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living theory and TASC: a multidimensional, inter and intra-relational, flowing Knot of Enquiry

Abstract

I believe that I have a responsibility as a professional educator to theorise my practice, that is, to create explanations for what I am doing and judge the efficacy of what I do against standards that arise from recognising my own living educational values as they emerge through my practice. I am part of my world so I appreciate I have to take account of the constraints, opportunities and demands emanating from my employers, the communities in which I live and work and government agencies. I hope that teachers and other educators reading this paper will hear the words of the children and adults who are seeking to improve and explain their own learning as they hold themselves to account by living their values as best they can and be inspired to try to do the same.

Introduction

I try to listen and work with ideas and practice drawn from many sources mediated through my own imagination, practice and theorising. Shekerjian (1991) wrote in her introduction to 'Uncommon Genius'.

'Everyone has an aptitude for something. The trick is to recognise it, to honour it, to work with it' p 1.

The phrase really resonated with me and provoked me to ask how I can recognise, honour and work with, not just my aptitudes and those of others, but the gifts created, valued and offered. I am very much of the mind of Hymer (2007) that gifts are understood and expressed in a dynamic relationship and they are not categories with

which to describe and define people. In the introduction to his thesis he offers a:

'...value-laden concept of generative-transformational giftedness and its latent fecundity in and relevance to the field of gifted and talented education. To this end, I suggest an inclusional, non-dualistic alternative to the identification or discovery of an individual's gifts and talents by arguing that activity-and development-centred (not knowing-centred) learning-leading-development Vygotskian environments lead not to the identification of gifts and talents but to their creation' p 5.

In this paper I will focus on recognising, honouring and working with the educational gifts created and offered by two

of the educators who in recent years have significantly influenced my thinking and practice: Belle Wallace and Jack Whitehead. Both have worked internationally for decades to contribute to a world of educational quality which carries hope for progressing a humane world, Belle Wallace (Wallace et al, 2004) by developing TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context), Jack Whitehead (Whitehead, 1989 and Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) by developing Living Educational Theory and Living Values enquiry and research.

Jack Whitehead's work has been used predominately by adults to extend their own and other adults' abilities to ask and answer questions such as 'how can I improve what I am doing'. He clarifies the connections between his own work and that of Belle Wallace in his keynote (Whitehead, 2007) to the Second National Conference on Foreign Language, Teacher Education and Development 2007 in Beijing.

'We have used action reflection cycles (McNiff, 2000) in our own problem-solving processes in the development of our living educational theories. In these action reflection cycles we:

- i. Express our concerns about what we want to improve
- ii. Imagine ways of improving our practice
- iii. Act on our plans and gather data to make a judgment on our effectiveness
- iv. Evaluate the effectiveness of our actions
- v. Modify our concerns, ideas and actions in the light of our evaluations
- vi. Share our explanations of our learning to strengthen their validity and to benefit from the ideas of others

I particularly like the way Belle Wallace, working independently of Jean McNiff and myself had produced a visual

representation of action reflection cycles in her TASC Wheel. (TASC stands for Thinking Actively in a Social Context).

What I like about the TASC Wheel is that it can be used by young people, individuals who are studying for their initial teacher education qualifications and workers who are studying for their masters and doctoral programmes. It also has wider applications for improving practice in the workplace. Joy Mounter (2007) has shown how 6 year olds have both used the TASC Wheel to improve their learning and expressed their creativity in improving the model so that it more adequately represents their own learning.'

[http://www.webquestuk.org.uk/TASC WHEEL/Learn from Experience.htm](http://www.webquestuk.org.uk/TASC_WHEEL/Learn from Experience.htm)

(Please refer to p149 for the full TASC Wheel)

Belle' Wallace's work has been used predominantly by teachers to extend children's sophistication as skilful enquirers as demonstrated in her many publications.

By connecting the work of Jack Whitehead and Belle Wallace I hope to invite you to explore with your pupils and students how you and they may be empowered to create your own, individual, living theory accounts. I appreciate that as an educator I have a special responsibility towards others but I see this as a possibility of expressing responsibility towards, rather than for the other (Huxtable and Whitehead, 2006). In appreciating how I do that I believe I might respond more inclusively to those who would have power over me as well as those who may see me as potentially having power over them.

Both Belle Wallace and Jack Whitehead engage in what could broadly be described as action research, or enquiry based learning. Both see 'learning' to be something 'learners' create for their own benefit and the benefit of others. Most importantly for me, both are very clear about the educational values they are seeking to live more fully; their commitment to the individual learning about themselves, the person they are and want to be, and to enabling people to grow as they create, value and offer gifts that contribute to a humane world. Biesta (2006) expresses this:

'...education is not just about the transmission of knowledge, skills and values, but is concerned with the individuality, subjectivity, or personhood of the student, with their 'coming into the world' as unique, singular beings' (p 27).

That for me distinguishes the work of Wallace and Whitehead from many others; their theory, practice and values are living standards of judgement interconnected and interrelated, with emancipating and empowering intent. It is where the process of enquiry moves into creating new knowledge about and for the world and self, the 'coming into the world' that brings the work of Whitehead and Wallace together in an exciting fusion for me. I can connect enquiring and improving what I am doing, whether that is focussing my enquiry in the terrain that is 'given', for instance a 'curriculum' or a national strategy, or the terrain that is 'living' which arises from a tension, curiosity or passion of my own.

Up to the time of writing this I have had about 55 years experience as a learner trying to understand and live a life that is satisfying and productive. About 30 of those years have also been taken up with working as an

educational psychologist fascinated with how other people, particularly children and young people, learn and strive to live a life that they feel is worthwhile, and trying to contribute more to their educational experience. Despite a lifelong professional and personal interest in how and why people learn, I have yet to see any substantial difference between myself learning as a child and myself learning as an adult. I hope I am more skilful, more sophisticated than I was as a child but I recognise more similarities than differences in how and why I learn.

I was struck by the similarities very forcefully a few years ago when travelling to a meeting about 16-19 year olds taking modules with the Open University. On the train I worked on a 5 minute presentation I was due to give at a local annual conference of Head teachers on learning beyond the curriculum. I wrote about the barriers we faced:

- overwhelming demands
- constraints of the curriculum
- targets
- drive for standards
- exams, tests
- the timetable
- need to relax and be unengaged, to socialise, to have a life

and I had prepared a slide on which I

Learning to overcome barriers for ourselves helps us help children overcome the barriers to learning



pronounced:

When I sat in the meeting I listened to a presentation by young people who had

chosen to embark on the courses offered by the Open University. They said how much they valued the experience and described the competing demands made on them that they had to deal with. I was startled by what they said; the pressures they described were almost identical to the ones I had written.

The idea of a 'TASC Knot' came to me through creating my first living theory research account and framing the account through TASC, which I submitted as an educational enquiry in a Masters programme at the University of Bath. I was very familiar with TASC but had not, until then, actually used it as a learner myself.

Can I pause at this point to ask you - Do you use the frameworks, practices and theories that you use to teach your pupils and students to develop your own learning? What as a learner do you appreciate about educational relationships and space? I am asking you because I believe that as educators we should practise what we preach - but often don't, which is I think to the detriment of our students. In treating ourselves as learners, testing our practice and theories against ourselves, I believe we will make significant advances and appreciate and respond to our students with a better appreciation of the diversity which is our humanity.

The similarities between myself as an adult learner and as child struck me again in creating and writing the account and I found Freeman's (1996) findings, when exploring self-report and high ability, interesting:

'...expertise in the skills of teaching was very much appreciated - but teachers also have to be in genuine two-way communication with their pupils. The quality most appreciated in teachers was a contagious enthusiasm for their subject'

p 198.

I can hear a similar refrain in the reflections of Erica Holley, an educator working in a university, in an email to her supervisor, Jack Whitehead, on completing her master's degree:

'You offer acceptance of me for what I am and push at the boundaries of what I could become. You accept ideas, puzzlement and confusion from me as part of a process of me coming to understand but the understanding reached seems always a new understanding for us both. I think I've seen our work as collaborative parallelism' Erica Holley Jan 05.

Freeman concluded:

'A new paradigm is needed in gifted research, including a more collaborative and egalitarian mode of enquiry' *ibid.*

I would go further than Freeman and suggest that what excites me about the fusion of the work of Whitehead and Wallace is the possibilities it carries for a new gifted and talented educational paradigm which is inclusive and inclusional (Rayner, 2006) and contributes to a world of educational quality where 'gift' is recognised as a dynamic, relational concept rather than a definition and category; very much as Hymer (2007) suggests. By inclusional I am thinking of Rayner (2006) who describes inclusionality as a relationally dynamic awareness of space and boundaries that is connective, reflexive and co-creative. I hope this becomes clearer as I return to my story of myself as learner using TASC.

In my educational enquiry master's assignment (Huxtable, 2006) I focussed on my excitement in recognising and trying to explain the connections I see between the

work of Belle Wallace and Jack Whitehead. One aspect of my work is to increase the palette of educational thinking and practice that local educators can draw on, which I believe enhances and develops inclusive gifted and talented education for all in schools. As part of that programme I had invited Belle a number of times to run TASC training days locally, since when, many teachers have been working with TASC in a variety of ways. When I was introduced to Jack Whitehead's work on Living Theory and learnt that teachers could work with him on a master's programme, I asked him to offer a programme. The programme is ongoing with participants continuing to join and successfully completing assignments which you can find in the University of Bath library and on <http://www.actionresearch.net>

Before I go on to explain where I believe TASC and Living Theory come together, I would like you to have a sense of why I felt, and still feel, there is a lot to be learnt by exploring where the work of Wallace and Whitehead are brought together. It is not just in what they write, it is in the way they are, and I hope this brief description of where I felt this resonance might help you get beneath the words. I was talking with Belle at a conference when she shared with me some of the photos she had taken to illustrate her work. As Belle talked about the photos I could see and hear that each had been taken and selected with the care of a loving educator. One in particular struck me, not so much the picture, which was of a beautiful child like the rest, but the tone and the way Belle moved as she talked to me about the photo which brought Jack's phrases 'the flow of life affirming energy' and 'embodied knowledge' vividly to mind.

My anticipation of Jack's response to the photos was realised and is described by him in his Keynote for the Act, Reflect, Revise III

Conference, Brantford, Ontario. (Whitehead, 2005). Jack says,

'Such affirmations and visual narratives can be understood in a conversation between myself and Marie Huxtable. Marie is a psychologist working on educational projects in the Bath and North East Somerset local authority, the equivalent of your School Board. The affirmations of inclusionality felt and understood by Marie Huxtable and me are focused on our responses to the expressions in the eyes, face, body and hands of the pupil below as she shows what she has been working on, to the photographer Belle Wallace. We both felt a flow of life-affirming energy in our responses to the image and with each other. We recognised this flow of energy between us and affirm that it carries our hope for the future of humanity and our own. For us, the way the pupil shows Belle what she had produced carries two affirmations. There is the affirmation from the pupil that what has been produced is a source of pleasure and satisfaction. There is the affirmation from Belle and ourselves that we are seeking to enable ourselves and others to feel this quality of pleasure and satisfaction in what we and others are producing. I am associating such affirmations with what I mean by living a productive life in education.'

<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/monday/arrkey05dr1.htm>

To return to the 'cognitive' points of synthesis; the 'TASC Knot' emerged through the creation of that account as for the first time I tried to work with a Living Theory research process and frame my writing for a reader using TASC.

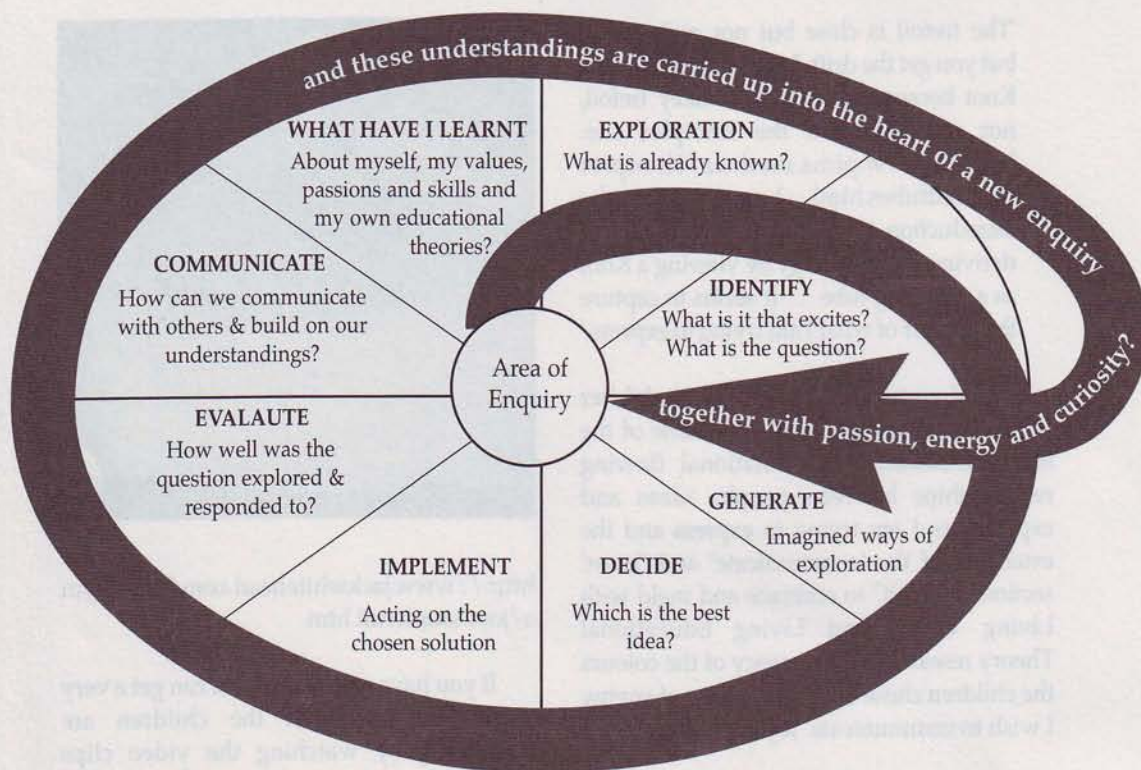


Figure 1: TASC Knot (Huxtable, 2006)

The biggest movement for me came as I was trying to explain to others what I had been doing and found that the learning and creation of new understandings emerged as I went beyond 'communicate to' or 'telling' other people about what I had understood. I realised at that time I was listening and engaging in the creative flow of 'communicating with' myself and others. I found, in hearing myself articulate in different ways using the spoken and written word, pictures, physical movements, video, and creating an account for an audience such as the readers of this journal, my understanding shifted and in that movement I created and co-created new knowledge both 'of the world' and 'of me'.



accessed from <http://www.pims.math.ca/Knotplot/se/radtubes.html>

This picture of the smokey trefoil that I liked at the time begins to show some of the flowing, three dimensional form of the process of enquiry that I was trying to express. I wrote

'The trefoil is close but not quite right; but you get the drift. I particularly like this Knot because of its title 'smokey trefoil, not relaxed' from the Knotplot site. <http://www.pims.math.ca/Knotplot/se/radtubes.html>. I even like the introduction to the page 'The notion of deriving a Knot energy by viewing a Knot as a radiating tube ...' It seems to capture the flavour of what I am trying to express.'

Joy Mounter (2007) shows a model her pupils built that communicates some of the multidimensional inter-relational flowing relationships between people, ideas and experiences I am trying to express and the extension of the 'communicate' and 'learn' sections of TASC to embrace and meld with Living Values and Living Educational Theory research. The vibrancy of the colours the children chose add to the sense of energy I wish to communicate. Joy explains:

'My children are confident exploring learning skills and using the TASC Wheel, but are dissatisfied as well. There is more --- 'P' described the Wheel as too 2d, flat, whereas his thinking spirals around, flows through the middle of the Wheel and explodes, sometimes showering others with sparks from your learning. This is a photograph of the Wheel the children developed from their experiences and reflections as learners. I think often we get caught at the end of the Wheel and it is easy to just share our learning in a topic through an assembly and think about how many facts we have learned. The Wheel needs to encourage us to self reflect, evaluate skills we have used and need to develop within the topic as well as a learner. It is the knowing of 'self' that moves our thinking forward and the emotional aspects of myself that reflect in my learning'. Mounter (2007).



<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/joymounterull.htm>

If you have web access you can get a very vivid feel for what the children are expressing by watching the video clips where they begin to explain their learning theories as they reflect on the TASC Wheel.



Joy is asking 'What use is the TASC Wheel?' <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hH2-5xexbAQ>

'What do you think of the TASC Wheel?' <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ti4syOriDdY>

and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSqg1phEEaM>

Like the children I recognise that my thinking is not linear, unidirectional, and two dimensional but to try to understand and communicate, to myself as much as to others, in a manner that will help me understand what it is that I am doing I become trapped. Murray (2007) expresses my problem in the concluding moments of creating his doctoral thesis.

'One of the consequences of my epistemological nomadism for producing a clearly communicable text that I have come to understand through my inquiry is that I have this creative, excessive, or 'leaky' (Lather, 1993) tendency where my imagination is still working out the possibilities that have moved further on than I have been able to communicate in my text. This produces a 'gap' because I have not stabilized either my meanings or writings before I have moved on again in the direction of new, insightful 'oases'.

The flow of my liquid imagination requires a solution, or moment of stability, perhaps a stabilising process, in which the runaway liquidity of my meanings are staunched just long enough for me to translocate them in communicable ways into my text. This tension of exposing and opening up new ideas set against the practical need to hold them steady and stabilise them so that I can communicate their meanings has remained with me throughout my research inquiry as a journey of liquid discovery, and ever-present in my writing-up process. I have not resolved this issue. The tension remains: I imagine it will require a very conscious effort of self-discipline on my part whenever I write' p 208.

Working with a 'TASC Knot' has enabled me to hold my thinking long enough to be

able to reflect on it. I have recognised how much of my learning arises from where I try to explain to others and myself what I have learnt and I now share the drafting process of accounts and reports as a creative possibility rather than as a tedious transmission of historical information. I am not alone in recognising the energy that comes from enquiring in this manner. I have found it fascinating to be part of the group of educators working with Jack Whitehead on the master's programme at the University of Bath and experience the process of engaging in living theory research and the energy that I think the children so beautifully show with the shower of sparks. Many of the assignments and theses that can be read on <http://www.actionresearch.net> communicate the same energy, and that is not something that can often be said of writing that has passed through the gates of the Academy for accreditation at a higher degree level.

I have understood today that the process of enquiry whether driven by the 'given' or the 'living' is not significantly different, but the starting place might be. For children or adults responding to the demands of the 'given' such as an imposed curriculum the terrain is set and must take priority. It seems then the process starts with 'gather and organise' what is already known as I have shown in figure 1. Where we are allowed to inform the terrain from 'living', our tensions, passions and curiosities it appears to shift as shown in figure 2. The process starts with our reflections and tensions that emerge as we 'communicate to and with' ourselves and others, and what we have learnt from our experiences and enquiries, and recognise and explain what we understand about ourselves; our values, our educational theories to account for our learning, our aptitudes, passions and curiosities...the tensions we experience as living

contradictions (Whitehead, 1989) ... I can feel the showering sparks and energy as the children show, as my learning and foci for the new enquiry connect with the boundaries and scope of enquiry and explode up through the centre of TASC.

I know that I have not communicated as well as I want to the systemic, inter and intra-relational, flowing, multidimensional nature of my living enquiry; rather like Alice Through the Looking Glass, the closer I get to it the further I find myself from it.

However I hope the representation through a mathematical Knot which incorporates notions of energy (Vasyliuk, 1991), showing 'communicating with and to...' in the pole position and removing the segregating lines dividing the spaces enables you to recognise signposts in the process of my enquiry sufficiently to follow some of my thinking and test out the paths you tread in your enquiries as learner and teacher. The spaces are distinct but not discrete (Alan Rayner introduced me to this

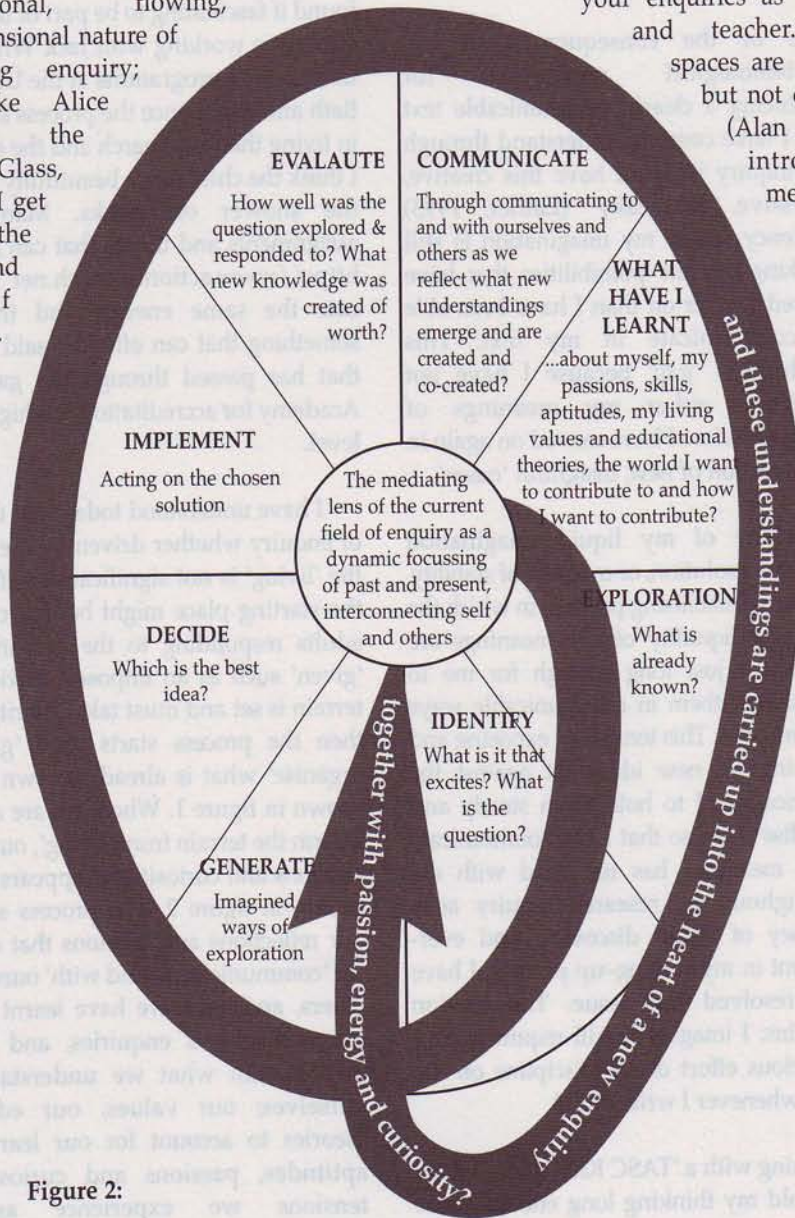


Figure 2:

invaluable phrase) and thinking does not necessarily move in a systematic fashion but I feel there is quite often a directional flow which embraces the continually multidirectional moving gossamer threads of time, relationships and the processes of learning and knowledge creation.

Looking back over what I have written, I am very aware that what is missing are the living, vibrant relationships that are the essence and fuel of my research. I need to invite you to step outside of TASC for a moment and share my desire to create educational spaces and relationships where the values I hold can be expressed, that is:

- an intention to recognise and value through use, the skills and understandings of the other, and their ability to create and co-create valued and valuable knowledge
- an interest in, and respect for, the other as a person with complex multidimensional individuality
- the intention to help that person live as satisfying and productive a life as possible, as judged and determined by that person's standards; not just as an optional extra but it is core to what drives me
- energy and courage and the pleasure of the energy and courage I find in the educational relationships I have with others

and to explain that I hold myself in the same regard as 'other', neither superior nor inferior, but as another human seeking to live a satisfying and productive life, contributing to a humane world. You may have other values and I ask you to hold them in mind as you reread this paper. I also ask you to hold in focus the warmth I experience and the energising humour and pleasure I feel expressed in the educational relationships which are part of my world of practice and

which these pictures communicate to me and keep me connected to.

Thanks to Joy Mounter (2006), Margaret Dobie (in Laidlaw, 2006), Eden Charles and Alan Rayner for these photographs.



I appreciate you may come from a culture different to my own and the photographs may not communicate to you, but I am asking you to set to one side for a moment, if you can, the conventions that may separate us, to recognise and focus with me on the human qualities of warmth, humour and pleasure to be found in educational relationships which I believe unite us. How do you communicate the qualities that are important to you, those values of humanity that are the bedrock of your practice?

I hope through this paper to encourage you to engage in creating your own living theory to account for your practice. What is meant by this I think is beautifully put by Whitehead and McNiff (2006)

'These theories are living in the sense that

they are our theories of practice, generated from within our living practices, our present best thinking that incorporates yesterday into today, and which holds tomorrow, already within itself' p 2.

How do I create my own Living Educational Theory? As it is not a 'package' it is difficult to answer as there can be no simple formula, but I offer you a brief resume of my own understandings that are evolving as I engage with Living Educational Theory research; as I recognise, value and work with Whitehead's gift of Living Educational Theory (Whitehead, 1993). For me working with Living Educational Theory includes:

- *Including the 'I' in researching answers to the question, 'how do I improve what I am doing?'*

This means not treating myself as a contaminant to be eliminated from what I am doing, but recognising and accepting who and what I am, and the influence I have in my own life and that of others, and in social formations. Ghandi communicates something of this when he said 'Be the changes you want to see in the world!' In creating my Living Educational Theory I believe I recognise that I am the changes – whether they are the ones I want to see takes me to recognising my values and myself as a living contradiction.

- *Recognising my educational values, seeking to live them as fully as I can and holding myself to account, not simply to externally imposed standards but to include my own standards through clarifying my values based living standards of judgment.*

I seek to live with the best of intent but often in practice live a contradiction either knowingly or inadvertently. This is

recognised as a common concern in the popular saying, 'the path to hell is paved with good intentions'. To recognise my educational values as they emerge through my practice is not easy for me. At times I have found it easier to recognise them through reflecting on the qualities of educators and educational spaces and relationships that I wish to live more fully in my own. I have given a description of this process in an account I created and presented at the BERA 2007 annual conference. (Huxtable, 2007). This extends the 'communicate' and 'learn' spaces of TASC to put it at the centre of what drives me in researching my own practice as expressed in Figure 2.

- *Integrating my 'I' as a living contradiction in the form of an action reflection cycle; recognising where there is a tension created by not living my values as a fully as I can and taking action to improve.*

Laidlaw (2007) clarifies for me two distinct, but not discrete sources of contradiction; internal contradiction, where an individual does not live out his/her values, and external contradiction where the conflict arises from what one wants to do and what the social/institutional/hegemonic/political conditions appear to demand. I have found making connections explicitly between my new enquiry and the knowledge created, through communicating with and to myself and others, and the understandings of myself; my values, my aptitudes, my aspirations... has enabled me to respond with hope to experiencing myself as a contradiction and the negating demands of others.

- *Generating descriptions and explanations of my learning and educational development and the educational influence I have in my own learning, the learning of others, and the learning of social formations, as I research my*

attempts to live my values more fully in my practice.

In other words, theorising my practice. It is in those 'last two' sections of the TASC Wheel that the most learning through theorising practice lays. These two sections, ironically, receive the least time commitment; time to think in a disciplined manner by moving outside of ourselves and creating accounts that communicate meanings and understandings beyond the moment. There is a Yorkshire phrase, 'make haste slowly'. Sometimes I think there is such pressure to be 'doing' and to produce a 'product', that we completely lose sight of the connection between the 'why' and the 'how' and anything learnt is rapidly lost in the whirring activity.

- *Evolving and explicating your living (Laidlaw, 1996) standards of judgement by which you hold yourself to account.*

I believe it is insufficient to do something with no other justification than, 'I was told to'. I believe I have a responsibility as a person as well as a professional educator to hold myself to account by standards of judgement that are connected to my living and lived values.

A framework such as a Living TASC Knot is one that children, young people and adults can understand. It offers emancipating power by enabling educators and their pupils and students to create their living educational theories, and account for the lives they live as satisfying and productive, while engaging with the 'given' curriculum. The reference in Whitehead's (2007) keynote to the work of leaders in Canada and China provides inspirational examples of people in positions of power who are also prepared to 'walk the talk'.

The importance of leadership in creating

a culture of enquiry that supports such teacher research groups in jiaoyanzu is well known, with one of the best illustrations provided by Jacqueline Delong (2002) in her research into her work as a Superintendent of Schools in the Grand Erie District School Board in Ontario. Laidlaw acknowledges the vital importance of Dean Tian Fengjun's leadership in establishing and sustaining a collaborative living theory approach to professional development with Chinese characteristics. What is outstanding in this leadership is Dean Tian's (2005) willingness to engage in a self-study of his own leadership practices and to account for his own influence in his enquiry 'How can I help my colleagues to become more collaborative and thus promote sustainable educational development?'

<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/jack/jwkeynotechina220907.htm>

The development of the idea of a living multidimensional and flowing inter-connecting TASC Knot has moved my thinking and I hope I have stimulated your imagination to describe your own processes. As you explored the different spaces described in the living TASC Knot, do any of them resonate with your process of enquiry? Does it help you to identify spaces that you have previously skimmed or missed and create new knowledge from what you find? Does it help you to help your pupils and students recognise more the person they are and want to be as they acquire the skills and understandings that are the tools intended to contribute to the possibility of living a life they deem satisfying and productive while earning a living and contributing to a humane world?

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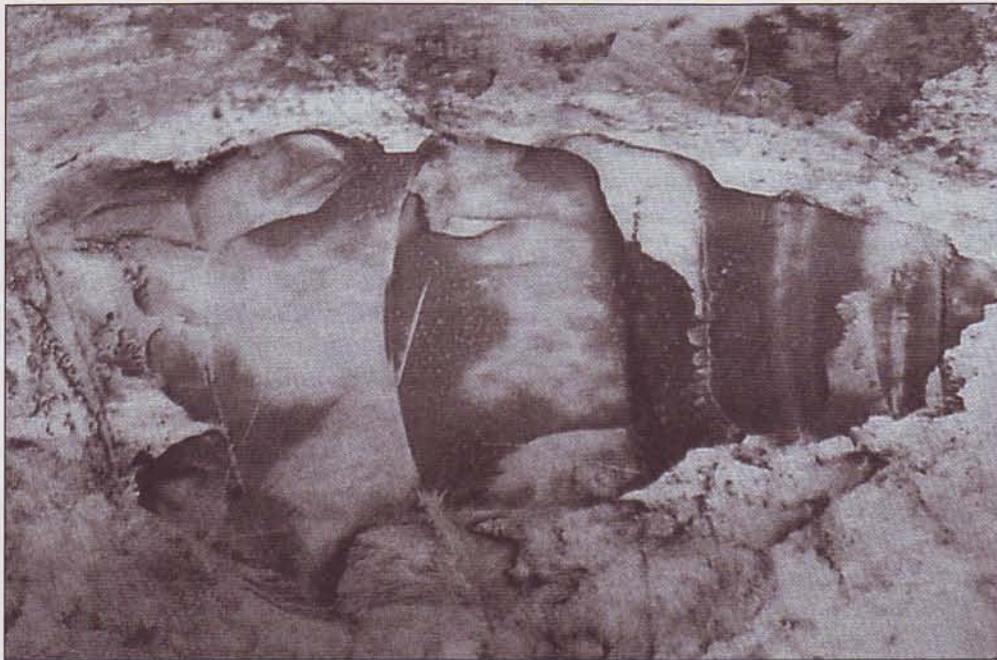
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