

Cultivating Equitable Education Systems for the 21st Century through Living Educational Theory
Cultures of Educational Inquiry in an Indian /global context.

Abstract

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The impact of the COVID-19 shutdown of in-person teaching and learning has retrograded the progress made in education. Teachers, the world over, are facing challenges educating students virtually, from computer screens as most are abruptly pushed into using ‘edutech’. ‘Emergency remote teaching’ reduces the students to the status of passive objects to be acted upon by the teacher (Freire, 1996). Forcing a large number of us, teachers, to reconsider the way we teach and the way students learn.

This presentation is focused on how a teacher grounds the creation of her living–educational-theory as she sidesteps the main bottleneck faced during the days of the pandemic. The obstacles created are due to inadequate access to the right technologies or the skills to use them. How reassessing her assumptions and challenging them enabled her to transform her understanding to become a more socially responsible thinker.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we teach. In this contribution, I try to explain how my living-educational-theory enabled me to answer the fundamental question raised by the teaching community; how do I re-evaluate my teaching practice amidst a global crisis in a world that is rapidly changing and uncertain?

The key questions this presentation asks are: 'What new questions should we ask? How should we ask old questions in new ways? Some of the questions I have been asking myself since I started teaching in 1998 are –

- How do I improve my practice?
- How do I improve the process of education here?
- How do I live my values more fully in my practice?

I have tried to answer these questions and variations on these questions (see Rawal, 2014, 2017, 2018), the questions I ask in this presentation are related to the longstanding ones but further amplified in today’s practice:

1. Why do I want to improve my practice?
2. How does living my values more fully in practice help?
3. What is education and how does making it better help?

Essentially, the question I am asking is: who is all this effort for; is it personal or is it for my students?

I believe when I try to answer questions 1-3, above, I will be able to answer the questions raised by a validation group and directed at the validity of the explanations of educational influence that are:

- i) How could I enhance the comprehensibility of my explanation?
- ii) How could I strengthen the evidence I use in my explanation of educational influence in learning?
- iii) How could I deepen and extend my understanding of the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences in my practice and understandings?
- iv) How could I enhance the authenticity of my explanation in showing that I am living my values as fully as possible?

A lens for viewing education

Beginning with question 3- What is education and how does making it better help?

There are many definitions of the word education; the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2022). The same online dictionary also suggests that education is an enlightening experience. The word 'Education' is derived from two words 'e' and 'duco', 'e' means from inside and 'duco' means to develop. The Indian philosopher, Swami Vivekananda (Bharathi, 1998), proposed, 'Education is the manifestation of the device perfection, already existing in man. This definition according to me is so close to the etymological explanation of 'education' derived from the Latin word 'educere' means to bring forth.

I believe there is a connection between education and freedom; Education can play a significant role in helping people decide their paths. A verse in Sanskrit –'Sa Vidya ya Vimuktaye' – explains my understanding of the purpose of education. The meaning of the Sanskrit verse is the ultimate aim of education is liberation. *Mukti* – means freedom from all bondages. Its reference is not only to spiritual liberation but to be able to break the bondage at every level is the ultimate aim of *Muktakari Vidya* or Liberating Education.

Theoretical framework

The vision of 'education as liberation' leads me to the above-asked question number 2: How does living my values more fully in practice help? Living Theory acknowledges that 'education is a value-laden, practical activity (Whitehead, 1989, p. 4). My aim as a teacher is not to pass on information, instructions, or resources; it is to empower my students with critical faculties, so they could understand the social reality they are embedded in and become capable of transforming that reality. I believe my students can be empowered through the dialogic process I maintain in my 'life skills through drama classes. My values are equity, equality, love, dialogue, and teacher actions that lead to student empowerment.



AERA2022 Group Meeting Jan 17 2022 –See 18:04- 21:00 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbR2s6nWLZU>

The COVID-19 pandemic caused wide-scale illness and death and provoked preventive measures like social distancing, confinement, and school closures. It ushered the ‘new normal’ in which digitization forced ways of working and learning. The Oxford University Press (2020) defines new normal as ‘a previously unfamiliar or atypical situation that has become standard, usual, or expected’. The ‘new normal’ that is much talked about is not really new because leaders putting education online are still thinking in terms of classrooms. Today’s digital classes are essentially made up of reading assignments, lecture videos, homework problems, and quizzes. I believe it is, in actuality, the method of education we were trying to transform.

These digital classes remind me of what Freire (1970) called - banking education. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués, making deposits which the students patiently received, memorized, and repeated. This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. During the pandemic, with the new normal in place, I could see my values being negated in my practice. Values that involve experiential and negotiated to learn, and intellectual empowerment.

In this presentation, I reflect on what I have learned so far with the view that when a teacher shares the experience of her practice she is supporting a ‘knowledge-creating culture’ (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 2006). This involves not only cultivating knowledge---building skills but seeing themselves and their practice as part of an effort to advance knowledge for the benefit of others.

I propose there is a connection between ‘culture of inquiry’ and ‘knowledge-creating culture’. A culture of inquiry is 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). I argue without a culture of inquiry a knowledge-creating culture is challenging to achieve because in a self-study, like mine, the researcher is vulnerable and may not be assertive enough about putting their new learning into practice and may not be confident enough to share knowledge.

My circle of trust, my peers on the editorial board of EJOLTs Jack and Jackie, ‘helped in creating a space, a culture of inquiry, where [I was comfortable] and agency to use [my] knowledge-creating capacities to improve [my] own learning and that of [my] students (DeLong). I believe our online kinship not only fosters sharing and helping others but, importantly, sustains professional development (Rawal, 2018). A Culture of Inquiry, for educators to influence themselves, others, and social formations. This Culture of Inquiry space is an environment for giving voice to teachers.



AERA2022 Group Meeting Jan 10 2022 –See 2:24-10: 50 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIBXAKHiazM>

The context of values and my living-education-theory

I believe I am committed to my values and I strive to achieve them. Sometimes, I experience myself, my 'I', maintaining two mutually exclusive opposites- my educational values and the experience of their negation (Whitehead, 1989). For example, I am critical of what Freire (2000) termed 'anti-dialogical, banking education'. The theory and practice of banking education (Freire, 2000) employ '[v]erbalistic lessons', and maintain a 'distance between the teacher and the taught' (p.76). In 'banking education' [t]he students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher.'(p.80); the students do not use their cognitive abilities as cognition is the

domain of the teacher. I believe online classes are teacher-driven and contradictory to my values of experiential learning. If I carried out my online classes using Emergency Remote Learning (ERL) then I would be negating my values in practice. (ERL) is the unplanned and sudden shift in rapidly changing landscapes with differing needs and limitations and involving a ‘temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances’ (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 6). By asking myself the old questions in new ways, I turned the problem on its head. I asked how can I carry out an online lesson and yet ensure it is learner-centred. Importantly, when I did so I negated the contradictions I experienced in practice.

Seeing myself as a ‘living contradiction’ enables me to remain open to my values as they evolve in my practice and also in my ‘living’. As I refined my values, they gave a new direction to my actions. The act of improving my practice is grounded in my passion to ensure that my values of holistic educational practice, equity, equality, love, and dialogue are lived out as fully as possible. These are the values that give meaning and purpose to my life. Through my living-theory methodology, I expressed, clarified, and developed these values as explanatory principles in the descriptions of educational influences in my learning and in the learning of my students. Linking the culture of inquiry to my educational-living theory is my distinctive idea. In the sense is I am an empowered teacher, I have a strong voice, and I do not need help to uncover/discover my values yet I do need the online kinship to sustain professional development (Rawal, 2018) for the environment it creates that allows me to express my voice, comfortably.

My values and why I want to improve my practice

Teaching makes extraordinary performance demands of teachers (Shulman and Shulman (2004), in this self-study research, a practitioner narrates how she broadens her practice. The point I am making is that excellence in teaching does not just mean knowing how to use the latest technology and techniques, it's more than that. Excellence in teaching means teachers should have the skills to utilize different classroom pedagogies to facilitate student learning. Excellence in teaching also means continuous self-learning.

A self-study examines the extent to which one is living out one's values, making it an appropriate and suitable method to be used with action research and Living Theory methodology. Action research begins with values (McNiff, 2021) and Living Theory acknowledges “education is a value-laden, practical activity” (Whitehead, 1989, p. 4) both support self-study research.

The rude shock

“The... educator must be awake, critical, open to the world. It is an honor and a responsibility to be a teacher in such dark times—and to imagine, and to act on what we imagine, what we believe ought to at last be.”

(Greene, 2005, p. 80)

I had read these words before and never imagined I would be teaching in ‘dark times! On the first day of the pandemic lockdown, March 25, 2020, I was awake but I did not, for the first time in my life want to get out of bed. The previous evening, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for a complete lockdown of the entire nation for 21 days in an effort to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. I suddenly saw everything I believed in crumbling. Since I believe life skills education can increase social and mental abilities, prevent harmful behaviours, and promote mental health I decided not to give up and created a ‘21-Day life Skills Challenge’. Another reason I carried out the #21DayLifeSkillsChallenge was that I am a Living Theorist and I believe:

‘A Living Educational Theory (Living Theory) approach focuses attention on the experiences and implications of living values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. These values are the life-affirming and life-enhancing values that give meaning and purpose to the researcher’s life (Whitehead, 1989a).’

Additionally, as I have suggested above education is not only what we do in schools and colleges, education helps people decide their paths and the ultimate aim of education is freedom from bondage.

Keeping this in mind I uploaded a video every day on Twitter to teach a core life skill and also Tweeted a game or activity the whole family could play in the confines of their homes. When the lockdown was extended I continued my life skills classes terming them #Lockdown0.2



Day 3 of the Twitter #21DayLifeSkillsChallenge

<https://tinyurl.com/bdctw6kk>



Day 7 of the Twitter #21DayLifeSkillsChallenge

<https://tinyurl.com/5n7n6vyf>

Sadly things did not get better, there was the first COVID-19 wave and then the second wave. COVID-19 dramatically and distinctively changed education. E-learning was the new buzzword, it replaced traditional educational methods. I for one went into depression. How would I teach my students with the ‘new normal’ in place? I could no more teach using ‘drama in education’ with the

norms of social distancing. When schools and colleges struggled to start teaching everything was online. Virtual or digital learning has some critical shortcomings such as the lack of human connection; it makes collaborative learning difficult, and the one that affected me the most was the lack of opportunities for experiential learning. I asked myself - How can I improve my practice as a teacher by developing expertise in online teaching?

Living Educational Theory is a form of enquiry that falls within the tradition of action research (Whitehead, 1989). Whitehead (2008, p. 112) suggests that: Teacher-action-researchers present their claims to know how and why they are attempting to overcome practical educational problems in this form:

- I experience problems when my educational values are negated in my practice.
- I imagine ways of overcoming my problems. I act on a chosen solution.
- I evaluate the outcomes of my actions.
- I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations ...and the cycle continues...

The above-mentioned framework supports practitioners in a quest to find ways they can find answers to problems they find in their practice. I followed the 'reflect, plan, act, observe, reflect,' cycle of action research and created an interesting program to teach my Post-Graduate students of Sardar Patel University.

I taught life skills online through Google Meet and used the Google Classroom to interact with them. I created an attention-grabbing lesson plan. The students were engaged through a conversation-like power-point presentation. Less 'listening' and more 'doing' content was used; activities like discussions, drama, arts and crafts took up a huge part of the class. The physical separation that leads to a psychological and communication gap (Moore, 1993) was minimized through a teaching-learning process by the use of constant change in the class communication. Sometimes I asked the students to answer questions verbally, sometimes I asked them to answer in chat, and sometimes to note down the questions and write their answers after the class hours via Google Classroom.

Importantly, I videoed the class. I watched the first week's videos tried to understand the problems of online teaching. One of the changes I made in my class was to introduce cinema-in-education. Additionally, I resolved to use more activities to explain the theories because my data indicated that when I used too many slides there was a drop in my students' attention.

Keeping this in mind I collected film clips and videos to use for the online classes. Made shorter PowerPoints and created more online games. I analysed the students' online responses by watching the new videos. I also observed my teaching and students' pattern of behaviour to determine

whether the level of communication had improved. Reflected on what my learning. Made some new plans and take new actions for the next semester.

Using film clips allowed me to rise above the traditional and orthodox methods of teaching. At a time when using technology for imparting knowledge is compulsory, using the contemporary concept of utilizing movies as a tool for providing education is advantageous. The transactional distance between the teacher and student is wide. The younger students find textbooks difficult, combining learning with a source of entertainment seems like the ideal way of getting the most out of them. The film clips I used caught my students' attention and helped to keep them interested in the class. To prevent them from getting easily distracted I kept changing the methods used for teaching.

For me it was creative yet hard work whilst improving my ICT skills I also improved my skills of editing clips. I did that so I could show the exact moment for what I wanted to teach them and not waste their time by showing long-drawn scenes.

Results

Firstly, my students' learning improved; I could enhance their 21st-century skills while sustaining the new normal.

Through watching the recording of my classroom I could improve my practice. Not only could I improve my lesson plans but importantly I could improve my teaching or delivery style. I could see my 'I' in the question, 'How do I improve this process of education here?' When you see yourself on the video you can perceive and experience your 'I' and you can see yourself as a living contradiction, holding educational values whilst at the same time negating them. When that happens you can negate the contradiction and take concrete steps to improve your practice.

I learned and have elucidated that my classes were not 'lecture' classrooms online but were active learning classrooms online. I have demonstrated that an online class should have a well-planned sequence of activities for 'active engagement' that allows the learners an opportunity to interact with the teacher and each other and have hands-on, experiential learning.

There was a 360-degree change in my teaching philosophy. Adhering to my values of continuous self-learning prevented me from aborting my practice. In this presentation, I am exercising my power as an educator to suggest the status quo in teacher education needs to be questioned and challenged. As teachers, we must be willing to be progressive to bring about a radical change in education.

Which draws me to the point – Why do I need to create a culture of inquiry? Why do I need to help other teachers? I claim that we need to reassess our assumptions and challenge them and that enables me to transform my understanding to become a more socially responsible thinker and educator.

I would like to discuss ‘a more socially responsible thinker and educator’. Social responsibility is a moral obligation on an individual to take decisions or actions that are in favour and useful to society.

This makes it obligatory for me not only to improve my teaching practice but to act in a manner so as to support teachers who are not tech-savvy, who are not trained to use technology effectively (see Ean, 2020)

Why is it my responsibility? In Ukani & Rawal (2016, p 23) I suggested that ‘ All this was not [only] for my benefit but to enable a new beginning towards equal education for a better way of life. As Lord Krishna says ... in the Bhagavad Gita (take concrete steps towards) (Glossary):

“... from the viewpoint of societal welfare you should perform your actions. Whatever actions a role-model perform, common people follow. Whatever standards they set by their actions, all the world pursues.” (Bhagavad Gita, 3:20-21)

Significance

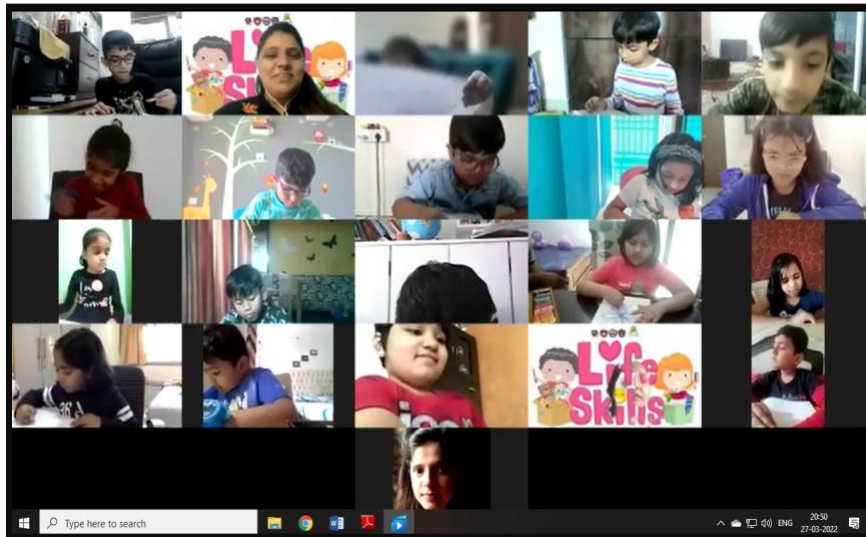
The pandemic has changed the way we teach. I believe it will be a long time before we can use the term post-pandemic. With the shift from the familiar face-to-face teaching to the strange screen-to-screen format, all aspects of teaching and learning are being tested. Online learning will continue to be the major method of learning even after schools and colleges reopen. This blended pedagogy mechanism, called the phygital, is going to be the way of the future. Thus, if we are committed to strengthening education, then it is critical to empower teachers. We will have to invest in the necessary capacity building to take advantage of the potential of remote and blended learning.

Additionally, the pandemic has exposed many inequities that already existed in the education landscape. If we desire to take education forward into the 21st century, the learner must be central to the process. However, there are no ready-made solutions, technological or otherwise. We will have to take collective actions to strengthen public education and expand global solidarity.

The challenge now is to come out of crisis mode and to think beyond the 'new normal. If educators re-invent, then students will benefit from educational experiences that not only educate holistically but also prepare them as citizens to engage with a swiftly changing, diverse world.

I believe if I have to follow the 'new normal' I should look at new media or new tools of teaching. The new media are radio, television, films, social media, and so on. In October 2021 I pledged to do 75 online Pro Bono life skills workshops for any Indian educational institute that registered. This was done to celebrate 75 years of Indian Independence. I believe by carrying out the workshops I stood by my values of equity, equality, love, dialogue, and teacher actions that lead to student empowerment. I will end by leaving you with a video of my students; children I have never met before but yet managed

to teach them in a way that they can learn and enjoy learning. By doing so I have completely erased the transactional distance between the teacher and the students.



A video of a class from Workshop to celebrate 75 years of Indian Independence

<https://youtu.be/FWqxOnC4FGI>

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