

## **7 CREATING A LIVING EDUCATIONAL THEORY FROM QUESTIONS OF THE KIND, 'HOW DO I IMPROVE MY PRACTICE?'**

### **SUMMARY**

This paper argues that a living educational theory of professional practice can be constructed from practitioner's enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'. The significance of 'I' existing as a living contradiction in such enquiries is considered and other epistemological issues related to values, validity and generalisability are discussed from the living perspective. The process of gaining academic legitimation for a living form of theory is examined in terms of the politics of truth within our Institutions of Higher Education.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Have you ever made a claim to know your own educational development and subjected the claim to public criticism? If you have, what does such a claim to educational knowledge look like?

I'm assuming that all readers of this Journal will at some time have asked themselves questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?', and will have endeavoured to improve some aspect of their practice. I believe that a systematic reflection on such a process provides insights into the nature of the descriptions and explanations which we would accept as valid accounts of our educational development. I claim that a living educational theory will be produced from such accounts.

The idea that philosophers interpret the world whilst the point is to improve it, is not a new idea. I have been urging my fellow academics for some years (Whitehead 1982) to carry out an investigation into their own educational development as they question themselves on how they are improving their practice. I believe that academics who write about educational theory should do just that: make a claim to know their development and subject it to public criticism. In this way I believe that they will come to see that it is possible to create a living educational theory which can be related directly to practice.

### **PRODUCING A LIVING EDUCATIONAL THEORY**

The traditional view is that a theory is a general explanatory framework which can generate descriptions and explanations for empirically observed regularities and the behaviour of individual cases. The explanations are offered in the conceptual terms of propositions which define determinate relationships between variables. Piagetian Cognitive Stage Theory is a classical example of such a theory. By their nature concepts involve grasping principles thus ensuring that theories are presented in general terms.

A commitment to the propositional form can also be seen, surprisingly, in those researchers who are committed to a reflexive approach to understanding. For example, Kilpatrick's (1951) view on the importance of dialogue in educational theory is presented in a propositional form. A more recent example in the work of Gitlin and Goldstein (1987) on a dialogical approach to understanding shows the authors presenting their case within a propositional form. Whilst I can recognise the importance of what they say, about teachers forming relationships that enable school change to be based on a joint inquiry into what is really appropriate, I believe that the propositional form of presentation will prevent them getting closer to answering their final, dialogical question, *'How can we encourage the conditions necessary for teachers to enter into a dialogue aimed at understanding?'*

Even those academics one would expect to understand the need to create an alternative to the propositional form of theory remain within it. For example Donald Schön (1983) points out that:

*"when someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case."*

Schön is however committed to the fundamental category of established theory in holding to the propositional form:

*"Theories are theories regardless of their origin: there are practical, common-sense theories as well as academic or scientific theories. A theory is not necessarily accepted, good, or true; it is only a set of interconnected propositions that have the same referent - the subject of the theory. Their interconnectedness is reflected in the logic of relationships among propositions: change in propositions at one point in the theory entails changes in propositions elsewhere in it."*

*Theories are vehicles for explanation, prediction, explanatory theory explains events by setting forth propositions from which these events may be inferred, a predictive theory sets forth propositions from which inferences about future events may be made, and a theory of control describes the conditions under which events of a certain kind may be made to occur. In each case, the theory has an 'if...then....' form." (Argyris, C. and Schön, D. 1975)*

I am arguing that the propositional form is masking the living form and content of an educational theory which can generate valid descriptions and explanations for the educational development of individuals. This is not to deny the importance of propositional forms of understanding. I am arguing for a reconstruction of educational theory into a living form of question and answer which includes propositional contributions from the traditional disciplines of education.

Gadamer (1975) points out that despite Plato we are still not ready for a logic of question and answer. He says that Collingwood (1978) helped to move us forward

but died before he could develop this logic in a systematic way. Collingwood points out that if the meaning of a proposition is relative to the question it answers, its truth must be relative to the same thing. I agree with his point that meaning, agreement and contradiction, truth and falsehood, do not belong to propositions in their own right, they belong only to propositions as the answers to questions.

In saying that the theory should be in a living form, I recognise that this creates a fundamental problem. The way academics think about theory is constrained by propositional logic. All academics working in the field of educational theory present the theory in terms of propositional relationships. However, the purpose of my own text is to direct your attention to the living individuals and the contexts within which a living theory is being produced (Lomax 1986). Again I wish to stress that this is not to deny the importance of propositional forms of understanding. In a living educational theory the logic of the propositional forms, whilst existing within the explanations given by practitioners in making sense of their practice, does not characterise the explanation. Rather the explanation is characterised by the logic of question and answer used in the exploration of questions of the form, 'How do I improve my practice?'

In developing such an approach I have had to come to terms with questions concerning an appropriate methodology for enquiries such as, 'How do I improve this process of education here?'. In looking at video-tapes of my practice I have had to confront the questions which arise on recognising the 'I' in the question as existing as a living contradiction. In the production of an explanation for my practice I have had to question how to include and present values whose meaning can only be clarified in the course of their emergence in practice. I have had to face questions related to validity and generalisability. I have also had to question the power relations which influence the academic legitimacy of a living educational theory.

In such a short article all I can do is outline the present state of my thinking in relation to these questions.

### **1) 'HOW DO I IMPROVE MY PRACTICE?' - A QUESTION OF METHODOLOGY.**

If we look at the locations where a living form of educational theory is being produced (Lomax 1986, McNiff 1988) we can trace the development of a number of teacher/researchers who have used the following form of action/reflection cycle for presenting their claims to know their own educational development as they investigate questions of the form;

*'How do I improve this process of education here?'*

*I experience problems when my educational values are negated in my practice.*

*I imagine ways of overcoming my problems.*

*I act on a chosen solution.*

*I evaluate the outcomes of my actions.*

*I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations ...(and the cycle continues).*

This form of enquiry falls within the tradition of action research. It can be distinguished from other approaches in the tradition through its inclusion of 'I' as a living contradiction within the presentation of a claim to educational knowledge.

## **2) A QUESTION OF ACKNOWLEDGING ONE'S EXISTENCE AS A LIVING CONTRADICTION.**

My insights about the nature of educational theory have been influenced by viewing video-tapes of my classroom practice. I could see that the 'I' in the question 'How do I improve this process of education here?', existed as a living contradiction. By this I mean that 'I' contained two mutually exclusive opposites, the experience of holding educational values and the experience of their negation.

I searched the back issues of Educational Theory to see if I could find details of similar experiences reported by other researchers. I began to appreciate how the crucial issues of logic and values continued to reappear in the Journal. From Cunningham's (1953) analysis of the 'Extensional Limits of Aristotelean Logic', through Mosier's (1967), 'From Enquiry logic to Symbolic logic', to Tostberg's (1976), 'Observations of the Logic Bases of Educational Policy', the debate about the logical basis of educational theory continues to rage in the literature.

A similar debate can be seen in the realm of values. We have "The role of Value Theory in Education" (Butler 1954), 'Are Values Verifiable (Bayles 1960); 'Education and some moves towards a Value Methodology (Clayton 1969); and 'Knowledge and Values' (Smith 1976). What these articles pick out is the continuing concern of educational researchers with the fundamental problems of logic and values in the production of educational theory.

I began to understand the concrete problems experienced by adherents to dialectical and propositional logics when they try to establish a sustained dialogue. The nucleus of dialectics, contradiction, is eliminated from descriptions and explanations presented in the propositional form (Popper 1963). Dialecticians claim that the propositional form masks the dialectical nature of reality (Marcuse 1964). I traced the tension between these logics to differences between Plato and Aristotle. In the Phaedrus, Socrates tells us that there are two ways of coming to know. We break things down into their separate components and we hold things together under a general idea. He says that those thinkers who can hold both the one and the many together he calls dialecticians. Aristotle, on the other hand demands, in his work on interpretation, that the questioner puts his

question into a definite form and asks whether or not a person has a particular characteristic or not. Aristotle's propositional logic eliminates contradictions from correct thought.

An understanding of a living form developed, in my case, from the combination of the following insight from Wittgenstein with visual records of practice.

*"I" is not the name of a person, nor "here" of a place, and "this" is not a name. But they are connected with names. Names are explained by means of them. It is also true that it is characteristic of physics not to use these words.*" (Wittgenstein 1953)

Now 'I', 'this' and 'here', are contained within questions of the form, 'How do I improve this process of education here?'. In viewing video-tapes of our own educational practices I believe that we can see our own 'I's existing as living contradictions. This revelation, through the visual record, is crucial for the reconstruction of educational theory. Yet there is a tendency to reduce the significance of "I" as it appears on a page of text. It is so easy to see the word 'I' and think of this as simply referring to a person. The "I" remains formal and is rarely examined for content in itself. When you view yourself on video you can see and experience your 'I' containing content in itself. By this I mean that you see yourself as a living contradiction, holding educational values whilst at the same time negating them. Is it not such tension, caused by this contradiction, which moves us to imagine alternative ways of improving our situation? By integrating such contradictions in the presentations of our claims to know our educational practice we can construct descriptions and explanations for the educational development of individuals (King 1987). Rather than conceive educational theory as a set of propositional relations from which we generate such descriptions and explanations I am suggesting we produce educational theory in the living form of dialogues (Larter 1987, Jensen 1987) which have their focus in the descriptions and explanations which practitioners are producing for their own value-laden practice.

### **3) HOW DO WE SHOW OUR VALUES IN ACTION?**

The reason that values are fundamental to educational theory is that education is a value-laden practical activity. We cannot distinguish a process as education without making a value-judgement. I am taking such values to be the human goals which we use to give our lives their particular form. These values, which are embodied in our practice, are often referred to in terms such as freedom, justice, democracy, (Peters 1966) and love and productive work (Fromm 1960). When offering an explanation for an individual's educational development these values can be used as reasons for action. For example, if a person is experiencing the negation of freedom, yet believes that she should be free, then the reason why she is acting to become free can be given in terms of freedom, ie, I am acting in this way because I value my freedom. If someone asks why you are working to overcome anti-democratic forces in the work place then I believe that a commitment to the value of democracy would count as a reason to explain your actions. I do not

believe that values are the type of qualities whose meanings can be communicated solely through a propositional form. I think values are embodied in our practice and their meaning can be communicated in the course of their emergence in practice. To understand the values, which move our educational development forward, I think we should start with records of our experience of their negation (Larter 1985,1987). I want to stress the importance of the visual records of our practice. In using such records we can both experience ourselves as living contradictions and communicate our understanding of the value-laden practical activity of education.

Through the use of video-tape the teachers can engage in dialogues with colleagues about their practice. They can show the places where their values are negated. A clear understanding of these values can be shown to emerge in practice through time and struggle (Jensen 1987). The kind of theory I have in mind forms part of the educational practices of the individuals concerned. It is not a theory which can be constituted into a propositional form. It is a description and explanation of practice which is part of the living form of the practice itself. I have suggested a dialogical form enables such a theory to be presented for public criticism. Within this form the action reflection cycle has been found (Lomax 1986) to be an appropriate way of investigating questions of the kind, 'How do we improve this process of education here?'. In this cycle we can study the gradual emergence of our values through time as we struggle to overcome the experience of their negation. We can describe and explain an individual's attempts to improve his or her educational practice (Foster 1980). This approach to educational theory is being developed in a community of educational researchers who are committed to forming and sustaining a dialogical community (Bernstein 1983) and who are willing to offer, for public criticism, records of their practice which are integrated within their claims to know this practice (Lomax 1986). I am suggesting that a form of question and answer can also show how to incorporate insights in the conceptual terms of the traditional forms of knowledge whilst acknowledging the existence of ourselves as living contradictions as we refer to the records of our practice.

#### **4) HOW DO WE KNOW THAT WHAT THE RESEACHER SAYS IS TRUE? - A QUESTION OF VALIDITY.**

Questions of validity are fundamentally important in all research which is concerned with the generation and testing of theory. Researchers need to know what to use as the unit of appraisal and the standards of judgement in order to test a claim to educational knowledge. I suggest that the unit of appraisal is the individual's claim to know his or her educational development. Within this unit of appraisal I use methodological, logical, ethical and aesthetic standards to judge the validity of the claim to knowledge (Whitehead and Foster 1984).

Whilst most researchers may find it strange to take a unit of appraisal as their claim to know their educational development I think the unit is clearly comprehensible. My commitment to this unit owes a great deal to the work of

Michael Polanyi. As I read *Personal Knowledge* (Polanyi 1958), and reflected on my positivist approach to research (Whitehead 1972), Polanyi's work fulfilled its purpose of, "*stripping away the crippling mutilations which centuries of objectivist thought have imposed on the minds of men*".

*"In grounding my epistemology in Personal Knowledge I am conscious that I have taken a decision to understand the world from my own point of view, as a person claiming originality and exercising his personal judgement responsibly with universal intent. This commitment determines the nature of the unit of appraisal in my claim to knowledge. The unit is the individual's claim to know his or her own educational development."* (Whitehead 1985).

I have given above some indication of the nature of the standards of judgement I use to test the validity of an individual's claim to know their own educational development. The questions I ask in judging the validity of the claim include:

a) *Was the enquiry carried out in a systematic way? One methodological criteria I have used is the action reflection cycle described above (Foster 1980, Forrest 1983)*

b) *Are the values used to distinguish the claim to knowledge as educational knowledge clearly shown and justified?*

c) *Does the claim contain evidence of a critical accommodation of propositional contributions from the traditional disciplines of education?*

d) *Are the assertions made in the claim clearly justified?*

e) *Is there evidence of an enquiring and critical approach to an educational problem?*

I characterise the application of these criteria as an approach to social validation. They are related to Habermas' view on the claims to validity I am making if I wish to participate in a process of reaching understanding with you. Habermas (1976) says that I must choose a comprehensible expression so that we can understand one another. I must have the intention of communicating a true proposition so that we can share my claim to knowledge. I must want to express my intentions truthfully so that we can believe what I say. Finally, I must choose an utterance that is right so that we can accept what I say and we can agree with one another with respect to a recognized normative background. Moreover, communicative action can continue undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified. However, such claims to knowledge may conform to acceptable standards of judgement yet still raise questions about their generalisability.

## **5) HOW CAN WE MOVE FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE UNIVERSAL? - A QUESTION OF GENERALISABILITY.**

Instead of thinking of an educational theory in terms of a set of propositional relationships between linguistic concepts I am proposing a view of educational theory as a dynamic and living form whose content changes with the developing public conversations of those involved in its creation (Whitehead & Lomax 1987). The theory is constituted by the practitioners' public descriptions and explanations of their own practice. The theory is located not solely within these accounts but in the relationship between the accounts and the practice. It is this relationship which constitutes the descriptions and explanations as a living form of theory. In being generated from the practices of individuals it has the capacity to relate directly to those practices. To the extent that the values underpinning the practices, the dialogues of question and answer and the systematic form of action/reflection cycle, are shared assumptions within this research community, then we are constructing an educational theory with some potential for generalisability. The 'general' in a living theory still refers to 'all' but instead of being represented in a linguistic concept, 'all' refers to the shared form of life between the individuals constituting the theory. Now History shows us that new ideas have often met with scepticism, rejection or hostility from those who are working within the dominant paradigm. Researchers who are trying to make original and acknowledged contributions to their subject, education, might expect powerful opposition to their ideas.

## **6) WHICH POWER RELATIONS INFLUENCE THE ACADEMIC LEGITIMACY OF A LIVING EDUCATIONAL THEORY? - A QUESTION OF THE POLITICS OF TRUTH.**

My enquiry has led me to the question of how to support those power relations which support the autonomy of practical rationality within education. As part of this enquiry I think it important to examine the power relations which are distorting, undermining and systematically blocking the development of dialogical communities.

*"... In addition to the attempt to recover and reclaim the autonomy of practical rationality and show its relevance to all domains of culture, we realize that today the type of dialogical communities that are required for its flourishing are being distorted, undermined, and systematically blocked from coming into existence.... But today, when we seek for concrete exemplars of the types of dialogical communities in which practical rationality flourishes, we are at a much greater loss. Yet we can recognize how deeply rooted this frustrated aspiration is in human life." (Bernstein 1983)*

Whilst this part of my enquiry is still embryonic I am continuing to study my own educational development as I engage with the following three problems.

A crucial issue in gaining academic legitimacy for a particular view of educational theory concerns the institutional arrangements for appointing examiners for Research Degrees in Education. For example in some institutions a student is not permitted,



under any circumstances, to question the competence of an examiner once the examiner has been appointed by the Senate. Given that the academics in one such institution have committed themselves to the statement, "*A University has a moral purpose in society in the sense of upholding certain standards of truth, freedom and democracy*", this raises a question on how the academics are upholding these values.

I wish to question the power relations which sustain the view that competence is a matter of appointment rather than of judgement, on the grounds that any academic judgement should, as a matter of principle, be open to criticism and to the possibility of incompetence. Could any academic keep his or her integrity and at the same time accept the truth of power which sustains the view that no questions of competence can be raised in the light of actual judgements?

I argue that, on principle, the power of truth is served by permitting such a challenge in relation to an examiner's judgement rather than seeing competence to be a procedural matter of appointment.

The second problem concerns the problem of self-identification in texts for publication. I would have had a problem in sending this work to a refereed Journal such as Educational Theory. The problem follows from a central point in this paper that academics and practitioners should identify themselves in their work context and, at some point in their research, offer for public criticism a claim to know their own educational development. However, the guidelines and procedures of the staff of Educational Theory state,

*"Manuscripts are subjected to a double-blind reviewing process ( i.e. reviewers do not know the identity of authors, the authors will not learn the identity of reviewers)*

...

*To preserve the advantages of blind reviewing, authors should avoid self-identification in the text as well as the footnotes of their manuscripts."*

In asking that an alternative form of presentation is considered by the readership of such Journals as Educational Theory, a presentation which demands self-identification, I am conscious of entering, as Walker (1985) says, long-standing and fiercely defended positions in the history and philosophy of science. I do not enter such a debate lightly. I have found it necessary to engage with such politics of educational knowledge for the sake of developing an educational theory which can be directly related to the educational development of individuals.

The third problem is one in which the power relations in the academic community support the power of truth against the truth of power. I am thinking about the problem of testing one's ideas against those of others. In supporting the power of truth against the truth of power, academics offer their ideas for public criticism in a forum where the power of rationality is the force of better

argument is paramount. Acknowledging mistakes is a fundamental part in developing our ideas.

In his paper, *Educational Theory, Practical Philosophy and Action Research*, Elliott (1987) treats Hirst (1983) rather gently and chooses a statement which does not fully acknowledge Hirst's mistake in advocating the 'disciplines approach to educational theory'.

*"It is not so much that what I wrote in 1966 was mistaken as that what I omitted led to a distorting emphasis. Educational theory I still see as concerned with determining rationally defensible principles for educational practice."* (Hirst 1983)

Because our views about educational theory affect the way we see human existence I believe it imperative to acknowledge that mistakes have been made and to understand the nature of these mistakes so that we can move forward.

Paul Hirst has in fact made a most generous acknowledgement that he was mistaken in his view of educational theory.

*"In many characterisations of educational theory, my own included, principles justified in this way have until recently been regarded as at best pragmatic maxims having a first crude and superficial justification in practice that in any rationally developed theory would be replaced by principles with more fundamental, theoretical, justification. That now seems to me to be a mistake."* (Hirst 1983)

I believe both Hirst and Elliott are making a mistake in their view of rationality. They both subscribe to a view of rationality which leads them to use a propositional form of discourse in their characterisations of educational theory. What I am advocating is that the propositional form of discourse in the disciplines of education should be incorporated within a living form of theory. This theory should not be seen in purely propositional terms. It should be seen to exist in the lives of practitioners as they reflect on the implications of asking themselves questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'

What I wish to do is to push Elliott's position forward. I think Gadamer points the way, but his propositional logic does not permit him to make the creative leap to a new synthesis.

Elliott points out that in developing our understanding we have to risk our values and beliefs. As we open ourselves to the things we seek to understand they will force us to become aware of problematic pre-judgements and to criticise them in the light of new meanings.

Let us be clear about my purpose. I am attempting to make an acknowledged and scholarly contribution to knowledge of my subject, education. This purpose is part of my contract of employment as a University Academic. I have chosen the field of educational theory because I am committed to the profession of education and

believe that it needs a theory which can adequately describe and explain the educational development of individuals. I am writing as a professional in education. In saying this I want to distinguish my activities from those of a philosopher, psychologist, sociologist or historian. I value their contributions to education but I do not believe that educational theory can be adequately characterised by any of them. I believe the limits of philosophers, whose work I have benefited from, such as Elliott, Carr (1986) and Hirst, are limited by the propositional form of their discourse. As philosophers, rather than educationalists, they have not taken the leap necessary to comprehend the nature of educational theory. I am saying that educationalists, through studying their own attempts to answer questions such as, 'How do I improve my practice?', are constructing a living educational theory within which the work of Hirst, Carr, Elliott, Habermas and Gadamer, is usefully integrated (Eames 1987, Larter 1987).

It seems to me to be crucial to ask the right questions in Collingwood's sense of moving our enquiry forward. In his work on Educational Theory and Social Change, Pritchard (1988) says that the questions are: "How much do we wish to see, How much do we wish to understand? What conceptions, and alternative conceptions, of human practices do we have that will enable us to enhance and significantly enrich life and well-being?".

Pritchard argues that we urgently need studies within educational theory which will serve to demystify institutions and to unmask ideologies. He concludes:

*"It is evident that the attempt to 'raid' the disciplines of education and to use materials drawn from these areas without considerable theoretical understanding and support is ill-advised and, ultimately, is based upon an incoherent conception of the theory of education."*

My worry is that Pritchard's questions are still grounded within the conceptual forms of the disciplines of education. In order to construct an educational theory for professional practice I believe we will have to face the practical and theoretical implications of asking ourselves questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'.

In the past I have been critical of academics who are unwilling to study their own educational development and subject their claim to know this development to social validation (Whitehead and Foster 1984). It seems that Whitty (1986) voices a similar criticism in the context of the work of American and Australian sociologists on the politics and sociology of education.

*"Yet, if the prescriptions of these writers are not to remain purely rhetorical, there is an urgent need for them to engage in an active exploration of the implications of their work among the political constituencies in whose interests it is supposedly being carried out."*

I hope to demonstrate my own engagement by investigating how relations which support the power of truth against the truth of power influence my own educational development. These influences are emerging as I engage with the politics of truth within arenas such as the Educational Research Associations and Institutions of Higher Education.

In conclusion I identify with a conversation between Giles Deleuze and Michel Foucault which considers the necessity for the practitioner of speaking on his or her own behalf.

*"You were the first to teach us something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others. We ridiculed representation and said it was finished, but we failed to draw the consequences of this 'theoretical' conversion - to appreciate the theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf." (Foucault 1980)*

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The following paper shows the beginning of the transformation in my understanding of my educational development from the propositional logic of my previous papers into the dialogical and dialectical forms of this text. As I said above this transformation came out of the fury and disgust I experienced following the disciplinary hearing in 1987. I continued to think about the nature of an educational theory which could explain the educational development of an individual. My determination had been strengthened by the above violations to my academic freedom, integrity and sense of social justice. I presented the following paper at the First World Congress on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management in Brisbane in July 1990. I think you will see that I am now integrating my understanding of my existence as a living contradiction within the power relations of my workplace in the explanation for my educational development.