Living Educational Theories and Living Contradictions: a response to Mike Newby

JACK WHITEHEAD

I feel sure that Newby's review (*Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 28. 1, 1994, pp. 119–126), of Jean McNiff's (1993) book *Teaching as Learning* will help to stimulate philosophers of education to contribute to debate about the nature of the educational knowledge and the logic(s) of the educational theories being produced by educational action researchers. I share his commitment to clarity of thinking in education and to the value of philosophy in examining the grounds on which other disciplines make their claims to knowledge. Let me take a number of criticisms that he explicitly makes of me in his review.

While Newby may see my work as an action research approach to pedagogical problem-solving I see my work as focused on the epistemologies of living educational theories. I am interested in the logics of educational theories and in the standards of judgement that can be used to test the validity of the descriptions and explanations that individual learners produce for their own educational development as they answer questions of the kind 'How do I improve what I am doing?' Recent research (Elliott and Sarland, 1995) and papers in *Teacher Education Quarterly* (22. 3, 1995) on Self-Study and Living Educational Theory show that, as Newby says, there are indeed 'several university departments of education adopting an action research approach to pedagogical problem-solving in the McNiff and Whitehead style'.

I am surprised at his suggestion that 'the McNiff–Whitehead position rejects the impersonal propositional form which research normally takes in favour of a dialectical approach', since Newby himself quotes me as having written:

> I am arguing for a reconstruction of educational theory into a living form of question and answer which includes propositional contributions from the traditional disciplines of education.

I have argued (Whitehead, 1989) that living educational theories can be presented in a dialogical and dialectical form which, while not being validly reduced to a propositional theory, *can integrate insights* from such theories.

In his remarks on 'Whitehead's five-fold question-and-answer strategy' Newby clearly states that I have an approach to action research that 'never seems to ask philosophical questions about the logic of "improvement", the form goals are to take, and the criteria for choosing certain goals rather than others'. I asked and tried to answer such questions in public debate some 12 years ago over a period of two years in the *International Journal of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* (Whitehead, 1983, 1985a,b; Wilson, 1984).

Perhaps Newby might like to engage with these published papers and review his claim that I never seem to ask such philosophical questions.

Similarly, with regard to evaluation, Newby asks how evaluation can take place 'if the fundamental questions about improvement have not been asked, let alone answered'. Again, unless I misunderstand what he thinks counts as a fundamental question, I do think the debates in the early 1980s within the Classroom Action Research Network (Whitehead and Foster, 1984) and elsewhere (Whitehead, 1985a,b, 1989) show that I have engaged with this and related points.

I wonder about the evidence for Newby's claim that I impute arrogance and incorrigibility to professors of education:

> Jack Whitehead accuses professors of education of unwillingness to open their own account of their educational development to public criticism (p. xi). Whether or not this is the case, it is quite unfair to impute arrogance and incorrigibility to them.

I must ask the reader to read my words in my introduction to Jean McNiff's book (1993, p. xi). At no point do I impute arrogance or incorrigibility to 'Professors of Education'. I think their logic and language is too limited to provide a logic and language of educational theory and I have put forward an alternative (Whitehead, 1985a,b, 1989).

Newby accuses Jean McNiff and myself of being 'unfairly judgemental and highly suspect. They have first had to assassinate the characters of the renowned before attempting to climb on the pedestal themselves' — this in the context of the writings and practice of Richard Peters and his colleagues.

I make no secret of the fact that I came to Bath University in 1973 with the explicit intention of trying to reconstruct educational theory because I believed the 'disciplines' approach of Richard Peters and Paul Hirst was mistaken. I believed it to be mistaken because it could not produce a valid explanation for the educational development of an individual. I recall studying under the team of philosophers led by Richard Peters with the utmost respect for their professionalism. Indeed in my own book (Whitehead, 1993) I say on the first page of the Introduction:

> As a student of education at the University of Newcastle in 1967 I was influenced by the work of the philosopher Richard Peters on ethics and education . . . Peters emphasised the importance of other values such as rationality, consideration of interests, respect for persons and worthwhile activities. He also believed in the value of educational theory for the professional development of teachers and saw education as being related to the creation of a good social order.

I would also say that the idea of living educational theories is not the kind of idea through which an individual can elevate herself or himself on to a pedestal. The whole point of the view that educational theories are being produced by individuals in their descriptions and explanations for their own educational development is that it is open to all individuals to create their own living educational theory. There is a slogan on my office door at the University,

Undermine the Dominant Paradigm. The slogan is a constant invitation to critique.

There are two further general points I wish to raise about Newby's review. The first is his claim that Jean McNiff's book attempts to introduce an ethic of teaching and learning that is built around Habermas's ideal speech situation. He says that this is by no means new or original. While Jean must speak for herself I feel sure that her well-known Christian commitments exemplified in the book's preface:

> Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others . . . Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Peter 4:10, 3:15).

do more than suggest that her ethics are not built around Habermas' ideal speech situation. Because Jean and I, whilst agreeing on many things, have such a different base to our ethics and our spiritual lives I think some care is needed in referring to the McNiff–Whitehead or the Whitehead–McNiff position.

I do agree with Newby when he says that:

> Any approach to research that, whatever it might sometimes appear to say, disregards all academic standards and refuses to deliver propositionally expressed truth-claims as opposed to claims made in the first person, is going to have real problems developing criteria of quality. This concerns me, because teachers are now being awarded MA degrees in this tradition of action research.

However, I wonder why my approach to research is associated with the idea that propositionally expressed truth-claims are opposed to claims made in the first person. The validation procedures, included in Jean McNiff's (1988) text on *Action Research: Principles and Practice*, following Martin Forrest (1983), show that Jean and I agree that propositionally expressed truth-claims can be integrated within claims made in the first person rather than being opposed to them. And Newby's criticism here is difficult to sustain in the light of recent texts on the criteria for judging action research (Lomax, 1994, 1996; McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 1996).

This brings me to a further point which is related to the previous paragraph. Newby says that:

> Truth-claims have their context in traditions of enquiry. They are not personal or group preferences. Their context is historical. . . . It is when we become aware that thinking can be done expertly or badly, and that traditions of expertise are digests of the best that has gone before, that we have some chance, however small, of combating our prejudices and engaging in dialogue with experts.

I wonder if Newby's beliefs about truth-claims should be questioned. Where he says that they are not personal or group preferences, hasn't Foucault (1977) made rather a good case in showing that what counts as truth and truth-claims can be related to the power relations invested in particular interest groups?

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I also wonder how he copes with the problem that some traditions of expertise, which are indeed digests of the best that has gone before, no longer provide the answers to some significant questions. If he rests in the best that has gone before how does he respond creatively when this best is no longer good enough for the here and now? I argue (Whitehead, 1985a,b) that new truth-claims are required to test the validity of new forms of educational theory and that in establishing a new view of educational theory personal or group preferences, rather than a context in traditions of enquiry, may be the basis for legitimating the new view. Again, this is not to deny the value of including standards of judgement drawn from the traditions in testing the validity of a claim to knowledge.

Newby gave the title 'Living Theory *or* Living Contradiction' to his review. As these terms had their genesis in relation to my own work, I would like him to consider my title, 'Living Educational Theories *and* Living Contradictions'. I wonder how I might share an understanding of my dialectical logic and commitment to education with an orthodox philosopher (Whitehead, 1985a) who is operating from within a propositional logic that sets up such oppositions by eliminating contradictions from correct thought. I suppose one way might be to show that I understand and share a commitment to Newby's academic values and, in a sympathetic way which does not deny his integrity, make a response which is intended to help him to enhance his own contribution to the philosophy of education.

For example I feel that Newby's critique addresses aspects of my life as a living contradiction. In the positive pole of the dialectic I am thinking of our shared values of scholarship, of our concern to represent the ideas of another with honesty and integrity and of our respect and insights into those qualities of spiritual and aesthetic sensibility that are required to communicate within an *I–You* relationship rather than an I–It relationship.

In the negative pole of the dialectic I am thinking of not living fully my value of scholarship which should lead me to address the points that, as he says, I never seem to address. I am also thinking of not living fully the values of honesty and integrity that should lead me to represent the ideas of others truthfully. I am thinking of not living fully my spiritual and aesthetic sensitivity to the *I–You* relation in the language of my written communications. These written communications often fall short of the full mutuality I can experience with you in face-to-face communication.

I want to say something in conclusion about the tone in which I have tried to respond to Newby's criticisms of my work. At the World Congress 3 on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management at the University of Bath in July 1994 I witnessed a dialogue between Dr Peter Reason, the Director of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at Bath University, and Orlando Fals-Borda, Emeritus Professor at the University of Columbia in Bogota and one of the leading proponents of Participatory Action Research. Orlando demonstrated the art of a dialectician in embracing opposites and working with contrary views. He showed great humility, yet enormous intellectual integrity, in focusing on the uniting influence of human values and the desire to contribute to improving the world through cultural renewal and education. Terri Austin (1994) of the Alaskan Action Research Network and Tom Russell (1995; Munby

and Russell, 1996) have also contributed to the kind of language I need to develop if I am to make a full contribution to such a community.

I hope that I have integrated what I have learned from the human qualities expressed by Peter Reason, Orlando Fals-Borda, Terri Austin and Tom Russell, in the content and tone of my response. I hope Mike Newby feels directly addressed and that he experiences my response as a genuine invitation to continue to critique my ideas. Other readers might like to join with me in showing how our philosophies not only interpret our world but are also integrated in our living educative relationships with our students, as we try to improve them. I am thinking of the creation of our own living educational theories that show how we are struggling to express more fully and to justify the values that we think will help to regenerate our culture and that at the same time will help us to improve the contributions our philosophies can make to the creation of an educated community.

Correspondence: Jack Whitehead, School of Education, University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, UK.

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