

## **Collaborative Living Educational Theory Action Research in China**

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### **Abstract**

Following a review of accomplishments by staff and students in China's Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching (Tian & Laidlaw, 2006) I will make some suggestions for the development of masters and doctoral programmes at Ningxia Teachers University. The suggestions are based on original work from CECEARFLT on collaborative living educational theory action research in China with undergraduate students. They are also based on original work from the University of Bath in the UK, from the University of Limerick with Jean McNiff and from Dublin City University in Ireland on living educational theories with masters and doctoral researchers. The suggestions include the development of an E-life Connecting People Project based on the work of Farren (2008) and Crotty (2008) at Dublin City University.

### **Introduction**

China's Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching was opened in December 2003. Its purpose is to improve the learning experience for all children in China starting with Ningxia Province. Such an ambitious project has made a promising beginning. China has a New Curriculum and that has become the main focus for the Action Research in CECEARFLT. The New Curriculum advocates task-based approaches to teaching and learning that cannot be developed with traditional modes of didactic teaching. The New Curriculum requires greater flexibility and creativity from teachers and students. This challenge gives the impetus to the work at the Centre. However, as a Centre of Research in a University CECEARFLT's purpose includes the generation of new knowledge through our research. Hence colleagues are evolving a new form of action research called 'Collaborative Living Educational Theory Action Research with Chinese Characteristics'. The case-studies and reflective writing from the Centre (Tian & Laidlaw, 2006) bear witness to these early attempts in developing a new epistemology. These case-studies and writings can be accessed from the web-site <http://www.actionresearch.net/moira.shtml>

The work on this site is the result of four years of collaboration between colleagues of the English Department in Guyuan and at the Hui Zhong (Moslem Middle School) in Haiyuan. It is also the result of collaborative work between the leader of the Centre, Dean Tian Fengjun, his assistant Li Peidong, and the Centre's advisor, Professor Moira Laidlaw. Here is Professor Laidlaw having been awarded a China Friendship Award, with Premier Wen Jiabao.

理事会二00四年度“友谊奖”获奖专家  
二00四年九月三十日于人民大会堂



Maira also suggested that you might find it helpful if I showed you the following to help to clarify the meanings of some of the words I use:

epistemology: 认识论 theory: 理论

methodology: 方法论, 方法学

dissertation: 学位论文

legitimate: 合法

dialectics: 辩证法

virtual environment: 虚拟环境

The work at the Centre also represents international collaboration with Professor Jean McNiff at St Mary's University College and myself, from the University of Bath. If you scroll down the site, you will see work over the years 2003-2007 by English teachers of varying experience in the profession, helping students majoring in English and in other subjects, to improve their learning:

*Some colleagues have written two case-studies, and a few of them have been published in international books. There are also a few entries by grade three students from Professor Laidlaw's Teaching Methodology classes as well as they make their action plans and reflect on the efficacy of their new teaching methodologies. You will also find two Teaching Methodology Handbooks, copyright belonging to the Centre, but which you are welcome to use if you want. There is also a short guide to Action Research by Tian Fengjun and Moira Laidlaw. There are also some details about the opening of the Centre and Professor McNiff's and Dr. Whitehead's visits here over the last three years. These contain pictures. (See <http://www.actionresearch.net/moira.shtml> )*

Professor Moira Laidlaw sends her best wishes to everyone at Ningxia Teachers University. She would have like to be present today, but her doctors have told her that she would not be wise to travel at the present time. Moira has asked me to say that she is always willing, indeed eager, to help colleagues with their AR enquiries through email and the internet. I know that she is hoping to return in the future to help to extend the accomplishments of the Centre.

These accomplishments have been documented in the 2006 publication by Dean Tian Fengun and Professor Moira Laidlaw in their book on '*Action Research and the New Curriculum: case studies and reports in the teaching of English*'. I do hope that you have all studied their book.

I now want to move from the present accomplishments to the future. Here are two suggestions for future developments and even greater accomplishments.

### **THE FIRST SUGGESTION**

#### **The development of a masters programme based on collaborative living educational theory action research in China**

One approach to a masters degree in education that is widely used in Western Universities is a system of credits for writings produced for assessment from 5 modules of study. Each module is worth 12 units and five successfully completed modules count for 60 credits. A dissertation carries 30 credits.

My first suggestion looks at the possibility of offering the following five units, appropriately modified for a Chinese context and a dissertation for a masters programme at Ningxia Teachers University. The suggestion is based on an educational enquiry approach to issues of:

- i) LIVING THEORY RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS;**
- ii) CURRICULUM;**
- iii) LEARNING;**

**iv) TALENTS AND GIFTS;**

**v) IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL INFLUENCES WITH ASSESSMENTS FOR LEARNING.**

Here are some details from the work I do at the University of Bath that might help in the construction of a masters programme at Ningxia Teachers University.

**FIVE EDUCATIONAL ENQUIRY MODULES WITH WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS OF A MAXIMUM OF 5000 WORDS.**

**i) LIVING THEORY METHODOLOGY AND ACTION RESEARCH METHODS (IN CHINA)**

Using a living theory methodology in improving educational practice - see <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/jack/jwLTM080508.pdf>

Using Action Research Methods – see <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/jack/arplanner.htm> and see Jean McNiff's booklet on 'Action research for professional development: Concise advice for new action researchers' at <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/booklet1.html>

I like very much the way Belle Wallace has shown an action reflection cycle in her work on Thinking Actively In A Social Context (TASC)



**II) THE GIVEN CURRICULUM AND THE LIVING CURRICULUM (IN CHINA)**

**The Given Curriculum** is the New Curriculum. To help with the implementation of the New Curriculum Moira Laidlaw has produced two Handbooks on:

- a) Handbook One 'From Competence to Performance: English-Teaching Methodology for 'The New Curriculum' in China.  
(<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/china/mlhand105.htm> )
- b) Handbook Two 'Teaching Communicative Methodology for the New Curriculum to Student-Teachers.  
(<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/china/mlhandbooktwo.htm>)

Moira writes about the purpose of Handbook One:

*This Handbook is about teaching and learning, and specifically teaching and learning English in a communicative way for the New Curriculum. It is more than knowledge about English. It's more than you knowing about grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation, spelling, speaking and listening, reading and writing. It's about knowing how to communicate your understanding together with others in order that they understand the language and enjoy learning it well. Let's face it, if you don't enjoy learning, you don't learn much yourself, so try to remember that when you're teaching. Your students want to enjoy their English lessons with you and it's your job to help them do so. (Laidlaw 2006, Handbook 1)*

**The Living Curriculum** is expressed in the educational development of teachers and students as they engage with the Given Curriculum in developing their own learning.

Graduate student Qiao Qian shows such a developing with her living curriculum as she asks, researches and answers her question:

*How can I help my students to build a better communication with me in order to improve their English learning?* (<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/china/qiaopian.htm>)

Ma Li Juan also shows this developing a living curriculum in her educational enquiry,

*How can I attract my students' attention educationally?*  
<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/china/malijuanar3.htm>

You can see my response to Ma Li Yuan's draft action research report at  
<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/china/jwMaLijuan.htm>

### iii) IMPROVING LEARNING WITH UNDERSTANDING LEARNERS AND LEARNING.

In my tutoring of the masters unit on understanding learners and learning in the Department of Education of the University of Bath I have following the unit description at: <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/ull.pdf>

I do hope that you will read Joy Mounter's writings on *Can children carry out action research about learning, creating their own learning theories?* at <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/joymouterull.htm> . What is very special about this presentation is that it includes video-clips of 6 year old pupils not only using the action research process of the TASC wheel, but demonstrating their creativity in explaining why it needs modifying to explain their own learning. Here is a brief clip to show that 6 year olds have the talents to understand their own learning if teachers create the appropriate educational spaces for their expression.

You can also access Sally Cartwright's MA writings on Understanding Learners and Learning at <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/sallycartwrightull07.htm>

and other successfully completed writings on Understanding Learners and Learning at <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/mastermod.shtml>.

(These are 9 credit units on the MA programme with a maximum of 4,500 words and where 6 units are studied for 54 credits and then a 36 credit dissertation is produced).

I do hope that you will also read Sally Cartwright's educational enquiry at <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/sceejan08.pdf>. Sally has used the TASC wheel herself with both her students and staff in her secondary school to explain how she has worked to both improve learning and generate educational knowledge. If you are interested in working collaboratively with colleagues in developing a living theory action research approach to improving learning with the new curriculum, I think you will find Sally Cartwright's writings most useful.

#### **iv) DEVELOPING STUDENTS' AND/OR COLLEAGUES' TALENTS AND GIFTS.**

In my tutoring of the masters unit on Gifts and Talents in Education I have been following the unit description at: <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/G&TinEd12.htm>

(This is a new unit offered by the Department of Education of the University of Bath and the first completions passed through the MA examination board at the University of Bath on the 29 May 2008).

You can access Barry Hymer's impressive doctoral thesis on *How do I understand and communicate my values and beliefs in my work as an educator in the field of giftedness?* from <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/hymer.shtml>. Hymer has developed an original inclusional approach to talents and gifts in education.

Ningxia Teachers University concentrates on teaching and creatively launches teaching reform and academic practice, *'building the university in its own speciality, setting up the university in terms of its quality, gaining reputation on the basis of scientific research, and strengthening the university with its talents'* (Ningxia Teachers University, 2008)

This emphasis on building and strengthening the university with the talents of its staff and students fits well with the construction of living educational theory action research. It fits well with its localization in collaborative living educational theory action research with Chinese characteristics at Ningxia Teachers University. I think you will find Marie Huxtable's website useful in this development at: <http://www.spanglefish.com/mariessite/>. Huxtable is focusing her doctoral

research on the development of Hymer's ideas on an inclusional approach to talents and gifts in education.

v) **IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL INFLUENCES IN LEARNING WITH STUDENTS AND ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING.**

In my tutoring of the masters units on educational enquiries that have focused on improving educational influences in learning with students and assessment for learning I have followed the unit description for educational enquiries at:<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/ee.pdf>

You can see writings on some of the tensions being experienced by teachers as they use National Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) while wanting at the same time to stimulate the creativity of their students. Amy Skuse (2007) has written about this tension in her educational enquiry on

*How have my experiences of Year 2 SAT's influenced my perceptions of assessment in teaching and learning?*

(<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/amyskuseeeoct07.htm> )

(SATs – are Standard Assessment Tests used nationally in the UK. However Scotland is scrapping national tests for 5-14 year olds.)

You can also access some of my own thinking with Margaret Farren of Dublin City University on how to explain educational influences in learning with visual narratives:

Farren, M & Whitehead, J (2006) Educational Influences in Learning with Visual Narratives, in Childs, M., Cuttle, M. & Riley, K. (2006) Developing Innovative Video Resources For Students Everywhere; Glasgow; Glasgow Caledonian University. Retrieved 1 June 2008 from

<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/jack/mfjwDIVERSEcomplete.pdf>

Here is a video-clip of Professor Moira Laidlaw at the end of a lesson here in Guyuan. The students are flowing past Moira and she is expressing her values of relationship and recognition. I think the inclusion of video-clips in our **explanations** of our educational influences in learning will become very important as we develop a better understanding of the energy and values that motivate us to do what we do in education. For example, I love what I do in education and I hope that you are experiencing this love for education in the flow of life-affirming energy your presence helps me to express today. When you are assessing and explaining what is important in education I do hope that you will bring into your assessments and explanations the values in the strategy to develop Ningxia Teachers University. These values are in the working spirit that is forming the university's atmosphere with creativeness and devotion. This includes a teaching atmosphere of care, clearness and good discipline and a learning atmosphere of valuing truth, kindness, practical improvements, creativity and innovation (Ningxia Teachers University, 2008). Branko Bognar is a pedagogue at Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek, Croatia. Branko is already living these values with his colleagues at the University and with teachers and pupils in local schools as this video-clip shows. Branko is working with Moira, myself and others to establish EJOLTs - an Educational Journal of Living Theories. You can see what we are doing and contribute your ideas to the Journal from

<http://ejolts.net/drupal/index.php> .

After the completion of the above masters units the teachers move on to their dissertation.

### **Dissertation (20,000 words maximum)**

In my tutoring I focused on the development of dissertations in which individuals explore a question of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ in which they create their own own living educational theory.

You can access a number of such dissertations from:

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

In a process of life-long learning in education, educators develop their knowledge as they learn how to improve their educational influence. Initial programmes of teacher education rightly focus on basic standards of competence in learning about the curriculum and in managing and teaching pupils in classrooms. Through continuing professional development programmes we can demonstrate the growth of our embodied knowledge as master educators. Over the course of a life-time’s commitment in education it is also possible to demonstrate the growth of our educational knowledge as doctor educators. By doctor educator I am meaning educators with a doctorate for reseaching their own practice. Universities have a vital role to play in legitimating and developing the educational knowledge of doctor educators through a research-based approach to professional development (Whitehead, 1989).

## **THE SECOND SUGGESTION**

### **The development of doctoral research programmes for evolving collaborative living educational theory action research in China at Ningxia Teachers University**

In my keynote presentation for the Second National Conference on Foreign Language Teacher Education and Development, Beijing Normal University, 22-23 September 2007 on ‘Living Theory and Educational Action Research in Foreign Language Teacher Education and Development’, I gave a rationale for developing a living theory action research approach to teacher education in China. You can access this rationale at: <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/jack/jwkeynotechina220907.htm>

Professor Wang, an international expert on action research (Wang, 2002), helped to organize the conference with another keynote on ‘Narrative’ presented by Michael Connolly. Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin, 2007) has increased in popularity with educational researchers over the past 20 years. All of the living theory doctorates I have supervised have used a narrative approach in generating the living theories. Jean McNiff (2007), a visiting professor at Ningxia Teachers University, has described this process very clearly in her contribution to the Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology (Clandinin, 2007) on ‘My Story Is My Living Educational Theory’. So, in developing living theories of improving practice I suggest. the use of narrative enquiry. A distinguishing characteristic of a living theory approach to narrative enquiry is its inclusion of an explanation of the individual’s educational influence. The explanation is of their include in own learning, in the learning of others

and in the learning of the social formations in which the individual is living and working.

The doctoral research programmes I have supervised have taken a minimum of 5 years to successful completion. It requires a sustained commitment by both researcher and supervisor(s) to move from the initial proposal to successful completion. At the University of Bath, researchers who wish to register for a doctorate usually move through an M.Phil. to the Ph.D. programme with a **transfer seminar**. This is a seminar where the researcher demonstrates that they are ready for their Ph.D. programme. It involves the production of a **transfer report** and a transfer seminar where three internal readers from the Academic Staff make a judgment about whether the researcher is ready to transfer from the M.Phil. phase of the research programme to the doctoral programme. You can see Karen Riding's transfer paper of October 2006 on *Why I do what I do: How can I come to understand my educational influence in students' learning through the cross-generation mentoring of student researchers?* at: <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/krtrans.htm> .

To help researchers prepare a living educational theory, action research proposal, for submission to a university research committee for a doctoral research programme, I have produced the notes at:

<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/jack/jwarphdprops280508.pdf>

You can see Marie Huxtable's initial doctoral proposal on *How can I help children and young people learn to live satisfying and productive lives through my professional practice as a senior educational psychologist?* at

<http://www.jackwhitehead.com/marie/mhphdproposaljan06.pdf>

### **Some possible foci for doctoral research programmes at Ningxia Teachers University that could contribute to the evolution of collaborative living educational theory action research in China at Ningxia Teachers University**

I am suggesting that a collaborative living educational theory action research approach to improving practice and generating educational knowledge could evolve at Ningxia Teachers University. It could evolve through a creative response by researchers at Ningxia to the existing living theory doctorates and masters degrees at the University of Bath, at the University of Limerick with Jean McNiff and at Dublin City University with Margaret Farren and Yvonne Crotty.

**You can access the living theory doctorates legitimated at the University of Bath from** <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/living.shtml>

I think that Chapter six of Kevin Eames' thesis on Action Research, Dialectics And An Epistemology Of Practically-Based Professional Knowledge For Education is likely to be of great use in the development of doctoral programmes in CECEARFLT. This is because Eames shows how a school-based teacher-researcher group was formed and sustained over a number of years. You can access the whole thesis at <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/kevin.shtml> and Chapter six at <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/KEVINPHD/kechap6.pdf> .

The doctoral research programme of Simon Riding (2008) is also likely to be particularly useful. Riding has sustained a collaborative form of living theory action research through his masters programme and into his doctoral research programme.

He has examined his professional development in moving through middle management to senior management in secondary schools. He has also explained his educational influence in establishing teacher-researcher groups within two schools. This includes partnerships with masters degree programmes of universities for the accreditation of the teachers' accounts.

The doctoral research programme of Karen Riding (2008) includes an explanation of her influence in supporting the development of intergeneration groups of pupil researchers. This research could be particularly significant for the future development of doctoral research programmes at Ningxia Teachers University because of the inclusion of pupils' voices together with the teacher's voices in the co-creation of educational knowledge. This co-creation of educational knowledge could be a highly original contribution to knowledge from doctoral researchers in CECEARFLT.

I am thinking here of the development of a group of doctoral researchers who will collaborate in improving practice and generating educational knowledge at Ningxia Teachers University.

Some doctoral researchers at Ningxia could, like Moira Laidlaw (1996) and Karen Riding (2008), focus on the processes of improving learning with their students.

Other doctoral researchers at Ningxia could, like Simon Riding (2008), be enquiring into enhancing the influence of their educational leadership within a school.

Other doctoral researchers at Ningxia could, like Jacqueline Delong (2002), be enquiring into the educational influence of their educational leadership within a Prefecture. They could research the creation and sustaining of a culture of enquiry for supporting teacher-research within schools.

**You can also access the living theory doctorates legitimated at the University of Limerick**, as well as other accounts legitimated by the University of the West of England from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/reports.html>

Here are some of the living theory doctorates legitimated at the University of Limerick. The titles show the range and breadth of the topics studies, plus the freedom of choice of the researcher.

Sullivan, B. (2006) A living theory of a practice of social justice: Realising the right of traveller children for educational equality.

Glenn, M. (2006) Working with collaborative projects: my living theory of a holistic educational practice

Cahill, M. (2007) My living educational theory of inclusional practice.

McDonagh, C. (2007) My living theory of learning to teach for social justice: How do I enable primary school children with specific learning disability (dyslexia) and myself as their teacher to realise our learning potentials?

Roche, M. (2007) Towards a living theory of caring pedagogy: interrogating my practice to nurture a critical, emancipatory and just community of enquiry.

**Concluding with the eLife connecting people project**

I want to conclude with a focus on the work of Margaret Farren and her colleague Yvonne Crotty at Dublin City University. Farren is a lecturer in e-learning. She is supporting the development of some of the most advanced e-learning communities in the world today. You can access her web-site at <http://webpages.dcu.ie/~farrenm/> with a number of living theory dissertations that have integrated information and communication technologies into the e-learning. From this url you can also access the new up-dated website to which students can upload their own work.

Farren and Crotty are also actively involved in research on the use of Web technologies, virtual learning environments and conferencing technology that can help to build a web of betweenness and a pedagogy of the unique (Farren 2005). They are working to create a living global network of practitioner researchers with the aim of improving educational practice. They are also focusing on the production of digital narratives of learning (Crotty 2005) through the creative use of video and audio technologies such as the podcast on action research below in their most recently developed 'eLife Connecting People Project':

*"The purpose of the eLife project is to share the action research accounts of practitioner-researchers who are doing postgraduate research in the area of eLearning. Action research accounts involve expressing concerns when educational values are not lived in practice. Special importance is placed upon the processes of imagining a way forward, gathering data, evaluating practice on effectiveness of actions, modifying plans in light of the evaluation. In the session, we will present text based and e-media action research accounts of learning and discuss how we are combining our voices with an international living global network of practitioner-researchers to improve practice."* Podcast - Action Research - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qg83f72\\_6Gw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qg83f72_6Gw) (Farren & Crotty e-mail, 28/05/08)

My own feeling is that we have much to learn from each other through our action research within our own cultures and in co-creating our educational knowledge in the dynamic boundaries between our cultures. I am looking forward to extending my own learning next week through my visit to Zhejiang University in Hangzhou with Hong Qin Zhao (2006). There is much to be gained by exploring these creative possibilities of collaboration and in working to overcome tensions when the boundaries of our cultures feel to be in resistance with each other (Whitehead, 2008). I do hope that we will find it possible to sustain and strengthen our relationships between and within our cultural boundaries through face-to-face meetings and in helping to extend the influence of the eLife Connecting People Project.

I am thinking here of extending the influences of the eLife Connecting People Project at Dublin City University in Ireland with the original work of researchers in the CECEARFLT of Ningxia Teacher's University. You are leading the way for the development of Collaborative Living Educational Theory Action Research in China.

I want to thank once again the organisers of the Conference and in particular Dean Tian Fengjun who once again has made it possible for me to join you and to continue our collaboration. These visits have been most influential in my own learning and in my understanding of the importance of your gifts and talents in sharing the passion for education I have enjoyed here at Ningxia Teachers University. Thankyou.

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