

# **Meanings of Empathetic Resonance and Validity in Visual Narratives: A passion for compassion and loving what we are doing.**

Jack Whitehead  
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## **Introduction**

I am aware of a difference in communication between my experience of the meanings of embodied expressions of energy and values, that I and others use to explain why we do what we do in our educational relationships, and the meanings of explanatory principles of educational influences in learning, in pages of printed text.

The difference is important because of my belief that the explanations in pages of printed text are distorting, masking or omitting the sharing of vitally important understandings that we embody in what we do. I am claiming below that the ideas of empathetic resonance (Sardello, 2008) and validity (Polanyi, 1958; Habermas, 1976; Dadds, 2008) can help to prevent such distortions, maskings or omissions with the inclusion of visual data in the communication of meanings of energy flowing values in explanations of educational influence. Hence the question I am seeking to answer is:

*Are ideas of Empathetic Resonance and Validity helpful in communicating meanings of embodied expressions of life-affirming energy and values? I am thinking of energy flowing values of compassion, love and learning in explanations of educational influences in learning.*

## **Empathetic Resonance**

I first encountered the idea of empathetic resonance in the writings of Sardello (2008). For Sardello, *empathetic resonance*, is the resonance of the individual soul coming into resonance with the Soul of the World (p. 13). Sardellos' meaning carries a religious commitment. I am using *empathetic resonance* from my humanistic perspective to communicate a feeling of the immediate presence of the other in expressing the living values that the other experiences as giving meaning and purpose to their life.

Because I felt empathetic resonance as I watched a video-clip, taken by Marian Naidoo in her doctoral enquiry of Marion and Charlie, a wife and husband where Charlie was caring for Marion as she lived with dementia, I want to see if I can communicate this feeling of resonance by reenacting the scene where I experienced it.

This is how Naidoo sets the scene in her doctoral thesis for the second of two video-clips:

“Shortly after meeting Charlie and Marion we were given the opportunity to make a documentary about dementia for a medical series. The Director asked if any of the patients and/or carers would like to make a contribution to the film. I

asked Charlie and Marion if they would like to be involved and they agreed to help us. I felt it was very important for the filmmakers to meet them both before the filming in order to develop a relationship with them and to put them at their ease. Charlie and Marion handled the whole event with confidence and dignity. The account of their lives together and their love for each other was very moving. The director asked them at one point how they like to spend their day. Charlie replied that they just enjoy each other's company and sometimes they just sit together on the sofa, quietly, and hold each other's hand. As he spoke he was holding his wife's hand, and although she now finds language very difficult, with her other hand she gently touched his face. As we packed up all the filming equipment the director, who was still very moved by the interview said to me, ***"Today I experienced real unconditional love for the first time and that image of Charlie and Marion will stay with me for ever."***



Marian goes on to write:

"You can share some of Charlie and Marion's experience of living with and caring for someone with dementia in DVD chapter 2, ***"Breaking down the walls of silence."*** I have included the first clip of Charlie and Marion in their home in conversation with me. In this first clip I have tried to show the life affirming energy of this couple who engaged in a warm loving and trusting relationship with me as they talked about living with dementia. I have included the second clip of Charlie reading from a letter he had prepared for me because he wanted to make sure he was able to communicate his feelings clearly. As I was filming and listening to Charlie I was becoming anxious about Marion who seemed to be drifting away and becoming excluded from what was happening. There follows which is for me a very beautiful and significant moment where Marion, who is now unable to use very much language found another way to communicate. In this moment she catches my eye and gestures behind Charlie's back in a very comical way that she thinks he is being big headed. I have included this clip because I believe it shows that I am being inclusional and responsive in my

engagement with Marion and Charlie. I also believe it shows how the relationship I had developed with them both was one of mutual trust and respect.” (see Naidoo, 2005) pages 188-190

Here is the second clip Naidoo describes above.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxJluUVE0qA>

The clip is 1:03 seconds and the moments described by Marian can be seen clearly at 54 seconds in this image:



Naidoo’s thesis brings an energy-flowing value of a passion for compassion into the Academy as a living standard of judgment. As I watch the 1:03 video-clip above and read Marian’s words I am aware that both are necessary in the visual narrative to evoke my empathetic resonance with an embodied expression of a passion for compassion.

Following Naidoo (2005) I want to ground ‘bearing witness to this resonance’ in claims to educational knowledge that are both scholarly and can gain academic legitimacy within the Academy . To do this I need to face the issue of the validity of any claim to know that I might make that includes such resonance.

## **Validity**

In judging the validity of claims to know something about educational influences in learning I draw on insights from both Polanyi (1958, p. 327) and Habermas (1976). I accept Polanyi's point about making a decision to understand the world from my point of view as a person claiming originality and exercising judgment, responsibly with universal intent. At the heart of my understanding of validity is this personal ('I') commitment to take responsibility for the validity of my own beliefs and claims to knowledge. In recognising that the validity of knowledge-claims is influenced by the social contexts in which they are made, I draw insights from Habermas' (pp. 1-2) four criteria of social validity. By this I mean that I seek to strengthen the validity of explanations of educational influences in learning by submitting the explanations to a democratic processes of evaluation. I ask validation groups of peers to respond to the explanations in terms of their comprehensibility, the evidence used to justify assertions, the awareness of the influence in my explanations of the normative backgrounds of my writings and their authenticity in the sense of showing over time and interaction that the individual is sustaining their commitment to live their values as fully as they can.

In this brief paper I want to focus on the evidence that can be used to validate claims to knowledge that are grounded in empathetic resonance. I draw insights from Dadds' ideas where she uses the idea of empathetic validity as the potential of practitioner research in its processes and outcomes to transform the emotional dispositions of people towards each other, such that greater empathy and regard are created. Dadds distinguishes between internal and external empathetic validity. Dadds sees internal empathetic validity in terms of that which changes the practitioner researcher and research beneficiaries. She sees external empathetic validity as that which influences audiences with whom the practitioner research is shared. (Dadds, 2008, p. 279).

My interest in explaining educational influences in learning is concerned with spreading the influence of a passion for compassion through enhancing the external empathetic validity of compassion. It is also focused on spreading the influence of the educational influences of educators and others who are helping individuals and groups to find, express and enquire into interests that give meaning and purpose to their lives. In saying this I am aware of ruling out some interests that do not carry hope for the future of humanity and my own.

### **Explaining educational influences in learning with a grounding in empathetic resonance in loving what we do.**

My visual narrative is grounded in Sally Cartwright's educational relationships. The images and video clip are from the beginning of an evening of presentations of extended projects on the 16<sup>th</sup> March 2010 with Cartwright's 17 year old students, at the University of Bath. The extended projects are part of advanced level courses in which the students can enquire into a topic of their choice. My visual narrative includes the still images below, an 11 second video clip and Cartwright's writings for her masters degree, on *How can I enable the gifts and talents of my students to be in the driving seat of their own learning?*

Whilst Cartwright's account is focused on 'How' she does something I am also interested in explanations of educational influence that can answer 'Why' questions. I am interested in the explanatory principles that are used in explanations of educational influence. I am thinking of explanatory principles that include energy-flowing values that carry hope for the future of humanity and my own, such as loving what we do.

Here are three images and an 11 second video clip that evoke a response of empathetic resonance from me. I expressed this resonance in an e-mail to Cartwright in terms of her loving what she does:

*On 20 Mar 2010, at 14:51, Jack Whitehead wrote:*

*I've said many times Sally that you express a quality of receptive and responsive engagement with others that communicates a love for what you do, a love of humanity and a valuing of the other. I've said that you express this quality through an awareness of space and boundaries in the places I see you working and living. I think these 11 seconds show you expressing this quality.*

I'm hoping that you will share your responses to the images and video (I'd turn the sound down or off) in relation to Dadds' ideas of internal and external empathetic validity. It is my belief that spreading the influence of such empathetic resonance in loving what we do is part of making the world a better place to be.





Here is the 11 second video to show the relational dynamic of Cartwright's presence and for you to evaluate the validity of my belief that such visual data can communicate, through empathetic resonance, the meanings of energy-flowing values in explanatory principles such as 'loving what we do'.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ra5RAgflNXk>

Cartwright's writings include an answer to her question *How can I enable the gifts and talents of my students to be in the driving seat of their own learning?*



(Cartwright, 2008) (You can access this from <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/tuesdayma/scgandtnov08.pdf> )

In this paper Cartwright explains the 'How' of her influence in enabling the gifts and talents of her students to be in the driving seat of their own learning.

The following suggestion is intended for all practitioner-researchers who are exploring the implications of asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'

The suggestion is that we will enhance the spread of the influence of values and understandings that carry hope for the future of humanity, by including in our visual narratives explanatory principles with energy-flowing values such as a passion for compassion and loving what we are doing. I am thinking here of the explanatory principles used in answering 'Why' questions as well as our 'How' questions in researching our educational influences with our students. I am thinking of research that focuses both on improving practice and on generating educational knowledge in our living educational theories that can help to enhance the flow of values and understandings in our present practices and that can carry our hopes and intentions for the future with our learning from our histories.

## References

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