

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

**Abstract**

**Swaroop Rawal**

**Draft- 06-02-2022**

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, 2012, 2014, 2017), 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). 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 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.

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 learning, 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.

## **In 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-centered. 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.

## **Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry**

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.

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....

### **Data collection and analysis**

Data collection and analysis for this study have been guided by Living Theory-Action Research. At the heart of the inquiry is that values in learning carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. Living Theory approach to Action Research or Living Theory-Action Research focuses on the life-affirming and life-enhancing values of the researcher as explanatory principles and standards of judgment for evaluating the validity of the contribution to educational knowledge (Whitehead, 2017).

The data sources include a large number of videos of the online lesson, webinars, my reflective journals, and that of my students.

### **Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view**

The results comprise the explanation of a Living Educational Theory, by doing so they demonstrate how a teacher has lived her values in practice. Following the goal of transformational learning, which is to change the "frame of reference" 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 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, ... (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 prepares them as citizens to engage with a swiftly changing, diverse world.

## References

- Ean, T. G. (2020, January 6). *Global teacher prize finalist Swaroop Rawal on the importance of life skills in education*. Optionstheedge.Com. Retrieved February 6, 2022, from <https://bit.ly/3B3f2fv>
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. 30th-anniversary ed. New York: Continuum.
- Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause Review*, 27, 12. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>.
- McNiff, J. (2002) *Action Research: Principles and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- McNiff, J. (2021). AR –Booklet. Retrieved on 7.7.2021 from <https://www.jeanmcniff.com/ar-booklet.asp>
- Oxford University Press. (2020). the new normal. Lexico.com. [https://www.lexico.com/definition/the\\_new\\_normal](https://www.lexico.com/definition/the_new_normal).
- Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (2006). Knowledge building: Theory, pedagogy, and technology. In K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Cambridge Handbook of the Learning Sciences* (pp. 97-118). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Shulman, L.S. and Shulman, J.H. (2004). “How and what teachers learn: a shifting perspective”, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Vol. 36 No. 2, pp. 257-71.
- Ukani, R. & Rawal, S. (2016). A dream for equal education. *Educational Journal of Living Theories*, 9(1), 53–82. Retrieved February 5, 2022, from <https://ejolts.net/files/270.pdf>.
- Vaughan, M., & DeLong, J. (2019). Cultures of inquiry: a transformative method of creating living-theories. *Educational Journal of Living Theories*, 12(2), 65–88. <https://ejolts.net/files/349.pdf>
- Whitehead, J. (1989). How do we Improve Research-based Professionalism in Education? A question which includes action research, educational theory and the politics of educational knowledge. Presidential Address to the British Educational Research Association. *British Educational Research Journal*, 15(1): 3-17.
- Whitehead, J. (2017). Practice and Theory in Action Research: Living-Theories as Frameworks for Action. 10.1057/978-1-137-40523-4\_24.