

29

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY DURING COVID-19 IN GLOBAL LIVING EDUCATIONAL THEORY RESEARCH

Jack Whitehead

Introduction

We are all influenced by the sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts of where we live and work. Between January 1, 2020, and August 31, 2022, we have experienced the influences of COVID-19 in our different contexts. My experiences in education over the past two years have been influenced by my economic security. While millions of people have been adversely affected by COVID-19, I have benefited from the many invitations to contribute key-notes virtually to webinars and to virtually present accepted paper proposals at national and international conferences.

I cannot overemphasize the economic influence of being able to present virtually during COVID-19. For example, to present face to face at both the 2021 and 2022 conferences of the American Educational Research Association with flights, fees, accommodation, and subsistence would have cost me personally some GBP 6,000. The registration for virtual presentation was no less than GBP 200. Both symposia involved participants from the United States, Canada, India, Nepal, and the United Kingdom, who, like myself, were able to present virtually during COVID-19 while face-to-face presentations would have been financially impossible.

Virtual platforms and digital technology

COVID-19 has moved much higher education and many national and international conference presentations onto virtual platforms. This has enabled the gathering of digital visual data from a wide range of cultural and international contexts, to be used in evidence and values-based explanations of educational

influences on learning – that is, to create living-educational-theories. I shall focus on the significance of the technology in gathering and sharing these data, including visual data, for enhancing the flow of global values of humanity such as educational responsibility, equity, and critical reflection. The methods for clarifying and communicating the meanings of these embodied values that we express in our practice include empathetic resonance with digital visual data.

The embodied values are the actual values we express in what we are doing, rather than the value-words we use to describe our values in what are called lexical definitions of meaning. I want to be clear about this difference. Ostensive or demonstrative expressions of meaning include pointing to what we are doing with the help of digital visual data and clarifying the meanings of our values as these emerge in what we are doing. Lexical definitions of meaning are when we define the meanings of the value-words we use, such as freedom, justice, care, and love.

The following data are from symposia at the 2021 and 2022 American Educational Research Association with the themes of educational responsibility and equity; presentations at the 2021 and 2022 meetings of the Network Educational Action Research Ireland on “Critical Reflection in Educational Practice”; the 2022 Educational Studies Association of Ireland on “Why a focus on ‘What is educational’ matters so much in reconstructing education?”; and the 2022 Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa on “Transforming practices in Higher Education through critical reflection.”

The analysis of this data, using a method of empathetic resonance, clarifies and communicates the embodied expression of values of humanity. An Eastern Wisdom Tradition together with a Western Critical Theory Knowledge Tradition are included, within the generation of living-educational-theories, in improving educational practices within different international contexts and in making original contributions to educational knowledge with values of human flourishing.

Eastern wisdom and Western critical theory traditions

At the heart of my use of digital technology during COVID-19 was an engagement with individuals and communities that draw on both Eastern Wisdom traditions and Western Critical Theory traditions in enhancing educational influences to learn values of human flourishing. For example, Suresh Nanwani uses technology to make his book on human connections freely available. It contains many images from his teaching experience in Chongqing, China. Here is my abbreviated foreword to his book *Human connections: Teaching experiences in Chongqing, China and beyond*, which embraces a holistic fusion of both Eastern and Western traditions:

Eastern values and thoughts are embraced in a holistic fusion of both Western and Eastern angles. Eastern values and thoughts include *ikigai* in relation to the meaning and pleasures of life. They include yoga as the unity of

the individual as a system of physical, mental, social, and spiritual development within universal consciousness. The writer uses *ikigai*, yoga, meditation, and *tai chi* as a practice, with techniques such as mindfulness, to build awareness and achieve calmness and stability by weaving positive experiences into the brain and self. He practices *vipassana* as insightful meditation to see things as they really are. *Tai chi* is seen as an art form, embracing the mind, body, and spirit by giving a fresh perspective on life. His perspective also includes Organization Development concepts viewed from a typically Western outlook.

Suresh's originality lies in the form and content of his account that twine together the simplicity, intensity, and probity of his passion for education and teaching with the complexity of asking, researching, and answering his question: "What matters most to me?" and "How do I improve what I am doing?" Suresh's creative story captivates an individual's imagination as to the opportunities that life permits for each person to generate their own story, from a passion to improve their own practice with values of human flourishing.

(Whitehead, 2022, pp. xix–xx)

Before I focus on accessing data from my use of technology from presentations during COVID-19, I want to be clear about my meaning of educational.

Meaning of "educational"

I have been professionally engaged in education since my initial teacher education course (1966–1967) at the University of Newcastle in the United Kingdom. What I mean by "educational" is that it involves learning with values of human flourishing. My inclusion of these values is because not all learning is educational. History is full of examples where human beings have learned to violate these values. Being born in August 1944 might have made me more aware of the importance of enhancing the flow of values of human flourishing. The world was at war, and the gas chambers in Europe were, as a matter of state policy, murdering millions of people who were seen as less than human in the Nazi ideology. The recognition of these crimes against humanity has continuously served to strengthen my own determination to contribute to educational influences in learning, in local, regional, national, and international contexts, with values of human flourishing. Here are the values, with access to the data used as evidence in generating valid, evidence-based explanations of educational influences in learning.

Educational responsibility and equity

Responding to COVID-19 meant that I could, along with others present in symposia at the 2021 and 2022 American Educational Research Association



FIGURE 29.1 American Education Research Association (AERA) 2022 Symposium with participants Jackie Delong, Jack Whitehead, Swaroop Rawal, Michelle Vaughan, and Parbati Dhungana (clockwise from top) on April 22, 2022.

Source: © Jack Whitehead

(AERA), discuss the themes of educational responsibility and equity. In the 2021 symposium, I presented with Jacqueline Delong, Jack Whitehead, Swaroop Rawal, Michelle Vaughan, and Parbati Dhungana (see Figure 29.1). As with Suresh's book on *Human connections: Teaching experiences in Chongqing, China and beyond*, I think the visual image in Figure 29.1 (together with the digital video) is important in communicating the energy-flowing and life-affirming values we express from within our sense of community.¹

For example, Parbati Dunghana explains in her 2022 presentation the importance of an Eastern Wisdom Tradition in creating her own living-educational-theory. She elaborates that *Ardhanarishvara* signifies "totality that lies beyond duality."

The digital technology I used with the still and video images during COVID-19 enabled the following group to gather data on "Cultivating Equitable Education Systems for the 21st Century in Global Contexts through Living Educational Theory Cultures of Educational Inquiry," as they presented at the 2021 Conference of the American Educational Research Association. The participants from top left moving clockwise are Jacqueline Delong (Canada), Jack Whitehead (the United Kingdom), Shivani Mishra (India), Michelle Vaughan (the United States), and Parbati Dunghana (Nepal) (see Figure 29.2).

We all agreed that this image communicates to us all the embodied life-affirming values of human flourishing we experienced while working and presenting together in expressing a totality that exists beyond dualism.

Critical reflection in educational practice

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to present virtually on "Critical Reflection in Educational Practice" to the Network Educational Action Research Ireland (NEARI) Meeting of April 2, 2022.²



FIGURE 29.2 Participants at the 2021 conference of the American Educational Research Association with participants Jackie Delong, Jack Whitehead, Shivani Mishra, Michelle Vaughan, and Parbati Dhungana (clockwise from top).

Source: © Jack Whitehead

Here is the summary of notes I prepared for my virtual presentation:

This presentation builds on the NEARI Meet of the 29th January 2022³ with its theme of Transforming Practices. Stephen Kemmis provided the keynote with ideas from his book on *Transforming Practices* (Kemmis, 2022). I shall explore the implications of including “educational” in Critical and Creative Reflection in Educational Practice for members of NEARI. While working from a different educational perspective to that offered by Kemmis’, I do agree with Kemmis’ idea that:

Once education systems and the work of schools are conceptualized principally in systems terms, their essential lifeworld character, their grounding in the everyday life of people’s lifeworld is obscured and then ignored. . . . Obscuring and ignoring these lifeworld processes, many PEP (Pedagogy, Action and Praxis) researchers argue, is to obscure and ignore the very substance of the process of education. Neoliberal approaches to educational systems management throw the baby of education out with the bathwater. For me, these neoliberal approaches to educational systems management are policies that promote free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending.

These policies include: choice for parents; per capita funding meaning schools driven by recruitment; competition; League tables; management modeled on business – focusing on “efficient” use of resources and budget maximization; a complex infrastructure of testing; undermining professional autonomy in education; making colleges and universities more vocationally oriented to be responsive to market requirements rather than educational values.

My different “educational” perspective is focused on the generation and sharing of living-educational-theories with values of human flourishing as

explanatory principles in explanations of educational influences in learning and as embodied by evaluative standards of judgment. A living-educational-theory is an individual's explanation of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which the practice is located. Such explanations help individuals to answer questions of the kind, "How do you know that your practice has improved?" and "What standards of judgement do you use to justify a claim that your practice has improved?"

My emphasis on critical reflection owes much to the Western Critical Theory tradition that stresses the importance of understanding the influence of the sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts within which the educational practice can be located.⁴

The webinar at the 2022 Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa (HELTASA) on "Transforming practices in Higher Education through critical reflection" enabled me to continue to stress the importance of critical reflection:⁵

With the post-COVID-19 turn in higher education it is imperative that we pause and critically reflect on our educational practices in the last 27 months. . . . The approach rests on each individual's acceptance of their professional, educational responsibility, to ask, research and answer their question, "How do I improve my professional educational practice in Higher Education with values of human flourishing?" It is shown how transforming educational practices in Higher Education rests on each practitioner accepting their professional educational responsibility to subject their own practice to critical reflection. The critical reflection is focused on being accountable to improving practice and generating educational knowledge with using values of human flourishing. It involves generating and sharing one's own living-poster, creating and sharing one's own living-educational-theory and engaging critically and creatively with the living-educational-theories of others and their contributions to the Educational Journal of Living Theories.

Because of my interest in expressing a totality through an Eastern Wisdom Tradition that goes beyond the dualism in a Western Critical Tradition, I identify with Ubuntu ways of living from Africa, which stress the importance of "I am because we are." (Ubuntu is humanity, a quality that includes essential human virtues.) I share my insights from my pre-COVID-19 keynote to the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa (Whitehead, 2009) and my Inaugural Nelson Mandela lecture at Durban University of Technology (Whitehead, 2011) with the value of Ubuntu in living-educational-theories with values of human flourishing.

Summary

Responses to COVID-19 isolation meant that ideas have been flowing more through digital communications in webinars and virtual conference presentations. These have enabled individuals and communities who engage with both Eastern Wisdom Traditions and Western Critical Traditions to link up their living-educational-theories in generating educational knowledges. They do this by exercising their educational responsibility to continuously improve their educational practices and to generate and share their living-educational-theories as values and evidence-based explanations of their educational influences in learning, contributing to the global educational knowledge base.

While I have personally benefited from the greater virtual opportunities during COVID-19 for communications across global communities with their differing cultural and historical contexts, I do not want to underestimate the damage and suffering around the world caused by COVID-19.

Values of human flourishing

The values of human flourishing of educational responsibility, equity, and critical reflections are closely related to community engagements grounded in societies that are suffering from COVID-19. For example, South African universities enable their academics to engage in community engagements and community-based research that are focused on responding to the effects of COVID-19 with these values of human flourishing.⁶ Using digital technology during COVID-19, Global Living Educational Theory Research is enabling the growth of empathetic understanding of how individuals and communities across the world are affected by COVID-19. These communications go beyond this understanding as practical campaigns are developed, grounded in social justice, to ensure the equitable spread of vaccines.

Notes

- 1 The full video of the 90-minute symposium plus a 15-minute pre-session conversation. https://youtu.be/4h_rRDqIJJ8
- 2 See Part 1 of “Critical Reflection in Educational Practice” presentation. www.eari.ie/2022/04/22/notes-from-nearimeet-2-april-2022/. The digital technology in Part 2 showed participants how they could access over 50 Living Educational Theory Research doctorates freely available from www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml
- 3 See notes at www.eari.ie/2022/02/08/notes-from-nearimeet-29-january-2022/
- 4 The face-to-face presentation at the 2022 Educational Studies Association of Ireland on “Why a focus on ‘What is educational’ matters so much in reconstructing education?” (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2022). www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwmh2022ESAIFINAL.pdf
- 5 The abstract for my webinar facilitation. www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwheltasal40722.pdf

- 6 You can access the living-posters of colleagues at North-West University and Nelson Mandela University. www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/homepage2021.pdf to access the evidence on how colleagues are responding in their communities of practice with their values of human flourishing, including Ubuntu, as they respond to the negative effects of COVID-19.

Reference list

- Dunghana, P. (2022). Living educational values for enhancing self-educating strategies for equitable education. In J. Delong, J. Whitehead, P. Dhungana, M. Vaughan, & S. Rawal (Eds.), *Cultivating equitable education systems for the 21st century in global contexts through living educational theory cultures of educational inquiry*. www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/AERA2022sessionprop.pdf
- Kemmis, S. (2022). *Transforming practices: Changing the world with the theory of practice architectures*. Springer.
- Nanwani, S. (2022). *Human connections: Teaching experiences in Chongqing, China and beyond*. Suresh Nanwani. www.actionresearch.net/writings/nanwani/nanwaniconnections.pdf
- Whitehead, J. (2009, November 27). *A keynote presentation at the higher education learning and teaching association of Southern Africa 2009 on risk and resilience in higher education in improving practice and generating knowledge*. www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwheltasakey09.pdf
- Whitehead, J. (2011). *Notes for the inaugural Mandela day lecture on the July 18, 2011 in Durban, South Africa, with a 63-minute video of the presentation*. www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwmandeladay2011.pdf
- Whitehead, J. (2022). Foreword. In S. Nanwani (Ed.), *Human connections: Teaching experiences in Chongqing, China and beyond* (pp. xix–xx). Suresh Nanwani. www.actionresearch.net/writings/nanwani/nanwaniconnections.pdf