

Jack Whitehead,
40 years in
education.

Was it worth it?

An individual's
view point.

Moira Laidlaw

25 April 2008

Dear Jack,

I suggested for your book on your educational influence that I look at the ways, and to what effect, you have influenced my learning. I want to concentrate most specifically on the years you spent as my supervisor, because that is when I worked with you most closely and when I experienced the most influence.

I don't want to suggest any causal relationship, because as we both know, learning, truly deep learning, isn't about cause and effect: it's much more subtle than that. The ways in which people influence each other are as many as there are people, but there are strands I can isolate that constitute for me the ways in which I am conscious of your influences on my learning, and these I will present because it may be that you don't see it in quite the same way, although I would imagine by now that much of what I am going to say will be familiar. I hope that the following has some useful insights anyway. You can use the information in any way you choose.

I have worked with you since 1988, and so as you celebrate 40 years of educational development I celebrate 20 years of working with someone I value very much, who has helped me to become a better educator throughout that period (Laidlaw, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001a 2001b, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008a&b). I start from the premise of intuition and what *feels* right, particularly in the classroom. I come heavily influenced from classical literature and poetry, and a sense of what constitutes an aesthetic in music in particular. Your rationality is very different from mine. I think it has partly been that which has influenced me, but I am getting ahead of myself. I would like this to be a tribute to you, Jack, for your forty years, for your help throughout the last twenty years, for your companionship, your scholarship, your mentorship and most of all your friendship.

It is my experience that people can learn good and bad things, and that learning itself does not necessarily imply improvement of anything. My understanding of learning is of a process by which I acquire something in my mind or heart that I didn't have before. It doesn't necessarily mean that it is something I wanted to know, but I have it anyway. When you talk about influencing learning I think you mean influencing the other in such a way to render that person more able to do good in the world.

I am not sure how to present this, Jack. I wish I had loads of urls to point to with dynamic videos of our interactions, because I know those spark your interest more keenly, but I don't, so my words are going to have to make do. *Deal with it!*

Beginnings: You have the biggest laugh of anybody I know, and I remember walking through the school of education as it was at the time at Bath University in 1988 and hearing this great booming laugh cascading its way out of one of the seminar rooms. You were conducting a module for the Masters degree in Education on qualitative methods, or rather 'method', as you and your dozen or so students were finding out about action research. After a session one of his students, Peter, said that there was this mad guy talking about the Holocaust and getting very enthusiastic about something that John (another student) was showing him and I really ought to come and watch. A Masters degree in canned-laughter seemed more exciting than some of the other courses I was taking, I can tell you! I went along and indeed there you were, talking about the Holocaust, leaning forward in a way suggesting that what you had to say was urgent and telling us that we should bear in mind the negatives of human

nature as we actually strove towards the positive, about how your father had shown you pictures of the Holocaust when you were only six, which I just thought was bizarre! The question formed in my mind of what the Holocaust had to do with education anyway (Laidlaw, 2001a), but after one session in which I saw you striving to understand the significances rather than just the meanings, I was absolutely hooked. Enthusiasm like that is rare. I thought your subject-matter was odd but there was something about the way you got enthusiastic about what you were saying or more especially when you listened to what others were saying, and finding in each statement some kind of golden nugget that you would hold up to the light of rationality and celebrate. I found that very alluring. It was my experience that university lecturers lectured and students tended to be silent, sitting at the feet of the great master. That was a stance that has never appealed to me as a learner, as all my school reports would testify! I hated being taught, but I loved learning (Bognar, 2008). Here was an opportunity to talk about what really mattered, or at least what seemed to really matter to me. I particularly remember talking to you at Jim Harvey's house at the graduation party and drinking wine and feeling that you were according me the status of being the most important and interesting person in the world! However, I realised that this was your way with many others too, and an intoxicating one it is too. To have the attention, the full, engaged, wrapt attention, of someone is very engaging. It was the beginning of something I was to learn a great deal about as your student and later your friend: giving time and attention is perhaps the most valuable way we can relate to another human being. As I worked with you over the years I became more and more aware of the ways you interacted with students. There was a sense that as long as the student was genuinely enquiring, then everything s/he said was of interest, and was relevant.

Enthusiasm: First of all I have to mention the influence on me your enthusiasm has had. I haven't ever met anyone whose enthusiasm has been so galvanising. It is focused enthusiasm, however. In your educative relationship with me I would say the focus was more on becoming than being, and I was stuck in being quite a lot of the time. It really did make an impact on me that you read my stories and learned – almost – to curb your frustration when I presented you with yet another story about dragons or gargoyles coming alive on buildings instead of something about educational research. I was more fascinated in researching gargoyles than researching myself at the time, an orientation you were to gently lead me away from, but in fact, I felt at one point, you realised that in fact I was, through this strange addiction to fictional and magical stories, actually developing my own sense of the world I lived in and wanted to live in. You didn't exhibit (much) frustration, because, I believe, looking back, you were living out the idea from Buber of subordinating your own view of the world to the worldview of your student in order to help me learn. An interest in gargoyles was a strange manifestation of an educational process, but you understood it as being educational. You could see the potential of the stories, as they were grounded in values you also held. Your enthusiasm took the form of always welcoming me into your office – during 1991-1994 on an almost daily basis. You never seemed to tire of our discussions, although you took the opportunity on every occasion to focus ideas towards a sense of purpose and process and progress. But your huge smile and laugh and galvanic energy communicated far more to me than your words in the early years. You gave me time, and instinctively I knew that was hugely significant. I know I bore that in mind in subsequent years in Oldfield and in China with students (see the video of the students leaving the classroom and works cited

above). Learning isn't causal, but there are currents of influence and I know this was a big wave for me. I also realised from your enthusiasm about how interesting you find other people. I remember you saying on one of our trips to Swindon that you really found people interesting and couldn't understand those who didn't. Yes, for you, Jack, the world is a fascinating place, full of fascinating and talented people who can do remarkable things. It's simply a matter of finding out how to facilitate that process. Your enthusiastic approach enabled me to believe that I too may have something to offer.

Understanding the student's insights and pushing them further: If you had left it there – understanding my values – you could be accused of being a psychotherapist rather than an educational researcher, which you consciously strove to gainsay in your practice, but your focus was always what the potential was, drawing it out, by using my own values and playing on them. It's harder to see this for myself but over the years I saw you do this with a number of people: give them scope to find themselves so that they might find the world of educational research as well, yet one embedded firmly in the self-hood, the self-concept of the individual. You never, ever, once stepped on my sense of territory with my values. *You never made me feel less than I was, always more*, because you constantly brought conversations and writings and readings back to my own interests. I remember you saying you only ever worked with people with whom you felt an educational rapport, and whose research could help you in your own research to create a clearer grounding in living educational theorising. I didn't understand the theory, the rhetoric or the worldview, Jack, but I *felt* the genuine interest, the sense that I was a worthwhile person, doing worthwhile (if somewhat weird) things, and that I had something to offer. You stood firm on that all the years I worked with you.

Humour: A review of your talents as a supervisor would be incomplete without any mention of your (dire) sense of humour. It encompasses everything from existential to slapstick. You seem at some level not to take life very seriously at all. You have a capacity to laugh at the foibles of human nature. I mean laughing at JJ and all the terrible abuse is certainly one way of protecting yourself against any projections from those quarters. You tended to use your humour sometimes, I noticed, as a way of seeing how far you could go. The classic incident of:

Moira: *So if an educative relationship has something mutual about it, what have you learned from me?*

Jack (after 30 seconds of deep reflection) *Nothing!*

is a case in point. There was something very funny about it, but boy oh boy did you sail closely to the wind on that one. Well, you often sailed close to the wind, but I realised that you did this with yourself too, so it was allowed!

Responsibility as a Form of Empowerment: One of the chief ways in which I feel your influence is in the boundaries you set for our work together: this much is mine; this much is yours. You balanced responsibility with empowerment in such a way that I grew to take ownership and responsibility for what I was doing, to the point I could stand face to face with you and say no! Or yes, if it was warranted.

- Your responsibility? To offer a safe and challenging space, to be present, to be engaged, to offer me useful and rigorous parameters for my research, to seek to understand the world from my point of view (only understand, not

necessarily take part in – more anon), to help me draw out the significances of the research, to point out any invalid avenues of exploration. To do your best to help the fledgling to fly!

- Mine? To engage in the research to the best of my ability, which sometimes meant experiencing a lot of pain if that was necessary for my development. If you pointed out areas of exploration, which when engaged in caused me pain, then this was my responsibility, rather than yours. Owning this was the hardest part of the whole process for me, but in retrospect you didn't put a foot wrong because you held to that sense of boundaries, which are so crucial for an educative relationship (for any relationship, but that's not the point here).
- Yours? To accept the differences of the research paths that your students will follow. Not to dominate, but to facilitate ownership at all times when at all possible. You did this brilliantly.
- Mine? To take responsibility for the conclusions of my research (this meant coping with any rewrites of my Ph.D., which took me a long time to understand). To meet deadlines. Finally, to own the Ph.D. and recognise my own part in completing it. Letting go of the educative relationship as a dependent one in any sense. To become an equal in this research competence and eventually superior: this is my work. To be able to mean: this is who I am; this is where I stand; this is what I stand for. That I knew and owned my work more fully than anyone else.
- Yours? To prepare me for the various stages of the doctoral process, so that I could more fully take ownership of it.
- Mine? Take ownership of the whole process, particularly the rites of passage – M.Phil, Ph.D. transfer and the vivas. It was my decision to stick to the two original external examiners against your better judgement – and I was proved right – haha! – which showed my confidence, and I believe, probity! But in reality, of course, it showed a necessary development in my sense of ownership and the worthwhileness of my research, which you had helped to facilitate over the years.
- Yours? To let go. You had *no* problems with this one as I recall. It was more a question of, 'Oh for fuck's sake, Moira, just get on with it, will you, and LEAVE!'

Timing: In this you were incredible. I have never met anyone who could prod when necessary, cajole, suggest, enthuse, hold back, listen (a lot), talk when some closure was necessary, push, and the catch-phrase: *I don't know if this is too much but...* I think this timing was linked to your ability to hold an overview of my research without ever taking it away from me and declaring it your own. It was also, I believe, linked to your respect for me as someone who was competent, potentially had something to offer educational research, and was simply a worthwhile human being. In expecting a lot from me, whilst at the same time never attempting to foist your own pace onto my learning, required very delicately honed abilities to time your interventions. I was not the easiest student, I am sure, because I was so emotionally volatile. You knew when to intervene in ways, which afterwards staggered me by their appropriateness. Your timing wasn't the influence, so much as the underlying insights and values that drove the timing, but the timing was the external manifestation of your genius as a supervisor. I can remember only one instance of you getting it wrong with me and me flaring up because you'd touched such a raw nerve. Your solution to this was not to apologise – because you had meant no harm – but to

enable me gradually to see this as a way to understand myself better and to appropriate this knowledge to my educational research. Your timing, Jack, has been truly awesome. Let me give you another example out of the many, but this one stays in my mind, because it seemed that such perception that you displayed was magical.

You were an external examiner at Worcester College (I think it was) for Masters degrees in education, and I accompanied you to a couple of vivas. One was for a woman whose dissertation you liked – but not enough. You asked her to talk about herself and then asked her why she had done this research. It was like opening a floodgate of feelings, perceptions, significances, painful as well as uplifting. I sat and watched in awe because I couldn't understand where your insight had come from. You said you simply knew there was something she was not saying, and thus the result was, in one sense, inauthentic. And you wanted her to experience the profundity of what she'd actually done, to help her synthesise experience with emotion. You were always brilliant at that with me too. She thanked you for the experience and said that this wasn't at all what she was expecting: she'd been expecting a formality and you turned it into an opportunity for learning.

Your sensitivity to me within the educative relationship in terms of your timing was however, in living contradiction to the way in which I sometimes saw you treating others – *not* students ever – even the tussle with Pat with her famous *I will not change my categories* incident wasn't inappropriate, it was in defence of your value of the freedom to learn for the other people in the room. I'm referring to AERA 1995. I saw you then exhibiting what appeared to be the desire to suppress another person's right to speak. I don't mean I disagree with the particular instance, but it was a living contradiction. I also saw you in contradiction with some of your colleagues, during which your manner was quite different from the one I experienced with you. I surmised that these professional relationships were not educative and therefore your responsibilities were different. I was initially shocked by those times, though, in the sense that the antagonistic vibes forced me to recognise my supervisor had claws as well as pads on his paws. It was another influence, in the sense that I learned something about healthy boundaries from you, which, as I have said on many occasions, is the key to mental health.

Values: I believe I know that everything you stand for – in terms of your core values (as I understand them): freedom to learn, respect for persons, fairness, justice, scholarship, rigour (Winter, 1989), educational theory, trust in the essential goodness of being – was experienced by me within my educative relationship with you. Indeed, that is how I learned these *were* your values – over time in relationship. I saw you walking the talk every day. I learned through the course of my educative relationship with you the significance of rigour (Laidlaw, 2008a) for example, like the time you went through the first draft of my Ph.D. and required yet another read-through, yet another careful perusal, way beyond the time when I wanted to do it. I could have killed you then, but in retrospect that might have been an overreaction.

Paramount in this dimension, is your belief in the essential good capacities of human beings, our potential to rise above our lower natures of projection, resentment, envy, those aspects of humanity that follow the death-instinct, rather than the life-affirming potential of us all. We have to take responsibility for our actions, and even our feelings and thoughts. If we can do this, your processes would seem to suggest we

will become stronger and gain a greater joy out of life. And it's true. I think you find many ways of conveying your values to me (and others, I know, but you know the old thing of only speaking for oneself on issues which concern that self). You do it through word of mouth, through actions – especially over time and consistently – through body-language, facial expression, tone of voice – and you do it both naturally and in the sense of an educator at the height of his craft: with a fine touch, almost sleight of hand. Strip away an educative encounter with you and what are we left with: a belief in the other. It's that respect thing for me, Jack. It's the way through years and years and years of sometimes almost daily contact, you showed me that I was worthwhile. You helped me to unstitch (as a by-product) years of childhood abuse – although I fully accept that you are not a psychotherapist – but your educational processes are therapeutic in themselves. They can salve the soul and that's what you essentially did for me, which is strange because you don't even believe in souls, but you would defend to the death *my* right to believe in them, eh! I've heard you in the past listening seriously to someone who believed she was an alien – that graduation party at Jim's really was kooky! I've seen you reach right inside someone and draw out the life-force for them to see that they too possess it, even when they don't believe it themselves. You did it to me.

Connectivity. This is the summary point in terms of the ways that influenced me. This again, is an awesome talent of yours as a supervisor. You could take something I said weeks ago and tie it in to something I was saying in the present. And always, this wasn't simply a feat of memory, it was a feat of connectivity. It connected the psychological, ethical, moral, epistemological or even ontological features of my learning. It enabled you also to synthesise what my current learning constituted. I remember an occasion when you said something about the way in which all my research was into ethics. I had never put it together before, but it was like a flash of revelation. You were able always as well to connect ideas from apparently disparate places – i.e. that a particular research angle was the result of past experiences that were unresolved. You did that with me on countless occasions, whether you knew you did or not. You had a perfect pitch for pinpointing psychological sources, which I never knew to fail in you in terms of being my supervisor. With your respect for me in terms of a person capable of coping, you never came too close, but you pinpointed nevertheless. Such a fine touch on this one, Jack. You have a spirit of integrity (meaning wholeness) and seek an inclusional way of being with your students. This is bound to help you connect ideas, people, ethics and so on. And it is a most fruitful way of learning and supervising.

How has all this influenced me?

Mostly, I would say that I have been influenced to believe differently about the world. Because you made a point of consistently revealing the above values and practices I came, gradually, to believe consciously in the goodness and possibilities of the world. I had taught, I hope, with that sense for years, but I had not yet come to own it in any significant way. I have consistently said to you, Jack, that you helped me to grow up. And I believe that to be the case. You helped me to take responsibility for myself and the world I am a part of. Somewhere in the growth of a spirit towards maturity was becoming independent and going to China enabled me to put more fully into practice the values I had become more confident about. I think some of the instigation for the Guyuan AR Centre came from my freed spirit. I am not going to attempt to prove it, but I can say it to you and know it's true and that will have to do.

There may be things here I've missed. I hope, however, there is something in here you can use.

Love from,

Moira xxx

P.S. You get a bibliography with this letter, Jack!

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