Accepting Educational Responsibility: Building Living Theory Cultures of Educational Inquiry in a USA/global context

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Abstract

This paper addresses the theme of accepting educational responsibility through the lens of living-educational-theory. The purpose of this paper is to make connections between the individual journey of uncovering one's own living theory and building cultures of inquiry within the spheres of influence we each have around us. My own living theory is constructed on a framework that supports care and connection in learning through the use of vulnerability in dialogue and teaching. In the exploration of my own values, data sources include evidence of student feedback through multiple semesters of course evaluations that explore how students interpret my practice. This evidence highlights where my core values are flowing freely and felt by my students, but also highlights where there are contradictions and perhaps blockages that prevent the flow of my values. As the journey moves from individual exploration to the work of building cultures of inquiry, I explore how we can build "a safe, supportive space wherein practitioner-researchers are enabled to share their vulnerabilities, to make explicit their values, and to hold themselves accountable for living according to those values" (Vaughan & Delong, 2019). Working alongside colleagues in the field of living theory and within this symposium, video evidence is shared that allows us to see the values of vulnerability, authentic connection, mindful questioning, and loving educational conversations as they play out in the construction of a culture of inquiry. Lastly, I propose

that is it our educational responsibility to bring values of love, vulnerability, and care into the work we do in academia. The living theory methodology asks us each to consider how we can improve our practice, but, more than that, the methodology is built on the foundation that it is necessary to improve who you are through a deep understanding of how you are operating in the world. I argue that it is our educational responsibility to consider that question and to engage in dialogue and create spaces that allows peers and students to consider how their values are impacting the spaces around them. Building cultures of inquiry and raising the level of consciousness of the educational climate can have immediate and lasting impact on creating harmony in our world.

1. Objectives or purposes

The objectives of this paper include the uncovering and validation of my core values of connection and care with peers and students through the lens of living-educational-theory. They include the generation of my living-educational-theory as I embrace my identity as an activist scholar and global citizen within my educational practices and scholarship within higher education in the USA. The purpose of this paper is to build a bridge of understanding between the individual work of building my own living-educational-theory and then translating and transforming that work to make connections with others to create sustainable living theory cultures of educational inquiry. A culture of inquiry can be defined as "a safe, supportive space wherein practitioner-researchers are enabled to share their vulnerabilities, to make explicit their values, and to hold themselves accountable for living according to those values" (Vaughan & Delong, 2019). To build cultures of inquiry, I believe it is necessary to integrate vulnerability as a cornerstone of the dialogue shared between members of the group. The role of vulnerability,

dialogue, and the methods used to capture and examine that growth will be discussed in subsequent sections.

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

My living theory is constructed on a framework that supports care and connection in learning. A primary contribution to my theoretical framework comes from the work of Nel Noddings and her discussion of the nature of caring relationships in education.

> This value grew initially from the work of Nel Noddings, who explains that, "every human life starts in relation, and it is through relations that a human individual emerges" (2012, p. 771). The relationship between student and teacher is multidimensional, and each person within the relationship may seek something different. Yamamoto (1998) discusses the significance of being seen and validated in a mentoring relationship, which is an accurate description of my work with graduate students, specifically in my role as an advisor. But it is not only the student who needs to be seen, for the relationship to work there must be, "a delicate interweaving of a sense of seeing and being seen" (p. 184). Without both, the synthesis or symbiosis of the relationship cannot occur (Vaughan, 2019).

Noddings (2005) goes on to explain that in order to create a caring relationship, it is necessary for both parties to engage fully in caring. This echoes Yamamoto's (1998) belief that when both individuals are being seen, the relationship is at its fullest. My own values of caring connect fully to these ideas, but the nuance of a living theory is *how* these values are embodied in your practice. The very notion of theory being *living* contains action and movement and the methods used to transmit your values are equal in importance to naming the values themselves.

These values show up in my own practice and relationships with students in a myriad of ways. The presence of vulnerability within my relationships forms a foundation in which I create a space for sharing and model open dialogue for my students. Brown's (2012) research on vulnerability explains:

> Vulnerability is based on mutuality and requires boundaries and trust. It's not oversharing, it's not purging, it's not indiscriminate disclosure, and it's not celebrity-style social media information dumps. Vulnerability is about sharing our feelings and experiences with people who have earned the right to them. Being vulnerable and open is mutual and an integral part of the trust-building process (Brown, 2012, p. 45).

To build the type of trust described by Brown, I also find Noddings' (2005) description of engrossment helpful. Noddings explains that engrossment is the total and complete focus on the other individual at that moment in time, the act of truly listening, caring and an overwhelming feeling of wanting to help or connect with that individual to move them closer to their expressed goals. Evidence of the presence of these values, and the described methods in which they are embodied, can be seen in my practice through student evaluation feedback, video of student interactions in coursework, and taped critical conversations with doctoral advisees (Vaughan, 2019.

In the video clip below I am working with a graduate student who is conducting classroom research with one of her seventh-grade students who is considered a non-reader. Afifeh and I have been working together throughout the semester on this project and have altered the course of her research based on her passion to help this one student.
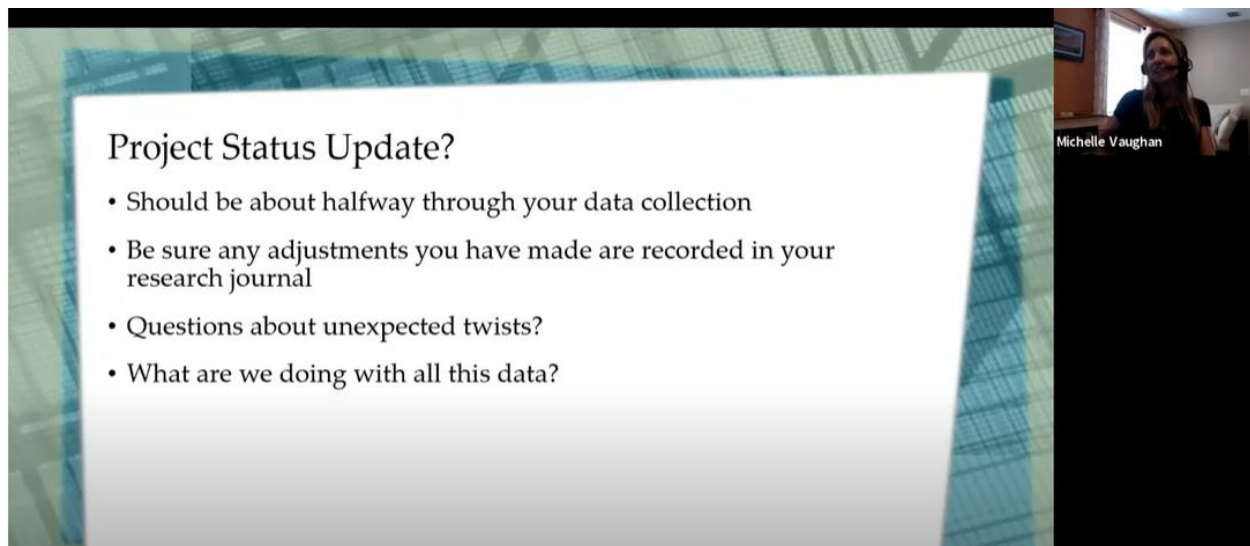
Conversation with a graduate student about becoming a teacher-researcher (Vaughan, 2018)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa2s8nU2lZg&feature=youtu.be

This clip highlights the growth in our relationship as we reflect on her decisions as a practitioner researcher, and I assist her in seeing the importance and application of her work in the larger educational setting. The transcript below, taken from the end of the clip, illustrates my enthusiasm for her growth as well as my conscious work to show her how important her research contributions are.

Michelle: When you're dealing with students who have even fallen through the cracks or been failed by traditional curriculum, you're making a really good argument for curriculum that's based on student needs which is awesome. So yay! I'm glad you decided to switch to this, you're really making a difference in his life.

Afifeh: It's not all me obviously, but I'm really glad that I can make I can make that difference even if it's a slight progression in his skills. I'm glad you know it's for him

because I can see the difference in his self-esteem when he comes into class now because he knows he's actually making some kind of progress.

Michelle: That's a big deal in seventh grade because normally, I mean you see that in an eight-year-old they're easy to build their esteem but more normally by middle school that's difficult. All right, good job!

When I watch this clip, I see us both comfortable, sharing easy dialogue and connecting on a level that comes with sustained and supportive interactions over time. At the end of our work together, Afifeh included the following at the end of her research findings.

What I once thought was intimidating and daunting has now become a welcome challenge that I hope to continue to conquer. I realized during this process that I enjoy research. In the past whenever I heard the term "research" I shied away because of my fear, however, through this project I realize that I have been a "teacher researcher" for many years (Shatara, 2018).

As we build a bridge from uncovering the individual living educational theory to creating cultures of inquiry that support others in their own living theory work, my own theoretical framework melds with that of others in the field to grow in its power and reach, thus supporting living theory as a movement as opposed to an individual endeavor.

3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

As we seek to build cultures of inquiry and study their impact and influence, I find it essential to pull from diverse and differentiated data to address the layered inquiries being investigated. At an individual level, I am constantly asking the question "How can I improve my practice?" Yet

as I work with my peers in the field of living theory to create cultures of inquiry, my practice shifts to include others and the focus is brought outside of the individual to encompass the creation of a space that supports others. A method of empathetic resonance is used with digital visual data to clarify and communicate the meanings of nonverbal communication and exchanges of life-affirming energy within this created space as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influence. This method is used to clarify and communicate meanings of vulnerability, care, and connection as core values of facilitating cultures of inquiry. Digital visual data is also used to identify living contradictions in practice within cultures of inquiry, and my own practice, as I seek to live values of my own living theory as fully as possible.

4. Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials

In the exploration of my own values, data sources include evidence of student feedback through course evaluations that explore how students interpret my practice as well as the written work my students produce in class that documents their learning. This evidence highlights where my core values are flowing freely and felt by my students, but also highlights where there are contradictions and perhaps blockages that prevent the flow of my values. In particular, previous data revealed that teaching in an online modality presents additional challenges for my core value of connection as the cornerstone of my teaching practice.

Additional data from video interactions with students and advisees provides evidence of and validates the use of my core values of connection, vulnerability, and caring within my practice. As we shift from individual practice to the larger work of building cultures of inquiry, the use of videos from our conference sessions are key pieces of data (as shared in this paper) to validate the melding of multiple values into a concerted effort to create safe spaces in which to build cultures of inquiry.

Visual data can also play a role in capturing nonverbal communication and an exchange of life-affirming energy that is unable to be recorded when looking at a transcript of a conversation. It is these nonverbal cues that are often so important in building trust and encouraging the members of a culture of inquiry, whether micro or macro, to grow in their thinking and independence (Vaughan& Delong, 2019, p. 83).

5. Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view

Traversing from individual living theory work to the creation of cultures of inquiry requires a thorough understanding of your own practice (acknowledging that practice is fluid and growing) so that you may be vulnerable with others as you make authentic connections within the space. It is only through understanding yourself, your own values, and your own practice that you can begin to see how you can challenge the systems and structures currently in place that are serving to deny the values of human flourishing. Living theory identifies the ways in which you are a living contradiction and provides the clarity to align yourself to use your values in ways that will help you flourish.

In the examination of efforts to build cultures of inquiry, we see diversity in the methods used as well as diversity in the spaces in which they are created (Vaughan & Delong, 2019). Results reveal that cultures of inquiry can be on a micro level (two people involved in a mentoring relationship) or on a macro level (groups of students in courses, conference attendees, professional development cohorts, etc). Additionally, cultures of inquiry can be further categorized as spontaneous and/or sustained.

A sustained culture of inquiry is an intentional culture of inquiry that exists over extended

periods of time at both micro and macro levels. Mentoring relationships are an excellent

example of a sustained culture of inquiry at a micro level…At a macro level, sustained

cultures of inquiry might be courses or professional development experiences that are

taught with the intention of exploring values in the participants' practice. Spontaneous

cultures of inquiry occur in meaningful moments that take place when individuals

involved in a dialogue or experience have created an open flow of life-affirming energy

where participants can feel safe to explore their own values (Vaughan & Delong, 2019, p.

74).

The video clip below highlights a spontaneous culture of inquiry that occurred at the ARNA

2019 conference where I served as a co-facilitator with Jackie Delong. You can see the

connections being made between the participants first and then with me. What is also clear in

this clip is how vulnerable participants have made themselves, sharing their concerns which are

then echoed and supported by the facilitators. This is evidence of the authentic connection that

can occur in a short amount of time (a conference session) when priority is placed on creating a

space that supports it.

Liz Campbell on living with dissonance (Delong, 2019).

https://youtu.be/zl-4AncxM0s

Liz: This has been a big part of my struggle, too. The contradictions where I didn't think I had any power and I didn't want power but wanted to be able to affect change. Right? And so, I struggled but, in the end, realized that it is in the dissonance that the most growth can take place. And not that you have to start with a problem; you can start with something you are doing really well. Why is this working and how can I do it better? Or How can I share it? What should I do next? What I came to realize was that it's OK for some 'ying and yang' and dissonance and it's not necessarily all what we would call false dichotomy-it's possible for things to co-exist in an effective way.

Jackie: And still live your values.

Liz: And still live according to your values. That's what Living Theory research did for me. It allowed me to navigate a way to co-exist within that dissonance and still have a purposeful life.

Michelle: I think that last piece is really important and why this research is important. Your research about trying to figure out how to navigate this and how to still be at your best and fulfill your values is very important for someone who is just like you to read. Right? Because we get this disillusioned thought, especially if you are in a PhD program:

am I generalizable; am I this; am I that? If we are looking to make change to affect other humans and to live our values more fully then this is the most important work. This what I want to read and what changes the way I think. So for those who are in that fight, this is the work that is closest to your heart."

As facilitators, we propose that the *how* of creating a culture of inquiry should be examined and explored in the methodology of living theory just as each of us did with our individual theories. Using video evidence (as seen above) allows us to see the values of vulnerability, authentic connection, mindful questioning, and loving educational conversations as they play out in a spontaneous culture of inquiry. This form of data also allows us to see if there are any contradictions between how we are suggesting that we are living out our values and what is actually occurring in the video clips. This is an essential part of the living theory methodology and provides significant validity to our claims. In my own work to build cultures of inquiry, I have already discussed the role vulnerability plays to support my core value of connection. Connection can serve as a value, method, and goal for living out one's core values.

> While there are a number of definitions of connection that exist, Brown's description (2010a) of connection as "the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship" (p. 19) fits well when we are discussing how connection can support the goal of building cultures of inquiry as a way to further expand Living Theory research as a social movement and the impact of the field (Vaughan & Delong, 2019, p. 78).

The last clip highlights another participant at ARNA, Stephanie, sharing her own ideas of connecting with students by creating spaces for "intimate conversations." This clip is an hour into our session and is the first time Stephanie has addressed the group. Jackie Delong and I have been steadily laying the foundation of support for her to feel comfortable to share up to this point.

Connections in classroom interactions:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WS5cCfj99Jg&feature=youtu.be

In the culture of inquiry that we set out to create in this session, our participants have connected with each other in a short amount of time, underscoring the idea that connection does not have to be strongest between the facilitator and the participant.

6. Significance

Through the lens of my own work, I interpret and pursue the theme of accepting educational responsibility when I apply my values to consciously build cultures of inquiry within my work

with graduate education students as well as the broader living theory scholarly community. The scholarly significance of this work is in clarifying and communicating the values of human flourishing in dialogical communities that can be used as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influences in learning. The AERA conference call asks us to consider "how can we individually and collectively demonstrate greater care about what happens in our society and in educational institutions?" As stated earlier, care and connection are core values of my own living educational theory and I believe that in order to demonstrate that we care about our society and what occur in our educational institutions, we must first demonstrate that we *care* about the individuals within them. Demonstrating care at a micro level has a compounding effect as it moves to the macro levels of society and institutions. It is significant to meaningfully connect with scholars and graduate students and provide safe spaces for them to explore their own value-based work. Creating these spaces for cultures of inquiry to grow and thrive is how we also demonstrate that we care about what happens within our educational institutions. Additionally, providing the cultures of inquiry where educators can explore, connect with, and align their teaching and research to their own core values is how we demonstrate that we care about what happens in our society. Supporting educators to teach and research from a place of value enriches the experience for every student involved and has a domino effect on society. As evidence of the impact, I present an email sent to Jackie Delong following a doctoral class where I led them through a values exercise. I followed up with Jackie the next day:

> Just wanted to send a quick email to let you know that last night was our
> "Living Theory night" in our doc class. The students spent time before class exploring
> actionresearch.net and reading some pieces to help them understand the methodology.

We used the AR planner Jack shared with me after the conference and had some really great conversations. I usually don't take tears in class as a good sign, but it was a welcome sight last night as students talked about things in their practice that they held dear to them. I look forward to doing more of this work and taping it (I wasn't ready to do that last night) and asking you more questions!! Just wanted to share!

In my 10 years in higher education, students rarely tap into the emotions and values connected with conducting educational research and aligning your work to your values, yet in one evening many students were brought to tears when asked about the values that were important to them in this space. They were eager to make connections and it was my educational responsibility to simply provide the space and support for them to do so. This was a powerful part of a larger curriculum and highlighted the need for more opportunities similar to this.

Each scholar in this symposium is also wrestling with the question of "How can we unite with practitioners, with scholars across other academic fields and disciplines, and with other citizens beyond academia to strategically address complex social and educational problems?' This question itself calls for the need to make meaningful connections outside of our immediate circles. I propose that meaningful connections can be made through the conscious commitment to build cultures of inquiry that can address the complex social and educational problems we face. As each individual within a culture of inquiry identifies their own personal values, a diversity of thought and experiences weave together to provide space for conversation, dialogue, and, most importantly, trust to explore the complicated issues we face. Acknowledging that we each have values that are unique to us and that those values create a lens in which we navigate the world is an important step to having dialogue (and studying that dialogue) that builds a strong culture of inquiry.

It is interesting to note that there are consistent themes that run across the work of each member of this symposium. Core values of love, vulnerability, and care show up in explicit and implicit ways in much of the work we each do in our speres of influence. Perhaps these values also play a role in what we should be considering as educationally responsible moving forward. Are we teaching with love, vulnerability, and caring? Are we leading with love, vulnerability, and caring? And, lastly, are we researching from a place of love, vulnerability, and caring?

I, and I believe my colleagues in this symposium, would encourage conference attendees to pause and reflect on how these values appear (or do not appear) in their own practice and scholarship. As we consciously shift to take on more responsibility in education, the role and importance of these values has never been more necessary. In whatever educational space we find ourselves in, it is our educational responsibility to put connection first and content second.

What values are we bringing into our culture of inquiry?

The culture of inquiry that has been developed as a result of this symposium brings together five educational scholars from across the globe working diligently to make a significant influence on their own social context by working from and through their own values. While we each work and live quite different lives, it is through our values that we find connection, joy, and growth. I firmly believe in the power of connection and believe it should be one of the primary goals of education to foster understanding of oneself and others. As this group of diverse scholars came together each week with a common goal of working on this symposium, our dialogue created a space for value-based discussion and the careful reading and validation of each other's writing informed that dialogue each week. While we found significant overlap in some values shared across the group, it is just as important to note that values that are not shared by other group members provided depth to the culture of inquiry being created. Ladson-Billings has written

about the essential need to honor the culture of individual students in a classroom setting for over 20 years (Ladson-Billings, 1995), however, when reflecting on the unique nature of this group, I can see the application of her theory to the collaborative work within this scholarly endeavor in a higher education space.

My own values of connection, care, and vulnerability look different when viewed through the cultural lens of my peers and our discussions have deepened my own understanding of these values and how they are also rooted in my own culture. Reading Parbati's definition of vulnerability as a synonym to the tamas attribute of ignorance created synaptic connections for me and allowed me to see the correlations in my own experiences in higher education between expressions of vulnerability and perceived weakness. Our discussions allow me to see my values from a new perspective and this has been a key avenue for personal growth. The cross-cultural nature of this culture of inquiry supports the creation of spaces that can be reserved for values-based dialogue that seeks to make connections and honor the individual contributions of each member of the group as a true community of scholars develops. It is the collection of voices and values that creates the beauty and depth in our "we" not the subscription to a dominant set of existing and accepted values.

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