

Coaching to enhance the forming of 'I' questions for action research enquiries with living theories: conversations with Sally Cartwright.

Jack Whitehead, Liverpool Hope University, 3 July 2012



An 18:22 minute coaching session on forming 'I' questions at <http://youtu.be/gKaOsZdeZSY> on the 4th July 2012 with Jack Whitehead and Sally Cartwright.

Here are the notes that Jack produced on the 3<sup>rd</sup> July in preparation for the meeting on the 4<sup>th</sup> July.

My interest in exploring the significance of coaching in action research enquiries into improving practice and generating knowledge with living theories was stimulated by an invitation to present a keynote at the Association for Coaching conference on the 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2012 in Edinburgh in the UK. The keynote was entitled 'Action Research to Improve Coaching with Living Theories and the notes and a video of the presentation can be accessed at

<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwcoachlectureedinburgh010612.pdf> .

Since my first action research report (Whitehead 1976) I have been aware of the importance of asking a good quality question. I have focused my research on exploring the implications of asking, researching and answering my question, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' I found myself asking this question in the first lesson I taught as a science teacher in Langdon Park School in London's Tower Hamlets in 1967. Through my readings of Collingwood (1991, p. 39):

*Whether a given proposition is true or false, significant or meaningless, depends on what question it was meant to answer; and any one who wishes to know whether a given proposition is true or false, significant or meaningless, must first find out what question it was meant to answer.*

and Gadamer (1975, p. 333):

*A person who possesses the 'art' of questioning is a person who is able to prevent the suppression of questions by the dominant opinion.... **Thus the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply** (my emphasis) , i.e. it necessarily goes beyond what is said in it. The logic of the human sciences is, then, as appears from what we have said a logic of the question. Despite Plato we are not very ready for such a logic. (p. 333),*

I came to understand the importance of understanding the question to which a research report was providing an answer.

In the above keynote I explain how I can understand my supervision of research students in terms of learning how to use four social criteria of validity, derived from ideas of Habermas (1976) as a form of coaching. I explain how I coach researchers to strengthen the comprehensibility, rightness, truthfulness and authenticity (pp. 2-3) of their explanations of educational influence.

My present interest is in using coaching to help researchers to form good quality 'I' questions in their living theory action research emerged from a conversation with Sally Cartwright about her writings for her Master's Dissertation. Sally is one of the most impressive educators I have known and as part of my productive work I am supporting Sally, as a tutor, to make public her embodied knowledge as an educator, as a contribution to the knowledge-base of education. Here is the extract from Sally's writings of the 27<sup>th</sup> June 2012 that focused my attention on my coaching practice in forming good quality 'I' questions:

“In the same way that Gadamer draws on Plato's Seventh letter and identifies the importance of forming a question and seeking the truth, so within education the question to do with an understanding of how the educator can establish a relationship of giving and receiving is required. Such an educational community can itself promote qualities that enhance relationships and the learning of others. Within an educational community particularly with the development of technology an understanding of the educational relationships through embodied knowledge can be expressed and communicated to others. Technology can also now be added to the more conventional forms of communication of ideas and information. It allows the educator through movement and expression to communicate educational values. It allows a creative space to be established within which the expression of values can be explored and the relationships between those who are participants to be shown. Such a space opens up the opportunity to be creative in both thought and action allowing embodied knowledge to be developed and thus be sustaining and energising, for both giver and receiver. Such a release of energy enables the educator to resist the pressures created by living

boundaries which can take many forms such as changes in responsibilities within a school or family context.

Where there is the opportunity to be in the presence of another educator it is possible through the exchange of embodied knowledge to advance the educational experience of other as part of an educational community.”

What I want to focus on below is my response to Sally where I’m responding in a way that I hope helps Sally to form good quality ‘I’ questions from the assertions she makes and that might help to develop a ‘framing’ for her dissertation.

**Dear Sally** – I like very much the point you make about the importance of forming a question. What I noticed as I read the above paragraphs is that you are making statements which, if you could show that they are true in the sense of being justifiable with evidence, then this would give you (and others) a most significant dissertation.

What I suggest that we could look at is how to transform the assertions into the questions that could help you to form a ‘framing’ to your dissertation. What I have done below is to take each sentence that contains a statement of belief (truth) and transform it into an ‘I’ question. Do let’s chat about whether these transformations feel OK for you:

**Such an educational community can itself promote qualities that enhance relationships and the learning of others.**

*Can I show how an educational community can promote qualities that enhance relationships and the learning of others?*

**Within an educational community particularly with the development of technology an understanding of the educational relationships through embodied knowledge can be expressed and communicated to others.**

*Can I clarify and communicate with the help of technology my embodied knowledge and understandings of educational relationships within an educational community.*

**Technology can also now be added to the more conventional forms of communication of ideas and information.**

*How am I adding technology to the more conventional forms of communication in sharing my ideas and information?*

**It allows the educator through movement and expression to communicate educational values.**

*How am I using technology to clarify and communicate the meanings of my educational values through their movement and expression?*

**It allows a creative space to be established within which the expression of values can be explored and the relationships between those who are participants to be shown.**

*Can I show/explain how technology allows a creative space to be established within which the expression of my values can be explored and the relationships understood between participants?*

**Such a space opens up the opportunity to be creative in both thought and action allowing embodied knowledge to be developed and thus be sustaining and energising, for both giver and receiver.**

*Can I show/explain how such a space opens up the opportunity to be creative in both thought and action, allowing embodied knowledge to be developed and to be sustaining and energising, for both giver and receiver?*

**Such a release of energy enables the educator to resist the pressures created by living boundaries which can take many forms such as changes in responsibilities within a school or family context.**

*Can I show/explain how such a release of energy enables me, as an educator, to resist the pressures created by living boundaries which can take many forms such as changes in responsibilities within a school or family context?*

**Where there is the opportunity to be in the presence of another educator it is possible through the exchange of embodied knowledge to advance the educational experience of other as part of an educational community.**

*Can I show/explain how, where there is the opportunity to be in the presence of another educator it is possible through the exchange of embodied knowledge to advance the educational experience of other as part of an educational community?*

I am also drawn to work with Sally because I think that this will enable me to enhance my contribution to fulfilling the vision and purposes of the Faculty of Education of Liverpool Hope University:

The guiding vision and orientation of the Faculty is to develop educational thought and practices which promote education as a humanising influence on each person and on society locally, nationally and internationally.

The purposes are:

To contribute to the development of knowledge and understanding in all fields of education, influencing all work with values arising from hope and love.  
To support learning, teaching, research and other activities which contribute to the study and practice of education as a globally significant endeavour.  
To support undergraduate, postgraduates and others interested in educational progress and development so that they will be people of service.

With evidence that:

Move(s) from data to “intelligence” for informed decisions through the use of professional judgement and wisdom. (Liverpool Hope University, 2012)

In particular I believe that working with Sally will enable me to enhance my contribution to *'the development of knowledge and understanding in all fields of education, influencing all work with values arising from hope and love.'*

Sally writes about the significant influence on her dissertation of a diagnosis of terminal brain cancer with her recognition of the importance of being provided with a loving space that has been life affirming as well as becoming more accepting of the gifts of others and of the importance of inter-dependence:

Progress through the dissertation has been affected by a diagnosis of terminal brain cancer and has had a profound effect on social relationships within the family, relatives, friends and neighbours and has exposed levels of love, generosity and kindness beyond which had not been imagine prior to the illness.

An appropriate term to describe the love that has been experienced is agape, one that is unconditional and one that is freely given and one that has been given both socially and physically. Those around me have provided a loving space which has been life affirming, not only just within the family but also within a social and educational and professional context. From the social context of love, inspiration has been derived.

The brain cancer has brought its own forms of disability such as memory loss and an inability to use numbers. The recognition of the importance of being able to accept help has become increasingly important. Thus in the same way the expectations placed on students previously to become interdependent in their learning, I too have had to increasingly accept the place of dependency and inter-dependency in a range of contexts. The educational environment can be life affirming in relation to the giver and receiver. For the giver there needs to be an acknowledgement and recognition that there is something to give. 'If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not, when? Pirkei. (Ethics of the Fathers, Pirkei Avot 1:14). Within the development of an educational community there is question about the nature of the relationships between the participants and these can be significant.

I am hoping to continue my conversation with Sally on the 4<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

#### References:

Collingwood, R. G. (1991) *An Autobiography*, Oxford; Oxford University Press

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Habermas, J. (1976) *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. London; Heinemann.

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