

# Using A Living Theory Methodology In Improving Practice And Generating Knowledge

Jack Whitehead, Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath, UK.

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## ABSTRACT

The approach outlined below is focused on a living theory methodology for improving practice and generating knowledge from questions of the kind ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ It also includes a new epistemology for educational knowledge from creating living educational theories in enquiries of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ The presentation emphasizes the importance of the uniqueness of each individual’s living educational theory (Whitehead, 1989) in improving practice and generating knowledge. It emphasizes the importance of individual creativity in contributing to improving practice and knowledge from within historical and cultural opportunities and constraints in the social contexts of the individual’s life and work.

The web-based version of this presentation demonstrates the importance of local, national and international communicative collaborations for improving practice and generating knowledge in the context of globalization. Through its multi-media representations of educational relationships and explanations of educational influence in learning it seeks to communicate new living standards of judgment that are relationally dynamic and grounded in both improving practice and generating knowledge. The living standards of judgment express the life-affirming energy of individuals and cultures with values and understandings.

### A) What is a living theory?

A living theory is an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work.

#### i) Why did I feel the need for a living theory?

In 1967 in my special study on my initial teacher education programme, on ‘A Way To Professionalism In Education?’ I wrote about the importance of a professional knowledge-base for education. In my later studies of educational theory between 1968-72 for an Academic Diploma and then for a Masters Degree in Education, I began to see that the dominant view of educational theory, known as **the disciplines approach**, was mistaken. It was known as the disciplines approach because it was constituted by the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education.

The mistake was in thinking that disciplines of education could explain the educational influences of individuals in each other’s learning. The error was not grounded in mistakes in the disciplines of education.

The mistake was in the disciplines approach to educational theory. The mistake was in thinking that the disciplines of education, individually or in any combination, could explain an individual's educational influence in their own learning and in the learning of others.

My recognition of this mistake in 1972 re-focused my vocation from teaching pupils science in secondary schools, to the creation and academic legitimation of valid forms of educational theory. I believed then and believe not that the profession of education requires a professional knowledge-base of educational theories that can explain the educational influences of individuals in their own learning in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work.

My move to the University of Bath in 1973 was motivated by this desire to contribute to the creation and legitimation of educational theory. I continue to identify with the Mission of the University which includes having a distinct academic approach to the education of professional practice.

The damage inflicted on the teaching profession by the disciplines approach to educational theory can be appreciated in the 1983 acknowledgement of the following mistake by Paul Hirst, one of the original proponents of the disciplines approach. Hirst states 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.* (Hirst, 1983, p. 18)

The damage done by the old disciplines approach to educational theory can be appreciated in Hirst's understanding that the approach was based on the understanding that the practical principles you and I use to explain our educational influences in our own learning and in the learning of others **would be replaced** by principles with more theoretical justification:

*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."* (Hirst, 1983, p. 18)

## **ii) Making a clear distinction between education research and educational research**

Education research is research carried out from the perspectives of disciplines of education such as the philosophy, sociology, history, psychology, management, economics and leadership of education.

The scholarly context of my educational research in 2008, continues to focus on the creation and legitimation of valid forms of educational theory that can explain the educational influences of individuals in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work.

This contemporary focus on the significance of what counts as educational knowledge can be seen in a recent contribution to *Research Intelligence* (a publication of the British Educational Research Association) by Dr. Pip Bruce Ferguson:

*In this brief paper, I want to note the changes that have occurred in how research is carried out, funded, presented and assessed in the time I have been a practitioner-researcher, and the attempts that I have observed to include more diverse perspectives and presentation styles in research. I want to suggest that these changes are indicative of an epistemological transformation in what counts as educational knowledge. (Ferguson, 2008, p.24)*

I am saying that words on pages of text cannot adequately carry the embodied expression of meanings of life-affirming energy and gazes of recognition of the other, I am pointing to evidence to justify my claims that is beyond the words in this brief article. Stimulated to respond to Pip Bruce Ferguson's suggestion "...that these changes are indicative of an epistemological transformation in what counts as educational knowledge" I am claiming that this epistemological transformation will require new forms of representation and educational standards of judgment in Journals of Educational Research. I have directed attention to how the evidence, showing the nature of these forms of representation and living standards of judgment, can be accessed by those with the technology to do so.

In acknowledging the influence of the economic context on the study I have held a tenured contract at the University with secure employment from 1973 to the end of the contract in 2009. I do not want to underestimate the importance of this economic security in my capacity to keep open a creative space at the University of Bath to develop my research programme. Neither do I want to ignore the influence of individuals and institutional power relations of the political context that required some '*persistence in the face of pressure that could have discouraged and therefore constrained a less determined individual*'. These are the words used in a report to the University Senate in 1991 from a Working Party established to enquire into a Matter of Academic Freedom, related to my research (Whitehead, 1993). While the words are not my own, they resonate with my experience of working in the University and I believe them to be true. I shall return to this point in section d) when I look at the theoretical perspectives that have influenced my analysis of data.

The sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts of my workplace are western and mainly white. These are changing with multi-cultural and postcolonial influences beginning to question the power relations that sustain unjust privileges and the dominant logic and languages that sustain what counts as knowledge in the Western Academies. I have found the work of Edward Said (1993) most helpful in the evolution of my thinking to include these sociocultural understandings of the power relations that sustain colonial privilege. I have found the work of Eden Charles (2007) on Ubuntu, guiltless recognition and societal reidentification most helpful in understanding how to engage in transformatory educational practices. These practices move beyond the power relations that reproduce social formations and into transformational practices that are living the values of inclusionality. I am also grateful to Yaakub Murray (2008) who first introduced me to the idea of Ubuntu.

In my early work between 1967–73 I used a positivist and propositional view of knowledge from the influence of my first degree in physical science. During the middle period between 1977– 1999 I extended my epistemological understandings to include dialectics and since 2003 I have been exploring the implications of an epistemology of inclusionality which has much in common with African, Eastern and other indigenous ways of knowing (Ferguson 2008). This is not to imply a rejection of all my insights from propositional and dialectical theories. I continue to value insights from these theories as I deepen and extend my understandings of living educational theories and a living theory methodology with the evolution of the implications of asking, researching and answering ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’

## **B) What is a living theory methodology**

### **i) Using action reflection cycles as a method**

My understanding of action reflection cycles emerged from my practical question, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ The method emerged before my awareness of its significance as a research question. I asked this question in my first day as a science teacher in Langdon Park School, a London Comprehensive School in 1967. I felt a passion to help my students to improve their scientific understandings. In my first lessons I could see that my pupils were not comprehending much of what I was saying and doing. However, I did not feel my concern to be grounded in a ‘deficit’ model of myself. I felt a confidence that while what was going on was not as good as it could be, I would be able to contribute to improvements. My imagination worked to offer possibilities about improving what I was doing. I chose a possibility to act on, acted and evaluated the effectiveness of what I was doing in terms of my communications with my pupils. This disciplined process of problem forming and solving is what I call an action reflection method.

### **ii) Developing an understanding of a living theory methodology**

A methodology is not only a collection of the methods used in the research. It is distinguished by a philosophical understanding of the principles that organize the ‘how’ of the enquiry. A methodology explains how the enquiry was carried out in the generation of a living theory.

For example, my awareness of the importance of improving practice is grounded in my passion to see values of freedom, justice, compassion, respect for persons, love and democracy lived as fully as possible. Hence in my living theory methodology you should expect to see the meanings of these values emerge in the course of my practice.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of action research from action learning is that the researcher must make public the story of their research in a way that is open to others to evaluate its validity. A living theory methodology includes the processes of validation.

I work with Michael Polanyi's (1958) decision that distinguishes personal knowledge. This is a decision to understand the world from my own point of view as an individual claiming originality and exercising judgment responsibly with universal intent. I know that the local identity of my 'I' is influenced by the non-local flows of space and energy through the cosmos. Yet I do work with a sense of responsibility for the educational influences I have in my own learning. I do recognise myself as a unique human being with this responsibility and I do exercise a sense of personal responsibility in validating for myself my claims for what I believe to be true. In doing this I take account of responses from a process of social validation.

Since 1976 I have used a process of democratic evaluation, described by Macdonald (1976), together with the four criteria of social validity proposed by Habermas (1976a), to strengthen the personal and social validity of living theories. By this I mean that I submit my explanations of educational influence to a validation group of peers with a request that they help me to strengthen the comprehensibility, truthfulness, rightness and authenticity of the explanation. Within comprehensibility I include the logic of the explanation as a mode of thought that is appropriate for comprehending the real as rational (Marcuse, 1964, p. 105). Within truthfulness I include the evidence for justifying the assertions I make in my claims to knowledge. Within rightness I include an awareness of the normative assumptions I am making in the values that inform my claims to knowledge. Within authenticity I include the evidence of interaction over time that I am truly committed to living the values I explicitly espouse.

### **C) Issues of language in creating living theories**

*Language is widely recognised as the most important tool in human thinking and communication as well as an essential requirement for people to fully participate in social activities. Language is of great significance in a person's all-round development. The globalisation of social life and economic activities necessitates the mastery of a foreign language by citizens worldwide. Learning and mastering a foreign language, especially English is thus considered of great importance to Chinese Students. (Tian Fengjun, 2008, Ningxia Teachers University)*

### **D) Issues of culture in creating living theories**

The way we make sense of experience in the knowledge legitimated by Universities is influenced by history and culture. The knowledge in Western Universities and cultures includes theories that are abstract, general and separate the mind from the body. The knowledge in Eastern cultures includes the integration of mind and body. The knowledge in Eastern Universities has been influenced by the Western view of knowledge.

In living theories, mind and body, energy and values are not discrete, they are related. Chinese culture has emphasised the importance of the collective. The idea of individual creativity is needed in producing living educational theories. The living theory action researchers at Ningxia Teachers University are developing a collaborative living theory action research with Chinese characteristics.

### **E) Issues of research in creating living theories**

In producing their living educational theory individuals much recognise the value of their embodied knowledge. Embodied knowledge is expressed in practice. It is the knowledge in what we are doing. Embodied knowledge also evolves in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' To judge the validity of claims to embodied knowledge we need new living standards of judgement in research.

### **i) New living standards of judgment in research**

Living theories evolving from embodied knowledge require new living standards of judgment for evaluating the validity of claims to knowledge. The living standards are clarified in the process of their emergence in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' The living standards include the energy-laden values individuals use to give meaning and purpose to their lives. Each researcher clarifies the meanings of their own living standards of judgment in their living theory. These standards include the life-affirming energy with the values the individual uses to give meaning and purpose to their lives. See the living theory theses at:

<http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/living.shtml>

Using video-clips from a Chinese classroom and one of my own keynotes I will show you what I mean by energy-laden values in standards of judgment. You can access the keynote and video from <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/aerict08/jwict08key.htm> and

[mms://wms.bath.ac.uk/live/education/JackWhitehead\\_030408/jackkeynoteict2803081arge.wmv](mms://wms.bath.ac.uk/live/education/JackWhitehead_030408/jackkeynoteict2803081arge.wmv)

I believe that these standards are being expressed in the development of the new curriculum in China.

### **ii) Researching standards of judgment in the New Curriculum in China**

The standards of judgment to evaluate the implementation of the new curriculum are:

- Helping students to develop their learning goals
- Developing learning autonomy
- Promoting cooperative learning
- Forming effective English Learning Strategies
- Developing comprehensive language competence

### **Content Standards in the New Curriculum**

- Language Skills
- Language Knowledge
- Affective Attitudes
- Learning Strategies
- Cultural Awareness

I think that we can help each other to develop our research through national and international cooperation as we research our questions, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'

## **H) Developing national and international cooperation for improving practice and generating educational knowledge**

### **i) Developing national collaboration for improving practice**

The best work I have seen in China on a living theory approach to improve practice and generate knowledge is at China's Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching, at Ningxia Teacher's University. The Director of the Centre is Dean Tian Fengjun. Much good work could develop nationally in China through collaborations with this Centre at Ningxia Teacher's University. See:

Fengjun, T, & Laidlaw, M. (2006) *Action Research And The Foreign Languages Teaching*. Shaan xi; Shaan xi Tourism Publishing House.

The living theories of teachers and students about their learning and implementation of the new curriculum at Ningxia Teachers University can be accessed at:

<http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira.shtml>

### **ii) Developing international collaboration for improving practice and generating knowledge with living theories**

Dr. Margaret Farren and her colleague Yvonne Crotty at Dublin City University are evolving a living theory action research approach for improving practice and generating knowledge. Dr. Farren is a lecturer in e-learning at Dublin City University who is working to support international collaboration with the Action Research Collaboratory. See <http://webpages.dcu.ie/~farrenm/>

Whitehead, J. & McNiff, J. (2006) *Action Research Living Theory*, London; Sage.