Action Research to Improve Coaching with Living Theories

Notes for a keynote address by Jack Whitehead to the Association for Coaching 10th Anniversary Conference from Inner Game to Neuroscience on the 22nd June 2012 in Edinburgh.

A 37:31 minute video of the keynote address

at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXL2XGG4z_k

> The neuroplastic revolution has implications for, among other things, our understanding of how love, sex, grief, relationships, learning, addictions, culture, technology, and psychotherapies change our brains. All of the humanities, social sciences and physical sciences, insofar as they deal with human nature, are affected, as are all forms of training. All of these disciplines will have to come to terms with the fact of the self-changing brain and with the realization that the architecture of the brain differs from one person to the next and that it changes in the course of our individual lives. (Doidge, 2007, pp xi-xvi)

Abstract

This presentation provides an overview of action research with its systematic use of action-reflection cycles to improve coaching practice.

These action-reflection cycles include the expression of concern about what one wishes to improve; the creation of action plans; acting and gathering data to make a judgment about the effectiveness of the actions; evaluating the effectiveness of the actions; modifying concerns, action plans and actions in the light of the evaluations; producing a validated explanation of the action-researchers influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which they live and work.

These validated explanations are called living-theories. The importance of the values-base in sustaining motivation for improving practice will focus on the values used by action researchers and coaches to give meaning and purpose to their lives in their professional practice. The overview will focus on the practicalities of beginning the action planning process and of the importance of working with practitioners in the creation and sharing of their narratives of learning as they work to improve their practice and to contribute to the knowledge-base of coaching.

Introduction

I first want to thank the organizers of this 10th Anniversary Conference of the Association for Coaching for the opportunity to share the presentations on the theme of 'From Inner Game To Neuroscience', and to learn about recent developments in some of the fields that have influenced coaching in the past. In my presentation I accept the important idea of neuroplasticity and introduce the idea of living theories in relation to improving coaching practice in the hope that the creation of these theories will be useful in influencing the development of coaching in the years to come.

There are many sociohistorical and sociocultural influences that can be seen in a wide range of the professional practices that coaches are seeking to improve. These influences can be seen in gender, race and other social stereotypes. They can be seen in the ways many of us have been taught to think and to express our ideas with 'taken-for-granted' assumptions. I am thinking particularly of the ways in which we might have been taught to remove the 'I' from our discourses about knowledge on the grounds that 'I' accounts are merely subjective and anecdotal and lack objectivity. I am thinking of the ways in which we have been taught to represent our embodied knowledge, the knowledge in what we do, in pages of printed text. I am thinking of the ways in which we have been influenced to see ourselves as consumers and regurgitators of the knowledge of others rather than seeing ourselves as knowledge-creators with values that carry hope for the future of humanity.

In this presentation I shall focus on some implications of acknowledging 'I' as a living contradiction in questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' The use of 'I' as a living contradiction in contributions to knowledge does appear to conflict with a 2,500 year history of a logic that removes contradiction from correct thought. My insistence on including 'I' as a living contradiction is because of my recognition that I, and the individuals I work with, all acknowledge the importance of recognizing the motivating power of recognizing that they are not living the values they believe in, and hold themselves accountable to, as fully as possible. I imagine that everyone can recognize those experiences in which they are conscious of holding together the values they believe in, together with their negation. My first use of video in 1971 in my science teaching, revealed my existence as a living contradiction as I thought that I had established enquiry learning in my classroom. I mean this in the sense that I was making a response to the questions that my pupils were asking. I could see on the video that, however subtly, I was 'giving the pupils' the questions rather than responding to questions the pupils were asking themselves.

To distinguish my use of 'I', from an egotistical use of 'I', I usually draw on the following insights from the poetic expression of Martin Buber (with a non-sexist use of language):

> How much of a person a man is depends on how strong the I of the basic word I-You is in the human duality of his I.
>
> The way he says I - what he means when he says I - decides where a man belongs and where he goes. The word "I" is the true shibboleth of humanity.
>
> Listen to it!

How dissonant the I of the ego sounds! When it issues from tragic lips, tense with some self-contradiction that they try to hold back, it can move us to great pity. When it issues from chaotic lips that savagely, heedlessly, unconsciously represent contradiction, it can make us shudder. When the lips are vain and smooth, it sounds embarrassing or disgusting.

Those who pronounce the severed I, wallowing in the capital letter, uncover the shame of the world spirit that has been debased to mere spirituality.

But how beautiful and legitimate the vivid and emphatic I of Socrates sounds! It is the I of infinite conversation, and the air of conversation is present on all its ways, even before his judges, even in the final hour in prison. This I lived in that relation to man which is embodied in conversation. It believed in the actuality of men and went out toward them. Thus it stood together with them in actuality and is never severed from it. Even solitude cannot spell forsakenness, and when the human world falls silent for him, he hears his daimonion say You.

How beautiful and legitimate the full I of Goethe sounds! It is the I of pure intercourse with nature. Nature yields to it and speaks ceaselessly with it; she reveals here mysteries to it and yet does not betray her mystery. It believes in her and says to the rose: "So it is You" - and at once shares the same actuality with the rose. Hence, when it returns to itself, the spirit of actuality stays with it; the vision of the sun clings to the blessed eye that recalls its own likeness to the sun, and the friendship of the elements accompanies man into the calm of dying and rebirth.

Thus the "adequate, true, and pure" I-saying of the representatives of association, the Socratic and the Goethean persons, resounds through the ages. (Buber, 1970, p. 117)

In some 45 years engagement with continuing professional development programmes I have become increasingly confident that practitioners use action reflection cycles to improve their practice, once they see and feel themselves as living contradictions in terms of living and not living their values as fully as they can. This feeling of contradiction can sometimes be felt as a need to improve a skill and develop understand. I like the way Sue Burnell intends to explore the importance of reflective practice in improving skills in her workshop at this conference.

Reflective practice has a role to play in helping leaders extend the capability in these softer areas; reflection fosters change and can trigger transformation. Coaches can help address this problem by modelling reflective practice in the way we work with our clients. Action research provides a framework for doing this. It facilitates working with leaders in their context, with the difficulties they are experiencing now. Furthermore, attending to difficulties at an organisational level, the types of problems leaders are trying to solve are more usefully approached with enquiry and a mindset of continuous improvement, as opposed to solutions and quick fixes. (Burnell – e-mail correspondence 24 May 2012).

Following my focus on action reflection cycles I shall examine the significance of using living theories with action research to improve coaching. In doing this I am agreeing with Forde and O' Brien (2011) that we need to reinvigorate the concept of professional learning with a sense of the key place that knowledge and understanding have in helping to explore values and purposes and the practices we use to achieve these. (p. 86). I am thinking here of the importance of the coach in enabling the person they are coaching to come to recognise their ontological values as they emerge and are clarified in the process of researching their practice to improve it. I am thinking of the transformational importance that recognizing, communicating and understanding that these values have, in forming the explanatory principles and living standards of judgment in both improving practice and generating knowledge.

In exploring the values and purposes we use in working and researching to improve our practices I shall focus on the use of digital technologies in the creation of visual narratives of professional learning and on publishing multi-media accounts of our educational influences in journals such as the Educational Journal of Living Theories (EJOLTS). In conclusion I shall focus on the importance of coaching in enhancing the validity of explanations of educational influence in learning, using four criteria of social validity influenced by the ideas of Habermas (1976, pp. 2-3).

I usually make a distinction between what I do as coach, mentor and supervisor. As I coach I work to improve specific practices that are often skills based. As a mentor I respond in a wholistic way to the concerns and interests of the mentee. As a supervisor I accept an educational responsibility to assist an individual to a successful completed of an accredited programme. These are not mutually exclusive activities and I use coaching and mentoring within my supervisory practices.

In emphasizing our capacities as knowledge-creators I shall stress the importance of producing valid explanations of our educational influences in our own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work. I call these explanations 'living educational theories' for the reasons I shall give later.

Action Research with Coaching

The ideas of Torrance (2011) on the nature of coaching relate closely to the use of action-reflection cycles in the improvement of practice, especially where she says that the identification of desired outcomes, changes in behaviour and strategies to achieve these outcomes, along with examining progress towards realizing the desired outcomes, all become part of the coaching conversation. (p.57)

Here is one representation (Wallace, 2001) of action-reflection cycles that I like because of its clarity and attractive diagrammatic representation. Such action-reflection cycles have been used to improve practice and explain their learning by individuals between 6 – 65 year olds and beyond (Mounter, 2006; Huxtable, 2012).

Thinking Actively in a Social Context (TASC) developed by Belle Wallace (2001, p. 22).

The significance of action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009, 2011) with coaching for both improving practice and generating knowledge can be appreciated in relation to the theme of the 2012 Conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), 'To Know Is Not Enough'. According to Ball and Tyson (2011) educational researchers have been vigilant in fulfilling one half of the AERA mission to advance knowledge about education and to encourage scholarly inquiry related to education but have been less vigilant in promoting educational research to improve education and to serve the public good. In a symposium to this conference on 'To Know Is Not Enough: Action Research as the Core of Educational Research' I presented my arguments (Whitehead 2012) to explain why researchers, who form their questions from within the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of traditional disciplines of research could advance knowledge and encourage scholarly enquiry, but are limited in improving practice and serving the public good because their questions were not of the form, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' Such questions focus on improving practice and can include values of improvement that are directly related to serving the public good.

Using an action research approach with coaching includes making public explanations of learning in improving practice. The idea of 'making public' is important for research if by research we understand it to be a form of systematic enquiry that is made public in order to evaluate the validity of the claims to knowledge. For an excellent overview of action research in education see Waters-Adams' (2006) theoretical underpinning for action research in education and his analysis of limitations and criticisms of action research.

In my practice as a supervisor of many successfully completed masters and doctoral research programmes (http://www.actionresearch.net) I have coached my students in the use of validation groups to enhance the validity of their explanations of their professional learning. In my coaching I use a variant of the four criteria of social validity put forward by Habermas (1976) in his work on Communication and the

Evolution of Society. On reading Habermas my attention focused on his idea that in reaching an understanding with another person, I make judgments about the comprehensibility, the rightness, the truthfulness and the authenticity of the communications. In coaching practitioner-researchers to enhance the validity of their accounts I encourage them to submit their accounts to validity groups of between 3-8 peers and request responses that include:

i)   How could I strengthen the comprehensibility of my account?
ii)   How could I strengthen the evidence I offer to justify the assertions I make?
iii) How could I strengthen my understandings of the sociohistorial and sociocultural pressures that influence my account?
iv)   How could I strengthen the authenticity of my writings to show that I am truly committed to living as fully as I can the values that I claim give meaning and purpose to my life?

You can see some of the influences of this coaching in the successfully completed masters dissertations at:

http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/mastermod.shtml

and in the successfully completed doctoral theses at:

http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml

The most recent advances in the use and modification of TASC action-reflection cycles have been made by Huxtable (2012) in Living-Theory TASC, *a relationally-dynamic and multidimensional approach to research and developing praxis, which integrates Living-Theory (Whitehead, 1989a) with Thinking Actively in a Social Context (TASC) (Wallace and Adams, 1993).* (222-241)

Huxtable stresses the importance of recognizing the relationally dynamic nature of action-reflection cycles in the creation of living educational theories with the use of multi-media narratives for clarifying and communicating the meanings of the expression of embodied values in explanations of educational influence.

Coaching with Living Educational Theories

I coined the phrase 'Living Educational Theory' (Whitehead, 1985, 1989, Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) to distinguish the explanations for the lives and learning of individuals **derived** from the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of disciplines of education, from the explanations **created** by individuals to explain their own lives and their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which they live and work. In 2008 the Educational Journal of Living Theories (EJOLTS) published its first issue and in 2010 Jacqui Scholes-Rhodes contributed her paper on, *Exploring an extended role for coaching – through the eyes of an action researcher*. Here is the Abstract to the paper and I do urge you to engage with Jacqui's ideas:

Abstract

This is an account written by a coach, action researcher, organisational development and inquiry practitioner whose main aim is to share an

exploration of the power implicit in combining and integrating these four lenses into an extended form of coaching - one that might help catalyse new forms of organisation and leadership.

In my original thesis (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002) I presented my newly formed practice as: "...a practice that encompasses both its own assumptions about the nature of knowledge and about the appropriate methodology for obtaining 'correct' understanding" (p.268) "... a living form of inquiry... an original contribution to an appreciation of inquiry as a creative art" (p.315).

I would like to draw on this emergent understanding to put forward the principles of my coaching practice, initially formulated as the standards of judgement to support my claim to the development of a unique form of first-person inquiry and now fully incorporated into my coaching practice as the fundamental principles upon which my work is built. I would like to take the time to explore where their impact might be both substantial and limited. I would also like to take the time to explore to what extent these same principles can provide the framework for my collective work – an emerging practice, and one in which I aspire to have greater impact. (Scholes-Rhodes, 2010, p. 193)

I shall return to the idea of the importance of collaborative energy in coaching (Lines and Scholes-Rhodes 2013) in teams and organisations in the final section of this presentation. I shall conclude this section on coaching with living theory with Barry's (2012) idea of 'Transformational Quality' as a living standard of judgment that a coach could bring into an explanation of influence:

Infectious pessimism, widespread apathy, and volatile relationships: This describes the high school culture I adopted as a first time principal at Potsdam High School in rural New England, U.S.A. I conducted a three-year intensive self-study and participatory action research project to develop a school culture of quality and hope. I worked to challenge the status quo definition of educational quality in public education as an exclusionary, elitist, and quantitative concept based in constant interpersonal competition and materialism. Based on the research, I created a new meta-model of quality as a guide to my leadership orientation toward other people and learning called, 'Transformational Quality (TQ) Theory™. The article, derived from my Ph.D. thesis, describes how TQ Theory influenced my improvement as a school leader, the learning of students and teachers, and transformed the academic and social milieu of a previously failing American high school. (Barry, 2012, p.1)

In this concluding section I shall focus on improving coaching with living theories (Whitehead, 2012a, b & c) in multi-media narratives of professional learning.

Improving Coaching with Living Theories in Multi-Media Narratives of Professional Learning.

The use of digital video and visual narratives in improving coaching is well established in sports science, but is less well developed in other professional contexts such as health, education, social services, industry and commerce.

Here are three illustrations of improving coaching from education, health and industry to show the significance of improving coaching with living theories in multi-media narratives of professional learning.

The first is provided by two practitioner-researchers in Croatia (Bognar & Zovko, 2008), who worked with colleagues and 10 year old pupils as co-researchers. They have produced a multi-media narrative which includes a 10 year old pupils working with her peers to validate an account of her learning. The account includes the use of an action-reflection cycle that has been developed through the coaching of Bognar with his colleague Zovko and then through Zovko's coaching with her pupils:

> Although an increasing number of teachers carry out action research inquiries in their educational practice, the role of pupils and students is not still sufficiently explored. In spite of the theoretical requirement for pupils to be equal participants, we explored the possibility of their becoming fully-fledged action researchers. In this report we reveal how ten-years-old pupils take over the whole processes of action research themselves. We realise that action research is not a teaching strategy for gaining better educational results, neither is it a preparation for life: it is life itself. We believe that traditional schooling cannot create a conducive atmosphere for pupils to carry out their own action research. Our research shows that it is possible to do this only in a child-oriented school whose main purpose is the development of the creative potentials of all participants. In our inquiry the pupils determined their own challenges with the aim of improving something important in their own lives. We show that action research is meaningful only if students engage with it on their own terms, on the basis of their own needs, interests and self-chosen values. Anything that hinders pupils' freedom will only compromise the foundations of action research itself and any educational value accrued from it. (p. 1)

The second is provided by Robyn Pound (2003), a Health Visitor, in her doctoral enquiry, *How can I improve my health visiting support of parenting? The creation of an alongside epistemology through action enquiry*:

> The thesis contributes to a new scholarship of enquiry for health visiting. It shows how values generated and embodied in the process of enquiring can be transformed into living standards of judgement both for evaluating practice and for judging my claims to knowledge. It explains how the generation of living theory through reflective action enquiry has potential for the improvement and explanation of practice.

You can access the thesis and digital video-clips at:
http://www.actionresearch.net/living/robynpound.html

Pounds idea of alongsideness in her health visiting with parents with her videos (Pound, 2011, 2012) communicates to me similar qualities of collaborative energy described by Lines and Scholes-Rhodes (2013) in their research into their coaching practices and influences. My emphasis on the importance of digital video in multi-media narratives has much to do with communicating the significance of expressions of collaborative enquiry in improving practice and contributing to knowledge.

The third is provided by Graham van Tuyl (2009) in his work and research into change management within an industrial setting. Tuyl demonstrates through the narrative of his personal journal of learning, how being an engineer and co-creative catalyst can be an inclusional and transformational journey. The particular significance for explanations of the influence of coaches is that he explains why current economic practice needs to be understood as a fundamentally important barrier to the fluidity of ideas across boundaries. The thesis demonstrates how inclusional change can incorporate social, technical as well as economic models to be truly sustainable. A further element that his thesis shows is that the language used needs to change in order to generate an inclusional and transformational journey. The language used in his narrative changes with the development of his epistemology.

If coaches are to create their own living educational theories with visual narratives and encourage their clients/students to do the same I am suggesting that the language used to explain our practices may need to change because of the limitations of printed text-based media to communicate the meanings of the expression of embodied flows of energy with values.

I am suggesting that this language will involve the recognition of ourselves, our 'I', as a living contradiction in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'

I am suggesting that an increased used of digital technology in visual narratives will enable the creation of valid explanations of coaching practice that can include the explanatory principles of the values that carry hope for the future of humanity.

Interim Conclusion

Looking forward to a celebration of 20 years of the Association for Coaching in 2022, I shall be interested in whether any of the above ideas have been helpful in extending and deepening the influence of coaching. I am thinking particularly of the generation of explanations of influences in improving practice by both coaches and their clients and or students.

Will the explanations over the next ten years show an acceptance of neuroplasticity and move forward with transformations in the inclusion of 'I' in explanations of professional learning?

Will the explanations include the recognition of the importance of expressions of embodied values as explanatory principles in explanations of the influences of coaches in improving practice and generating knowledge?

Will the emerging digital technologies be used to communicate the meanings and significance of the embodied pooling of energy with values that carry hope for the future of humanity?

I hope that you can feel the expression of my life-affirming energy in asking these questions with you. Thank you for the opportunity to share these ideas and this energy with the love, hope and wisdom I continue to feel and understand in continuing to serve the values that constitute the public good.

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