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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Living Life as Inquiry – a Systemic Practice for Change Agents

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Abstract
The practical orientation of action research, together with its embedded and participative principles, means it is particularly suited to complex, interconnected questions and 'real life' systemic issues. In the realm of first-person action research, Judi Marshall's (1999) influential article "Living Life as Inquiry" described how such research can extend to one's whole life whereby professional and personal questions can be set within politically relevant frames. Over the past two decades, many students and researchers have worked with and drawn much imaginative inspiration from the idea of *living life as inquiry (LLI)*. However little has been written to describe *how* the practice develops and the many forms it can take. This article draws on our extensive experience as inquirers ourselves and as educators, working with students and change agents motivated to address social and environmental concerns. Twenty years after the original article we have conducted a reflective review that included surveying the literature, and working in depth with a range of stories and current practices. From this comes a textured expansion of the language and practice of *living life as inquiry* as it is approached from the specificity of people's lives. Through narrative and visual textures, we present views into the many different ways LLI is developed through day-to-day practices of experimentation, data gathering, artistic exploration, intervention and reflection. We explore what this means for quality in the enactment of inquiry. The article draws particular attention to the embodied nature of inquiry and seeks to capture its fleeting, processual quality.

Keywords Living life as inquiry · First-person action research · Self-reflective inquiry · Embodied practice · Systemic practice

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Introduction

Living Life as Inquiry – A Moment to Take Stock

In 1999 Judi Marshall wrote an influential action research article in which she offered a layered, reflective account of her approach to bringing an inquiring attitude into her life as a researcher and aspiring change-agent in the world. Marshall's article (Marshall 1999), titled "Living life as Inquiry", was published in the journal *Systemic Practice and Action Research*. It gave substance to the idea of research as a personal *and* political matter - and suggested that the work of an action researcher includes connecting and exploring the very distinctions that might, traditionally, separate the two realms.

In the intervening 20 years, Marshall's *living life as inquiry* has become an important point of reference in the pantheon of practices and ideas that constitute 'first-person' action research. Self-reflective, first-person work is itself an underpinning orientation of action research whereby the researcher is embedded in the field and looks to increasingly bring inquiry and awareness to their presence and moments of action there (Reason and Bradbury 2001; Coghlan 2003; Marshall and Mead 2005). First-person inquiry is seldom a solo activity. It contributes a vital thread in researching that is typically integrated alongside second- and third-person action research.

A wide range of authors from different heritages work from and seek to contribute to first-person inquiry practices, in action research and qualitative research more generally, encouraged to adopt self-reflexivity in times of multiple perspectives, contested paradigms and a 'triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: p.19). But in our experience many people find the notion of self-reflexivity challenging, however much it might be advocated in research paradigm and methodology literatures. That is partly why we wish to explore in depth here.

In highlighting these aspects of researching here we recognize that we are making a political choice to attend to and articulate what often remains muted in research practice and representation. Doing so matters, we think, because as inquirers and aspiring change-agents interested in systemic practice we are intervening in the world, potentially having impacts, and thus have responsibilities to pay attention to and account for what we are doing.

Within this field, *living life as inquiry* can be positioned as a particular interpretation of first-person action research, albeit a broad-ranging one, that contrasts and twins with more structured approaches such as those of action inquiry (Erfan and Torbert 2015; Reason and Torbert 2001) and action science (Argyris et al. 1985; Argyris and Schon 1996). We see companionship with Coghlan's integrative work, which locates self-reflective first-person inquiry centrally within the second- and third- person processes of action research (Coghlan and Brannick 2014), whilst also grounding it philosophically. Coghlan proposes that authenticity in the enactment of action research, as well as of one's life, lies not in one's data but in first-person practice (Coghlan 2008). Where Coghlan points to the interior territory, *living life as inquiry* might be seen as attempting to show what it is like to travel into it.

Living life as inquiry (LLI), Marshall proposed, means holding open the boundary between research and life generally (Marshall 1999, p.160), 'living continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges' (p.156) and adopting a range of strategies and ways of behaving to support this. It is depicted as a thoroughly aspirational notion. Drawing on two examples from her working life as a University professor, Marshall illustrated her inquiring approach, aware of the self-exposure this called for, as she made public her private processes, including

awareness practices for working on this ever-changing boundary. She developed curiosity for example about knowing 'when to persist and when to desist' (p.165, idem) in certain situations. This question, once noticed, and drawing on her research on women in management, started to ricochet across other projects she was working in and to connect with more pervasive questions of gender and feminist theories of 'relational practice' (Fletcher 1998).

In this way Marshall's approach, whilst it is situated within the locality of life experience, starts to take on a wider political purpose. In her later book Marshall (2016a) gave more explicit attention to issues of power and systemic thinking, enhancing the depiction of *living life as inquiry* as a way not only to release inner human yearning to learn but also to be creative in the service of outward systemic change. Thus Marshall's work has supported students and researchers who tap into the values-based systemic potential of action research as a means towards a better, freer society (Greenwood and Levin 2007).

In 2018 we set out to take stock of the notion of *living life as inquiry*, 20 years on, and to conduct research towards writing this article.

LLI in the Literature – Gaps and Curiosities

A prominent theme in the literature citing Marshall's work has been its legitimation for research practices that invite attention to how we experience ourselves in inquiry (Lord and Preston 2009; Allbon 2012). Her work is often set within broader notions of reflective practice, for example appearing alongside works from Schon and Torbert (Coghlan 2003; Nzembayie et al. 2019). The focus on integrated practice development rather than knowledge output alone brings natural companionship with the frameworks of action science. What makes *living life as inquiry* distinctive is its processual orientation, where the researcher is not separate but immersed in the action of the continuous present (Ragland 2006). The image Marshall (1999, p.157) offered of moving between 'inner and outer arcs of attention' was most often cited in the literature as an explanation of what LLI entails. It is suggested as a support for day-to-day awareness and living (Taylor 2004) and therefore for a way of being. Ramsey compares the process to poetic rhythms, of creating new possibilities in the moment - a process that is '*consciously experimental and transformative'* (Ramsey 2018, p.90). This connects with ideas of an epistemology of practice, offered by Raelin (2007) as well as Ramsey (2014), where knowing is an activity not a possession. As Raelin puts it, the sought-after knowing is practical and skills-based, to do with: 'learning our way out' of those moments when expertise, habit and competence fail us (p.500). Marshall's vocabulary of moment-to-moment living and practising appears to chime in an interesting way with such epistemologies, as well as with Ramsey's wider call for a 'language of process' (Ramsey 2014, p.8), that does justice to lived experiences, to underpin them. This was one potential linkage we wished to explore here.

Another question was what *living life as inquiry* might look like. Despite the clear link to practice, it is interesting that very little literature since 1999 describes the authors' own practices of conducting inquiry in any detail. There are some exceptions. Allbon (2012) for example, describes her personal application of LLI and makes connections to her autoethnographic writing. Shepherd (2006) articulated his journaling practices, drawing on Marshall's radical inquiry methods to enable him to work with radical content and ideas. We are aware that the space and conventions of journal articles do not often allow for explicating detailed practices. However, the paucity of illustration may also arise from a paradox that as a

'post-conventional' process, *living life as inquiry* offers no directive rubric of what to do. The result is that, despite Marshall's exhortation that *living life as inquiry* is a highly individual and contextualized matter, her expression of it remains somewhat alone in the gallery. It is our intention here to at least point to this gap, and partly to remedy it by presenting material with some texture.

LLI in Practice – From Slogan to Anchoring Construct?

Given the enthusiasm in literature citing Marshall (1999), but relative lack of specificity, we wonder if LLI is being used as an anchoring construct, from which people take encouragement and legitimation to develop their own path and practices of inquiry. Our experiences in education of the wide range of interpretations that people apply to *living life as inquiry* suggest this may be the case. We are inquirers and educators who have worked with Masters and Doctoral students across three institutions in the UK on action research based programmes. Our students have been engaged with systemic change in some form and many have been especially concerned with issues of sustainability and social justice. People have found first person action research helpful, important and liberating. We have witnessed many creative ways of working with the idea of *living life as inquiry*. The phrase has captivated students – a slogan-like aspiration at first that guides researchers into cultivating day-to-day practices of decision-making, data gathering, artistic exploration, intervention, reflective practice and timely challenge. Students have felt enabled through Marshall's careful and layered languaging and illustration - declaring themselves (sometimes a little too quickly it may be said!) to be *living life as inquiry*, with varying degrees of rigour and depth. The phrase can seem to confer permission to explore, to discover and be curious. People have developed their own practices in great variety, bringing their life experiences to doing so. With this research we set out to understand this evolution from slogan to deep practice further, asking how does one develop a practice of *living life as inquiry* and how does this shift over time?

Self-reflective inquiry is open to critiques of self-indulgence. Though we did not find this much discussed in the literature citing Marshall (1999), we are aware that reflection can be depicted uncritically as a 'good thing to do', and this requires caution. Our experience has helped us appreciate the challenges, both generative and de-generative, of such an approach and we set out with an interest to take stock of these. When all of life is open to curiosity, charges of ruminative self-indulgence can spar with ripostes of worthwhile, investigative self-expression. These are not easy tensions, but they are instructive. How the inquirer works with such dilemmas points to questions of quality that we also wished to approach in this writing.

In summary, we set out broadly with the following intentions. With systemic action research practitioners in mind, we sought to texture the original expression of *living life as inquiry* – to extend and further expose the dimensions of variability and quality processes there can be. Acknowledging the 20 years of sustained engagement there has been on our educational programmes, it feels timely to start bringing additional insights from practice alongside the initial voice of Marshall and, in so doing, to be open to generative and degenerative edges. We are curious as to how such insights might help us build further on existing links to epistemologies of practice and establish a firmer language that might both anchor *living life as inquiry* further within the realms of action research and create interesting connections outside of it.

Inquiring into Inquiry

This inquiry process was initiated by the first author (M), who then invited the second author (J) to join them. In doing so, there was an element of M honouring J's contributions to action research, including the 1999 article and subsequent book (Marshall 2016a), together with a desire to enliven conversations about inquiry in the student and practitioner communities in which she moved. J was very open to exploring first-person inquiry afresh, and to engaging with the challenge and questioning she knew M brought to it. An enthusiasm for the topic was generated easily between us. The twenty-year anniversary of the original article, coupled with continued engagement among students for the approach, suggested a need and relevance. This paper was then developed in an extended series of cycles of inquiry over twelve months. The methods adopted were intended to explore first-person inquiry from the inside and in some depth, to reach beyond initial articulations. Retrospectively we can identify three phases.

In phase one we set out to generate a range of source materials congruent with *living life as inquiry*, drawing on our extensive histories of working with action research. Additionally, and in line with the retrospective impulse that had initiated this work, a literature review of publications citing Marshall (1999) was commissioned. This was conducted by a research assistant (Ilma) who was a recent graduate from an action-research based Masters programme which one of us had led.

In parallel, we authors wrote self-reflective accounts about our practices of first-person inquiry and our current views on this form of researching and living. Ilma was also invited to write about her empirical experimentation and tracking of practices of inquiry as these had developed through and since the Masters programme. Of particular interest, was how such practices were shifting since graduation – as this represented a juncture between inquiry required and supported by one's studies, and inquiry as a continuing practice.

In the second phase of the project we set out to extend the diversity of stories of inquiry as well as to reflect analytically on the material already generated. We wrote pen-portraits of two further Masters graduates (Charles and Rachel – a pseudonym) whose inquiry practices we thought showed interestingly contrasting styles. Both were practitioners of systemic change, motivated by sustainability agendas and used inquiry as a means to bring about change inwardly and outwardly. The portraits helped us explore how inquiry practices might become clarified on action-research based Masters Programmes.

We checked these pen-portraits back with the people concerned, requesting their permission to use the material and inviting their comments. Initial versions of our pen-portraits were approved, and additional insights offered. These, together with the accounts of the research team, gave us five stories of inquiry to work with. We did not consider this a sample so much as a sufficient base from which to explore.

Developing this initial material, we engaged in mini-cycles of conversation, interpretation and iterative meaning-making through email exchanges (in which Ilma sometimes joined) and research meetings, which happened mainly by internet enabled video-conferencing. The meetings were recorded to aid ongoing review. Working this way generated a lot of diverging material, congruent with our experiences of people's diverse ways of undertaking first-person action research, and of how practices develop over time. We identified, critically evaluated and tested themes that emerged in the material.

Being engaged in the research project heightened our attention to ongoing inquiries in our lives, helping reflections and critical evaluations of research processes bubble to the surface. We found, in this phase, that all communications between us became relevant to the research.

For example, each time we emailed and held research meetings, we talked a little about ongoing inquiries in our professional and wider lives, and then reflected further on what we were potentially learning about action research, especially about first-person inquiry. These processes exemplified how first-person inquiry often benefits from engagement with others as learning companions, who can offer valuable support and challenge.

A balancing was required in working with our divergent sources of data, whilst holding sufficiently to our research questions to aid convergence. As co-inquiry our approach allowed for the 'interdependence of chaos and order' (Heron 1999, p.127) and we worked over time with multiple open threads, resisting the urge to tidy them up.

An initial table of themes was created from this material and this was tested, cross-checked and adapted several times as the project developed. This iterative process allowed us to identify converging threads in the research material and discussions and, through clustering, to locate the distinction between development and enactment of inquiry that arose through this work. The resulting table thus became a touchstone for what was emerging. It is presented below.

Engaging in these ways, we integrated quality processes, as first-and second-person action research does. As we worked, we exercised both suspicion and ambition. With our material we consciously asked: 'what or who is missing here?' and this helped us see the limits of our five inquiry accounts, who these might or might not represent, as we comment below. At the same time, we were ambitious to reach a fullness in what we might present.

During phase two we noticed ourselves using metaphors to portray inquiry, and wondered whether visual or sensory images could help us do so. We decided to seek out visual metaphors to capture inquiry in ways that words might not. The visual images we found or created started to interconnect with our thematic insights.

In the third and final phase, we crystallized and converged the main themes of this article. This involved not only determining what we had discovered but deciding what was important to say that might be useful to others, and how to present it. Throughout the research process we had been paying attention to multiple forms of data and wanted to offer these in the article itself.

Key Themes Arising

In the various phases of analysis which follow we especially wish to elaborate three key insights which arose through the research:

Distinctive Personal Practices and Quality Processes

Inquiry approaches and practices tend to be distinctive to the person concerned and the context in which they are operating - both in their development and their ongoing enactment. Thus, there is a close coupling between a lived life, past and present, and the 'practice' of inquiry within that life. Furthermore, inquiry appears to be continually evolving, shaped as life unfolds. Though quality processes are likewise individualized, common concerns and questions can be identified.

Embodiment

Embodiment is a key aspect of inquiry and by attending to it we widen understandings of first-person action research. By embodiment we refer to those practices of scanning back and forth

between cognition in the mind and sensation in the body in the hunt for what is going on and is relevant. Our research material continually showed a grounded embodiment suggesting inquiry is far from only an intellectual matter. The container of embodiment, and expression through embodiment, extends, we believe, the fullness of what we can imply.

The Processual Nature of Inquiry

Increased attention to embodied practices of inquiry shines further light on the inherently *processual* nature of inquiry. By processual, we refer to an interpretation of inquiry that is more flexible than hitherto depicted, that refers to fleeting states of being and action rather than fixed states of knowing.

A Textured Presentational Form

We have sought to shape this article to be congruent with how we worked and with these emerging insights. Our research efforts resulted in different genres of output that included pen-portraits, visual metaphors and a touchstone table of themes.

We have been struck by a challenge of articulation in approaching this subject matter and how that raises issues of language. Nuanced living inquiry is elusive to depict. Richardson and St Pierre invite those writing in post-conventional research paradigms to embrace this elusivity. They argue for a wider 'field of play' in writing research where genres might be blurred and the task is to crystallize – rather than to triangulate – meaning, working through potentially multiple forms of 'data' (Richardson and St Pierre 2005). It is in this exploratory spirit that we present the resulting material as different 'textures' that respond to our original questions. These textures have different modes – narrative, visual, and analytic – that offer different views on our material, and so are themselves an attempt at a wider 'language'. In this way we are seeking to *embody* living life as inquiry in the text, hoping to retain the layered and kaleidoscopic quality of the original article and to remain congruent with its image that inquiry 'treats little as fixed, finished or clear-cut' (Marshall 1999, p.156).

Narrative Texture: Pen-Portraits

We first introduce the two pen-portraits of former Masters students who developed inquiry approaches in the context of their studies**.** These were written by the authors, as discussed above, to illustrate contrasting ways of arrival 'into' systematic, articulated inquiry for a student. Whereas one student shows how the repeated application of action inquiry frameworks supported his inquiring approach to organizational development, the other student tapped into and repurposed (in a way) her existing artistic and embodied practices. We shall further expand on these differences in discussion below.

Pen-Portrait 1: Charles

Charles was an engineer/ scientist in his mid-50s and had a strategic job in the UK headquarters of an international water consulting organization. He wanted to advocate strongly for more

attention to sustainability but did not want people to think that he had 'lost it' and needed to be retired. He wanted to 'rock the boat without falling out of it'.

From the outset, Charles indicated that being on the Masters was an experiment in who he was and could become. For example, he soon realised in a three-hour fish stocks simulation "game" in the first workshop how calculating stock and depletion numbers was important if participants wanted to avoid over-fishing, but did not push this when team colleagues did not heed him. He did not want to become labelled as the technical expert early in the programme. He reflected on this in the session debrief.

Charles had an engaged and methodical approach to his work on the degree. Early on he found that the action inquiry framework (Fisher et al. 2003) made sense enough to him and adopted it with commitment, paying attention to purposes, strategies, behaviours and effects. He set out mini projects in these terms, repeatedly, as he went through the learning cycles between workshops and wrote Learning Papers. What seemed to start as a formula became a process for deepening what he was thinking, doing and feeling, helping him frame and undertake actions.

Charles was very explicit about how first-person action research opened up emotions for him to live and explore in a way he had not done before. He says: *I think a wider emotional awareness – that it is not just a matter of facts, but of how we each feel in response to them - really helped me to be much more accepting of differing views, and hence able to collaborate more effectively.*

Working with emotions helped him be brave in what would otherwise have been daunting circumstances, even with his standing in the company. He now tells those he teaches that "*action experimental approaches help you to try stuff in spite of fears and uncertainty, by protecting you from blaming yourself if things don't work as expected."*

Charles systematically undertook first-, second- and third-person action research across a wide range of organizational and professional activities. For example, he was invited to contribute a Knowledge Management seminar at his company. He offered environmental information, pushing warning messages of harm, going beyond what he thought acceptable, seeing this as challenging and risky. He explored in advance how to do this and talked it through with learning colleagues from the Masters. He made his presentation with some trepidation. It was at a lunch. He asked people to write feedback on their serviettes. This was good action inquiry practice and relieved his anxiety about how he had gone down. The comments were appreciative. He had spoken out, but had not, apparently, gone too far.

He then set up a co-operative inquiry group of volunteers from different areas and levels investigating how the company could address sustainability issues in its own practices. He was aware that the group members had different access to power and the consequences, including potential career implications, could vary for them. He therefore undertook a substantial exploration of theories of power and charted their implications for practice for older white men like himself and more junior colleagues who were different to him, taking these into account with the inquiry group and in organizational action.

Charles influenced his company's annual conferences and other events to incorporate and discuss more issues of sustainability. He wrote crafted letters to professional journals, advocating that engineering training should pay more attention to sustainability. He thus initiated ripples of third person inquiry within and beyond his organization.

He was appointed a Royal Society of Engineering Visiting Professor at Cambridge University for three years. Maintaining his approach of inquiry in shaping the content and

style of his teaching, he encouraged the international Masters students to see themselves as agents of change for sustainability.

Charles continued to work for his organization and speak internationally about his work after formal retirement. He was destined to develop. The Masters and action research came along at the right time for him.

Pen-Portrait 2: Rachel

Rachel was a busy NHS Nurse Educator who was concerned by issues of social justice and climate change and wanted to influence sustainability agendas in her workplace. She felt a deep care for those who are in the margins of society. During the Masters she explored her own sense of marginality and difference, reflecting on how this came from her upbringing (for example, attending a Steiner school), social class heritage, and her own hidden disabilities, including dyslexia. She felt her sense of difference gave her an innate understanding of diversity.

Rachel arrived on the Masters already convinced of the importance of self-development and familiar with alternative ways of being and learning - in particular Movement Medicine[1] (an embodied somatic practice), NLP and gestalt approaches. Encountering some of the deep experiential work of the Masters, she 'felt like it was coming home'.

Rachel had a keen sense of duty and service. Her workplace was stressful, her family life busy and demanding. She needed to resource herself. With Rachel, there was no question of knowing 'how' to live life as inquiry - she had a strong base to find her way. It was more a case of giving herself permission to do so, partly encouraged through reading Marshall (1999). She said: 'it legitimized what was already natural to me as "inquiry" '.

Rachel experimented with sketching small colourful, abstract pieces of art. This helped her approach areas in her life where she felt stuck, including writing course papers. She found reflective sketching cathartic, helping her become calm and 'quieten her mind', and choose from the many ideas and perspectives that could otherwise freeze her thought processes. This artistic practice evolved to include creative writing, connecting with nature in the local park and significantly, for 100 days, each day she danced: a form of embodied practice strongly influenced by Gabriel Roth's 5-rhythm dancing and Rachel's experience of movement medicine. She wanted to find a sacred practice:

> *"It's all about resilience – the practice leads to a resilience and changes how you show up".*[2]

She started to apply the inquiry practice to her experiences 'out in the world', for example when having to give a talk on sustainability at her place of work she reported feeling more integrated and inspired, noting:

> *"This represents an integrated me doing the inner and outer work that is my calling .... when I can access this place I feel more resourced."*

Rachel evolved her approach to inquiry in the busy context of her life. Her artistic sketching became a discipline.

[1] https://www.schoolofmovementmedicine.com/movement-medicine/what-is-movement-medicine/

[2] All quotes are drawn, with permission, from Rachel's learning papers and her final project portfolio

> *"These explorations of colour continued… on some occasions I … would realize that I was shifting from a negative state of mind to a positive just whilst doing them, often I found them soothing. There was nothing perfect about them, they were often done last thing at night as the curtains of tiredness drew in or a kettle boiled or food cooked"*
> *"I needed to reconnect to creativity, to what brings me meaning and joy. I needed to give myself permission to do the things that I love, to connect with self, happiness, wellbeing."*

Sketching and her dance practice invite her, she reported, into a 'whole body knowing', "*a space where the unconscious can become conscious and expressed",* one in which a wider texture of experience can be known and in which there are new ways to reflect and know.

Rachel's inquiry approach was initially more about self-expansion. Over time explorations flowed into action in her everyday life. At work, Rachel adopted a championing role in sustainability, her confidence and clarity in what she was doing enhanced by her inquiry practice, and by sharing this with Masters learning group colleagues.

> *"My art fed me, my spirit, who I am… It means I can stand in my own credibility and makes me able to bring about social change*"

The reconnection with art and 'whole body knowing' was significant and nourishing, but also had costs. Rachel was 'exhausted' at times and needed to switch off to cope with the pressure of studying, parenting and working.

Embodied Life Spaces

Though the ways into inquiry for Charles and Rachel were quite different, the cultivation of a discipline that encourages and orients action is evident in each account. The structuring frameworks of Torbert and colleagues guide Charles into repeated, disciplined inquiry cycles, whereas it is more the processual evocations of Marshall that inspire Rachel to create her own artistic structures of exploration. In their different ways, they carve out time and space to reflect, prepare, strategize and act from inquiry, and thus to work with their inquiry questions. This is primarily a practical knowing (Heron 1996) they are developing, where, supported by new doings – or old doings that are now configured differently (art sketching, writing, working through frameworks) - the direction of attention in their lives becomes changed, or made afresh.

We were struck by the expansions of perception that accompanied this. Charles attends to a wider emotional register and as such his knowing becomes more embodied. Through dance and art, Rachel starts to purposefully embody wider ways of knowing to express herself and be in the world. *Living life as inquiry* is already acknowledged in the literature as a thoroughly embodied process. Marshall is cited as an example of a scholar who interpolates her lived experience through her publications, seeking to enact in her writing what she advocates. In this research we were given glimpses into the embodied nature of the practice. Across all our material, the inquirers showed, in distinctive ways, attention to emotions, feelings, and physical sensations in order to guide choices in inquiry processes.

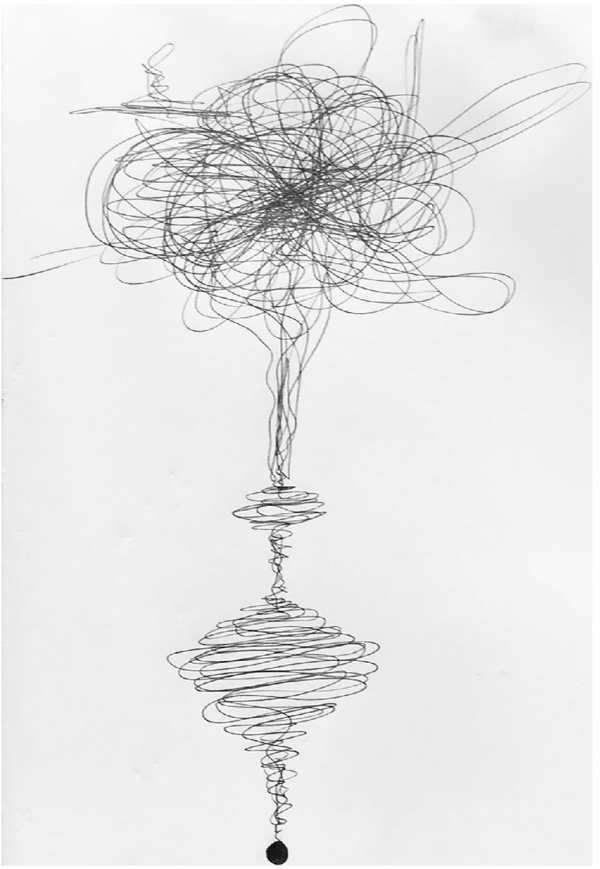


Fig. 1 Visual Texture A: Sketching my Inquiry Process
Pencil sketch by Ilma.
Ilma - I was carrying the need to think of an image representing my inquiry for a day or two and as the 'deadline' to come up with something approached, this visual idea came to me in a flash. It started with a chaos, a swirling of thoughts, emotions, no order, being swayed around and pulled in different directions, the sense of weightlessness and lack of grounding. Out of this chaotic swirl comes a conscious deliberate act to ground myself and anchor my experiences and make some sort of sense of them. And that is the act of inquiring, for me, usually, in the form of writing, as an attempt to describe, bring order and structure, and turn the emotional and mental chaos into insights and, potentially actions. It's a deliberate downward action, both towards rootedness, and also often requiring to descend deeper into myself and look at things that may not be pleasant to look at or accept. Until, finally, I can arrive at one moment, a full-picture encompassing insight, a relief. Complete clarity. Even though I know that it too shall pass

Visual Texture A: Sketching my Inquiry Process

This brings us to the first of three visual textures intended to show aspects of *living life as inquiry*. In the course of the research we asked ourselves what metaphors or artful presentations might offer what is harder to say in words. The first of these is shown in Fig. 1 - a pencil sketch created by Ilma in early 2019.

Analytic Texture: Table

In this section we offer our touchstone Table of themes, threads and questions which emerged from and was tested in our iterative sense-making. The material it presents was derived from the full array of accounts we worked with. We have sometimes illustrated through Charles' and Rachel's stories as their differences help demonstrate the themes, and you have read their portraits. This Table is work in process, not seeking to become definitive or fixed. On its most recent iteration we realized it reflects two threads of emerging insight – one relating to the

Table 1 Threads relating to inquiry as expressed in reflective accounts

Section A: ***Development of the inquirer: distinctive, ongoing and rooted in life experience***	
1. *Inquiry is shaped by the specificities of our lives*	How people approach inquiry and develop practice is distinctive, shaped by their life experiences and values. All the narratives showed this. There are, however, commonalities that make what people are doing recognisable as disciplined inquiry, as we see in the two pen-portraits. Working across and respecting multiple ways of knowing is one such commonality.
2. *Written accounts arise in the specificity of 'time'*	The accounts we explored were grounded in current life explorations and expressed a vulnerability and particularity illustrating and testing any general principles outlined. Our later discussion and Visual Texture A show this.
3. *Inquiry is an ongoing life quest*	In all the profiles, inquiry is affirmed as a special value and aspiration in our lives, resourcing our quests to act for generative systemic change. For example, for both Rachel and Charles operating from inquiry helps them challenge themselves to be more fully present, opening up insight and courage. We note, however, that consolidated practice does not necessarily become 'better'. It could become more habituated and less exploratory. How to keep inquiry rich and alive is a question of quality in the practice (see Cell 7).
4. *Current inquiry practice reflects a person's history of developing inquiry*	Inquiry develops with experience. The way it is developed reflects a person's life history and personal style. Charles and Rachel both show how they drew on previous practices to develop their distinctive, grounded, inquiry disciplines. People create the life space in which to do inquiry, and to make it some sort of 'habit', integrating reflexive attention to how they are developing it. For example, some people's early life tendencies to (over-)ruminate can become channelled into inquiry practice, developing such tendencies into more disciplined, and outwardly moderated, approaches. We lacked data about more extroverted styles.
5. *Ideas about inquiry become part of us – 'live' in us*	People's practices of inquiry incorporate ideas from literature and theories of change, matured by repeatedly testing them in practice.
Section B: ***Enactment of inquiry: patterns and questions***	
6. *Embodied Life Space*	People's practices of inquiry were set within their life spaces. Being and embodying were as significant as action. Different, distinctive, approaches to embodiment were apparent.
7. *Inquiry as dynamic, reflexive process*	Throughout the narratives we worked with, reference was made to ongoing reflexive questioning as key in practising inquiry. Common questions were: *How to decide what to inquire about* *How to stay fresh and open in inquiry* *How to discern whether an ongoing strand of inquiry and action continues to have vitality* *Practices for working with emotions* *What is the timely move to action, how is this twinned with reflection?* We see this self-questioning as an integrated quality process in the conduct of inquiry, whilst the form it takes will be distinctive to each person. Often what became apparent was how inquiry required dynamic processes of moving between so-called inner and outer arcs of attention. These were not separated activities.

development of inquiry in one's life and the second relating to the *enactment* of inquiry processes.

We were struck that, though there are general terms that describe or advocate inquiry practices, an inquirer can only develop a practice in relation to their own life. Several threads in Section A of Table 1 explore this development and the nature of these *distinctive personal practices*. The contrasting stories of Rachel and Charles have illuminated how the key moment(s) of establishing inquiry disciplines in one's life is (are) also approached in a way that is unique to the inquirer.

Section B of Table 1 then focusses on commonalities relating to the enactment of inquiry that arose across the five stories we explored. Cell 6 takes up the theme of embodiment that has already been introduced, whilst Cell 7 draws together a series of questions that we propose are indicative of integrated quality processes that are implicit and at work in the ongoing, reflexive processes of inquiry.

It is important to note here that our data did not fill out the degenerative potential there may be in first person inquiry, though this featured in our conversations. We will reflect on the generative/degenerative aspects of inquiry in the closing discussion.

In the remainder of the paper we take our cues from Section B of the table. We shall elaborate first on the ongoing reflexive questioning that arose in our material and that is summarised in Cell 7. We propose that this type of questioning is a marker of quality. We will also show how inquiry is strongly embodied. In the next section, there are different ways our bodies appeared as instruments, often guiding definitive choices of whether or not to pay attention in the development of ongoing inquiry. Thus, what follows shows the dynamic, interpenetrating processes of questioning and embodied living that arise. Whilst these are enacted in specific, located moments in life, we believe they also show something of the nature of inquiry itself and its engrossing attitude and continual provisional choicefulness. This leads us to Visual Texture B and Fig. 2 below which appears to be reaching for a perspective on the nature of inquiry itself tracking through a life.

Ongoing Reflexive Questioning in the Enactment of Inquiry

All the material below should be read in the light of first-person action research being an inherently uncertain, precarious activity, potentially involving exposure and vulnerability. As it is intrinsically concerned with issues that matter, things will be at stake, including the inquirer's legitimacy and well-being. As Charles' story hinted, our Masters students' inquiries often involved experimentation that had potential to head them into trouble. Adopting some forms of action research can help, but will not dissolve risks. First person inquiry should, then, be undertaken with critical questioning, and with care for self and others. The choices considered below are therefore challenging, edgy, not routine.

As illustration of the precarious nature of inquiry, in this section we also offer two stories from the authors' ongoing inquiries, in boxes.



Fig. 2 Visual Texture B: Paths of Inquiry Tracking through a Life Field with lines formed by haying (library image). *M*: I was coming to imagine inquiry as gestures inside a research effort or bigger life. How to show that? One day I was walking in the woods and the image of a crop circle came vividly to mind. Not a neat one though. If life was a field, then my inquiry would show up as paths I take through it. At times I'll cut through with focus, leaving clean sharp lines. Other times I might wander, meander or follow old routes. Only later and from a different viewpoint can I begin to see where they lead or how they connect or peter out. Meanwhile many areas of the field remain unvisited. As I decide where to inquire - how can I know what line to follow? The sensation is sometimes like jumping off a trapeze and knowing you'll be caught – my meta-inquiry, I think, is about trusting in the discipline as well as in life itself

Deciding What to Inquire into

With the recognition of inquiry as something woven into and intersecting with a full-flowing life, practices of discernment, in terms of 'what to pay attention to', emerged as significant. Refining one's curiosity to dwell on some experiences and not others is the imperative of any researcher. With boundless data, choices about what to notice, record and respond to as continuous in the living of life as inquiry form a practice in themselves. "Inquiry has woven itself into my life" wrote M. How then do we distinguish inquiry from life itself? The practice is one of ongoing, reflexive questioning. It relates to choice and discernment and ultimately to quality in the inquiry process. Table 1 (cell 7) elucidates some of these questions – elaborated below - whilst Visual Texture B highlights their unresolved nature.

> *J: what in life is taking my curiosity, has combined excitement and a hint of fear at what I might encounter through inquiry?*
> *M: am I inquiring into the centre of what matters?*

Over the years we have suggested a range of heuristics (like the two quotes above) to help guide our students in choosing their key questions for inquiry and picking their way through a

proliferation of 'data' available to them. But such guides can sometimes convey a false sense that there is an elusive clean line there to be discovered.

Our students, we noted, made time to be systematic in the practice of gathering and picking through data. Charles formulated and stuck with his inquiry approach - planning a presentation to his company assiduously and gathering material from what happened. Ilma tracked how her inquiry practices shifted, sustained or faded away after graduation. She continued the practice of journaling she had adopted on the Masters, and noted this helped her decide where to place her attention. She wrote that "*two years of capturing data while fresh, expressing it visually and then deliberately and critically reviewing it, has turned into a practical knowing of what to pay attention to*".

Staying Fresh and Open

For J and M inquiry takes place in the face of ongoing lives that can inevitably become humdrum, difficult or challenging. To live life as inquiry was not so much an additive demand, as it was a reminder and a means to stay open to what was happening. We were struck by the attention there was in J and M's writing to there being '*freshness'*. The inquiry itself needed to be *alive* in its own curiosity, to weave well into life and not become an end in itself.

The choice to inquire was sometimes quite deliberate. J wrote of her decision to be inquiring at a meeting in her mother's nursing home: *"I do it partly to keep myself a bit fresh, rather than habituated"* (for more on this inquiry context see Box below). At other times it was not so much chosen as resorted to out of necessity. When her mother became seriously ill, M spoke of writing daily as a means of '*survival*', a distinctive purpose for inquiry.

An example of edgy inquiry in action – J.

During this research we authors discussed challenges and risks in active inquiries. For example, J was seeking to act with other residents' relatives, through a negotiated, semi-formal Home 'Development Team', to help along improvements at the Care Home her mother lived in. Some of the many edges she considered were:

How to talk with the frequently changing home managers and interim managers in an appropriate voice, especially given her professional interests in action research and organizational change;

How to play her part without cutting across other relatives with their concerns and ways of expressing themselves;

How to raise systemic issues, into which relatives feel they have special insights, without appearing to criticize care staff or open paths for management to adopt new initiatives that override rather than listen to the staff;

How not to become an irritant, with adverse repercussions for her mum's care;

How to maintain energy when promised improvements did not appear, or conditions reverted;

How to judge whether she was doing enough and what was timely action, especially when there was another change of manager.

At any time, J could be poised on several edges. And then there were potentially precarious issues of gender (and age?) and voice to ponder too.

Checking for Signs of Vitality

How then to know if an inquiry is alive? Whether structured inside a Masters project or not, diligent habits can propel an inquiry mindlessly forward whereas too much attention to life's fine grain can fixate or freeze one's attention. We see this as a quality process – a practice of taking the pulse of an inquiry to check for signs of vitality. Here J noted how repeatedly checking in - "how am I, here and now?" - helps to surface tacit experience. When challenge,

or dullness, is sensed, inquiry could be a guardian habit, helping us take a step back – or further in (Marshall 2016b) or to directly review purposes (Fisher et al. 2003), opening the potential for re-framing as a key inquiry move. We noted how the pulse-check was sometimes an embodied rather than a thinking move: M wrote of how going out running has been useful to her in allowing the clarity of her intentions to resurface:

> *M: When I run, there is only time to focus on my breathing and surviving the physical imposition of the run. One-foot-in-front-of-the-other. Sky, breath, the road ahead. Thoughts are much further back during this process. Afterwards I am energized and distinctly changed in attitude. Somehow my intent is clearer.*

Such clarifying practices and pulse-checks are offered as a counterbalance to the narrative of pursuit that can overshadow the activity of any kind of first-person inquiry. We point here to the ways the inquirer might cultivate to help them decide when to desist (Marshall 1999) or let a line of exploration fall away.

Working with Emotions

Respecting and working with emotions, alongside other ways of knowing, is inherently threaded through *living life as inquiry*. On the Masters programmes people were invited and facilitated to bring their full register of emotions to inquiry. And they did. Each person then needed to develop their own inquiry practices for working multi-dimensionally in this way.

When the inner emotional terrain of a researcher is up for scrutiny, there is an accompanying heat of emotions to work and be choiceful with. Inner turmoil is often a feature of inquiry. However to inquire blindly 'where your energy is' might lead to a Brownian motion where questions attach themselves to emotions. Visual Texture A shows Ilma's artful presentation of working with this turmoil, leaving it time to clarify. In one example she elaborated, J wrote of the hunt for 'what is really important' when she tracked a diffuse feeling of unsettlement in mind *and* body that had attached to a practical issue, which was occupying her attention disproportionately, she thought.

An example of edgy inquiry in action – M.

One site of 'precarious' inquiry for M was in her organisational life where she was responsible for launching a new action-research based Masters programme whilst around her the institutional support and strategy was in flux following a merger. In this context, over a period of several months, M found different levels of pace and attention required as she plied between different constituencies of concern: her close colleagues on faculty, senior management who were reviewing the programme and with whom she had little relational history, and the prospective students themselves. Her inquiry approach was grounded in the central question of 'what was the pathway of integrity through this?' Her inquiry edge was to find a place to stand that 'made ethical sense' and that also was emotionally sound for M. This involved questions like:

What was thoughtful and timely response to shifting cues and, at times, diminishing support;

When and how might she bracket emotional distress in and around her, from valuable embodied 'data' on what to do next;

How to interpret 'stuck' moments and when should she act, swiftly and decisively;

When should she wait, take advice, consult;

How might she navigate the flux with colleagues whilst 'stepping up' to her responsibilities;

How could she turn up for students with quality and attention to the work they needed to do.

The pathway through this flux for M and her colleagues was nevertheless messy. However it was not purely reactive - as the framing of inquiry served to hold the action at many significant moments.

Practices of discernment

In the authors' accounts discernment was a fluid practice. We took cues from embodied experience and emotional knowing to guide us. We tapped into purposes, sometimes rekindling them. And we noted long periods of waiting, when action did not frame itself, and not acting became inquiry in itself. M wrote of 'waiting things out', discerning 'what's what' before deciding what to do. This then was an embodied practice that sought poise within the inner arc of attention. It included practices of noticing, adjusting and tracking of things unfolding or remaining stuck. Such practices have already been suggested by Marshall's earlier heuristic of knowing 'when to persist or desist' (Marshall 1999, p.165). Our material has shown us more of the ongoing processual nature of enacting such inquiries. It also showed that embodiment is highly significant in influencing the moment-to-moment moves from waiting to action.

Responding to M's invitation to offer an image, J identified the Heron/Yoga image shown in Fig. 3. The resulting Visual Texture C expresses these resonances in a different way.



Fig. 3 Visual Texture C: Heron/ Yoga Image (library image). *J*: Image of heron alert by the waterside, standing on one leg. Akin to tree pose in yoga, grounding and then releasing one foot from the floor and raising it to rest lightly higher up the other leg. Inquiry is always about me in situ. Requires a lot of orienting self-attention, aspiring to stay present, directing attention outward as well as scanning inward. Staying there requires small internal movements – like the sensory movements of standing on one leg. These are data in themselves, the adjustments I am making as cues about me-in-situ, and about the situation as I experience it. Keeping this stream flowing. If the flow of sensations – thoughts, feelings, images – become routine, repetitive, I seek to notice that, and make some move to prompt change, to gain another view. Scanning the world around me, watching for how it is and for any movement. It's the intersecting of these various senses that matters, juxtaposing them. In yoga tree pose, if ever I have the passing thought – 'I am doing well here' – I immediately topple. Similarly, inquiry is never under control, it is dynamic, ever provisional, aspirational. Breathing into this image, I think too that there can be much more dynamic stillness and poise in all this than we might expect.

The Timely Move to Action

The heron/yoga image evokes the moment of the 'move to action'. It also reflects questions that arose across the material and in our sense-making conversations about when and how to move inquiringly into action and how reflective practices can resource such moves. An emerging theme, in tune with the literature, was how inquiry affords permission to engage with one's life in a brave and experimental way. An interest in contributing to systemic change motivated our students and ourselves. We saw this directly in Charles' example above where inquiry provided a container out of which action and experimentation in his workplace could be planned. In Rachel's case, the connection was not so straightforward. Her outward actions in the world were resourced only after she had allowed herself time to look inward. Might this not also be perceived as a move to 'inward' action? We find it important to amplify such questioning. In our educational experience, students sometimes express fears of 'solipsism' or self-indulgence, which threaten to close the door on acknowledging entwined aspects of experience, that might then be suppressed, or rendered undiscussable.

Likewise, in our material the relationship between the reflective mode and action in the world emerged as complex. M likened it to a dance and wrote about seeking: "*a personal inquiring rhythm and cultivating a trusting move to action*", seeing clear designations of *'reflection'* and *'action'* as problematic.

In Reflection

Revisiting Inner and Outer Arcs of Attention

Given that the notion of moving between "inner and outer arcs of attention" was the most cited characteristic of LLI in our survey of the literature referencing Marshall (1999), we have been curious to explore what we have learnt about this dynamic.

In our thinking we have increasingly moved away from the idea of single 'incidences of action', with apparently delineated explicit zones of action and reflection, towards interest in the *moves* and *dynamics* within entangled patterns or fields of inquiry.

We see these reflective 'moves' as not so distinctively transitioning between states. They are embodied and dynamic: a fused way of attending to experience both inside and outside ourselves, as Coghlan (2007) suggests is central in self-reflexive inquiry. We have found that placing attention in the inner serves the outer action in an interesting way. Outer arcs could now be described as an expression of inner focus and attention. The previous section and Visual Texture C Heron have explored these ideas.

The enactment of this has felt flexible, as we move through 'fleeting states' of attention rather than ever knowing definitively, for example, when to persist or to desist. It suggests an agility – of mind-body – that is strengthened as a muscle is – by disciplines of practice. Following / unfolding this processual view ultimately dissolves the distinction between inner and outer arcs of attention. We might ask instead about how these attentions are integrated in an unfolding process, and can be understood dynamically.

The Processual Nature of Inquiry

In refining the notion of *living life as inquiry* and bringing texture to it, we believe we have illuminated its inherently processual nature. As the research progressed, we have empathized with Ramsey's quest to explicate a grounded language of process (Ramsey 2014, p.8) that does justice to lived experiences.

As Ramsey was doing, the inquirers in our research were looking for 'relational options for action' (Ramsey 2014, p.17) – not just 'any old options', but ones that connect with contexts and other people and simultaneously weave well into our lives and purposes. Our research casts light on what Ramsey called for: "*a more fine-grained understanding of the process by which we might learn to become practically wise, by which we might learn to make more skilful judgements in our practice*" (in Ramsey 2014, p.9). Working from our cycles of sense-making, we see ongoing action as ephemeral rather than determined by 'individual' (isolated) reflection. Knowing infused with reflection is process in action. Thus it becomes contingent, fleeting. Such reflection is not creating distinct knowledge as a resource to be deployed, but rather it is opening the potential for each moment to be created afresh. With Ramsey (2018) we are concerned that the academic gaze is not attuned to perceiving such momentary phenomena. How then might we depict the transitory art of becoming? Ramsey explored social poetics as a congruent form to evoke the ephemerality of process. In this article we have elaborated through images and multiple 'textures' as an experiment with amplified expressions of what cannot fully be said in words.

Reviewing Generative/Degenerative Aspects of Inquiry

The material we worked with told us little about potentially degenerative aspects of inquiry. Perhaps the most direct expression was the exhaustion Rachel sometimes experienced as she maintained inquiry processes in an already complex life. We did explore degenerative potentials in our research conversations.

We do not see first-person inquiry as inherently self-indulgent as some might accuse. We consider active self-reflection a responsibility of those engaging in research of any kind. Even so, we know from our experiences as inquirers and educators that sometimes inquiry can become especially inward-looking, where being self-challenging can become an end in itself. If this is not complemented by inquiry outwards, the inquirer can feel trapped in self-critical patterns they find it hard to escape. This can also impede movement into experimenting in action. These possibilities might be influenced by personal patterns, lack of self-confidence or especially hostile circumstances at a particular time. If this happens, the process becomes a cause for inquiry in itself.

Whilst those who contributed accounts to this research would find inquiry challenging at times, and may well have experienced such dynamics at some time, we all affirmed its value in our lives, and have developed strategies for being curious about the processes of inquiry themselves. Both authors have noticed that attending to *how* we inquire helps some of the more degenerative aspects we are prone to (which we characterised in conversation as *over*-rumination or joylessness) become better known to us and more easily avoided.

Concluding Remarks

Through our stories and reflections, we have explored how the anchoring construct of *living life as inquiry* might be developed and enacted in practice. We see our emerging depictions and analyses as contributing methodologically – lending insight not only to the practice of *living life as inquiry*, but adding to understandings of first-person inquiry more generally, in action research and in qualitative research. Our contribution is carried especially in the paper's three core themes.

We have found *living life as inquiry* to be distinctive and personal - a 'binding' practice that combines methods, disciplines and affinities from within a lived life that is continually evolving. We have noted the embodied quality of *living life as inquiry*, and in so doing we have been led to a more fine-grained understanding of the processual nature of first-person inquiry more generally. From this appreciation, inquiry is an ongoing, multi-faceted, ever shape-shifting process, rather than comprised of discrete states such as 'action' and 'reflection'. We have not so much found a language for this (as Ramsey would suppose) but rather have presented textures of its evocative expression. This work has made it clearer to us how important it is to be working with emotional and embodied knowing thoroughly and integrated alongside other ways of knowing - including the cognitive and intellectual dimensions of inquiry on which Ramsey focuses (Ramsey 2014, p.9; Ramsey 2018, p.95).

There is no 'go to' rubric for learning how to do *living life as inquiry*, although we do appreciate that people often initially use frameworks and structures as helpful steppingstones to guide them (for example adopting notions of inner and outer arcs of attention, and where Charles used Torbert's 4 territories of awareness). Such rubrics can be adopted but have to be transcended in developed practice, as Charles then did.

Rather a kind of humility (Walton 2011) is required in approaching inquiry, to be reflective of its epistemological underpinnings that suggest knowing is inextricably bound up with the knower (Coleman 2015), and that unfolding experience as it is lived within a life is the primary locus of how relevant knowledge can be derived. Each person can then be reflexive in their adoption of inquiry and in creating their own quality practices. The application of this attention to how one experiences oneself in inquiry and in life itself brings us somewhere fundamental – as Coghlan suggests to 'the structure of human knowing' (Coghlan 2010) itself.

The limitations of rubrics have led us to experimentations with multiple modes of representation – stories, analytics and visual images – 'textures' that are intended to offer developing inquirers prompts congruent with lived experiences of inquiry. In this way we see ourselves playing on the boundaries of what counts as legitimate knowing and representation (Richardson and St Pierre 2005). We thus acknowledge the politically edgy nature of this type of inquiry work, and the challenge it makes to accepted epistemological norms.

We recognise the limitation of our sample and how this curtails what we can say. And yet even with this small grouping we are struck by the variations of interpretation and form inquiry has taken. We hope this exploration will prompt other people to offer accounts of their practice, and to experiment with forms of representation. We look forward to reading and engaging with these.

In conclusion, we think we have shown that *living life as inquiry* as a form of first-person action research is both deeply political and deeply personal. It is political in how it offers a way to both ground and connect research to a systemic change agenda. It is personal in that – fundamentally – it is about learning to be perpetually curious – and to stay alive to the choices and possibilities involved in leading an ethical and enriching life.

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