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KNOWLEDGE and CONTRIBUTION to
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

At this juncture I really must bring in your living educational theory, not least because I guess you've been wondering if I was ever going to do you the courtesy of dwelling on it for a while. I'm including the text from one of my earlier attempts to construct my dissertation (Spring 1996) which might remind you of my efforts to understand your living educational theory. This is what I wrote:

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Working out what "I" was, especially with regard to Whitehead's "living educational theory", had been on my mind quite a bit. It was one of those theories that I'd think I'd got it and then I'd wonder if I really had.

I believe that I tend to unconsciously store up a great deal of information but don't necessarily understand its relevance to me at the time. Then all of a sudden it takes on a meaning, integrating with the vast body of knowledge that I have. However, I might inadvertently give it a different meaning to the one that the originator intended, perhaps because I've reached the same point via a different route or because my existing body of knowledge is different. I look at the world in a different way. Whatever the reason, I believe that the meaning of a piece of information can differ from one person to another basically because their lives differ. When I read someone else's ideas I try to understand what their ideas mean to them and how that differs from my understanding.

One incident in particular comes to mind whereby I'd been reading about living educational theory and suddenly thought that maybe I was coming close to understanding Jack Whitehead's explanation of it. It was during one of my many previous attempts to write my dissertation that I excitedly wrote to Jack about my feeling that education should be lived and not talked about:

Letter written 27 November 1994

Dear Jack,

...I'm sure you'll realise this is "emergent thought" but I realised that I too had used the phrase living education. No doubt I'd got it from you, but I had written it with my own meaning, a meaning that I understood. Up until now I had been reading your phrase and interpreting the word living as used to describe education or educational theories, which for me was quite abstract. I couldn't see how an educational theory could be alive in the sense of living and breathing as it's only people, animals, plants etc that live. However, my use of the phrase refers to a person living education as opposed to, for example, writing about it.....

I have started to write about combining my educational development with my personal development. Again I think this is relevant as personal development involves the living person whereas education has often been something that is hard to grasp and is more a concept or something to be talked about rather than lived. For me the education is demonstrated in the life. As I live my life, so I am becoming educated. A process rather than a product. I take part in my own education therefore, I am living (this thing which is known as) education. The education may be seen in the changes in me, my behaviour, or my attitudes etc. Of course the education may not be seen by others but it might still be there,

for example, different levels of thinking or increased knowledge. But it is not education that is living, it is me. I am living education.

I cannot see educational theory as something that can in itself be classed as living and I think that perhaps I differ from your views on this point. My reason is in my understanding of the word theory. For me a theory is a statement and it stands alone. It is something to be applied when required.

However, your ideas have helped me to have the confidence to describe and explain the process of my educational development. That in itself can be as valuable and useful as theories, or perhaps it can often be even more useful. Being enabled to see the route that another person has taken and to see what happened along the way gives a situation much more meaning for me. It says "This is what I do and this is why I do it".

Even as I write I'm open to accommodating your living educational theory but at the moment I'm still milling around in my mind. It's as if I'm trying to grasp something but it's still flying about and won't yet be pinned down. Mind you it's not a problem as it'll still be flying about there tomorrow - isn't learning strange! I feel that you are showing people how to learn from experience rather than telling them, and I think that perhaps this helps my creativity. I'm beginning to think that I, through being at the centre of my education could describe living education and could use that description and explanation to develop and articulate my own theories.

I could go on but I have to admit that it's taking me round in circles, so I'd rather stop and let this sink in. This is getting too deep for my present understanding so I need to go back to safe ground!

Now Jack I don't want a long reply at this time, because my brain needs to settle, but I would be interested if you could confirm whether we have a similar understanding and where we differ. I hope that in my dissertation I'll be able to show you how I came to my present understanding of living education. Hopefully I'll find time to pop up to Bath to see you in the not too distant future, so maybe your reply could wait till then (that's if it's OK with you).

With kind regards

Hilary

Reading this letter again reminds me of my urgency in writing to Jack, although I was quite prepared to wait for an answer. In fact I think I was almost afraid that he might confuse me with some "academic" language. Just getting my thoughts down into the letter was useful to me and I was pleased when I received Jack's prompt but simple reply....

*Initially I was going to re-produce Jack's letter within this text, but then I decided that **his** letter does not explain **my** understanding of **his** theory. My understanding of the word theory was quite set in terms of propositions but I am now using a definition of theory as simply "a system of ideas explaining something" (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1982). I have read Jack's letter several times but I still feel that I cannot accurately translate his explanation into my form of language.*

What I can say is that he is looking for a description of my life accompanied by some explanation for my actions based on my values. He is also looking for my intention to

improve my practice or to live my values more fully and an action plan that might take that forward. Crucial to this are the contradictions that I experience from within. This does not produce a theory that has a clear beginning and end and I would suggest that it produces something that can never be pinned down as it's always part of an ever changing picture. A re-construction or transformation of ideas is constantly taking place.

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I know that you've explained your theory to me many many times, but I never feel that I've quite got it. Despite that, I actually believe that what you say about it is true and valid. I suspect that I've demonstrated your living educational theory in my account but I can't define it. In your letter to me of 26 January 1997 you referred me to the Hockrill Lecture (1996) on The Spiritual and I want to mention this here. The paper provides six aspects of the spiritual, the second of which is - Dynamic. Could it be that because living educational theory is dynamic I constantly feel that I haven't got it when really I have. In the lecture, Priestley says,

"The spirit denotes life. The traditional images of the spirit are those of wind, fire, running water and many others. They cannot be arrested without ceasing to be what they are. To freeze the spirit is to kill the organism. ... To define is to put sharp edges round a blurred idea, to arrest motion, to stop the ballerina in mid pirouette or the orchestra in the midst of a concert. It is akin to asking a child on a stormy day to go out into the playground and to collect a jar of wind, to cork it and to bring it back into the classroom for analysis. There can only be one outcome, namely the assertion, "there is nothing in it". ... The wind, the fire, the rushing stream must be felt, they must be assessed by their consequences."

I wonder whether I have been trying too hard to "see" and "define" your theory when all along I have been "feeling" it. I have been understanding it but I just can't find words that fully explain it.

To quote from the letter that you sent me dated 31 November 1994 (even though I said in my previous text that I wouldn't re-produce it and there's only 30 days in November) you said,

"The reason I have argued is that these theories are "living theories" is that the explanations are not only embodied in the individual's form of life but they contain an intention to create something in the future which is based on that person's goals or values and which is contained in an action plan. So the individual's living educational theory is an explanation which makes sense of the present in terms of an evaluation of the past and an intention to change some aspect of their practice or the world in the future.

The explanations which make up living educational theories combine both values and conceptual forms of understanding. I find the experience of "I" as a living contradiction helpful in insisting that the "I" appears in the account and that the meaning of the values which constitute the explanation, emerges over time in action, as the individual shows what it means to try to live their values more fully in their practice. I liked what you said about combining your educational development with your personal development. I do see these as intimately related because your values do permeate both your personal and professional life. I wonder if this helps you to see why your own educational theory can be represented in a living form which is embodied in your form of life. Do let's talk soon.

Jack"

I have a problem with your sentence that says "*but they contain an intention to create something in the future which is based on that person's goals or values and which is contained in an action plan.*" Some time ago I told you that I relate to the literature which deals with spontaneity and informality and I do not feel comfortable when I read literature that seems to me to rely upon action planning (see page 42). I think I can now explain this by saying that I see my life as having elements of spontaneity and surprise which do not follow any sort of action planning, they just happen. I don't feel able to claim that I have *an intention to create something in the future*, unless of course that something is a better life for myself and others with greater knowledge and understanding. I certainly don't action plan for it but instead I just try to live up to my values. Therefore if I have shown you my living educational theory, it is not reliant upon an action plan, it is reliant upon living my values more fully. Gosh Jack, I think that's cleared away another stumbling block. Go and treat yourself to a pint, I think I can hear your laughter!