Close, but is research close enough to educational practice to generate educational theory and a discipline of education?

Jack Whitehead, Visiting Professor of Education, University of Cumbria, UK.
Extraordinary Professor in Community Based Educational Research, North-West University. South Africa.

Abstract

The response to the question, 'Is research close enough to educational practice to generate educational theory?', is focused on the contributions to the special section on 'Close to Practice Research' of the December 2021 issue of the British Educational Research Journal. The response draws on over 50 years of educational enquiry into a practitioner-researchers' question, 'How do I improve my educational practice as a professional educator and educational researcher?', in which the educator's reflexive educational research is a part of the practice itself, rather than being close to the practice. It includes an analysis of over 40 doctoral theses that are publicly available and that have been awarded from universities around the world for the originality of the explanations of educational influence in the learning of the individual researcher, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which the practice is located. These explanations are referred to as living-educational-theories (Whitehead, 1989). The validity and rigour of the values and evidence-based explanations is ensured by applying Popper's (1975) idea of the mutual rational controls of critical discussion within validation groups that draw on Habermas' (1976) insights on social validity in strengthening the comprehensibility, evidence, socio-cultural and socio-historical understandings and authenticity of the explanations of educational influences in learning, in terms of the practitioner-researchers espoused values being lived as fully as possible.

Introduction

The analysis below provides an evidence-based argument to justify the claim that the contributions to the special section of BERJ 14(6), (Biesta, et al.; Dominic, et al.; Hordern; Kelchtermans; Parsons; Takayama et al.; Wyse et al.) are close but not close enough to researching educational practice, that is, their own, to generate the valid explanations of educational influences in learning that are needed to constitute Educational Theory. It will be argued that the logic and language of the contributors is reinforcing the mistake in the Disciplines Approach to Education, recognised by Hirst (1983) in replacing the practical principles used by educators to explain their educational practices, by principles from the disciplines approach. This mistake was compounded by Whitty (2005) in his Presidential Address to BERA where he advocated a change in BERA's name to the British Education Research Association.

At the heart of the argument is the claim that the contributors to the special section are all working within what Maxwell (2021) calls 'knowledge-inquiry', rather than 'wisdom-inquiry'.

Maxwell's (2021) thesis is that Humanity is confronted by two great problems of learning. The first problem is learning about the universe, about ourselves and others forms of life as a part of the universe. Maxwell says that the first problem is being solved by modern science and technology. He claims that these have had profoundly beneficial consequences for humanity in that they have made possible the development of modern industry and agriculture, modern hygiene and medicine, modern travel, modern communications, and all the multitude of good things that have come from these developments.

The second problem is learning how to create a genuinely civilized, enlightened, wise world. In relation to solving the second problem Maxwell says there is a downside to the application of science and technology which he highlights as knowledge-inquiry. He says that we must learn how to acquire wisdom – social, political, economic wisdom – or we will end up destroying ourselves. Wisdom-inquiry:

> … has, as its basic intellectual-social aim, to seek and promote wisdom, understood to be the capacity, active endeavor and desire to realise what is of value in life for oneself and others, thus including knowledge, technological know-how and understanding, but much else besides. (43)

The contributors to the special section all use the logic and language of knowledge-inquiry. I am claiming that wisdom-inquiry in educational research requires a logic and language that is focused on and being used in educational practice with values of human flourishing. It will be shown how digital visual data from educational practice can clarify and communicate the meanings of the embodied expressions of the values of human flourishing that constitute a values-laden practice as educational. Using this data as evidence in explanations of educational influences requires a different form of representation, provided by digital educational technology, to communicate close to practice explanations of educational practice.

Multi-media presentations that include those at the 2021 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Symposium on 'Educational Responsibility' (Harper et al., 2020; Delong et al. 2021) and at an AERA, 2022 Symposium on 'Cultivating Equitable Education Systems' (Nasir, et al., 2021); Delong et al. 2022), webinars to the 'Network Educational Action Research Ireland' and to 'Communities of Practice' in some South African Universities, will be analysed, to show how this community-based educational research, is a form of wisdom-inquiry that overcomes the limitations of logic and language of the contributions to the special section of BERJ on close to practice research.

Close to Practice Educational Research

Wyse et al. (2021) have offered a new definition of close-to-practice (CtP) research:

> Close-to-practice research focuses on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and involves collaboration between people whose main expertise is in research, in educational practice, or both. (p. 1470)

They also propose a definition of high quality in CtP:

> High quality in CtP research requires the robust use of research design, theory and methods to address clearly defined research questions, through an iterative process of research and application that includes reflections on practice, research, and context.

Whilst I find these lexical definitions helpful in clarifying the meaning of a phenomena such as close-to-practice educational research, they do not communicate sufficient meaning for me to understand the phenomena itself. What I mean by this is that in lexical definitions of meaning, words are defined in terms of other words. I also need ostensive expressions of meaning to generate an adequate communication of my meaning, especially in relation to my meanings of educational research and educational practice and the relationship between them. I am aware that my writings are phenomenologically grounded in the lived experience of some 55 years (1967-2022) of professional engagement in education as an educational practitioner and educational researcher (Whitehead, 2022a). When I say that my writings are phenomenologically grounded I accept Husserl's point that:

> … in the transcendental sphere we have an infinitude of knowledge previous to all deduction, knowledge whose mediated connections (those of intentional implication) have nothing to do with deduction and being entirely intuitive prove refractory to every methodically devised scheme of constructive symbolism. (Husserl, 1912, p. 12).

My educational practice and educational research are intimately related through the question I asked in the first science lesson I taught at Langdon Park School in London's Tower Hamlet's in 1967. From my pupils' responses I could see that I was not communicating my meanings. I found myself saying, 'I've got to do this better', 'How do I improve what I am doing to help my pupils develop their scientific understanding?'. In the 55 years of professional practice that followed I have continued to ask, research and answer 'How do I improve my professional practice?' in which my understanding of improvement includes values of human flourishing. Rather than seeing my educational practice and educational research as discrete and separate activities, I experience them as distinct but intimately related. They are related through my understanding of continuing professional development in education as involving my educational research in asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my professional practice?' and making a contribution to the knowledgebase of education.

My starting point differs from the contributors to BERJ 14(6). I am starting within my educational practice which includes researching my question, 'How do I improve my professional practice?'. This starting point isn't close to practice, it is part of my practice. In 1972, whilst the Head of the Science Department of Erkenwald Comprehensive School, in Barking, UK, the inspectorate provided me with a video camera and recorder and asked me to explore its educational potential in the Science Department. I first recorded one of my classes in which I believed that I had established enquiry learning in the sense that my pupils were asking their own questions to which I was responding. I was embarrassed and shocked to see the video, as I was giving my pupils the questions rather than eliciting their own questions. I experienced myself as a living contradiction as I held together my value of enquiry learning together with my experience of negating the value in my practice. In other

words my 'I' in the question, 'How do I improve my practice?' existed as a living contradiction. Since my first presentation to BERA in 1977, where I attracted an audience of one. My audience introduced himself, after about 15 minutes of instructing Lawrence Stenhouse on local curriculum development, with 'Jack, perhaps you could develop your sense of audience, let's go and have a drink.' In addressing my audience of BERA members and BERJ readers in 2022 I am pointing to several of the presentations I have given at BERA conferences since 1977, including my Presidential Address in 1988. These have explored the intimate relationship between educational practice and educational research, not as close to practice educational research, but as a necessary component of the professional, educational practice itself. In exploring the relationship between educational practice and educational research I have encountered limitations in the logic and language of contributions to the British Educational Research Journal because of limitations in printed text to communicate embodied expressions of meanings of values-laden educational practice with explanations of educational influences in learning.

Limitations in the logic and language of contributions to the British Educational Research Journal

Wyse (2020), in his Presidential BERA address, analysed the academic discipline of education in terms of reciprocal relationships between practical knowledge and academic knowledge. His analysis was framed within a logic and language of printed text-based communications. These communications can be helpful in directing attention to the phenomena under investigation. They usually focus on lexical definitions of meaning where the meanings of the words used are defined in terms of other words. However, they do not use digital visual data to communicate ostensive expressions of embodied meanings in educational practice. This omission limits the meanings of an academic discipline of education.

I make a clear distinction between academic disciplines of education and the academic discipline of education. The distinction is related to the point made by Plato some 2,500 years ago through the voice of Socrates in the Phaedrus where Socrates pointed out that we have two ways of coming to know. We can break things down into their particular components (the Many) as nature directs, rather than using the methods of a bungling carver. We hold things together under a general idea (the One). Socrates points out that he calls those who can hold together both the One and Many, dialecticians.

In the dominant view of Educational Theory in the 1960s and 1970s in the UK, the theory was held to be constituted by the disciplines of education, the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education. A problem with this Disciplines Approach was recognised by Paul Hirst (1983) when he said that much understanding of educational theory will be developed:

> … in the context of immediate practical experience and will be co-terminous with everyday understanding. In particular, many of its operational principles, both explicit and implicit, will be of their nature generalisations from practical experience and have as their justification the results of individual activities and practices.

In many characterisations of educational theory, my own included, principles justified in this way have until recently been regarded as at best pragmatic maxims having a first crude and superficial justification in practice that in any rationally developed theory would be replaced by principles with more fundamental, theoretical justification. That now seems to me to be a mistake. Rationally defensible practical principles, I suggest, must of their nature stand up to such practical tests and without that are necessarily inadequate. (p. 18)

Whilst it is easy to define the disciplines of education in terms of their conceptual frameworks and methods of validation it has not been easy to define the discipline of education in a way that attracts the general acceptance in the BERA community. For example, in 1999 my doctoral thesis on 'How do I improve my practice? Creating a discipline of education through educational enquiry.' was accepted by the University of Bath as an original contribution to educational knowledge (Whitehead, 1999 – see https://www.actionresearch.net/living/jackwhitehead2.shtml). Whilst over 50 Living Educational Theory doctorates have now been accepted in Universities around the world (see https://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml) there is still much to do in the global communications of the ideas and in encouraging the testing of the validity of the ideas.

You can access my publicly available writings for you to test the validity of the ideas at https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/writing.shtml. In relation to the ideas presented in this paper, I wish to draw your attention to:

Whitehead, J. (1982) A Dialectician's Guide for Educational Researchers- Presented at BERA 1982 at St. Andrew's University. Accessed from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jw1982dialecticiansguide.pdf

Whitehead, J. (1989a) How do we Improve Research-based Professionalism in Education? A question which includes action research, educational theory and the politics of educational knowledge. The 1988 Presidential Address to the British Educational Research Association. British Educational Research Journal, 15(1); 3-17. Accessed from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jwberapres.html

Whitehead, J. (1989b) Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind, "How do I improve my practice?'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19(1); 41-52. Accessed from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/livtheory.html

Whitehead, J. (2011a) Developing a relationally dynamic epistemology for educational knowledge - Presentation at the British Educational Research Association Conference, 7th September 2011. Accessed from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwbera11dr040911opt.pdf

Whitehead, J. (2013) A living logic for educational research. Presentation at the 2013 Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, University of Sussex, 5th September. Accessed from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/bera13/jwbera13phil010913.pdf

Whitehead, J. (2019) What makes 'educational research' educational? Presentation at the 2019 Conference of the British Educational Research Association Conference on the 11th September 2019 at the University of Manchester. Accessed from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwbera2019final.pdf

I am claiming that the discipline of education, as distinct from but related to disciplines of education, can be created through individual educational researchers and educators researching their continuing professional development as educators in asking, researching and answering their questions, 'How do I improve my professional educational practice with values of human flourishing?'

In researching my own educational practice I shall now stress the importance of digital visual data in clarifying and communicating the embodied expressions of meanings in values-based explanations of educational influences in learning.

Explaining educational influences in learning with values of human flourishing within digital, multi-media narratives.

In my 2011 presentation to BERA (Whitehead, 2011a) I included the following:

> **Clarifying and Communicating meanings of flows of energy and values in practical principles.**
>
> The first 1:26 minute video-clip is of Jacqueline Delong and myself in 2001 in a doctoral supervision session. The expression of life-affirming energy I am drawing your attention to can be experienced at 38 seconds into the clip, where Delong says 'You aren't going to use wisdom with me yet?' and my answer 'No' evokes the explosion of laughter. The context is that Delong had heard me on the phone to another doctoral students where I had commented on their wisdom. In responding to Delong's Abstract I had used the word 'excellent', but not 'wisdom'.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2kdOfRKFYs

> I respond to this video-clip with the recognition and visceral expression of both

the life-affirming energy and loving warmth of humanity I use as practical principles in explanations of my educational influences in learning.

In the supervision sessions I am focusing on Delong's Abstract for her doctoral thesis. The video recordings show educational conversations where I am focusing on enabling Delong to state clearly, in her Abstract, her original contributions to knowledge. The transformation in the draft Abstracts over the week, demonstrate a greater clarity in the communication of the original contributions to knowledge in the doctoral thesis. My central point, in including digital visual data, is to emphasise the importance of this data in explaining educational influences in learning with values of human flourishing. One of these values I offer for your evaluation is that of the communication of a life-affirming energy in the gaze that recognises the value of the other in who they feel themselves to be within educational relationships.

Integrating educational research as a necessary component of continuing professional development in education.

Beginning in 1967, my continuing professional development, at the age of 78 in 2022, has undergone transformations in the meaning of my question, 'How do I improve my professional practice with values of human flourishing?'. My professional practice, whilst including my supervision of doctoral educational research is now focusing on my educational influence in spreading globally, a Living Educational Theory Research approach to continuing professional development with values of human flourishing. The integration of educational research in my continuing professional development in education can be seen in multi-media presentations that include those at:

- the 2021 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Symposium on 'Educational Responsibility' (Harper et al., 2020), with colleagues from Nepal, India, the USA and Canada (Delong et al., 2021);
- the 2022 AERA, Symposium, on 'Cultivating Equitable Education Systems' (Nasir, et al., 2021), with colleagues from Nepal, India, the USA and Canada (Delong et al., 2022);
- the Network Educational Action Research Ireland (NEARI) (Whitehead, 2022b);
- the Higher Education in Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa (HELTASA) (Whitehead, 2022c).
- the Communities of Practice in North-West University, Nelson Mandela University and Durban University of Technology in South Africa

Huxtable (2022) brought living-posters into Living Educational Theory Research. You can access the homepage of living-posters from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/homepage2021.pdf .

They include the living-posters from:

i)   Durban University of Technology at:
https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/dut22.pdf
ii)   North-West University at:
https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/nwu22.pdf

iii)   Nelson Mandela University at:
https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/nmu22.pdf

Nalini Chitterand's living-poster from Durban University of Technology at
https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/nalini22.pdf includes the following
statement:

> I am an Academic Development Practitioner-Scholar. I strive toward Transformative
> and Sustainable Academic Development with values of Respect, Love & Care -
> Embodied within the philosophy of Ubuntu (African philosophical approach).

In 2011 I presented the Inaugural Nelson Mandela Lecture at Durban University of
Technology (Whitehead, 2011a) and stressed the importance of an Ubuntu way of being in
educational research. I do urge you to read Eden Charles' (2007) doctoral thesis on 'How
Can I bring Ubuntu As A Living Standard Of Judgment Into The Academy? Moving Beyond
Decolonisation Through Societal Reidentification And Guiltless Recognition'. The relational
dynamics of Ubuntu, as a way of living, focus on the idea of 'I am because we are'. Whilst
this loses some meaning in translation, Ubuntu highlights the importance of working and
researching one's own community engagement with values of human flourishing.

I wish to emphasise that this is not close-to-practice educational research. It is an
educational practice that integrates educational research within educational enquiries of
the kind, 'How do I improve my professional practice with values of human flourishing?' It is
a form of wisdom-inquiry that transcends the limitations of logic and language of the
contributions to the special section of BERJ on close-to-practice research. I want to
emphasise that this is not to deny the importance of the writings on close-to-practice
educational research. These writings are highlighting an important issue. My own writings
are offered as a way of overcoming some of the limitations in the logic and language of
these writings in the generation and sharing of a discipline of education. The key to this
generation is in a view of professionalism in education that includes the practitioner
educational research as being integral to rather than close to their practice.

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