

A Self Study Of A Higher Education Tutor: How Can I Improve My Practice?

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for the degree of Ph.D.
at the University of Bath**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a self-study of a tutor in higher education committed to practice improvement. It is presented as a study of singularity and an example of first person education action research. It is epistemologically and methodologically distinct in that it is based on my values as an educator and ideas about what constitutes loving and life-affirming educational practice.

The aim of this thesis is to present a storied account of my inquiry, in which I explore what it means to live my values in practice. Through descriptions and explanations of my practice, this thesis unveils a process of action and reflection, punctuated by moments when I deny or fail to live my values fully in practice, prompting the iterative question “How do I improve my practice?”; the reflective process enabling me to better understand my practice and test out that understanding with others in the public domain.

My claim to originality is embodied in the aesthetics of my teaching and learning relationships, as I respond to the sources of humanity and educative needs of my students, as I listen to their stories and find an ethic of care in my teaching and learning relationships that contain them in good company and that returns them to their stories as more complete human beings.

Evidence is drawn from life-story work, narrative accounting, student assignments, audio and video taped sessions of teaching and learning situations, the latter of which include edited CD-R files. These clips offer a glimpse of my embodied claims to know what the creation of loving and life-affirming educative relations involves.

STANDARDS OF JUDGMENT

If this Ph.D. is differentiated or distinguished as a research process, it is because its methodology is underpinned by the values I as a researcher bring to my practice. It is with this in mind that I ask you to bring your eye as examiners to bear on the following questions, asking yourself as you read this thesis whether these questions are addressed sufficiently for you to say “yes, these standards of judgment have been met”:

- Are the values of my practice clearly articulated and is there evidence of a commitment toward living them in my practice?
- Does my inquiry account lead you to recognise how my understanding and practice has changed over time?
- Is the evidence provided of life-affirming action in my teaching and learning relationships?
- Does this thesis evidence an ethic of care in the teaching and learning relationship?
- Are you satisfied that I as researcher have shown commitment to a continuous process of practice improvement?
- Does this thesis show originality of mind and critical thinking?

Your judgment may be supported by applying the social standards of Habermas’s ‘truth claims’:

- Is this account comprehensible?
- Does it represent a truthful and sincere account?
- Is it appropriate – has it been crafted with due professional and ethical consideration?

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PREFACE

Summary

This thesis presents an account of a self-study of a tutor in higher education, as a study of singularity. It should be read because it offers a distinctive and original contribution to the new scholarship of teacher research in which the educative values of the practitioner provide the basis for the construction of a living educational theory.

The thesis has been constructed as a narrative account contained in stories which offer descriptions and explanations of my lived experience as a tutor working with postgraduate students on a Masters degree in Personal and Organisational Development.¹

This thesis needed to be undertaken for a number of reasons. Firstly, for me, as a vehicle for inquiry for the purpose of improving my practice and in order that I might learn how to live my values more fully in my practice. Secondly, for my students, in order that they might experience a life-affirming and transformative educational experience, one in which they might claim the integrity of their minds and find their voice to make a difference in their professional and organisational spheres. Finally, for the academy, so that this contribution, drawn from the lived experience of an H.E. tutor committed to practice improvement and as a study of singularity, might be recognised as a valid and legitimate contribution to academic knowledge, and as an exemplar of first person educational action research.

My original contribution to knowledge, illuminated by visual representation and described in my narrative account, points to the aesthetics of embodied knowledge in

¹ Hereinafter 'MAPOD'.

my teaching and learning relationships, showing how I am touched by the fundamentals of what it means to be human, as I respond to the sources and needs of my students, and as I listen to and return them to their stories as more complete human beings, containing them in good company in the process.

In the process of improving my practice, I have moved towards an ethic of care in my teaching and learning relationships. This position is significant to this thesis and in the crafting of my connoisseur's eye, drawing on the tacit dimension and the artistry of my emergent practice. As part of this ethic of care, I have been mindful of the ethics of constructing this thesis. In particular, I have paid regard to the draft ethical guidelines of BERA² (2003), for the conduct of this piece of educational action research. Specifically, with regard to my responsibility to participants, I have ensured that I have informed consent to the participation and the disclosure of material pertaining to individual students whose work and stories are shared within this thesis. Furthermore, I have endeavoured to protect the confidentiality of others who might prefer not to be named or to be such active participants in my inquiry. I am particularly indebted to those students who gave me permission to video and tape record my work with them and who gave me permission to quote extensively from their work.

This thesis is presented in three parts:

- Part One: Introduction.
- Part Two: The stories.
- Part Three: Toward a humane and critical scholarship of practice.

² The British Educational Research Association.

In Part One, I frame my thesis, outlining my context, purpose and position. I provide an account of my approach and method, and identify a body of literature that has informed my thinking and provided a synthesis of ideas integrated into my own living theory. Part Two consists of five stories that provide descriptive and explanatory accounts of cycles of my inquiry. These include a life story, an account of my lived experience as a woman in academia, and three practice-specific stories of my work and inquiry with students on the MAPOD programme. The final section of the thesis, Part Three, includes two chapters and an end piece. These chapters serve to move my inquiry on, providing an analysis and perspective of what it means to create loving and life-affirming educative relations and draws on an alternative form of visual representation to illuminate those insights. The final chapter returns to the three key stakeholders in this thesis, namely, myself, my students and the wider academy, and examines the lessons learned through this inquiry for these stakeholders, identifying the issues that need to be addressed in educating the social formation of the academy and the role and contribution of the new scholarship in this regard. The end piece draws the thesis to a close.

Part One: Introduction

Chapter One: Creating a Living Theory Account of my Inquiry

In this chapter I frame my thesis as a self-study of my practice as a form of ‘educational action research’. I begin by outlining what ‘living theory’ (Whitehead, 1989) means. I identify my practice context as a higher education tutor working in a business school. I state my purposes and intention to improve the rationality and justice of my practice, and outline the goals of my research to construct a humane practice based on an image of graceful and reciprocal educative relations. I present my position drawn from the values that I bring to my practice and which I clarify in the

course of this inquiry, and account for my approach as one that broadly draws on and is informed by humanistic, feminist and critical qualities of inquiry. Specifically, I begin to construct a frame for my originality of mind.

Chapter Two: Approach and Method

This chapter is presented in three sections. I present an account of my approach and method that engages reflectively with the work of others and, in particular, draws on ideas that are at the forefront of thinking in educational action research, embracing alternative forms of representation that serve to enhance a narrative account. As I work with ideas that are humanistic, feminist and critical, I craft the uniqueness of my approach to the self-study of my practice, finding a way forward through cycles of action and reflection that lead me toward the emergence of my connoisseur's eye and discipline of practice that facilitates the creation of loving and life-affirming educative relations.

In the first section of this chapter, 'defining action research', I begin with the legacy of Lewin's (1946) rational scientific social research and experiments in social change as an attempt to facilitate democracy. I then explore the relevance of a critical and emancipatory approach to action research and draw on critiques that expose the pretensions that a critical approach can eliminate distortions or power. Following this, I address the growing popularity of reflective practice as a means of inquiry in action research, and similarly urge caution toward unquestioning claims for reflective practice.

I conclude this section with an account of McNiff's (1999) conception of action research as a distinctly human endeavour, where individuals act with the best interests of others at heart. This other path is one which MacDonald describes as:

“a process of locating one's centre in relation to the other: to 'see' one's self and the other in relation to our centres of being; to touch and be touched by another in terms of something fundamental to our human existence” (1995:95).

Finally, I highlight the significance of personal knowledge in research, drawing on Polanyi (1962). It is this personal knowledge in the tacit dimension that ultimately leads me toward the crafting of my connoisseur's eye and the discovery of the aesthetics of my practice in the conduct of this research.

The second section is entitled 'I am the subject and object of my research: a dialectical engagement with the world'. In presenting my 'I' as the subject and object of my research, I further frame my inquiry in the form of 'a dialectical engagement with the world', concerned with passionate knowing and educative change, drawing on Rowan's (1981) dialectical paradigm for human inquiry. In constructing this account, I draw on McNiff's (1988) principles and practice of action research and Eames' (1993) account of a dialectical form of action research based on educational knowledge given from his own perspective as a teacher-researcher, and of his understanding of the shared characteristics between the action research cycle and dialectical logic. I further develop my appreciation of Whitehead's (1989) conception of 'I' as a living contradiction contained within the creation of a living educational theory and his subsequent development of these ideas (Whitehead, 1993).³ Additionally, I draw on Coulter and Weins (2002), whose conception of teaching includes embodied knowledge that draws on virtue, reason and judgment, a

³ In *The Growth of Educational Knowledge*.

perspective inspired by Arendt who asks in her writings about the Holocaust “what it means to be a judging actor?” and “what it means to be a judging spectator?”. Finally, I draw on Lomax’s (1994) professorial inaugural lecture to clarify what makes educational research valid.

The third section is ‘Method and process issues in theory, writing and data in this inquiry’. Here I address key issues pertaining to an action research approach, starting with the role of theory and literature in action research as a responsive and generative force drawn from a synthesis of values and understanding in response to practical action. I then explore the process of writing this inquiry, its role in the emergence of an action inquiry, its function of sense-making for my inquiry and as a way of knowing, with particular reference to the role of life story in the construction of my thesis. Next, I explore my process of data gathering and meaning making, drawing on oral and visual data in respect of my teaching and learning relationships with students on the MAPOD programme. Specifically, I address the visual form of representation, the purpose of which has enabled me to see the living form of my practice and which I draw on later in this thesis to show you moments in my practice in which I am inquiring in action and crafting my connoisseur’s eye with the purpose of creating loving and life-affirming educative relations.

Chapter Three: Women’s Ways of Knowing: A Review and Critique

In this chapter I aim to provide a review and critique of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). The ideas that this book has given rise to are especially relevant to this thesis, having informed my thinking and provided a synthesis of ideas that I have integrated within my own living theory. Ideas such as the maternal voice and connected teaching serve to highlight ways of knowing that women have

traditionally valued and cultivated, the influence of these ideas helping me move toward an ethic of care in my teaching and learning relationships. Having described the research study that gives rise to the five perspectives of knowing presented by the authors, I discuss the perspectives in relation to my own lived experience and the development of my own sense of self, voice and mind. Engaging with these ideas has enabled me to embrace the pieces of myself as I have searched for my own unique and authentic voice in the course of this inquiry.

Part Two: The Stories

Chapter Four: Mapping the Personal and Professional Self: Choices and Self Determination

In this chapter I present and reflect on two life stories, or rather events in my life, which are in part about choices and self-determination. I have included these stories in my thesis because I believe personal inquiry offers a perspective for self-study that may help us see possible links between our present and past preoccupations; in particular, between the personal and professional self. This perspective pointed me toward the source and development of my sense of self, voice and mind. Sharing and placing this account in the public domain may help others engaged with this type of reflective inquiry to better understand the journey from silence to voice.

Following the stories, I subject them to analysis and critique drawing on Belenky *et al.* (1986). I then explore autobiography as a vehicle for inquiry. What is distinctive about my account is that I present these stories and my analysis holistically, whereas the findings presented by Belenky *et al.* are fragments of individual life stories. Fragments, by contrast, do not allow us to see the whole picture that frames the quest or meaning of a life for an individual, or to see or trace the events that lead to change and transformation.

Such stories draw out the impact of stories we live by and are an important part of any personal inquiry process.

Chapter Five: Finding Voice in the Academy

Whilst the previous chapter told stories from a personal perspective, this chapter tells one from both a personal and professional perspective, as I explore the experience of finding voice in the academy as a woman within a new university and higher education sector. In so doing, I develop a critique of the academy, the context for my educative practice. Like hooks (1991),⁴ I take up a position on the margins as a ‘site of resistance’. I explore the gendered nature of universities, the demands of the new university sector, and describe the historical context of my journey in academia. Additionally, I describe how new universities are being repositioned as part of a global economy and I explore the implications of this for higher education.

This review and critique of the wider context is important to this thesis because firstly, it highlights political and ethical implications for the future of higher education itself. Secondly, it indicates how an alternative voice may offer a site of resistance by bringing knowledge from a different voice into the academy and creating ‘public homeplaces’ (Belenky, 1996) in higher education at a time when current policy is focused on education as an economic transaction and a site for knowledge exchange. Finally, it enables the educational action researcher, through critique of the wider system, to speak truth to power, and tell it like it is.

Chapter Six: MAPOD - The Early Days (1995-1998): A Reflective Review

In this chapter I review the reflective process of my inquiry as a higher education tutor in the context of my educative relations on the MAPOD programme, by reviewing the early days of the programme, spanning the life of the first two cohorts in the period 1995 to 1998. I do this by telling three stories.

⁴ Note that this is the preferred spelling of this author.

These stories are important to this thesis, firstly because getting to grips with what self-study involves is a story worth sharing, particularly with other educational action research novices. We are, I suggest, conditioned to see the world from the outside, rather than looking from the inside out. Therefore, the process of learning to place the ‘I’ at the centre of one’s inquiry may require a radical shift of mind.

Secondly, the stories reveal the educative values that underpinned the MAPOD and describe the strategies employed to put them into practice. They also reveal the power complexes involved.

The first story explores the values aspired to, lived out and denied in practice. It further reveals underlying tensions and contradictions involved, fuelled by anxieties and a subconscious fear concerned with a loss of control and power. The second story shows how learning from experience can enable finding a way forward and the realisation of values in practice, where previously those values were denied. The third story explores the dynamics of power and the potential for adversarial power relations creating a stand-off between the parties in terms of ‘them and us’. It also explores the emotional intensity involved in creating an alternative site for learning, and it shows how the journey became a metaphor for hope and survival during this action inquiry.

Chapter Seven: Working with Margaret: How Does my ‘Living Theory’ Constitute a Discipline of Educational Action Research?

In this chapter I present an account of three short stories of working with Margaret, a student on the fourth MAPOD cohort, during the period from 1998 to 2001. These stories are important to this thesis, because they show how my living theory helped

constitute a discipline of educational action research in my practice. They also demonstrate a shift in my attention from the general educative focus to the particular, exploring what it means to create loving and life-affirming educative relations for an individual student.

The stories are based around three assignments when I worked with Margaret as the tutor facilitator of the action learning set she was in. Each assignment represents a distinct spiral in a cycle of action research in which I *plan* to facilitate my students' learning.

Chapter Eight: Maternal Thinking - a Transformative Discourse for Educative Relations

In the previous chapter, my inquiry led me toward an ethic of care in the teaching and learning relationship. In this chapter, I build upon that ethic by drawing on the idea of maternal thinking as a heuristic device in the service of reflecting on and improving my practice. I begin by reviewing the literature of maternal thinking and then explore the practical application of this idea to my practice. The time-frame of the case example given is 1999, which overlaps with the period when I was working with Margaret.

Maternal thinking is important to this thesis because it is a form of strategic action, which provides a reflective process that can change the practice itself, as in action research. It causes us to question our perceptions and assumptions about what it means to care enough for our students, and how to hold the paradox effectively between feedback and judgment in the academic relationship. This story represents the next cycle of inquiry in my research.

Part Three: Toward a Humane and Critical Scholarship of Practice

Chapter Nine: Developing a Connoisseur's Eye: Exploring the Aesthetics of my Teaching and Learning Relationships on MAPOD

This chapter addresses my process of doing and knowing. It is about showing you my values in action, captured by a visual form of representation, as well as accounting for myself in narrative form. It is important for curriculum educational action research, because image-based representation captures the dialectical form and can show the meaning of values such as respect, compassion and affirmation; in other words, it can illuminate the embodied nature of my values that constitute loving and life-affirming educational practice. As a form of representation it is significant because it expands the constraints of narrative-based accounting. Furthermore, it points to the tacit dimension and underlying aesthetic qualities of knowing that shapes one's emergent artistry and educative connoisseurship, extending the possibilities for our understanding beyond the cognitive realm in respect of doing and being in educative relations.

Whilst much has been written about the process of action learning, the role of the set to provide support and challenge, and the idea of peers as comrades in adversity (Revans, 1971), little has been written about the process and purpose of conducting a reflective learning conversation. In this regard, I draw on ideas in constructivist and interpretivist approaches to human inquiry (Schwandt, 1994) as a means to help me construct and explain the qualities of my own 'living theory' (Whitehead, 1989) as embodied in my practice. I explain how I facilitate a reflective learning conversation that reveals the quest for clarity and coherence of stories told, the role of the facilitator in the dialogic creation of new narratives through inquiry, and the collaborative

process of co-authoring that takes place within this hermeneutic circle of meaning making. I illustrate my account with three examples of working with particular students, drawing on visual representation.

Significantly, in this chapter I aim to test my claim to originality described in my abstract as embodied in the aesthetics of my teaching and learning relationships, as I learn to respond to the humanity of my students and their educative needs, listen to their stories and find an ethic of care that contains them in good company, returning them to their stories as more complete human beings.

Chapter Ten: Educating the Social Formation: Reflecting on the Influence of my Living Theory Inquiry

In this chapter I reflect on the challenge of educating the social formation and transforming the educative sphere. I do this by reflecting on the influence of my living theory inquiry, by asking what difference this has made to both my practice and that of my students. In addition, I ask the question “How can we create a good social order in the field of higher education?”. The theme of this chapter is making a difference, which I explore through the eyes of the three key stakeholders to my inquiry as defined by Reason and Marshall (1987), who identify stakeholders of the personal process of human inquiry as me, us and them.

I begin with a review and critique of my inquiry, reflecting on what difference this has made for me. I conclude that I have developed the know-how and ability to articulate my educative values within a framework of an ethic of care in the teaching and learning relationship, and I suggest that this aspect of my thesis offers an original contribution to knowledge in that it goes beyond invoking the need for moral

reasoning, by showing how, through a discipline of educational action inquiry, we can develop our ethical awareness of the other.

Next, I explore what difference this has made for us (my students), by summarising two student exemplars, showing how they developed their work within an ethical framework. This is important to my thesis because it contributes to our understanding of how reflection can be organised in the teaching and learning relationship to have a transformative effect, and one that serves to reconstruct personal and professional identities for the purposes of critique and change to practice, revealing in the process universal stories of oppression.

Finally, for them, I ask the question “How might we create a good social order in the academy?”. I do this by drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, by exploring the consequences of separating teaching and research, and the management and process of learning. This review and critique is important to this thesis, because it exposes how current policy and practice in higher education undermines the very purpose of education itself. It frames the fundamental challenge facing the academy today and the imperative of educating the social formation, to which this thesis makes a contribution.

End Piece

The end piece serves to draw this thesis to a close.

Appendix 1: Critical Action Learning: Towards Best Practice in the Teaching of Business Ethics

Included in this appendix is the above paper, originally written in 2001.⁵ It was later submitted to *The Journal of Reflective Practice* for consideration, and has now been accepted for publication with some amendments during 2004.

In this paper, I seek to explore the case for ‘critical action learning’ (Willmott, 1994) as a ‘best practice’ intervention strategy for the teaching and learning of business ethics for management and professional development. In doing so, I draw on my own practice of applying this approach to the teaching of ethics in business and professional practice with my own students on the part-time MAPOD programme.

Anthony’s critique (1998),⁶ resonated with the approach that I had been developing on MAPOD, hitherto informally guided by the issues that students had brought to action learning sets. Avoiding any ‘prescriptive’ educational endeavour, Anthony suggests we should look to our students to guide us, by helping them draw out and learn from real-life work-based issues that go to the heart of the matter, asking the question “What is the nature of the ethical problem here?”.

His position that managers are moral agents, coupled with Willmott’s stance on what distinguishes a critical approach to action learning from a traditional approach, helped me find a way forward that challenged the ethical neutrality of our action learning interventions, enabling students to challenge the status quo, formalising and

⁵ Originally presented to The European Business Ethics – UK Conference on Teaching Business Ethics, City University, 1 June 2001.

⁶ A chapter entitled “Management education: ethics versus morality”.

legitimising such critique within a body of legitimate knowledge, namely ‘critical management theory’.

The reason for including this paper here is because it is relevant to my thesis. It helped me to shift the management learning agenda on MAPOD beyond the individual manager (student practitioner), to one that is interdependent with the well-being and learning of society at large. Moreover, it helped me to integrate and better understand how I could be in educative relations with my students and hold together in the dialectical tradition both a humanistic, feminist and critical perspective in order that I might better live my values in practice. In Chapter Ten,⁷ I draw on the ideas presented in this paper and show how they have influenced my inquiry.

⁷ Entitled “Educating the social formation: reflecting on the influence of my living theory”.