

**How do I use my creativity to enhance my educational influence in working with  
scarred identities and ways of healing?  
Creating a Living Theory of the fluidity of culture and building strong plural identities.**

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The focus of my research programme into the fluidity of culture and the importance of enabling plural identities (Sen 2006), has emerged through my professional life and two master's enquiries into 'Active Learning and Knowledge Creating Research' and 'An Inclusive Approach to Gifted and Talented Education'.

My professional career began as an art educator, which soon became supporting those who struggled at school, which led me to work as a county advisory teacher for drugs education, which led me into becoming a drugs policy advisor in the Home Office, during which time I developed my skills as an anti racist trainer for a local charity. This drew me to put myself at the forefront of developing national diversity policies within my area of work, until an opportunity arose to lead on the region's new agenda of Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), the government strategy.

This intense experience included two major regional terrorist incidents, both involving radicalised young men who were neither South Asian, black or born into the Muslim faith. However, I observed that the dualistic polarities (Lederach 2005) that prevailed in the media and in government restricted any logical thinking and the focus of attention on terrorism remained on those who were South Asian by origin and Muslim by faith.

This was possibly the 'final straw' for me and brought me to the realisation that I could no longer tolerate being a living contradiction. I made the decision to leave and to endeavour to make a living authentically. Authenticity (Crofts 2003) to me is being able to reflect on my practice and see no compromise, to seek justice for those whose lives are scarred by either their self belief or the belief of others around them. Goffman (1986) used the term 'stigma' to describe this detrimental 'labelling' which can lead to prejudice, discrimination and alienation.

I now seek ways to heal the hurt through my energy flowing values and find examples almost daily of engaging through my practice with this directed energy flow.

I currently feel privileged to work alongside the first generation of migrants who arrived as young adults in the 60s, from four continents. I prefer to use the term 'BME Elders' as this reflects the wisdom and experience which grows from maturity and longevity. My culture passes judgement and uses labels that devalue older people. To deny or diminish the sense of self that makes up each of our individual histories, our sense of self which can influence our futures, is to act or collude with great injustice.

I am becoming increasingly aware of the threads that connect with my own scarred childhood, which have continued to weave a tapestry of my life events, the pattern of which I am only now beginning to see emerge. I understand the importance of enabling the recognition of a fluid cultural identity for each person, which evolves and blends with our own history, experiences and our aspirations. As long as we remain fixed in our notions of static and immovable cultures, we will continue to create 'in' and 'out' groups, deny plural identities and stunt our own emotional growth through exclusion and rejection of 'difference'.

The idea of creating a living theory of fluid cultural and building strong identities is grounded in the idea that each individual can generate valid explanations of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work, as their own living theory. Whilst a number of living theory research programmes have focused on the importance of postcolonial theory, there is no living theory of the fluidity of culture and the impact on personal identity within the field of living theory. In constructing such a theory I shall bear in mind Noffke's (1997) points about the importance of interconnections between personal identity and the claim of experiential knowledge, as well as power and privilege in society:

'The idea of practitioners questioning the basis of their work is an essential element to action research efforts across a wide variety of contexts (e.g., Carr & Kemmis, 1985; Elliott, 1991; Whitehead, 1993; Zeichner, 1993). Some (e.g. Dadds 1995) highlight subjectivity and practitioner reflection and are rich explorations of the layers of self in action research. Others, while also included the subjective, lived experiences of practitioners, centre on the personal and professional growth of the individual teacher as a "means for the principled modification of professional practice" (Wells, 1994, p. 25). There is some evidence too, that concepts such as freedom, rationality, justice, democracy, and so forth, play a role in the examination of both personal theories and practices (e.g., McNiff, 1993). These, in turn, are seen as acting to encourage a support efforts to challenge trends within the educational system such as obstructing the realization of the "living educational theory" (Whitehead, 1993).

As vital as such a process of self-awareness is to identifying the contradictions between one's espoused theories and one's practices, perhaps because of its focus on individual learning, it only begins to address the social basis of personal belief systems. While such efforts can further a kind of collective agency (McNiff, 1988), it is a sense of agency built on ideas of society as a collection of autonomous individuals. As such, it seems incapable of addressing social issues in terms of the interconnections between personal identity and the claim of experiential knowledge, as well as power and privilege in society (Dolby, 1995; Noffke, 1991). The process of personal transformation through the examination of practice and self-reflection may be a necessary part of social change, especially in education; it is however, not sufficient.' ( Noffke, 1997, p. 329)

### **Context**

As a practitioner over many years I have been drawn to try to improve the lives of those who are discriminated against or undervalued because of ability, behaviour, history, origins, faith, race or orientation and currently, working across and alongside

(Pound) minority communities, I have become increasingly engaged with the notion of the negative impact on identity of implied or actual exclusion, alienation and powerlessness through messages received or believed, from those who have a supportive role. These messages, often subliminal, implicit or overt, have the effect of denying a sense of belonging or being valued.

I believe that these messages continue to feed into harmful 'us and them' notions, judgemental labels and a continuing and institutional ideology of white supremacy. I have experienced the impact of applying our limited and stereotypical perceptions of 'difference' to make judgements on 'others' whether it be a pupil, a person in the street, a client, a patient, colleague, community, faith or entire race is endemic, unjust and causes harm. This leave scars, the ripples of which on the world pond, we may never know the scale.

Throughout my career, I have sought to heal the scars of this injustice, both on individuals and through offering alternative perspectives to those who have the opportunity to positively impact on the people with whom they work. My embodied knowledge through direct experience with both the perpetrators and those who I believe are harmed through dualistic polarities (Lederach 2005), belief in stereotypes, unchallenged and thoughtless cultural norms and the normalising of outrageous injustice from the personal and local to the global leads me to believe that our societies have become desensitised to the pain and harm to others. In my practice, I develop trust and empathy as I work alongside those who struggle, as well as seek to reduce further harm through raising the profile of the need to spread the notion of plural identities by starting with self study.

As a community development worker, I am privileged to share in the lives of many former immigrants to the UK, now elders who possess high levels of positive energy and determination, after 50 years of struggles to survive, contribute and belong. They are acutely aware of injustice as applied to them and seek justice for future generations. As a person of faith, I believe in supporting and serving others and am familiar with the notion of healing through intention, compassion, valuing and giving of self. I practice one faith but feel a dynamic spiritual connection with many other faiths.

My enquiry is about exploring the impact on identity of those whose lives are in any way scarred by false truths, generalisations and the many ugly forms of discrimination. My practice embodies making public to educators, practitioners, academics and individuals, the notion of starting with reflecting on self, to realise the similarities between us, so that future generations of every faith, ethnicity and culture come to appreciate that injustice harms the victim and the perpetrator. I have to start somewhere and for me, this is here and now.

## **Background to the research**

As Snow (2001) writes:

'If we had agreed-upon procedures for transforming knowledge based on personal experiences of practice into 'public' knowledge, analogous to the

way a researcher's private knowledge is made public through peer-review and publication, the advantages would be great'.

I am using my personal experiences to make my private knowledge public, to clarify and communicate the inclusional and relational values which distinguish my practice as educational and form the explanatory principles in my living-educational-theory. By living-educational-theory I mean a validated explanation of my educational influences in my learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations, in which I live, work and research.

The focus on cultural values and influences remains fundamental to my research and informs my auto-ethnography in the sense that I am explaining my educational influences in ways that are influencing and influenced by the socio cultural contexts in which I work.

I also want to demonstrate the bridge between the written word and the enhanced ability to demonstrate my life affirming energy through the use of photography, video and audio which can effectively illustrate the reality of language, expression and images to communicate my meanings and confidence as explanations of my influence on changing hearts and minds. I am drawn to Crotty's (2012) recent work on multi-modal narratives:

The unit of appraisal in a living theory methodology is the explanation of the influence in my own learning, the learning of others and in the learning of social formations. The methodological inventiveness, particular to the Living Educational Theory methodology, has afforded me an opportunity to express who I really am; body, mind and spirit. I use multimodal forms to communicate and express the nature of the knowledge that I am generating. I can now claim that my values have become living standards of judgment.

My recent reflections on the importance of valuing the process of researching have come through years as a practitioner in a wide range of settings, including educating, tutoring and training and include my social engaged arts practice (Malone, 2013).

From the beginnings of my long experience of art teaching, I have continued to communicate and express the nature of my knowledge creatively. I feel able to claim that my values are my living standards of judgement. I now believe that culturally, we are bound by expectations of art being about creating a product to go on the wall, to be hung, to be double mounted and displayed.

Subjective judgements are often made by educators and other close adults, some work (products) are selected, praised and displayed without rational explanation for the learning group, the rest is cast aside, not through condemnation of being judged as 'poor' quality but by neglectful ignoring or silence. My practice pays great attention to the process, which is where the learning and progression takes place. I use the term 'facilitation' to describe the gentle handing over of responsibility for learning to the recipient. My role of facilitator has moved way beyond teaching art and has application for every aspect of my life.

This reflexion is an example of the way that our often embedded beliefs and influences impact on our choices, decisions, behaviours and understanding of the world. I have experienced this neglectful ignoring or silence to be widespread in much wider contexts. Our value judgements, preconceptions, beliefs and histories impact on us in subtle but harmful ways. I want to improve my practice by offering an example of mindfulness and ensuring equality of opportunity. My intention in explaining my research on generating living theory, is my belief in this neglectful ignoring and silence being an issue of significance. I seek effective ways through my own reflection on practice and learning, to find ways to overcome the harm. My focus in this thesis will be on my life affirming energy and intention to heal scars through my own practice and consequently, transform the practice of others through example.

## **Research Questions**

I am exploring the educational implications of asking, researching and answering my question, *How do I use my creativity in enhancing my educational influence in working with scarred identities and ways of healing?*

In relation to this question I am also exploring the educational influences of:

How are national policies and an understanding of my creative responses to economic rationalist policies of globalisation, influencing my learning and knowledge-creation?

How is the use of digital technology in my social-engaged arts practice influencing my explanations of educational influence.

How can I strengthen the validity of my explanations of educational influence in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which I live and work?

## **Methodology**

My methodology is grounded in Dadds' and Hart's idea of methodological inventiveness:

More important than adhering to any specific methodological approach, be it that of traditional social science or traditional action research, may be the willingness and courage of practitioners – and those who support them – to create enquiry approaches that enable new, valid understandings to develop; understandings that empower practitioners to improve their work for the beneficiaries in their care. (Dadds & Hart, p. 169, 2001)

Using my methodological inventiveness in exploring the implications of my question for both improving practice and generating knowledge I shall produce a validated explanation of my educational influences as an educator and educational leader in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which I live and work. I understand this explanation as my living-educational-

theory and the methodology that emerges in this enquiry as my living-theory-methodology (Whitehead, 2009).

My methodology will draw insights from narrative enquiries and auto-ethnography in acknowledging the significance of the cultural influences in what I am doing, thinking and writing. It will include the twice yearly use of validation groups, of between 3-8 peers, who will be asked to include in their responses to my evidence-based claims to knowledge suggestions on:

- i) How could I strengthen the comprehensibility of my explanation?
- ii) How could I strengthen the evidence I use to justify my claims to knowledge?
- iii) How could I deepen and extend my understandings of the socio historical and socio cultural influences on what I do, think and write?
- iv) How could I enhance the authenticity of my explanation in terms of living as fully as I can the values I claim to hold?

These questions are derived from Habermas' (1976, pp. 2-3) four criteria of social validation in reaching understanding with another.

### **Engagement with Relevant Literature**

In addition to the literature in the reference section below, I continue to be influenced by my creative and critical responses to the literature in my 2012 writings for my masters units on Gifts and Talents in Education (Appendix 1) and on Active Learning and Knowledge-Creation (Appendix 2)

I do agree with Habermas' point that the private autonomy of equally entitled citizens can only be secured only insofar as citizens actively exercise their civic autonomy:

"The dispute between the two received paradigms - whether the autonomy of legal persons is better secured through individual liberties for private competition or through publicly guaranteed entitlements for clients of welfare bureaucracies - is superseded by a proceduralist concept of law. According to this conception, the democratic process must secure private and public autonomy at the same time: the individual rights that are meant to guarantee to women the autonomy to pursue their lives in the private sphere cannot even be adequately formulated unless the affected persons themselves first articulate and justify in public debate those aspects that are relevant to equal or unequal treatment in typical cases. The private autonomy of equally entitled citizens can only be secured insofar as citizens actively exercise their civic autonomy." (Habermas, 2002, p.264)

I work with this insight from the literature in the sense that my embodied responses and expressions of meaning show an empathetic responsiveness to individuals and groups, such as Black Minority Ethnic groups and the elderly that can be explained in terms of a cultural awareness and passionate commitment to social justice.

### **Research Findings**

The research findings are related to recent research on the limitations of the knowledge created by educational researchers to improve practice and to serve the public good (Ball, 2012). The findings will show how the limitations of 'spectator research' to improve practice and serve the public good, can be transcended in 'living research'. The research findings will include:

A contribution to relationally dynamic ways of knowing that focus on educational influences in learning how to live as fully as possible, values that carry hope for the future of humanity.

To clarify and communicate the energy-flowing, relational values that can sustain the motivations of a socially-engaged artist in responding to her own creativity and the creativity of others who are responding to scared identities and ways of healing in contexts that are influenced by socio historical, socio cultural events and the constraints and opportunities of economic rationalism.

To develop forms of life that are grounded in the individual's creativity and the commitments of adults and young people to enhance the educational influences of their learning, the learning of others and the social evolution of the communities in which we live, work and research.

"If our aim is to create conditions that facilitate methodological inventiveness, we need to ensure as far as possible that our pedagogical approaches match the message that we seek to communicate. More important than adhering to any specific methodological approach, be it that of traditional social science or traditional action research, may be the willingness and courage of practitioners – and those who support them – to create enquiry approaches that enable new, valid understandings to develop; understandings that empower practitioners to improve their work for the beneficiaries in their care. Practitioner research methodologies are with us to serve professional practices. So what genuinely matters are the purposes of practice which the research seeks to serve, and the integrity with which the practitioner researcher makes methodological choices about ways of achieving those purposes. No methodology is, or should, be cast in stone, if we accept that professional intention should be informing research processes, not pre-set ideas about methods of techniques..." (Dadds & Hart, p. 169, 2001)

The living theory methodology (Whitehead, 2008) developed in the enquiry will focus on issues of validity and rigour to ensure that the explanations produced in the enquiry can withstand the public criticisms of peers within communities of educational researchers such as the practitioner-researcher group of the British Educational Research Association (BERA). The research will also abide by the BERA ethical guidelines.

Timescale/research planning:

The timescale of the doctoral research programme is to complete within 3-5 years of part-time study. I shall submit my research reports twice a year to validation groups comprising between 3-8 peers with individuals who differ in affirming and being sceptical of my adopted research approach. My intention is to use the responses of the validation groups to strengthen the:

- i) Comprehensibility
- ii) Evidence used to justify the knowledge-claims
- iii) Depth and extent of the socio historical and socio cultural understandings within the research reports related to the fluidity of culture and building strong plural identities.
- iv) Authenticity of the explanations that constitute a living theory of the fluidity of culture and building strong plural identities.

I have already established a participatory approach to enhancing the sense of belonging, with Black and Minority Ethnic groups in Bristol. These communities include: Somali, Chinese, South Asian and African-Caribbean heritage. My research plan is to continue to evolve this participatory approach in the creation of my living theory of fluid cultural and personal identities.

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