

A Critical Reflection On My Learning And Its Integration Into My Professional Practice

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Abstract

This paper on, 'A Critical Reflection On My Learning And Its Integration Into My Professional Practice', was successfully submitted for a Masters programme at the University of Bath in 2010, whilst Sally was working fulltime as a teacher in a large secondary school in an English town 10 miles for the city of Bath. Sally died of a brain tumour in 2012. By making her writings public she offered the knowledge she created as a gift to the development of the educational knowledge base of professional educators. While the detail of practice, procedures, policies and regulations change, the learning she offers is as relevant today as it was then. Teachers continue to experience tensions, as Sally did, in trying to be true to their values and improve the educational experience of their students in contexts dominated by economic rationalism.

Sally's account will particularly resonate with teachers who are committed as professional educators to struggling to develop their professional knowledge and contribute to evolving, rather than revolving, educational practice that contributes to the flourishing of their students.

Keywords: professional knowledge; independent learning; emotions; living-educational-theory.

Introduction

This paper shows how Sally's ideas about independent learning, first explored in 2006, were developed and put into practice between 2007- 2010, through researching her educational practice as part of her Masters programme. Sally shows how she learns to critically engage with, challenge and go beyond the hegemony of traditional academic research to develop her own language with which to research and enhance her educational influence in her own learning, the learning of others and the learning of the academic and practitioner worlds she was part of.

Sally refers to her other writings on the Masters programme and for the convenience of the reader they are listed here and can be accessed from

<http://actionresearch.net/writings/mastermod.shtml>:

- GWIST accredited professional development: Educational Management BANES (Bath and North East Somerset) A project report making a comparison of the performance of boys and girls within one school. (2001)
- Understanding Learning and Learners: How can I help my students understand and develop the skills of independent learning? (2007)
- Gifts and Talents in Education Module: How can I enable the gifts and talents of my students to be in the driving seat of their own learning? (2008)
- First Educational Enquiry: A Pilot Project The application of the TASC process Across 5 subjects To Year 7 students (2008)

- Second Educational Enquiry: How can leadership qualities improve my practice as a teacher? (2009)
- Research Methods in Education: How can I research my own practice? (2010)

Sally begins this (edited) account:

The purpose of this essay is to critically reflect on my learning during the MA programme, as represented in the above assignments, and to show how my learning has been integrated into my professional practice as both a classroom teacher and pastoral leader in a large secondary school in a small town in the South West of England. My reflections on my actions have led to new learning and enabled living-educational-theories of practice to develop (Whitehead, 1989).

Making critical use of the literature in the field of education

Throughout my research I have critically engaged with literature in the field of education. My engagement with literature from writers such as Claxton (2002), Williams (2003), Lightfoot (2006), Kesten (1987) and reports such as the B&NES (Bath and North East Somerset) 16- 19 Area Wide Inspection in Autumn 2000, enabled me to see that I was not alone in my concern about students' lack of independent learning.

Claxton (2002, 1997) and Wallace (2008) introduced me to relevant programmes of study. I also gained a critical appreciation of the work of Boud (1988) and Moseley (2005). Boud argues for the importance of not forgetting the values of building up subject skills and concepts. This has enabled me to keep in perspective my focus on how to address the deficit of students' learning skills. I have also been mindful of Boud's advice that the teacher is the senior learner in the teacher-student relationship even if both are seen to be on a learning journey. Likewise Moseley et. al. (2005) warned about the dangers of labelling students as teachers and searched to identify individuals' learning needs. It is a point that I have applied to the 'gifted and talented' debate (Cartwright, 2008) and argued that this should be an inclusive and not exclusive approach to supporting students.

Make critical use of professional experience in the field of Education

Drawing on the work of Wallace (2008) on TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) I developed and implemented a TASC project for Year 7 students involving colleagues across 5 subject areas, which I analysed in my first educational enquiry (Cartwright, 2008). Critical use of professional experience has been significantly influential in the development of the TASC project from its pilot stage in 2007 to its continued implementation during 2010. Evaluations were sought from both participating staff and students. To reduce researcher bias a consultant interviewed the students. The qualitative feedback has been influential in the development and delivery of the project. For instance, the project was moved from the first term of Year 7, when students were still new to the school, to that of the third term, and from being taught across eight consecutive lessons over a fortnight to being taught in one whole day with a collapsed timetable. Thus, through the critical use of professional experience in the field of Education significant changes have been made to the practical implementation of what became a 'Learning to Learn' project.

Analysing, interpreting and critiquing findings and arguments

The analysis, interpretation and critique of findings and arguments were particularly demonstrated in two essays, one concerning boys' underachievement (Cartwright, 2001) and the second concerning Gifted and Talented (Cartwright, 2009). In the first essay I analysed, interpreted and critiqued findings of boys' performance within my own school and was able to make a case for direction and change in how we delivered our schemes of work in my research methods module, 'How do I research my own practice?' (Cartwright 2010). A sample and critique of the data used from my own school within which I work is drawn from, 'GWIST Accredited Professional Development Programme: Educational Management B&NES: A project report making a comparison of the performance of boys and girls within one school' (Cartwright, 2001) and is given here:

A sample of the data used from the school within which I worked:

- In every year since 1998 the girls' average point score per pupil is higher than that of the boys'.
- Within the last 5 years the smallest difference has been 3:00 points in 1996 and the greatest difference was 8:1points 1997.
- The percentage of boys achieving grade B or better was lower than girls each year since 1988.
- Within the last 5 years the smallest difference was 4% in 2000 and the biggest difference was 14.2% in 1998.
- The percentage of boys achieving A*-C each year since 1988 was less than that of the girls.
- The last 5 years the biggest difference between boy/girl performance for those in the A*-C was 20:9% in 1998 and 9:7% in 2000.

The following questions arose out of the data analysis:

1. Is the school in a situation where the girls are performing exceptionally well?
2. If this is the case how can teachers enable the boys to perform exceptionally well?
3. Are there bigger differences between the performance of those boys and girls who are less able?
4. Does there need to be a more in depth analysis and comparison of boys and girls who achieve within the D-G range at GCSE at my school?
5. Are these averages applicable to all subjects or are there variations between subjects?
6. Does this pattern of results continue to Key Stage 5?

Gorard, et. al. (2001) highlighted the dangers of taking a reductionist approach to such data with the result that I analysed data between departments and compared internal and external assessment data. I presented the elements of an argument for an inclusive approach to gifted and talented education (Cartwright, 2008) as follows:

The National Strategy seems to ignore a range of issues concerned with those on and not on the Gifted and Talented register. For those not on the register, is there an assumption they do not have gifts and talents and so are not entitled to opportunities set aside for the Gifted and Talented? One has to ask on what grounds does one student qualify as Gifted and Talented and another not? According to White (2006) 'There are no solid grounds for innate differences in IQ; and there are none for the traditional subject-based curriculum' (p.1). My teaching experience shows that it is the student's readiness to learn, not what measurable set of grades or IQ results they bring to the classroom, that makes the difference between their progress or not. By failing to offer the opportunity to explicitly develop their gifts and talents to those students who do not meet the Gifted and Talented criteria, but are willing to be reflective and open themselves up to learning, is there not the potential to disappoint and reduce the self efficacy of such a student willing to learn and to sow the seed of the fixed mindset? (Dweck, 2008)

What about the pupil who is on the register one year but not another or the student who would be on the register in one school but not in another? For the students on the register what consideration has been given for their sense of failure if they do not achieve targets set or they do not want to participate in such a scheme? What consideration has been given to prevent the creation of an elitist attitude as I have seen amongst one of our own students, who on one occasion showed surprise when non 'gifted and talented' students were offered the same opportunities of extension and development?

I would question whether any educator is able to identify what any one student will derive from an opportunity. What I was able to recognise, from working along side the Gifted and Talented students on the AQA's new Extended Project, was that each student faced their own challenges and therefore derived different benefits. However, these needs and challenges emerged over time and could not have been recognised at the start of the project or identified by an IQ test, GCSE or A level grade or membership of an elite sports or artistic group.

Producing an extended piece of writing, making science accessible to the lay person and having the confidence to talk to a large audience were some of the challenges that these students identified for themselves. However these skills do not only belong to the top 5 – 10 % of a school population. I can think of many focused young people who, given the space and time to reflect, would welcome the opportunity to develop what they perceive as their learning needs and would be prepared to rise to the challenge. I also know of students who are on the school's Gifted and Talented register who, have declined the opportunities afforded by this classification. Our pilot course for the Extended Project Qualification was only offered to Gifted and Talented students.

However as we ran it for the second time the qualification was presented to all interested students in Year 12. The result is that two of the twelve newly registered students this year would not have been eligible if it had been exclusively for the Gifted and Talented.

Through the use of reasoning and evidence I also aimed to persuade the reader that an inclusive and not exclusive approach should be adopted towards the eligibility of students who wished to follow the Extended Project Qualification in the institution within which I worked.

Demonstrating self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, acting autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional level and managing change effectively and responding to changing demands.

My self direction is most clearly illustrated by my application to apply for the Farmington Fellowship (Cartwright, 2006) in order to pursue a concern about the lack of independent learning amongst students initially in the 16-19 age group identified through my practice. To understand the issues in the 16-19 area of the school I realised that I needed to understand what skills students were bringing in from the primary schools. I was able to conduct interviews with local headteachers and was introduced to the TASC process (Wallace, 2008), Building Learning Power (Claxton, 2002) and the ‘traffic light system’, all of which have been implemented into the Social Studies faculty within my own school.

The background of this work enabled me to appreciate the opportunities afforded by the Assessment and Qualification Alliances’s (AQA) Extended Project Qualification. My chosen delivery of this qualification brought together what I had learnt from Farmington Fellowship and the Masters course, with the result that the delivery and teaching of this course has been recognised as being distinctive but nevertheless successful. (Cartwright, 2008).

Evaluating research and variety of types of information and evidence critically, making informed judgements in the absence of complete data and evaluating my academic and professional performance.

I joined the Masters course with knowledge of Action Research using a Social Science model that enabled me to write with clarity and communicate effectively (Cartwright, 2006). However what I have gained through the Living Educational Theory methodology (Whitehead, 2008), which I show in my research methods module (Cartwright, 2010), is an understanding of my own values that underpin what I do and have become more critically aware as a practitioner. The consequence has not only been to change something systemically, which I show in my understanding learners and learning module (Cartwright, 2007) and to deliver a new course in the curriculum, but also to adopt a more holistic approach to teaching. Both the students within my classroom and I embody our own different values. This has enabled me to value students for who they are and not just what they bring to the educational economy of grades, levels and value added league tables. Thus I would argue I have not only managed change within myself but that I have responded to demands made of this Living Educational Theory research.

Through a review (Cartwright, 2010) of my different use of research methodologies and a comparison with that of Living Educational Theory I have evaluated research methods and the variety types of information and evidence. Within the Research Methods essay I demonstrated that my use of the Phenomenological approach was undermined by the lack of primary data and it was only with reflective hindsight that identified this as a weakness within the action research.

Contributing to professional debate in the field of Education and communicating conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences.

I have been introduced to both Action Research (Lomax et al, 1996) and the concept of a research community and these have become the basis for the introduction and delivery of the AQA Extend Project Qualification Level 3, in 2007, into the Sixth Form. I have been able to contribute to the professional debate in the field of Education and communicate my conclusions to a specialist and non – specialist audience in a range of forums. I wrote a report entitled ‘Independent Learning Skills through Religious Education’ (Cartwright, 2006) for the Farmington Trust, and presented a summative paper of the report at Bath Spa University and the Farmington Institute in 2006. In 2008 I wrote an article entitled: ‘A pilot project of 8 lessons across Social studies: Thinking actively in a Social Context. (TASC)’, for the journal: *Gifted Education International* (Cartwright, 2008). During 2008 and 2009 two groups of my students and myself gave presentations at four conferences throughout the authority describing, explaining and answering questions on the Extended Project Qualification. The audiences at these conferences included teachers from both, primary and secondary schools, advisors, representatives from exam boards and local authorities and students. Marie Huxtable videoed and (having obtained all the necessary permissions) placed an extract of the presentation to the regional 14-19 strategy managers on YouTube (<http://youtu.be/tMpaItNH7kg>). In conclusion I believe that I have contributed to the professional debate on independent and interdependent learning.

Managing time, prioritising workloads and recognising and managing personal emotions.

It has been through an engagement with Living Educational Theory (Whitehead, 1989, 2008) that I have increasingly recognised the role of emotion in what I write and a chronological review of my essays marks this development. Thus in my GWIST funded essay (Cartwright, 2001) Farmington Trust essay (Cartwright, 2006) and the first MA essay Understanding Learners and Learning (Cartwright, 2007) there is little reference to how I feel emotionally about what I do. However I begin my Educational Enquiry (Cartwright, 2008) with a consideration of the Christian concept of love and my Gifted and Talented essay (Cartwright, 2008) recognises my own emotional engagement with independent study as a teenager. The opening paragraphs of the Research Methods essay (Cartwright, 2010) describes both the emotions of tension and pleasure that I experience as a teacher. Tension, at working within a system that has put teachers in a straightjacket but also pleasure, derived from the intellectual curiosity of students. The concept of sharing experiences and values, as well as academic thoughts through the Living Educational Theory has sustained me through three years of significant changes in my own job due to staffing restructuring. Time management in terms of completing these essays has been a challenge in the face of

the competing demands of family life and not all the 'plates' have been kept 'spinning' and at times family needs have taken priority.

Developing new or higher level skills, for example in information technology.

Through the Masters course I have begun to have the confidence to use both photography and video material (Cartwright, 2010) to understand my working relationships with students and their responses. Thus through this new development in my work I am developing a higher level of skill in relation to information technology. This has enhanced my ability to be critical of my own work in both a positive and negative way.

Conclusion.

The essays that I have written during this Masters course are testament to the key skills required of this transition unit and the impact they have had on my teaching. Boys' underachievement, the TASC process and Extended Project Qualification have benefited from the opportunities afforded by this course. Living Educational Theory research has been transformatory in allowing me to enquire into the values that underpin my role as a teacher and thus giving me a foundation upon which I can allow myself to make changes to my practice.

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