

What I mean by an educational conversation

Jack Whitehead 21 May 2019

In my present exploration of educational conversations as both a method of data collection and a method of analysis I need to clarify my meaning of an educational conversation. I shall do this in four steps. First I shall clarify what I mean by a conversation. I shall then distinguish what I'm meaning by a good conversation. To avoid any misunderstanding about different forms of conversation I shall distinguish an educational response from a therapeutic response related to therapy. Finally I will clarify my meaning of an educational conversation with the help of a 4 minute digital video of an extract from a conversation between Joy Mounter, Jason Hocknell-Nickels, Marie Huxtable and I.

I identify with Gadamer's meaning of a conversation when he writes that the first condition of the art of conversation is ensuring that the other person is with us. One does not try to argue the other person down but really considers the weight of the other's opinion. I agree with Gadamer that a conversation is the art of testing in the sense of questioning.

Questioning is against the fixity of opinions. It makes the object of the conversation and all the possibilities fluid. This prevents questions being suppressed by the dominant opinion. A person who possesses this art of questioning in a conversation will search for everything in favour of an opinion. Rather than trying to discover the weakness of what is said a conversation also seeks to bring out its real strength. A conversation is not the art of arguing, which can make a strong case out of a weak one, but is the art of thinking in a way which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter. (Gadamer, 1975, p.367)

A good conversation

I participate in weekly conversations at a Breakfast Café conversation in Bath, UK. Some of the participants are contributing to 'A good conversation project' in Keynsham, UK – a town of some 17,000 inhabitants. For these participants a good conversation is a conversation in which the participants feel better. I always leave the conversations of the Breakfast Café Conversations in the sense that I feel better. This feeling is centrally connected with a flow of life-affirming energy that I feel is expressed through a community feeling in the conversations. In this sense of feeling better the good conversations are therapeutic. In using the word therapeutic I don't want to be mistaken to be saying that such feelings are evoked from a therapy. I understand a therapy to be a treatment that is designed to heal a disorder.

Distinguishing a good conversation from a therapy

I am distinguishing a good conversation from a therapy in terms of a therapy being a treatment offered by a professional therapist to heal a disorder. I know that R. D. Laing worked with a view of psychotherapy as a stubborn attempt by two people to regain the wholeness of being human through the relationship between them. Whilst I am working with a sense of mutuality in which those engaged in a good conversation recognize a concrete and mutual experience of inclusion, I am not seeing a good conversation in terms of a treatment to heal a disorder or an attempt to regain something that is lost. I am seeing

a good conversation as generative in the sense that it enhances the flow of life-affirming energy with the feeling that life is worthwhile. What I am meaning by an educational conversation includes this flow of energy and feeling but goes further in accounting to oneself and others in learning to live as far as possible the values and understandings that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

Distinguishing an educational conversation from a good conversation

What I mean by an educational conversation can be understood through purely lexical definitions in which words are defined in terms of other words. So, for me an educational conversation includes the above meanings of a conversation and a good conversation. It is distinguished from a good conversation as including a sharing of the values that an individual uses to give meaning and purpose to their lives. It includes learning to live the values and understanding that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity and a willing to share explanations of this learning in a good conversation.

What I mean by an educational conversation can also be understood through the ostensive expression of meaning in digital visual data of conversations in which individuals are contributing to a community feeling of life-affirming energy with explanations of their learning as they live as fully as possible the values that give meaning and purpose to their lives.

For example, the four minute video clip below includes from left to right, Marie Huxtable, Joy Mounter, Jack Whitehead and Jason Hocknell-Nickels. Joy is the MA and Leadership Course Leader and PGCE Lead at the Learning Institute in Cornwall. Joy's doctoral enquiry at the University of Cumbria is 'How can I contribute to the creation and enhancement of the educational influences of a community of learners, supporting each other and their own development?' Jason's doctoral enquiry at the University of Cumbria is on, 'Coaching digital cultural transformation within a UK Government Agency: My living-theory account.' Marie is a member of Jason's supervisory team and Jack is a member of Joy's supervisory team.

The video extract begins with Joy Mounter talking about The Learning Institute having become a Centre of the Chartered Management Institute. Joy is talking about an innovative apprentice qualification in leadership and management together with a qualification of Chartered Management Institute Centre, that are being offered by the Learning Institute. I then bring into the conversation a question about what we are doing now in relation to educational conversations. I also then bring into the conversation a presentation that Jason is giving on the 7th June 2019 on 'How have my embodied values of loving kindness and creativity helped inform my living epistemology?' I then say that we are each learning something about each other and I'm curious about how do we live our values more fully in our practice. Jason explains how he has brought Joy's idea of i~we~us relationships (see Joy's web-site at <http://www.spanglefish.com/allicanbe/>) into his work and goes on to suggest that Joy shares her ideas in a workshop that Jason is organizing. Joy responds that this sounds exciting.

What I think is being shown through the embodied expressions on the video are the living meanings on the words ' in which individuals are contributing to a community feeling of life-

affirming energy with explanations of their learning as they live as fully as possible the values that give meaning and purpose to their lives.'



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMCKPe83Nao>

Another example highlights the importance of an educational conversation being a process that can sometimes refer to communications over years.

In 2016 I accepted an invitation to participate as a teacher of Specialization in Educational Innovation in University Teaching at the University of San Simón Cochabamba, Bolivia, in the module TEACHING AND RESEARCH ACTION from Saturday 17 September 2016 to Friday 14 October 2016.

Here are my introductory comments:

I first want to thank the organisers of the module for inviting me to lead the module. It is a pleasure and privilege to be here. If you would like to know more about me, and my Living Theory research into action and other forms of research you can access a brief curriculum vitae at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwcv2016bolivia.pdf>

You can also access my web-site at <http://www.actionresearch.net> .

My priority is to respond to your questions and issues. Over the course of the module I also hope to share ideas on the following:

- i) Clarifying and communicating the values that matter to you. We all have our own unique constellation of values. In my case these include love, inquiry learning, knowledge-creation, freedom, justice, dignity, responsibility, pleasure and economic security.
- ii) Focusing on what concerns you in your professional practice that you want to improve, with the importance of a question of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'
- iii) Constructing an action-plan with an action-reflection planner to improve your educational practice. Gathering data and distinguishing this from evidence.
- iv) Constructing a valid, evidence-based explanation of your educational influences in your own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations that influence your educational practice and understandings.

As University academics I think that you will be used to the idea that knowledge is shared mainly through academic writings that is through printed pages of text. Your national and international reputations together with the reputation of Saint Simon University is likely to rest on the quality of your academic publications in your subject.

In researching your teaching in educational innovation I am asking you to trust me in exploring a different view of knowledge. I am asking you to trust my judgment that in this room there is a great depth and extent of educational knowledge **embodied** in yourselves and that you are expressing this knowledge in what you do in your professional practices as educators and researchers. You are expressing this knowledge every day in your relationships with each other and your students.

I am also asking you to trust me for a few days that I know what I am doing in supporting you to make public and share your embodied knowledge. It is not just a case of making your embodied *educational* knowledge public but you researching into the educational influence it is having in your own learning, the learning of others and social formations to improve it and to test the validity of your knowledge and claims to know your practice

Rather than giving priority to your reading of other peoples ideas (including my own) I shall focus on a process of researching into your own practice, that includes action research, self-study, narrative inquiry and autoethnography, as you express and make public your embodied, educational knowledge. I shall be encouraging you to talk with each other about your values, about what you wish to do to improve your practice. I shall be asking you to bring and share evidence with each other about the educational influences you have having in your own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which we live and work.

My intention is to help you to enhance the reputation of your University through the knowledge you are creating and sharing by bringing the innovative approaches of some forms of action research and Living Theory research into your pedagogy and research. I am hoping to encourage you to work at your knowledge-creation so that you can share it at the 1st Global Assembly for Knowledge Democracy in Cartagena on the 16th June 2017 and in the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA) Conference on Participation and Democratization of Knowledge: New Convergences for Reconciliation in Cartagena on June 12-16, 2017. See <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/brief.pdf> for the Brief and Call for Participation in English and <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/arna/ARNA2017briefspanish.pdf> for the Brief and Call for Participation in Spanish.

The success of the module will depend on the questions you are asking and on our responses that help you in your professional learning and in creating your explanations of your educational influences in learning.

My email is jack@actionresearch.net and I do encourage you to let me know your questions and the issues you would like to discuss.

Most of the learning will be cooperative in the sense that we will be learning from and with each other. I shall be bringing to you resources from around the world that should help you to locate the global significance of **making public your own knowledge**. I am hoping that everyone will be sharing their own values with your intercultural understandings that distinguish the Bolivian historical and cultural influences in your own practice. You will hear me stressing the importance of clarifying and communicating the meanings of the expression of your **embodied values** that distinguish your practice as educational. When I refer to values I am meaning what really matters to you, in your life and work as an educational practitioner and researcher **that carries hope for the flourishing of humanity**. Because of the importance of these values as explanatory principles in your educational influence, I intend focus on your expression of values in practice in all our sessions. Because of their importance I shall begin by asking you to spend some 10 minutes that is 5 minutes each, with a person next to you sharing what really matters to you in your life in general and in your work in education in particular. I shall then ask for your questions that you would like answering over the course of the module and any issues that you would like to see addressed.

My intention was to encourage and support the participants in creating their own explanations of their educational influences in learning.

In May 2019 I received a research report from Fernando Galando, the person who organised the invitation and a participant in the above programme. The summary of the report below includes a focus on:

the educational influences of my teaching practice in my own learning, the students' learning and the learning of the social formations of which we are a part, expressed

through these evaluation practices. The question that guides this action research is: How do I improve the evaluation of student learning in the subject of sociology of education through a collaborative learning project?

This was the final project submitted to the Universidad Mayor de San Simón, in partial compliance with the requirements for obtaining the degree of Specialty in Pedagogical Innovation in University Teaching. The title, summary and acknowledgements are as follows:

How do I improve the evaluation of learning in the subject of sociology of education through a collaborative learning project?

SUMMARY

This project focuses on the evaluation of learning in the classroom in higher education in the subject of sociology of education in a public university in Bolivia. From the action research approach, a collaborative learning project is implemented to investigate three aspects: 1) my learning assessment practices of the students who study the subject of sociology of education, 2) the investigation of my incarnate, underlying values in these evaluation practices, and 3) the educational influences of my teaching practice in my own learning, the students' learning and the learning of the social formations of which we are a part, expressed through these evaluation practices. The question that guides this action research is: How do I improve the evaluation of student learning in the subject of sociology of education through a collaborative learning project?

As a result of this action research project two interrelated learning emerges: 1) the multidimensionality of student learning, and 2) the need for the integrality of my evaluation practice to account for this multidimensionality of learning.

Thanks

Many people have contributed to the realization of this work. First of all my thanks to my friend and colleague Jack Whitehead, with whom I began my explorations in 2010 of the action research approach for professional development that provided me with a language and conceptual framework to start making sense of my searches, mistakes and successes. innovate my teaching practice Thanks Jack for the effort of finding time to visit Bolivia as a teacher of this specialty during the second semester of 2016 and for sharing not only your experience with this approach, but above all for your "energy of living loving" what we do (living loving energy). My thanks also to all (as) teachers (as) and facilitators (as) of the different modules of this specialty that with love, commitment and dedication shared their knowledge and passion to innovate higher education. Special thanks to my advisor, Mgr. María Luz Mardesich, for her suggestions for improving this document.

I believe that Fernando's inclusion of the question How do I improve the evaluation of student learning in the subject of sociology of education through a collaborative learning

project? shows the influence of our educational conversation as does his research report in which he explains:

...the educational influences of my teaching practice in my own learning, the students' learning and the learning of the social formations of which we are a part

Fernando thanks me for:

sharing not only your experience with this approach, but above all for your "energy of living loving" what we do (living loving energy).

I believe that this shows that I brought into our educational conversation the importance of recognising the importance of a life-affirming energy, in living loving energy, as a motivational and explanatory principle in explanations of educational influences in learning.

Whilst introducing my ideas to the participants (seen in the darkened foreground) I could see the highlighted picture in the background. The image highlights the importance of the educator (offering the book) and education in the emancipation of Bolivian citizens. My learning in the educational conversation with Fernando continues to focus on enhancing my contribution to Living Theory research as a social movement with values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. I believe that I can enhance this contribution by helping to spread the influence of Fernando's research report as widely as possible.



References

Gadamer, H. G. (1975) Truth and Method, London; Sheed and Ward.