

Living Theories

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My contributions to Living-Theory action research have emerged from my enquiry, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' in the contexts of a professional working life in education which began in 1967.

Perhaps my most significant contribution is in the original idea that an individual researching their own practice can create their own living educational theories as explanations for their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work.

The idea of Living-Educational-Theory developed from a question asked by the logician Ilyenkov (1977), 'If an object exists as a living contradiction, what must the thought (statement about the object) be that expresses it' (p. 320). This question emerged from a 2,500 year old battle between propositional and dialectical thinkers. Using Aristotelean logic propositional thinkers eliminate contradictions between statements in 'correct thought'. For example, in answering his question, 'What is Dialectic?' Popper (1963) rejects dialectical claims to knowledge as, '*without the slightest foundation. Indeed, they are based on nothing better than a loose and woolly way of speaking*' (p.316). Whilst holding to the view that logic is the mode of thought

appropriate for comprehending the real as rational (Marcuse, 1964, p. 105) Marcuse argues that Aristotelean logic conceals rather than reveals the basic dialectical proposition, which states the negative character of the empirical reality (p. 111).

My recognition of existing as a living contradiction came in 1972 as I viewed video-tapes of my classroom practice as Head of the Science Department of Erkenwald Comprehensive School in Barking, London. I believed that I had established enquiry learning with my students in which I responded to the questions they asked. The video-recordings showed that I was giving the students the questions, rather than enabling them to formulate their own. This was an embarrassing revelation and my first experience of the power of visual data on one's own practice to reveal one's existence as a living contradiction in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' The visual data also prompted a leap from improving performance to researching to improve the expression and clarification of the researchers living-values and revealing the tensions when they are experienced as contradicted in practice.

I experienced another contradiction whilst studying educational theory for an Academic Diploma (1968-70) and MA (1970-72) at the Institute of Education of the University of London. In the Academic Diploma I accepted the disciplines approach to educational theory. This held that educational theory was constituted by the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education. During 1971 I began to question the validity of this approach based on an intuition that something was fundamentally mistaken. Paul Hirst (1983), one of the proponents of the approach, acknowledged the following mistake in a way that enabled me to clearly articulate

what was mistaken. The mistake was focused on the replacement of the values-based practical principles I used, in explaining my educational influence in my own learning and the learning of my pupils, by principles from the disciplines of education. My emphasise on educational influences in learning rather than just learning, is that not all learning is educational. Much can be learnt that violates the values that carry hope for the future of humanity. Educational influences in learning focus on the importance of an individual's responsibility to explain their influences in terms of the values that carry this hope.

Hirst (1983) acknowledged the mistake in the disciplines approach in regarding practical principles 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. Having understood this mistake Hirst then rectified the mistake with the suggestion that rationally defensible practical principles, must of their nature stand up to practical tests and without that are necessarily inadequate. (p. 18)

In 1973 I moved to the University of Bath as a Lecturer in Education to contribute to the creation of a valid approach to educational theory. The distinction I make between education research and educational research is that education research is grounded in a discipline of education whilst educational research is grounded in enquiries that are intended to improve practice and generate knowledge.

My introduction to action research and action reflection cycles came in 1975-76 as I participated in a local curriculum development project on enquiry learning in science

(Whitehead 1976). During this project I produced two evaluation reports. The first was praised by academic colleagues as I explained the project in terms of contemporary models of changes in teaching and learning and of models of curriculum innovation and evaluation. The teachers I worked with criticised the report because they couldn't see themselves in it! Their criticisms were justified. Working with Paul Hunt, one of the teachers, I returned to the data of video-taped conversations with pupils and teachers and the accounts of the teachers. We reconstructed the report into a form that the teachers agreed was a valid explanation of the project. This had the form of expressing concerns and problems; imagining ways forward; acting on a chosen action plan and gathering data on which to make a judgment on the effectiveness of the actions; evaluating the effectiveness of the actions; modifying the concerns, plans and actions in the light of the evaluations and producing a validated explanation of our learning as we worked collaboratively to help the pupils to improve their learning. This was my first explicit understanding of action reflection cycles in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'

From the inclusion of 'I' as a living contradiction and my use of action reflection cycles in improving my practice in the enquiry, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' I originated the idea of an individual generating their own living educational theory as an explanation of their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations. I understood 'I' as an ontological not egotistical 'I' who has a responsibility to research the educational influence the expression of their embodied presence and knowledge has in the learning and lives of others. I began to supervise MEd, M.Phil. and Doctoral degrees in supporting practitioner-researchers to generate their own living educational theories. The first

MA dissertations were successfully completed in 1982, followed by MPhil degrees in 1987 and then the Ph.D. degrees in 1988. Between 1996 – 2012 I have supervised some 32 successfully completed living theory doctoral theses and these can be accessed from the living theory section of <http://www.actionresearch.net> .

One of the most significant transformation in the nature of the living theories produced between 1996-2012 has been in the use of multi-media narratives with digital video. The regulations of the University of Bath were changed in 2004 to permit such submissions and Mary Hartog's (2004) thesis was the first to be submitted with e-media.

This change occurred at the same time as an extension and transformation in my epistemologies as I included, through the influence of Alan Rayner, a colleague at the University of Bath, a relationally dynamic awareness of space and boundaries within my explanations of educational influence and within my influence as a supervisor of masters and doctoral dissertations and theses. Whilst I continue to value insights from propositional and dialectical researchers, I now encourage the creation of living educational theories that are informed by an inclusional awareness of space and boundaries. I have found video-clips that show oneself in an educational space with others particularly valuable in developing inclusional understandings. Inclusionality (Rayner, 2004) does not deny the existence of oneself as a living contradiction, nor does it deny the value of insights from propositional theories (Whitehead & Rayner, 2009). It overcomes some of the limitations in propositional and dialectical theories, especially in communicating the meanings of embodied expressions of energy-flowing values in explanations of educational influences in learning.

The growing influence of the living theories produced by action researchers can be seen in many different contexts throughout the world. In China, with the support of Dean Tian Fenjun and Prof. Moira Laidlaw (2006), the Chinese Government agreed to the establishment of the Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching at Ningxia Teachers' University. In Japan, Dr. Je Kan Adler-Collins (2007) successfully completed his doctoral enquiry into bringing a curriculum for the healing nurse into a Japanese University, through action research and living theory. In Canada, Dr. Jacqueline Delong is continuing with her post-doctoral enquiries and in supervising action research dissertations whilst responding to moves to support scholarly enquiries beyond written text in Journals such as *Teacher and Teacher Education* (DeLong and Whitehead, 2012). In South Africa, the Transformative Education/al Studies project (TES, 2010), funded from 2011-14 by the National Research Foundation of South Africa has the overarching research question, 'How do I transform my educational practice as...?' and the living theories of South African action researchers in higher degrees have already been successfully completed (Vargas, 2012) and some have been published with the guidance of Prof. Lesley Wood (2010).

In terms of contributions of living theories to transforming understandings of educational knowledge and theory, the first issue of the multi-media journal, *Educational Journal of Living Theories (EJOLTS)* was published in 2008. This journal is dedicated to the publication of living educational theories with action research. The Special Issue on 'Digital Creativity and Video in the Workplace', edited by Yvonne Crotty (2011), highlights the advances made in the use of multi-media narratives in the creation and publication of living educational theories with action

research at Dublin City University in Ireland. The Collaborative Action Research Network Study Day in the Centre of e-Innovation, Pedagogy and Workplace Learning at Dublin City University, in October 2012, focused on *Multimedia Forms of Representation in Living Educational Theories in Relation to Improving Practice*.

The latest living theory doctorates with action research to be successfully completed are those of Marie Huxtable (2012), Yvonne Crotty (2012), Keith Kinsella (2012), Mark Potts (2012) and Simon Hughes (2012).

At the heart of a living educational theory is an individual's responsibility for accounting for their influence in terms of the values they believe carry hope for the future of humanity. Pott's (2012) has analysed his learning in the exercise of his responsibility for accounting for his influence in terms of the value of living citizenship within educational contexts in schools in the UK and in South Africa. Huxtable (2012) has accounted for her learning in living as fully as possible her values of loving recognition, respectful connectedness, educational responsibility, inclusion, emancipation and equality. Kinsella (2011) has accounted for his learning in presencing developmental opportunities for his students and in presencing empathetic responsiveness in relation to their learning. Crotty (2012) has brought an educationally entrepreneurial spirit into the Academy as a living standard of judgment. Crotty's explanation includes a responsibility for students and her values of passion and care ('love' of what she does), safety, creativity and excellence within her practice.

By accepted a responsibility for accounting for their own lives and learning in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' living theory action researchers are making original contributions to knowledge and providing evidence that they are fulfilling both halves of the mission of the American Educational Research Association (Ball and Tyson, 2011).

Each of these living theories is unique in the sense that the explanations, as contributions to knowledge, are formed from the constellation of values and understandings that have emerged from each autobiography in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing? Their relatability (Bassegy, 1981), rather than generalizability, can be seen in the evidence that the living theories of action researchers are inspiring others around the world to create and share their own in a pooling of the life-affirming energy with values that carry hope for the future of humanity.

Note:

Eleven of the 32 successfully completed living theory, action research doctoral theses I supervised between 1996-2012 were supported within the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) of the University of Bath.

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