 Our reflections reveal that there were a number of ways in which we managed risk within the
32 group. Pre-meeting practices that we put in place mitigated risk. These practices included a
33 form to be filled in before each meeting and a 'checking-in' procedure at the beginning of
34 each meeting where we provided each other with an update on work and our writing activities
35 since the previous meeting. Our voices highlight our reflections on these activities. One
36 member reflected:
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47 *At the start we check in on how each of us is so we meet as people before looking at output on*
48 *paper. The form we complete before the meeting supports the safe environment. The two*
49 *questions, 'What do I like most about this paper?' and 'How might the paper be improved?'*
50 *are appreciative in nature and they are generative of both rich improvement content for the*
51 *paper under discussion and for the safe atmosphere for feedback.*
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3 Additionally, our behaviour towards each other when giving and receiving feedback was
4
5 important:

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7
8 *I tend to pose my feedback as questions. How about if...? Might there be another way to...?*

9
10
11 *I think that part of our success as a group in offering feedback to each other is the informal*
12
13 *and conversational approach we take, which I think, mitigates risk of causing offence to the*
14
15 *other person. We discussed how the guideline supports an appreciative stance, because we*
16
17 *begin with what we like about the piece and then, as the conversation progresses, we suggest*
18
19 *how something might be improved.*

20
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23
24 This reflection was further developed by this member at a later point:

25
26
27 *In probing extended ways of knowing, I was reminded that the concept of risk is an emotive*
28
29 *and very individual experience. In health care, one of the accepted ways to reduce risk is to*
30
31 *standardise care, and this mitigates against the idea of individuality and uniqueness of the*
32
33 *person. In our writing groups however, we focus on the other as individuals to grow and to*
34
35 *write. I believe that our notions of risk are influenced by experiential knowing. The process*
36
37 *may be positive depending on how much positivity we are exposed to previously, in terms of*
38
39 *feedback and outcome and how evolved we are. It may be negative if the risk approach is*
40
41 *driven by fear (with negative connotations from past, previous experiences). I think that*
42
43 *'experiential' knowing is most relevant to how we 'experience' risk.*

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48
49 Our reflections reveal that our practices pre- and during meetings led to the development of a
50
51 sense of psychological safety. As highlighted by one member:

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53
54 *We experience being in the group as being in a safe environment. We treat each other and*
55
56 *each other's work with respect.*

57
58
59 Another member adds:

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3 *As time went on, as well as learning from the input of others, I grew to value my input, and*
4 *the process of feeding back to others gradually felt like a far less risky process, especially as*
5 *we started to share our reflections. There were two key facilitators in this growth process: a*
6 *strong sense of team psychological safety within the group underpinned by an appreciative*
7 *approach to feeding back and a growing appreciation on my part of the value of different*
8 *types of knowing in the feedback process.*
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19 Thus, both the practices we put in place and our experiences of them, embodied in our
20 reflections on experiential knowing, helped mitigate risk in the group.
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26 **Emergent learning as third person contribution for writing groups**

27

28 Our first research question asked, how might we explore our experience of vulnerability and
29 risk in the group so as to improve the group's working and our own individual writing and
30 publishing? Through our first- and second-person inquiry on this research question, what
31 emerged was that it was the group's way of working that played a primary role in how we
32 coped with and managed vulnerability and risk. From our engagement in experiential,
33 propositional and presentational knowing we developed a practical knowledge of managing
34 risk and our vulnerability that is beneficial to us individually and to the writing group, and
35 which we can offer to a third-person readership.
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49 As co-researchers we reflected on our conversations and came to a judgement that there were
50 three elements of the group's dynamics to be significant: the appreciative stance, the creation
51 of psychological safety in the group and the use of the extended epistemology. We afford
52 these three elements a distinctive space. We offer these to the third-person readership. Figure
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3 2 expresses these three elements, with taking an appreciative stance as the foundational
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5 element on which the other two are built.
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10 [Figure 2 about here]
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13

14 ***Taking an appreciative stance***

15
16 To take an appreciative stance in inquiry means to experience the power of strengths-based
17 inquiry (Cooperrider, 2017). It engages participants in a collaborative, self-directed action to
18 co-create a future reality. This is the essence of the cooperative capacity that exists, often
19 untapped, in every human system. When an appreciative spirit of inquiry, that is based on a
20 sense of wonder, curiosity and surprise—is enacted, fresh perceptions of reality may result in
21 the creation of generative theory. The appreciative stance was set up by the two questions
22 which we each answered in responding to a paper. What do you like most about this paper?
23 What suggestions do you have for its improvement? These reflect the appreciative stance that
24 we adopted for our group meetings.
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40 The practice of ‘checking in’ with each other at the start of each meeting was understood as a
41 further enforcement of the appreciative stance.
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47 ***Psychological safety***

48
49 Psychological safety at a group level is a concept derived from the work of Schein (Schein
50 and Bennis, 1965). Schein and Bennis describe psychological safety as the climate in which
51 individuals are willing to take the personal and professional risk of admitting uncertainty.
52 They argue that it is the strength and sense of the support of the group that creates the
53 conditions for individuals’ sense of psychological safety. Schein and Schein (2021)
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1
2
3 emphasise that showing interest and curiosity in one another is at the heart of achieving
4
5 psychological safety. Edmondson (1999: 354) enforces Schein's view and characterises
6
7 psychological safety as a "climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in
8
9 which people are comfortable being themselves". In a group where members share a socially
10
11 constructed sense of psychological safety, group members can express uncertainty in the
12
13 expectation that they will not be censured and that others will not think less of them. It does
14
15 not imply that individuals must agree or that there are no issues within a group. Rather, it
16
17 means that individuals are more likely to hold productive discussions because their focus is
18
19 not on self-protection. Therefore, individuals who are members of a number of different
20
21 groups might express doubt or ignorance in response to a stimulus in a group which is
22
23 characterised by team psychological safety but do nothing in response to the same stimulus in
24
25 a group which is not.
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33 Our cooperative inquiry into risk highlighted for us that our group was for us a safe space, a
34
35 characteristic that we had socially constructed. This team psychological safety was
36
37 manifested in a sense of security in offering our writing for critique to others, in offering
38
39 constructive feedback to others and in testing out ideas in this safe space before offering them
40
41 to a wider audience. We engaged in learning and produced outputs in the form of pieces of
42
43 writing.
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48

49 *The extended epistemology*

51 We explored how the extended epistemology was operative in our second-person discussions.
52
53 The focus of the group was the creation of practical knowledge of how to support one another
54
55 in writing and publishing and in giving and receiving feedback. In the context of our writing
56
57 group, practical knowing in this context comprised many other forms of knowing. The
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1
2
3 experiential knowing enabled us to know how to act in a group setting and how to support
4 each other. Presentational knowing was drawn upon when presenting a piece of work by
5 knowing how to present the story of writing the piece – the whys, whats, and the struggles.
6
7 Propositional knowing of what a paper/book chapter should look like by anticipating what an
8 editor or reviewer might look for and being informed by theory in the area contributed to
9
10 defining the task to be accomplished. The outcome was co-constructed practical knowledge,
11
12 that went beyond supporting one another in writing and publishing and in giving and
13
14 receiving feedback towards engaging with colleagues if seeking feedback on our writing
15
16 topics and content and engaging with editors.
17
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26 When giving feedback, propositional knowing of what the differences are between
27
28 expectations for a book chapter as contrasted with a journal article was important.
29
30 Propositional knowing was also be useful when feeding back on content – what theory is
31
32 being used/could be used. If propositional knowing was relied upon however, it is likely that
33
34 a safe space would not exist and the feedback process would be impersonal. The experiential
35
36 knowing within the group, that is knowing how to support each other, how to be kind, how to
37
38 show appreciation and express admiration, had a protective effect when giving feedback
39
40 because in our group, this type of knowing facilitated the creation of a safe space.
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47 Our second research question asked how might our learning be of value to other writing
48
49 groups? From our shared inquiry and reflections on our experience as co-subjects and co-
50
51 researchers in a writing group, we are sharing the three elements of our learning for readers
52
53 who are or, who wish to be members of a writing group in order to enhance the working of
54
55 such a group and to support academics' writing and publishing. Coghlan and Shani (2021)
56
57 demonstrate how first-and second-person practices may be integrated to frame a third-person
58
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1
2
3 contribution to social science. The three elements which emerged through our second-person
4 exploration of our respective first-person experiences: the appreciative stance, the creation of
5 psychological safety in the group and the use of the extended epistemology played a primary
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10 role in how we coped with and managed vulnerability and risk. In order to consolidate our
11
12
13 learning as an integrated framework we offer three propositions for the development and
14
15 maintenance of academic writing groups.
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18

19 Proposition 1

20
21 *Adopting an appreciative stance is foundational to a writing group and enables participants*
22
23 *to manage their sense of vulnerability and to take risks in presenting their work-in-progress*
24
25 *for critique and in offering feedback on other members' work.*
26
27

28 Taking an appreciative stance in inquiry has shown to unlock creativity and collaboration and
29
30 lead to the creation of generative theory.
31
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33
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35 Proposition 2

36
37 *Creating and maintaining a sense of psychological safety minimises feelings of vulnerability*
38
39 *and enhances risk-taking.*
40
41

42 Psychological safety is described as a climate in which individuals are willing to take the
43
44 personal and professional risk of admitting uncertainty and where, as a result, individuals are
45
46 more open to other group members and the group develops the capability to deal with the
47
48 vulnerability of risk taking in the pursuit of its objective.
49
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53 Proposition 3

54
55 *Engaging with the extended epistemology of different forms of knowing enriches the practical*
56
57 *tasks of a writing group,*
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1
2
3 The interactions of a writing group draw on the extended epistemology of different forms of
4 knowing and experiential, presentational and propositional knowing play their part in
5
6 cogenerating practical knowing about writing for publication.
7
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10
11
12 That we had been a writing group working in a collaborative inquiry mode for over two years
13 meant that we had already created the 'communicative space' in which we could switch to
14 cooperative inquiry to inquire into our shared experience of vulnerability and risk (Gaya
15 Wicks and Reason, 2009). Through adopting the position of being co-subjects and co-
16
17 researchers into our experience of writing and giving and receiving feedback, the cooperative
18
19 inquiry approach enabled a rich reflection on our experience and enhanced our working. Our
20
21 conclusion is that cooperative inquiry offers a valuable approach to existential inquiry and is
22
23 congruent with the collaborative aims of a peer writing group. Strengthened by our learning
24
25 through cooperative inquiry we are returning to the collaborative inquiry mode of helping
26
27 each other to publish.
28
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36 **Concluding Remarks**

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39 In this article we have presented a cooperative inquiry into our experience of being a writing
40 group. We are showing how our writing group with its appreciative stance provided a
41
42 foundation for openness and confidence in acknowledging our felt vulnerability on matters of
43
44 risk in risking bringing one's work-in-progress to the group and in giving feedback to
45
46 colleagues,. In the context of groups of academics meeting with the aim of supporting one
47
48 another in writing and publishing, we believe that inquiring into our experience, particularly
49
50 of vulnerability in risking bringing one's work-in-progress to the group and in giving
51
52 feedback to colleagues, through cooperative inquiry, it is of value to a wider readership.
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3 Codifying our reflections into three elements and supporting propositions enables further
4
5 reflection on writing groups and hopefully contributes to their flourishing.
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Review Only

Reason's (1999) four phase process of cooperative inquiry	The methodological approach: Operationalisation of the four phase process within the writing group
<p>Phase 1. The group talks about the group's interests and concerns, agrees on the focus of the inquiry and develops together a set of questions or proposals that its members wish to explore.</p>	<p>April 2018: We discuss risk and vulnerability in the context of one member's paper which described an initiative in her workplace. We start by discussing risk in the workplace but in the ensuing discussion we discuss the risk and vulnerability that each of us feel when presenting work or feeding back on the work of others within our writing group. We realise that this is an issue of interest and concern to us all and we decide to engage in cooperative inquiry. We frame two research questions: How might we explore our experience of vulnerability and risk in the group so as to improve the group's working and our own individual writing and publishing? How might our learning be of value to other writing groups?</p>
<p>Phase 2. The group applies actions in the everyday work of the members, who initiate the actions and observe and record the outcomes of their own and each other's behaviour.</p>	<p>May 2018 – Feb 2020: We meet approximately once a month. Within meetings we continue to present our own papers and provide feedback on the papers of the other group members. In addition, as co-subjects and co-researchers, after each meeting we undertake a process of recording our reflections of our experiential knowing, capturing how we experienced risk and vulnerability at each meeting. We circulate those reflections in advance of the next meeting.</p>
<p>Phase 3. The group members as co-researchers become fully immersed in their experience. They may deepen into the experience, or they may be led away from the original ideas and proposals into new fields, unpredicted action and creative insights.</p>	<p>May 2018 – Feb 2020: Between meetings we engage with our own reflective notes and those of the other group members. We critically examine our own storytelling, our assumptions, our actions and those of others as well as the practical knowing that emerges for each of us as a result of the exercise. In doing so, we immerse ourselves deeper in the exploration of risk and vulnerability.</p>
<p>Phase 4. After an agreed period engaged in phases two and three, the co-researchers reassemble to consider their original questions in light of their experience.</p>	<p>May 2018 – Feb 2020: At the end of every meeting, we set aside time in meetings to discuss our first-person reflections and to make sense of them from a second person perspective, through sharing insights, critically analysing, constructively challenging and building on each other's experiences and reflections. We record first and person second reflections in our reflective notes.</p> <p>After nearly two years of cycles of action and reflection, we dedicate six meetings in 2020 and early 2021 to focus specifically on how we might consider our original thoughts on risk and vulnerability in light of the experiences of individual and group reflection. We address our second research question 'how might our learning be of value to other writing groups' by undertaking a process of discussing and agreeing a</p>

	<p>set of cohesive themes, which capture our cooperative inquiry experiences and organise our reflections under those themes. The themes relate to the risk of presenting a paper (stage of the paper being presented, level of confidence), the interpersonal dynamics of giving and receiving feedback and managing risk within the group. We write a paper around those themes, engaging in iterative cycles of writing, discussing and reflecting on drafts as a group and editing. In March 2021 we submit the final draft of the paper.</p>
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Table 1: The process of cooperative inquiry within the writing group

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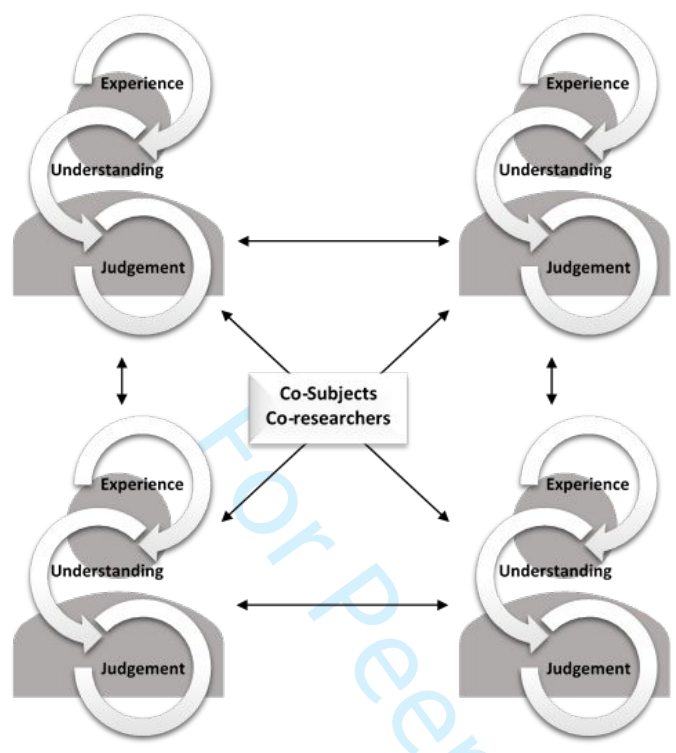


Figure 1 The Process of Cooperative Inquiry

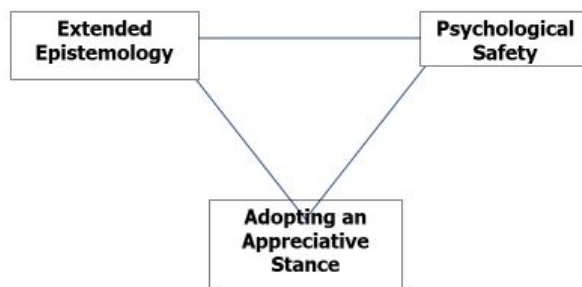


Figure 2 Elements of a Writing Group

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