

# The action learning, action research experiences of professionals

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## Abstract

*This keynote relates the experiences of professional educational-practitioners, which contribute to the legacy of action learners, action researchers, and others concerned with transforming social change for the flourishing of humanity. It provides an evidence-based justification for claiming that this legacy includes the creation of an educational epistemology that is transforming globally what counts as educational knowledge in the Academy. This transformation takes into account the power relations that are supporting and hindering its legacy, including the power of epistemicide. The epistemology is being created in the explanations of practitioner-researchers of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which the explanations are located. The energy-flowing values that constitute explanatory principles and living standards of judgement are clarified and evolved through the use of digital multi-media narratives. The freely available resources <http://www.actionresearch.net> include 10 years of the Educational Journal of Living Theories (EJOLTS - <http://ejolts.net>). These are international resources for all Action Researchers, Action Learners and educational-practitioner researchers who want to research their practice to understand, improve and explain it in terms of their ontological and social*

*values and their practice and to generate their own. These theories are generated from inquiries of the kind, "How do I improve what I am doing?" in which 'I' exists as a living contradiction and the researcher's ontological and relational values form their explanatory principles and standards of judgement.*

## Introduction

At the First World Congress of ALARA (then ALARPM) in Brisbane, I heard Reg Revans (1991) talk about how his original ideas on action learning were used to raise Belgium's industrial productivity growth. The ideas included the use of action learning sets of shared problems, imagined solutions, actions, evaluations and modification of problems, solutions and actions in the light of the evaluations. I also heard

Colin Henry (1991) evaluate the Congress in his paper 'If action research were tennis', in which he argued that action researchers needed to understand 'the game they were playing' in the sense of the rules that distinguished action research. This remains important. At the Second World Congress Robin McTaggart (1992) made the important point about the influences of economic rationality in action research.

We have moved beyond the reductionism which leads all questions to be discussed as if they were economic ones (de-valuation) to a situation where moral questions are denied completely (de-moralisation) in a cult of economic inevitability (as if greed had nothing to do with it). Broudy (1981) has described 'de-valuation' and de-moralization' in the following way:

De-valuation refers to diminishing or denying the relevance of all but one type of value to an issue; de-moralization denies the relevance of moral questions. The reduction of all values - intellectual, civic, health, among others - to a money value would be an example of de-valuation; the slogan 'business' is business' is an example of de-moralization (Broudy, 1981: 99) (McTaggart, 1992, p. 50).

It remains important for action learners and action researchers to understand the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences in their practice and understandings.

The theme of the Second World Congress on ‘Transforming Tomorrow Today’ is still relevant to the theme of the tenth congress on our legacy for transforming social change.

I helped to organise the Third World Congress at the University of Bath in 1994 on ‘Accounting for ourselves’ and jointly presented a multi-media text at the 7th World Congress in 2006 in Groningen on ‘How are we co-creating living standards of judgement in action-researching our professional practices?’. This was particularly significant in showing how the imposition of inappropriate criteria for publishing Conference Proceedings, in solely printed-text, can distort the embodied meanings of values and understandings that are being communicated in multi-media texts (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2006a & b).

In this presentation to the 10<sup>th</sup> World Congress on our living legacy I shall continue to include these insights about the nature of action learning, action research, accounting for ourselves and the importance of digital multi-media narratives for explaining educational influences in a living legacy of transforming social change, with living-educational-theories and living-posters.

In relation to this legacy I shall place **the values that distinguish educational learning** at the heart of my understanding of transforming social change. I am stressing two components of professionalism in education. The first is a professional’s commitment to improve their practice. The second is a commitment to contribute to the professional knowledge-base. I have organised this keynote in terms of:

1. The Action Learning, Action Research Experiences of Professionals.
2. An educational epistemology for social transformation.
3. Values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

4. Energy-flowing values and digital multi-media narratives.
5. Power relations and epistemicide.
6. Accounting for ourselves in Living Theory research and living-educational-theories with living-posters.
7. The Educational Journal of Living Theories and transforming social change.

## 1. **The Action Learning, Action Research Experiences of Professionals.**

In grounding this keynote in the action learning, action research experiences of professionals I am influenced by Fyodor Vasilyuk's (1991) ideas about 'The energy paradigm' in his 'Psychology of Experiencing', when he focused on the poorly understood relationships between energy and motivation, energy and meaning and energy and value (p. 64). As Vasilyuk points out, it is obvious that there are certain links in that we know how 'energetically' a person can act when positively motivated, we know that the meaningfulness of a project lends additional strength to the people engaged in it, but we have very little idea of how to link them into a psychology of motivation.

My address is based on the assumption that everyone here experiences embodied flows of energy with values that motivate actions. In my understanding of the action learning, action research experiences of professionals, the professionals experience a tension or living contradiction when they are not living their values as fully as they could do, in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'. In action learning sets and action research cycles, they clarify their problems or concerns, imagine what to do about them in an action plan, act and gather data on what they are doing, evaluate their influence in terms of what they are trying to achieve and modify their concerns, plans and actions in the light of their evaluations. What distinguishes action learning from action research is the requirement of research that the systematic enquiry is made public in the sense of being open to criticism. The additional requirement in **educational** action

research is that the practitioner-researcher creates and shares an explanation of their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations that influence practice and understanding (Whitehead, 1989).

In focusing on the action learning, action research experiences of professionals I am also including these experiences as the grounding for the development of evidence-based practice and explanations of educational influences in learning. My meaning of evidence-based practice, grounded in the AL and AR experiences of professionals, includes Biesta's view of interrelations among research, policy, and practice that 'keep in view education as a thoroughly moral and political practice that requires continuous democratic contestation and deliberation' (Biesta, 2007, p.1).

I now want to focus on the nature of the knowledge that has been created from the action learning, action research experiences of educational professionals as they create and share their evidence-based explanations of educational influence in living-theories that have been accredited as original contributions to knowledge in the Academy. In section eight I shall explain how such living-theories are forming a living legacy in transforming social change. My reason for focusing on this knowledge is because my view of professionalism includes a professional knowledge-base and the contributions of professionals to this knowledge. At the heart of understanding this knowledge-base in education is an educational epistemology. Here is a slide I used in the keynote to point to the educational knowledge created from the educational experiences of professional educators:

- Joy Mounter researching with 6 year olds.  
<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/tuesdayma/joymounterull.pdf>
- Branko Bognar and Marica Zovko, researching with 10 year olds. <http://ejolts.net/node/82>  
Sally Cartwright researching with 17 year olds.  
<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/tuesdayma/scgandtnov08.pdf>

- Jack Whitehead researching with a doctoral student  
<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/CS4.htm>

## 2. The creation of an educational epistemology for social transformation

The importance of epistemology as a theory of knowledge is that it not only clarifies the nature of the knowledge we are including in an educational epistemology for social transformation. It also enables us to raise questions about our justifications for communicating this knowledge to others as part of a process of social transformation. For example, the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Cole, 2019) was established after the second world to counter the ‘mass psychology of fascism’ and to contribute to the generation of a world that carried hope for the flourishing of humanity. Polanyi (1958), in his *Personal Knowledge*, stressed the importance of taking a decision to understand the world from one’s own point of view as an individual claiming originality and exercising judgement, responsibly with universal intent. Like the critical theorists, although his text was a contribution to a post-critical philosophy, Polanyi explained that his purpose was to strip away the crippling mutilations of centuries of objectivist thought. More recently de Sousa Santos (2014) has argued that such crippling mutilations are contributing to what he calls ‘epistemicide’ in the sense of killing off indigenous knowledges. I shall consider power relations and epistemicide in greater detail in section 5.

An educational epistemology is being created in the explanations (living-theories) of practitioner-researchers of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which the explanations are located. The archive of living-theories at <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml>

provides an evidence-based justification for claiming that this legacy includes the creation of an educational epistemology that is transforming globally what counts as educational knowledge in

the Academy. The educational epistemology is distinguished by its unit of appraisal, its standards of judgement and its logic. The unit is the individual's explanation of their educational influence. The standards of judgment include the ontological values the individual uses to give meaning and purpose to their lives and their understandings drawn from disciplinary theories. The logic is a living relational logic that is distinguished from formal and dialectical logics, as a mode of thought that is appropriate for comprehending the real as rational (Marcuse, 1964, p.105). It is distinguished by a relational dynamic awareness of space and boundaries that is connected, reflexive, and co-creative (Whitehead & Rayner, 2006) and grounded in the values-laden experiences of professionals.

### **3. Values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity**

In writing about values I am aware of the need to be as clear as I can in communicating my meanings of values. I am influenced by Wittgenstein's shift in thinking, from seeing language as a fixed structure to seeing it as a fluid structure that is intimately bound up with our everyday practices and forms of life, 'In most cases, the meaning of a word is its use' (Rayner, 2014). I am thinking specifically of my ontological values in the sense of my embodied expressions of the values I use to give meaning and purpose to my life. My values are included in my judgements about what is 'educational'. For me what is 'educational' involves learning with values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

In my understanding of values I draw on points made by Holmes', et al. (2011, p.8):

In both action and thought, people are affected by a wide range of influences. Past experience, cultural and social norms, and the money at our disposal are some of the most important. Connected to all of these, to some extent, are our values – which represent a strong guiding force, shaping our attitudes and behaviour over the course of our lives. Our values have been shown to influence our

political persuasions; our willingness to participate in political action; our career choices; our ecological footprints; the amount of resources we use, and for what purpose; and our feelings of personal wellbeing.

In my communications of my meanings of values I draw on both lexical definitions and ostensive, embodied expressions of meaning. These meanings are connected with energy and clarified through digital, multi-media narratives as I demonstrate in the next section. My understandings of value is influenced by the writings of the Common Cause Foundation – see <https://valuesandframes.org/downloads>

#### **4. Energy-flowing values and digital multi-media narratives**

One experience I value highly is the state of being grasped by the power of being itself (Tillich, 1962, p. 168). Whilst for Tillich this state has a religious grounding, for me it is experienced as a flow of life-affirming energy that sustains my ontological security and hope in the flourishing of humanity. When studying the philosophy of education (1968-70) I was influenced by Richard Peters' (1966) analysis in his *Ethics and Education*. This lexical analysis, where words are defined in terms of other words, focused on distinct, but not discrete, meanings of justice, respect for others, freedom, consideration of interests, respect for persons, with democracy as a procedural principle. Returning to Wittgenstein's point about the meanings of words being dependent on the context of their use, I shall focus in section 6 on embodied expressions of meanings of energy-flowing values in living-posters for digital multi-media narratives. The distinction I am drawing between lexical definitions of meanings and embodied expressions of meaning is at the heart of my claim that a new educational epistemology is being generated in the explanations of educational influence that are grounded in the professional experiences of action learners and action researchers. I use insights from Michel Foucault's (1980) work on power-knowledge in which his relational concept of power draws on micro-relations without



falling into reductionism. It avoids this by emphasizing the systemic aspect of the mutual influences in power-knowledge. It is my contention that the power relations sustaining the dominance of lexical definitions in theories in Western Academics are contributing to epistemicide. To transcend and transform this dominance I am demonstrating how and where the embodied knowledges of action learners and action researchers have been made explicit and recognised as making original contributions to knowledge in their living-educational-theories. You can access the multi-media texts at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml>

## **5. Power relations and epistemicide**

When researching the action learning action research experiences of professionals I accept Foucault's (1980) distinction between the 'specific intellectual' as opposed to the 'universal intellectual'. Foucault says that for a long period the 'left' intellectual was acknowledged as a champion of truth and justice. The universal intellectual was a spokesperson of the universal in the sense of moral, theoretical and political choices. In opposition to the universal intellectual, Foucault describes the specific intellectual in terms of an engagement in a struggle at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them. Foucault takes care to emphasise that by 'truth' he does not mean 'the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted'. By 'truth', he means the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true. The struggles 'around truth' are not 'on behalf' of the truth, but about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays. (Whitehead, 1993, p. 81)

Foucault's idea of power relations is very different to the idea that power is the probability that one actor in a social situation can impose his will on another irrespective of the basis on which the will rests.

Usually, power is understood as the capacity of an agent to impose his will over the will of the powerless, or the ability to force them to do things they do not wish to do. In this sense, power is understood as possession, as something owned by those in power in the sense that it is the probability that one actor in a social situation can impose his or her will on another irrespective of the basis on which the will rests.

Foucault however believes that power is not something that can be owned, but rather something that acts and manifests itself in a certain way; it is more a strategy than a possession.

This way of understanding power has two key features in seeing i) power as a system, a network of relations rather than a relation between the oppressed and in seeing ii) that the oppressor individuals are not just the objects of power, but they are the locus where the power and the resistance to it are exerted.

My understanding of power relations in relation to truth and the action learning action research experiences of professional also draws insights from the Ideas of de Sousa Santos. In my review of these ideas (Whitehead 2016) on the abyssal line; subaltern insurgent cosmopolitanism; epistemicide; ecology of knowledges and intercultural translation, I explain their influence in the evolution and transformation of my own living-educational-theory in my action learning, action research experiences and in my exploration of the implications of Santos' ideas for Living Theory research as a social movement (Whitehead, 2018).

I also want to emphasise the importance of Mary Hawkesworth's (2016) ideas on embodied power and demystifying disembodied politics. Hawkesworth explains why pervasive practices of racialization and gendering remain unrecognized and unstudied in the context of mainstream political science. Hawkesworth suggests that certain disciplinary assumptions about the nature of politics and the requirements of scientific study of the political world have rendered embodied power beyond the threshold of visibility:

Indeed, processes of racialization and gendering developed over the past five centuries under the auspices of "science"

have been embedded in law, custom, accredited knowledge and diverse social practices, lending coherences to forms of unknowing that continue to haunt political science in particular and public life more generally. (p. 5).

In developing my worldwide perspective on AI and AR in education, I want to acknowledge the importance of de Sousa Santos' (2014) ideas. In my review of these ideas (Whitehead 2016) on the abyssal line; subaltern insurgent cosmopolitanism; epistemicide; ecology of knowledges; intercultural translation, I explain their influence in the evolution and transformation of my own living-educational-theory, and in my exploration of the implications of Santos' ideas for Living Theory research as a social movement.

In developing this perspective on the living legacy and transformatory power of action learning, action research experiences of professionals I also want to draw attention to Inoue's (2015) arguments for bringing Eastern epistemological traditions into this perspective:

There are many different ways of defining mindfulness, but for the purpose of this book, mindfulness is best captured as a state of mind that accepts and accommodates multiple and seemingly conflicting perspectives, beliefs and assumptions. In Eastern epistemological traditions, it is considered to be a path to develop a deep awareness of the complexity of reality as well as what your mind is up to in the complexity. Mindfulness rejects a rigid persistence to only one perspective or belief system that narrowly confines your mind. It is characterized by a mental dispassion that is open and detached from one particular value system. It allows you to see the world from diverse perspectives and critically examine your actions and assumptions... (p.12)

I also want to highlight Zuber-Skerritt's (2017) insight about conferences as sites of learning and development in the renewal of society:

... I have argued that we need to shift away from the mindset of neoliberalism and reductionism dominating our present society and driving its obsession with consumerism,

power and control. Instead we need a collaborative, participative and inclusive paradigm built on love and working through local and global action to connect us with each other as human beings and with nature. Society needs to be renewed by making a shift from the negative energy of fear, competition, control and war to the positive energy of faith, love, hope and creativity. Clearly, we need to conceptualize and practice not just learning conferences but Loving Learning Conferences. (p. 224).

I now want to point to the evidence that shows how the research experiences of educational professionals can render visible and epistemologically significant, embodied power relations and the embodied expressions of ontological values as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influences in learning.

## **6. Accounting for ourselves in Living Theory research and living-educational-theories from the ground of our professional experience with living-posters.**

I helped to organise the third world congress of ALARA (then ALARPM) in Bath in 1994, with the theme 'Accounting for Ourselves'. From its grounding in the action learning action research experiences of professions, engaged in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' many participants showed a willingness and responsibility to account for themselves in evidence-based explanations of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of social formations, in their living-educational-theories. This responsibility for producing and sharing such explanations is grounded in the motivational power of ontological values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. It is also motivated by a desire to produce valid explanations of educational influence where the explanatory principles include these values. You can access in the Educational Journal of Living Theories (EJOLTS) the evidence that shows how the action learning action research experiences of professionals can render visible and epistemologically significant, embodied power relations and the

embodied expressions of ontological values as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influences in learning.

One research method some people have found useful in beginning to develop evidence-based practice and living- educational-theories, from their experiences as educational professionals, is that of a 'living-poster' (see below). A living-poster involves:

Creating an attractive A4 poster including text and images, and the url to your YouTube video, which provides brief details of your: context; interests; the values that motivate you and give your life meaning and purpose; research passions; details of a few of your key publications; the url to your website if you have one and your contact details. (Living-posters, 2017).

You can access the evolution of living-posters from 2015 to 2017 to 2018 from the 'What's New' section of <http://www.actionresearch.net>. If you wish you could contribute your own living-poster to strengthen Living Theory research as a social movement.

## **7. The Educational Journal of Living Theories and transforming social change.**

In the 10 years of publication of the Educational Journal of Living Theories (<http://ejolts.net/about>) the embodied power of practitioner-researchers has been included through multi-media texts that have clarified and communicated the embodied expressions of ontological values that action researchers have used to give their lives meaning and purpose. These values have been used as explanatory principles in explanation of educational influences. The gathering together of action researchers in a global social movement that carries hope for the flourishing of humanity is being informed by the worldwide perspective of action research in education discussed above. I am suggesting that we can strengthen the educational influences in learning of such a global movement of action researchers through working and researching co-operatively with *Living Theory as a Way of Life* (Whitehead, 2018).

The freely available resources <http://www.actionresearch.net> include 10 years of Educational Journal of Living Theories (EJOLTS). They are an international resource for action researchers and others who are generating their own living-theories with values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. These theories are generated from inquiries of the kind, “How do I improve what I am doing? In which ‘I’ exists as a living contradiction.”

I shall end this keynote on action learning and action research experiences of professionals by drawing attention to the co-operative movement, with the values of the international co-operative alliance (see <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/coop/coopvalues.pdf> ). I am thinking of the transformations that are continuing to take place as we learn how to co-operate in creating a social movement that carries hope for the flourishing of humanity.

If we are going to strengthen the living legacy of AL and AR in transformatory social change I am claiming that we are going to have to learn how to co-operate more effectively within global contexts and organisations such as the Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA), Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA), Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN), Network Educational Action Research Ireland (NEARI), Bluewater Action Research Network (BARN)

Lonnie Rowell (2017) stressed the importance of Knowledge Mobilisation ARNA (2017a) in developing such a co-operation, in supporting seven participatory workshops around the world in preparation for the ARNA (2017b) Conference in Cartagena, Columbia on, ‘*Participation and Democratization of Knowledge: New Convergences for Reconciliation*’. Because of our involvement in this Conference, Rowell invited Wood, McAteer and myself to submit a paper for a special issue of the journal Educational Action Research. The paper has been submitted on an analysis of the narrative reports from seven participatory workshops:

This paper presents a thematic analysis of the narrative reports from seven participatory workshops held around

the world for the purpose of dialoguing around this and related questions. Findings indicate that, generally, action researchers are indeed facing challenges on many personal, institutional and epistemic levels as they endeavour to promote knowledge derived from the principles of authentic participation and dialogue with those whom it is intended to benefit. However, the analysis also reveals creative responses of practitioners to these challenges. In keeping with the special issue theme, we offer this analysis as a starting point for further discussion around how we can mobilize knowledge for equitable social progress. (Wood, McAteer, Whitehead, 2018)

As ALARA moves into the future with 'The Action Learning and Action Research Legacy for Transforming Social Change: Individuals, Professionals, and Communities' Developments, Organizational Advancements, and Global Initiatives', we could look forward to the 11<sup>th</sup> World Congress of ALARA as we seek to strengthen this legacy as co-operative educational learners and researchers who are generating and sharing their living-theories in support of Living Theory Research as a social movement.

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