



The role of educational theory in generating an epistemological transformation in what counts as educational knowledge with educational responsibility: Responses to Huxtable and Rayner, and Biesta, Allan and Edwards

Jack Whitehead, University of Bath

Because of my belief that enhancing professionalism in education requires the generation of valid educational theories that can explain educational influences in learning and practice (Whitehead, 1989) I was delighted to hear of the establishment of 'The Laboratory for Educational Theory'.

This was reported in RI 109 by Biesta, Allan and Edwards with their commitment to undertaking research in relation to the usage of theory in current educational research, the role of theory in relation to educational practice and input from other disciplines.

The presentations at the Keynote Symposium at BERA 09 on *Explicating A New Epistemology For Educational Knowledge With Educational Responsibility* (BERA 09) may be of some use to 'The Laboratory for Educational Theory'. The presentations explored the epistemological implications for educational knowledge of the living educational theories generated by practitioner-researchers. The theories were constituted by explanations of their educational influences in learning as they asked, researched and answered questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'

"The theories were constituted by explanations of their educational influences in learning as they asked..."

In the generation of an individual's living educational theory (Whitehead, 1989: 6) a key idea is that the theory is constituted by explanations of the individual's educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which the individual is living and working. Another key idea is that the explanatory principles include the energy-flowing values that an individual uses to give meaning and purpose to their life. I understand these as their ontological values.

Some 36 years into my educational research programme at the University of Bath into the nature of educational theory, I feel confident that I can offer an evidence-based understanding of energy-flowing and values-laden practical principles that are necessary to explanations of educational influences in learning. The evidence below begins with visual data of my educational practice in which I am expressing educational responsibility through my understanding of the African way of being of Ubuntu in a workshop in South Africa in 2006. It is the kind of evidence that cannot yet appear in the present issues of BERJ because they are not yet open to the same possibilities of the e-version of Research Intelligence for the presentation of multi-media narratives. In offering the evidence of energy-flowing values below I am agreeing with Huxtable's point that:

BERJ in its present form cannot help develop the educational knowledge-base that we, and other educational researchers, are generating in terms of our energy-flowing and values-laden explanatory principles. (Huxtable, RI, 107:25)

The video data below is used as evidence of the energy flowing relational values of Ubuntu in explaining my educational influence in the learning of social formations.

In my presentation to the BERA keynote symposium, on *Generating Educational Theories That Can Explain Educational Influences In Learning* I drew attention to the 3.20 minute clip below, from a workshop in the University of the Free State in South Africa where I am seeking to express the values of Ubuntu – an African way of being. I do this on page 9 of the presentation at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/187849.pdf>. I offer a visual narrative and at 2.37 minutes into the clip I explicitly draw attention to my embodied expression of the life-affirming energy I see myself living in my educational practice with educational responsibility in the workshop. You can access the clip from YouTube from the url under the image on page 26.



<http://tinyurl.com/jackwhitehead>

I am claiming that such embodied expressions of life-affirming energy with values, including educational responsibility, together with their representations in the accounts of educational researchers, are necessary for the generation of educational theories that can explain educational influences in learning.

I am suggesting that the e-version of Research Intelligence holds the key to communicating an

epistemological transformation of educational knowledge through the generation of living educational theories. This is because the e-version is making accessible multi-media narratives with energy-flowing and values-laden explanatory principles for explaining educational influences in learning. Such narratives offer educational researchers opportunities for generating educational theories with educational responsibility. I am thinking here of the responsibility of an educational researcher to make public their explanations of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we are living and working. In saying this I am agreeing with Biesta, Allan and Edwards (RI, 109:18) that 'One of the defining characteristics of educational research is that it aims to contribute to the improvement of educational practice'.

“Let me be clear about the relationships between explanatory texts and present practice, in constructing a living theory.”

In developing my understanding of the relational dynamic of energy-flowing values that are necessary to explanatory educational principles I was pleased to read Rayner's agreement about the importance of 'educational' research in relation to 'education' research in his point about a natural inclusional approach to living educational theory:

I wish to agree with Whitehead by saying that, if anything, the relation between 'educational' and 'education' research should be viewed the other way around, i.e. with 'educational' being regarded as more general in both its philosophical approach and practical implications. I do this on the basis of a contrast between the kind of generalization that follows from abstract rationality, which currently underpins most conventional education research, and that which flows from what Whitehead recognises as the more comprehensive 'natural inclusional' approach (see Rayner, 2006) of 'living' educational theory. (Rayner, RI 109: 26)

A point I stressed in my Presidential Address to BERA in 1988, about the nature of living educational theories, might be worth restating because of its potential relevance to research in the Laboratory for Educational Theory:

Let me be clear about the relationships between explanatory texts and present practice, in constructing a living theory. The texts are historical accounts. They describe and explain past activities. They also have a proactive function in that the evaluation of these accounts prompts a vision of the future in an imagined possibility of how present practice might be improved. We can thus make sense of the living practice through understanding the relationship between the account of the past and the vision of the future. Hence educational theory is, for me, a living theory in that the explanation contains evidence of an evaluation of past practice, evidence of an intention to produce something not yet in existence and evidence of the present practice through which the intention is being realised in action. (Whitehead, 1985a)

I hope that you can now see why I characterise the approach as a living approach to educational theory. It is to distinguish it from a linguistic approach which is contained within propositional relationships and captured in texts on library shelves. In contrast to this I am proposing an organic view of educational theory which is living in the public conversations of those constituting professional practice. It is thus growing in the living relationship between teachers, pupils and professional researchers and embodied within their forms of life. (Whitehead, 1989: 6)

It isn't a major technological innovation to open BERJ to multi-media narratives. Without such narratives BERJ is imposing an unnecessary restriction on the forms of representation that can be used by educational researchers to communicate valid explanations of educational influences in learning.

References

- BERA (2009) *Explicating A New Epistemology For Educational Knowledge With Educational Responsibility*. A keynote symposium presented on the 3rd September 2009 at the British Educational Research Association Conference in Manchester. Retrieved 8 March 2010 from <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/bera/bera09keyprop.htm>
- Whitehead, J. (1989) *How do we Improve Research-based Professionalism in Education? A question which includes action research, educational theory and the politics of educational knowledge*. 1988 Presidential Address to the British Educational Research Association. *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 15, No.1, pp. 3-17, 1989. Retrieved 8 March 2010 from http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/presidentialaddresses/Whitehead,_1988.pdf