

The Practice of Helping Students to Find Their First Person Voice in Creating Living-Theories for Education

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In a living theory approach to action research (Whitehead, 1989) individuals produce validated explanations of their educational influence in their own learning (first person action research), in the learning of others (second person action research) and in the learning of the social formations in which the research lives, works and researches (third person action research) (Whitehead 2007). At the heart of these explanations are the first person voices of the action researcher. Hence it is a necessary condition for the creation of a living-theory that students learn to use their first person voice. I make a distinction: Living Theory research differs from a living-theory. This is a distinction between the general principles of living theory research and the unique explanations produced by individuals that constitute their living-theories. When I use 'I', I am not referring to an egotistical 'I'. I am referring to the relational 'I' of infinite conversation, described by Buber (1970).

How dissonant the I of the ego sounds! ... But how beautiful and legitimate the vivid and

emphatic I of Socrates sounds! It is the I of infinite conversation. (p. 117)

To help students find their first person voice I tell them the following story of how I learned to include my own voice in my explanations of educational influence in the face of pressures from academics to eliminate my 'I' from my explanations of educational influence. I offer my story as a way to exemplify how courage can be found and success can ensue.

My understanding of the importance the 'I' of the action researcher emerged from early experiences of the constraints in my studies of educational theory at the Institute of Education of the University of London during my studies for the Academic Diploma in Education between 1968 and 1970. At the time of the award of the Diploma I accepted the view of educational theory, known as the disciplines approach, in which it was claimed that educational theory was constituted by the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education. During my studies I benefitted from a group of highly motivated

academics who were also inspirational teachers. They were passionate about their disciplines and this inspired me to remain a student of the most advanced philosophical and social science theories of the day.

In 1970 I moved on from the Academic Diploma Course into a part-time Masters of Education programme in the psychology of education, whilst a full time science teacher and Head of the Science Department at Erkenwald Comprehensive School in Barking, London. It was whilst undertaking a 'Preliminary investigation of the processes through which adolescents acquire scientific understanding', employing a controlled experimental design within the Science Department, that I began to question the assumptions in the disciplines approach to educational theory. I began to appreciate that the methods and underlying assumptions of my enquiry were not getting me closer to answering my action oriented question, 'How do I help my pupils to improve their scientific understanding?' What I was doing was testing the validity of Piaget's Cognitive Stage Theory and Bloom's Taxonomy. A worthy but quite different outcome. In retrospect I should have understood that my tutors, as academic psychologists, would be focused on developing theories in the psychology of education, rather than on supporting my exploration of the implications of asking, researching and answering my pedagogical question.

On receiving my MA degree in 1972 I knew that there was something wrong with the dominant disciplines approach to education. I knew that what was wrong was something about the denial of the significance of my own voice, my own 'I', in explaining my educational influence in my enquiry. In 1983 Paul Hirst (1983), one of the proponents of the disciplines approach, acknowledged a mistake with a clarity that enabled me to articulate what I had known, in an intuitive and embodied sense, was wrong with the disciplines approach to 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. Rationally defensible practical principles, I suggest, must of their nature stand up to such practical tests and without that are necessarily inadequate. (Hirst, 1983, p. 18)

The crucial mistake was in failing to recognize the importance of the first person voice in articulating the practical principles used by an individual to explain their educational influences in learning. This failure led to the 'replacement' of these practical principles by the abstract explanatory principles in the theories of the disciplines of education. I could now make a distinction between educational research and education research. Education researchers produce explanations within the disciplines of education. Educational researchers produce explanations of educational influences in learning. I stress the importance of 'educational influences' because not all learning is educational.

In helping students to find their first person voice in the creation of their living-theories I share my experience of being pressured, by academics and their theories, to 'replace' the practical principles I found so useful for explaining my educational influence, with their own theoretical abstractions. My experience invariably strikes a chord of recognition with students as they have often experienced criticism that stories grounded in their own 'I' are 'merely' anecdotal and need to be more 'objective' which seems to often imply the need to remove the 'I'.

RECOGNIZING ONE'S 'I' AS A LIVING CONTRADICTION

Having focused on the importance of including their own 'I' in their enquiries, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' I then share the following story about the importance of recognizing one's 'I' as a 'living contradiction'.

The epistemological significance of including 'I' as a 'living contradiction' in the explanations of educational influence of living-theories is that it challenges the 2,500 year dominance of propositional forms of theory that are grounded in the Aristotelean logic that eliminates contradiction from correct thought. This limitation in Aristotelan logic does not include Aristotle's idea of praxis and its use by action researchers. Following my recognition of myself as a living contradiction, in the sense of holding together the experience of holding certain values with the experience of negating these values, I read Ilyenkov's (1977) book on dialectical logic in which he asked the question, 'If an object exists as a living contradiction what must the thought (statement about the object) be that expresses it?' (Ilyenkov, 1977, p. 313). Having experienced myself as a living contradiction I coined the phrase 'living educational theory' for an individual's explanation of his or her own learning in an enquiry of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'

This story, about including living contradictions in explanations of influence emerged from the context of my teaching science to 11–18 year olds, during 1971, when I was Head of a secondary school science department in Barking, London. I believed in enquiry learning in which pupils posed their own questions. Watching video-tapes of my classrooms I could see myself giving my pupils the questions to answer rather than encouraging them to form their own questions and then to make a response. I experienced myself as a living contradiction in the sense that I held together my valuing of enquiry learning together with its negation. I had the disconfirming data on the video that I was not doing what I believed I was doing, my espoused practice was not met in lived practice. This experience immediately stimulated my imagination to think of ways in which I could live my value of enquiry learning more fully in my practice. I acted on the possibility I thought most likely to be effective and over several weeks could see that some of my students were asking their own questions and

that I was making a serious response. All the students I have worked with in higher education recognize their existence, their 'I', as a living contradiction in the sense that they are not yet living as fully as they believe to be possible, the values that they are committed to. I am thinking here of their ontological values in the sense of the values they use to give meaning and purpose to their lives.

SHARING STORIES

To strengthen the student's confidence about resisting the imposition of inappropriate conceptual frameworks in 'replacing' their practical principles, I share the following story in which I found myself succumbing to pressures and then transcending them with the help of the criticism of the teachers I was working with.

In 1976 I worked with a group of six teachers on a Schools Council funded Mixed Ability Exercise to improve learning for 11–14 year olds in mixed ability science groups. The proposal was grounded in the idea of the teacher as researcher, rather than in action research. It was during the project that I first explicated the following action–reflection cycle.

In March 1976 I produced an evaluation report that explained the educational influences of the teachers in their pupils' learning in terms of the most advanced social theories and models of the day. On showing the report to academic colleagues they commented favourably on my use of the academic model in the explanation.

However, on showing the report to the teachers I was working with, all six commented that they could not see themselves in it. I recognized that I had eliminated the voices of those I had worked with! I had replaced their voices with the conceptual theories and models of others. Working with Paul Hunt, a former student of mine, who was in his first year of teaching, I returned to the video-tapes, transcriptions of audio taped conversations

with pupils and teachers, and copies of the learning resources produced for the pupils, together with copies of the pupils' work.

On showing this second report to the teachers, they all agreed that this was a valid explanation of their educational influences in the project. This report marks my first explication of the use of an action–reflection cycle in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' The report was organized within the form of an action–reflection cycle in terms of the teachers' expression of their concerns and problems; our imagined possibilities for improving practice in an action plan; our actions and data gathering to enable us to make an evidence-based judgment on our influence; our evaluations of the influence of our actions; our modifications of our concerns, ideas and actions in the light of our evaluations; the production of a validated and evidence-based explanation of our influences in our own learning and in the learning of students.

Since 1976 I have used this action–reflection (AR) cycle (Whitehead, 1980, p. 91; 1995) with students to enhance their confidence that there is a systematic form of enquiry which they can use to meet criticism that their enquiries lack methodological rigour. In workshops all over the world participants tell me that once the AR cycle has been made explicit they recognize it as something that they do intuitively but can now clearly articulate that this is what they are doing:

- 1 What do I want to improve? What is my concern?
Why am I concerned?
- 2 Imagining possibilities and choosing one of them to act on in an action plan.
- 3 As I am acting what data will I collect to enable me to judge my educational influence in my professional context as I answer my question?
- 4 Evaluating the influence of the actions in terms of values and understandings.
- 5 Modifying concerns, ideas and actions in the light of evaluations.
- 6 Producing a validated, evidence-based explanation of educational influences in learning.

In explaining an individual's educational practice using an action–reflection cycle

I also stress that the 'structuring principles of the explanation are educational values as they are expressed in an individual's form of life' (Whitehead, 1980, p. 91).

ONTOLOGY – CULTIVATING A SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO TEACHING

In the creation of living-theories I stress the importance of ontological values. These are the values used by an individual to give meaning and purpose to their life. Throughout my working life, beginning in 1967, I have been influenced, as a secular humanist, by Fromm's (1960, p. 18) insight that if a person can face the truth without panic they will realize that there is no purpose to life other than the one they give to their lives through their loving relationships and productive work. I love what I do in education in the sense that I have found meaning and purpose in supporting learning in others and myself that carries hope for the future of humanity. I am sure that there are many interpretations of the meaning of 'love' in the idea of 'loving what I am doing'. In working with Liz Campbell (Campbell, Delong, Griffin and Whitehead, 2013) I share her understanding of love, from the work of Peck (1978):

Love according to Peck (1978) is, 'the will to extend one's self for the purpose of one's own or another's spiritual growth' (p. 85)... I explain that I use the term spiritual according to the definition bell hooks provides, 'one who seeks to know and live according to values that promote universal well-being' (hooks, 2001, p. 19). (Campbell, 2013, p. 50)

I also use the idea of 'spiritual' in terms of values that promote universal well-being. Since engaging with the ideas of Martin Buber (1970) in the early 1970s I have been influenced by his understanding of 'I–You' relationships. I believe that a form of 'I–You' relationship is at the heart of my educational relationships and ontological values.

I began my initial teacher education programme in the Department of Education

at Newcastle University in 1966 in the UK with an ontological valuing of a flow of life-affirming energy that I know is at the heart of my finding meaning and purpose in my existence. Many living theory action researchers (including Pound, 2003; Laidlaw 1996; Huxtable, 2009, 2012) have acknowledged that they have experienced the influence of such flows of life-affirming energy. Paul Tillich (1962, p. 168) has helped me to express the ontological significance of this flow of energy when he writes about being affirmed by the 'power of being-itself'.

Tillich's meaning is expressing a theistic commitment to his Protestant theology. My humanistic experience and expression of a life-affirming energy is cosmological rather than theological. By this I mean that I identify the ground of a flow of life-affirming energy with a source outside myself whose genesis, whilst a mystery, I feel with gratitude, as it continues to flow through me.

I draw the attention of students to their embodied expressions of meanings of energy-flowing values with the help of digitalized multi-media explanations of educational influences in learning.

I have also been helped to explain my educational influences in the learning of my students by the original contributions to knowledge of my students that focus on their unique ontologies. These are freely available through the Internet (<http://www.actionresearch.net>). I share these with other students. For example, I encourage students to find their first person voice through expressing the ontological values of 'presencing empathetic responsiveness' and 'presencing developmental possibilities'. Keith Kinsella (2012) introduced me to these two values in his doctoral research and they help me to explain what I do.

EMPATHETIC RESONANCE

In encouraging students to find their first person voice in their living-theory I show them a research method that responds

to digitalized visual data with 'empathetic resonance' in clarifying and communicating the meanings of their embodied expressions of their ontological values.

I first encountered the idea of empathetic resonance in the writings of Sardello (2008). For Sardello, *empathetic resonance* is the resonance of the individual soul coming into resonance with the Soul of the World (Sardello, 2008, p. 13). Sardello's meaning carries a theistic content. I am using *empathetic resonance* from my humanistic perspective to communicate a feeling of the immediate presence of the other in expressing the living values that the other experiences as giving meaning and purpose to their life.

The method of 'empathetic resonance' involves the use of digitalized visual data of one's practice. The cursor is moved backwards and forwards, smoothly, along the clip to find places where the embodied expressions on the video evoke the strongest empathetic response. The movement of the cursor, from this point, gives the antecedents of the expression and the subsequent expressions in their social context. This is helpful in clarifying the meanings of embodied values as they emerge in practice. Huxtable (2009) has explained this process in more detail and used it within her own doctoral enquiry (Huxtable, 2012).

This process of clarifying the meanings of energy-flowing embodied values as explanatory principles is related to the methodologies of living-theories (Whitehead, 2009). Whilst the ideas on ontology, methodology and epistemology are considered under separate headings, which might appear to suggest that they are separate and discrete, they are in fact, distinct and in dynamic relationships.

ENCOURAGING METHODOLOGICAL INVENTIVENESS IN THE ENQUIRY, 'HOW DO I IMPROVE WHAT I AM DOING?'

I introduce students to Dadds' and Hart's (2001) insights about methodological

inventiveness. These stress the importance of each individual's capacity to create their own methodology for exploring the implications of their questions. Dadds and Hart (2001, p. 166) explain that perhaps their most important insight is the awareness that, for some practitioner researchers, creating their own unique way through their research may be as important as their self-chosen research focus.

Saying that each living-theory methodology is unique does not mean that there are no general principles that can be used to guide the generation of the methodology (Whitehead, 2008). Some of the general, methodological principles are intimately related to the above ontology and the epistemology below. Hence, in explaining how I support students in finding their first person voice in their living-theories I want to stress that my responses to each student are unique in being guided by their own responses as they are exploring the implications of asking, researching and answering their own question of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'

I also encourage students to engage with a range of methodological approaches to research. I use Cresswell's (2007) analysis of five methodological approaches: case study; narrative enquiry; grounded theory; phenomenological; ethnographic, to encourage students to engage with insights from each of these approaches to see if they can use them in the creation of their own living-theory methodology. I also focus on autoethnographic research as this approach encourages the inclusion of the researchers 'I' in relation to cultural influences. However, Cresswell encourages researchers to make a choice between the methodologies, whilst a researcher, in developing their living-theory methodology integrates insights from different methodologies where appropriate.

EPISTEMOLOGY

In supporting students epistemologically, I stress that each living-theorist is a knowledge-creator.

I stress the importance of:

- 1 Clarifying the meanings of the energy-flowing values that can constitute both explanatory principles and living standards of judgment;
- 2 Ensuring that the logics of the explanations clarify for a reader the mode of thought used by the researcher for comprehending their explanation as rational – these logics are referred to below as living-logics (Whitehead, 2010);
- 3 Ensuring the quality validity of the explanations in the sense of their validity.

1. Clarifying the meanings of energy-flowing values

We express energy in everything that we do. So, an explanation of what we are doing needs to include a representation of this energy (Vasilyuk, 1991, p. 64). I have found digital, visual data from practice enables this representation through the process of empathetic resonance described above. I encourage students to use this process in clarifying and communicating the meanings of their embodied expressions of ontological values. One of the distinguishing characteristics of an explanation is the logic that defines its rationality.

2. The living-logics of the explanations of living-theories

In supporting students in finding their own voices in their living-theories I stress the importance of understanding the logic of their explanations. I am using logic in Marcuse's (1964, p. 105) sense as the mode of thought that is appropriate for comprehending the real as rational. The rationality of an explanation is vital for its comprehensibility. There has been a 2,500 year old argument between formal logicians and dialecticians about the nature of the rationality that should distinguish the rationality of theories. I have documented (Whitehead, 1982, 1992) the arguments between formal

logicians and dialecticians. I highlight Popper's arguments (Popper, 1963) to show that dialectical theories are based on nothing better than a loose and woolly way of speaking and entirely useless as theories. I contrast Popper's argument with Marcuse's analysis that shows how propositional theories that abide by the rules of formal logic mask the dialectical nature of reality. Adherents to formal and dialectical logics have shown a tendency to deny the rationality of each others' logics.

In enabling students to have confidence in the rationalities of their living-theories I point to explanations (Whitehead and Rayner, 2009; Charles, 2007; Huxtable, 2012; Kinsella, 2012) that are distinguished by a relationally dynamic awareness of space and boundaries (Rayner, 2004). The living-logics (Whitehead, 2010) that distinguish the rationalities of these explanations can include insights from both propositional and dialectical theories, without denying the rationalities of the logics that define the rationalities of these theories.

3. Ensuring the validity of the explanations

Every student of action research I have worked with has been concerned to establish the validity of their explanations of influence. I ask each action researcher to ground the validity of their explanations in the following decision and responsibility for their personal knowledge (Polanyi, 1958):

To understand the world from one's own point of view as an individual claiming originality and exercising personal judgment, responsibly with universal intent. (p. 327)

To answer criticisms that this grounding in personal knowledge is not sufficiently robust in terms of the validity of the explanations I introduce Popper's (1975) idea that we strengthen the objectivity of our explanations through the mutual rational controls of critical discussion (Popper, 1975, p. 44). I also

introduce the idea of a validation group of between 3 and 8 peers who will subject the action researcher's explanations of influence to the rational controls of critical discussion with the help of four questions I derived from Habermas' four criteria of social validity in which the writer chooses a comprehensible expression so that writer and reader can understand one another. The writer must have the intention of communicating a true proposition so that the reader can share the knowledge of the writer. The writer must want to express his intentions truthfully so that the reader can believe the utterance of the speaker. Finally the writer must choose an utterance that is right so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance 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 (Habermas, 1976, pp. 2–3).

I ask action researchers to submit their explanations to their validation groups, which can include one's students (Griffin, 2013), and ask for responses to the following questions:

How can I enhance the comprehensibility of my explanation?

How can I strengthen the evidence I use to justify the assertions I make?

How can I deepen and extend my understanding of the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences on my writings and practice?

How can I enhance the authenticity of my explanation in showing over time and interaction that I am truly committed to living as fully as possible, the values I claim to hold?

Because I stress the importance of making public the action researcher's living-theory I emphasize the importance of MacIntyre's (1988) insights:

The rival claims to truth of contending traditions of enquiry depend for their vindication upon the adequacy and the explanatory power of the histories

which the resources of each of those traditions in conflict enable their adherents to write. (p. 403)

In contributing to these resources with their living-theories, action researchers are enhancing the flow of values and understandings that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

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