

What has Living Theory research got to offer professional educators?

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Abstract

In this paper we show how Living Theory research has enabled us, as higher education teachers/educators, to realize our professional responsibilities to research our practice to improve it *and* to contribute to the development of an educational knowledge-base with the living-theories of master and doctor educators. We also focus on the motivational, values-laden energy that has helped us as practitioner researchers to sustain our commitment to education.

One distinguishing feature of a profession is that it has a professional knowledge-base. In this paper we show how professional educators can contribute to an educational knowledge-base by drawing insights from the theories created by education researchers while resisting pressures from the British and American Educational Research Associations to devalue their own educational knowledge-creating capacities.

Living Theory researchers research their practice to improve it by creating and making public accounts of their living-educational-theories. Living-educational-theories are evidence-based and validated explanations created by people of their educational influences in their own learning, the learning of others and the learning of the social formations they live and work in (Whitehead, 1989). These explanations and standards of judgment are grounded in the life-affirming values that give meaning and purpose to the researcher's life and carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. A practical approach to validating knowledge claims and a variety of research methods used by professional educators, which transform practice, is described.

The key findings and implications for practice are that teacher inquiries, which are grounded in enhancing the educational experiences and learning of students, can produce both a new epistemology for a professional knowledge-base of education and improve practice with values that contribute to the flourishing of humanity.

Introduction

Our answer to the question ‘What has Living Theory research got to offer professional educators?’ includes a definition of a living-educational-theory as an individual’s explanation of their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations that influence practice and understanding. We distinguish, through the use of hypens, the individual’s unique living-educational-theory from the conceptual definition of Living Theory research that can include the unique contributions of these individual living-educational-theories, without define them. We also use the idea of living-theory-methodology to refer to the unique methodology that emerges in the creation of a living-theory. The unique methodology can draw insights from other methodologies such as phenomenology, narrative research, case-study, ethnography, autoethnography, self-study and action research (Whitehead, 2015).

We also work with an understanding that what is educational involves learning that includes the values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. The nature of these values, like the nature of democracy, are contested both within and between different normative backgrounds that are influenced by sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts. We also distinguish what is educational from education in the creation of living-educational-theories. Education researchers research within the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of disciplines such as the philosophy, sociology, historical, psychological, economics and politics of education. Educational researchers produce explanations of educational influence that include insights from the disciplines of education and values, as explanatory principles, that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

This paper contains four sections that include:

- 1) Showing how Living Theory research has enabled us, as higher education teachers/educators, to realize our professional responsibilities to research our practice to improve it *and* to contribute to the development of an educational knowledge-base with the living-theories of master and doctor educators.
- 2) Evidence that justifies the claim that professional educators have contributed to an educational knowledge-base in their educational research by drawing insights from the theories created by education researchers while resisting pressures from the British and American Educational Research Associations to devalue their own educational knowledge-creating capacities.
- 3) Explicating the methods, life-affirming energy, values and methodologies that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity in validating educational knowledge claims.
- 4) Producing a new epistemology for explanations of educational influence.

1) Realizing our professional responsibility as educators with Living Theory research.

As higher education teachers/educators we research our practice to improve it *and* to contribute to the development of an educational knowledge-base through our educational influences in the generation, legitimation and sharing of the living-theories of master and doctor educators. One of the generally accepted distinguishing characteristics of a profession is that it has a knowledge-base. In the 1960s and 70s the view of this knowledge-base was dominated in the UK by what became known as the disciplines approach to educational theory. This approach held that educational theory was constituted by the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of the disciplines of education, such as the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education. A fundamental mistake in the disciplines approach was that the practical principles used by educators to explain their educational influences in learning were regarded at best as *pragmatic maxims having a first crude and superficial justification in the practice that in any rationally developed theory would be replaced by principles with more fundamental, theoretical justification* (Hirst, 1983, p. 18).

With this mistake, and the breakdown in a consensus about the nature of educational theory, there is no general agreement about the nature of the theory that should form the educational-knowledge base of education. We understand education, following Peters (1966), as a values-laden practical activity.

What we are suggesting is that part of our responsibility as professional educators is to create and share our explanations of our educational influences in learning as we ask, research and answer questions of the form, 'How do I improve what I am doing in my professional practice?' Our focus on influence is supported by Said's (1997) focus on the work of Valéry:

No word comes easier or oftener to the critic's pen than the word influence, and no vaguer notion can be found among all the vague notions that compose the phantom armory of aesthetics. Yet there is nothing in the critical field that should be of greater philosophical interest or prove more rewarding to analysis than the progressive modification of one mind by the work of another. (p.15)

We are thinking of explanations of educational influence that can be legitimated by accrediting bodies such as Universities as contributions to educational knowledge in masters and doctoral degrees and recognized as distinguishing the embodied knowledge of master and doctor educators. In presenting this paper at 2016 RIPLE conference we have the pedagogical intent of captivating your imaginations in a way that persuades you to create and share your own living-educational-theories as part of fulfilling your responsibilities as a professional educator in contributing to the educational knowledge-base.

2) Contributing to the educational knowledge-base

In fulfilling our pedagogical intent we believe that we might captivate your imaginations with the evidence that justifies the claim that professional educators have contributed to an educational knowledge-base in their educational research by drawing insights from the theories created by education researchers while resisting pressures from the British and American Educational Research Associations to devalue their own educational knowledge-creating capacities.

The significance of the distinction we are drawing between education research and educational research can be appreciated by focusing on the statements of Felice Levine the executive director of the American Educational Research Association and of Geoff Whitty in his Presidential Address to the British Educational Research Association. Levine has recommended to editors of AERA publications that they use the term education research rather than educational research. In his BERA Presidential Address, Whitty writes:

One way of handling the distinction might be to use the terms 'education research' and 'educational research' more carefully. In this paper, I have so far used the broad term education research to characterise the whole field, but it may be that within that field we should reserve the term educational research for work that is consciously geared towards improving policy and practice..... One problem with this distinction between 'education research' as the broad term and 'educational research' as the narrower field of work specifically geared to the improvement of policy and practice is that it would mean that BERA, as the British Educational Research Association would have to change its name or be seen as only involved with the latter. So trying to make the distinction clearer would also involve BERA in a re-branding exercise which may not necessarily be the best way of spending our time and resources. But it is at least worth considering.
(Whitty, 2005)

These attempts to prioritise the education knowledge generated by education researchers over the educational knowledge generated by educational researchers seems to us to be very damaging to the creation of an educational knowledge-base for education. The disciplines of education produce theories from which educational researchers can draw insights in the creation of their living-educational-theories. We are claiming that no theory from education researchers, taken individually or in any contribution can produce a valid explanation of your educational influence in your own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation that influence our practice and understandings. The recognition of the importance of teachers as educational professionals producing and sharing their validated accounts of their educational influence is completely missing from an issue of Research Intelligence (2013) that is focused on teacher education.

We are hoping that the living-educational-theories of practitioner-researchers generated in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing in my professional practice as I seek to live my values as fully as possible?' will captivate your imaginations in a way that motivates you to create your own.

You can access the living-theories of master educators at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/mastermod.shtml>

You can access the living-theories of doctor educators at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml>

3) Methods, energy, values and methodologies in Living Theory research

The methods we use in Living Theory research include a process of 'empathetic resonance' with digital visual data to clarifying the meanings of the embodied expression of values that can be used as explanatory principles in explanations of influence. The include the use of a method we refer to as Living Theory TASC that incorporates the action research TASC wheel created by Belle Wallace, with the addition of producing an explanation of educational influence.



In producing an explanation of educational influence we also advocate a method for enhancing the validity of explanations that draws insights from Habermas' (1976, pp. 2-3) four criteria of social validity in the use of the following questions to be asked in validation groups (usually between 3-8 peers). The questions are:

- i) How can I enhance the comprehensibility of the explanation?
- ii) How can I strengthen the evidence I use to justify the claim that I make in my explanation?
- iii) How can I deepen and extend my understanding of the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences in my practice and understandings?
- iv) How can I enhance the authenticity of my explanations in the sense of showing that I am living my values as fully as possible.

What is often missed in the explanatory principles that are used to explain educational influences is the fact that expressions of energy are necessary in any explanation of what we are doing. We use digital visual data from practice to

communicate the necessity of recognizing flows of energy in values-laden explanatory principles.

Here is a one minute video from a class in China with Moira Laidlaw to illustrate what we are meaning by such flows of energy and the use of a method of empathetic resonance to clarify and communicate meanings of expressions of embodied values.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1jEOhxDGno>

As we move the cursor towards the end of the 1 minute clip, Moira engages with a student in a way that Moira experiences as her expressing a loving warmth of humanity. The expression of such energy-flowing values can be used as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influence (Laidlaw, 2015)

4) Producing a new epistemology for explanations of educational influence.

Donald Schön's work on reflective practice and educating reflective practitioners has helped to focus attention on the importance of making public the embodied knowledge of educators. Towards the end of his life he argued Schon's (1995) that the new scholarship of teacher education required a new epistemology. Schön died before he could develop this epistemology. We agree about the need for a new epistemology but feel that this epistemology is emerging from the living-theories of practitioner-researchers. These living-theories draw insights from a range of theories and methodologies including action research, but cannot be subsumed under a pre-existing theory or methodology.

We distinguish different epistemologies by their unit of appraisal, standards of judgment and logic. In Living Theory research the unit of appraisal is an individual's explanation of their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations that influence the practice and understandings. The standards of judgment are grounded in values, understandings and flows of energy that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. We know that our claims to have improved something include beliefs in the validity of our value-judgments that can be contested. What we believe to be improvements might not be accepted by others who hold different value perspectives. When we claim that realizing values such as care, compassion, love, justice, loving kindness, courage, wisdom, respect, freedom, together with the procedural principle of democracy, carry hope for the flourishing of humanity, we submit our explanations to public criticism in order to reduce bias and enhancing the validity of our explanations. In doing this we follow Popper's insight about objectivity being grounded in intersubjective criticism and that the validity of an explanation can be strengthened through the mutual rational controls of critical discussion (Popper, 1975, p.44).

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