

Notes for Jack Whitehead's keynote presentation to the Workshop on Alternative Research Paradigms and Indigenous Knowledge Production, 14th to 17th February, 2011 in the Africa Development Centre, Covenant University, Nigeria, on:

## **How do I improve what I'm doing? Living Educational Theory for the African Context.**

### **Introduction**

The context for my presentation has been provided by the following information on the 2011 Workshop on Alternative Research Paradigms:

*The need to really engage African communities has never been more urgent. Facing chronic crises of troubling proportions, African economies and communities are crippled by alarmingly poor quality of life standards and other socio-political problems. To do this, The Nigerian/African academic must embrace new research tools - however unorthodox or removed from mainstream praxis – that do not encourage complacency (the 'publish or perish' culture), and that help relocate him/her in the very centre of the vortex of public concerns, needs and hopes. WARP is designed to help expose the researcher to new ways of conducting research, new ways of constructing his/her identity in relation to the researched, and new ways of promoting social change. Hence, WARP exposes participants to alternative ways of perceiving the researchable world, and equips all with tools that have great transformative potential. The workshop, built on the postmodern sensitivity to the idea of plurality, is a quest to decolonize the African research situation by introducing more contextually significant approaches to knowledge production and application, and promoting indigenous knowledge systems that aid mental health, education and meaningful living.*

*This year's workshop is designed to facilitate the training of participants (academics and students) in the Action Research paradigm (an approach to research that challenges traditional social science, emphasizes action, and supports social change as a legitimate research outcome), Living Educational Theory (which introduces the idea that people live in pluralistic worlds of meaning that shapes their educational influences) and the need to promote the exploration of indigenous knowledge systems in psychology and psychology-related fields.*

I shall focus on the quest to decolonize the African research situation and the creation of living educational theories in exploring the implications of asking, answering and researching, action research questions of the kind, "How do 'we~I' improve what 'we~I' are doing in our professional contexts?"

In asking, researching and answering such questions I ask that you bear the following words in mind from Ben Okri (1996), the poet and novelist was born

in 1959 in Minna, northern Nigeria, to an Igbo mother and Urhobo father. I ask that you bear in mind his words about the significance of stories and values:

*1) To poison a nation, poison its stories. A demoralised nation tells demoralised stories to itself. Beware of the story-tellers who are not fully conscious of the importance of their gifts, and who are irresponsible in the application of their art: they could unwittingly help along the psychic destruction of their people.... (p. 17)*

*14) Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals or nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations.*

*15) Nations and people are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings. (p.21)*

In emphasizing the importance of your stories and values in the creation of the Nigerian academic researcher and in the process of decolonization I also ask that you bear Bakhtin's (Morson & Emerson, 1989) point in mind about the importance of accepting your responsibility as an individual 'I'.

*As Bakhtin explains "I" do not fit into theory - neither in the psychology of consciousness, not the history of some science, nor in the chronological ordering of my day, not in my scholarly duties..... these problems derive from the fundamental error of "rationalist" philosophy... The fatal flaw is the denial of responsibility - which is to say, the crisis is at base an ethical one. It can be overcome only by an*

*understanding of the act as a category into which cognition enters but which is radically singular and “responsible”. (p. 13.).*

Here are some thoughts on how you might exercise this responsibility in the creation of the Nigerian Academic Researcher by decolonizing the western ‘I’ with the ‘we~I’ of African ways of being.

### **The colonizing western ‘I’ and the decolonizing ‘we~i’ of African ways of being.**

This year’s OpenSpace problem focus is ‘Reimagining the Identity and Work of the Nigerian Academic Researcher’. I am suggesting that part of this transformation in identity could focus on the relational or ‘we~i’ qualities of African ways of being influenced by Ubuntu. Nelson Mandela is perhaps the most famous of Africans and he acknowledges the importance of an Ubuntu way of being that translates into English as ‘I am because we are’. In much academic writing that has been influenced by a western epistemology the ‘I’ is often thought of as an autonomous individual. The dominant logic of Theories in Western Academies continues to be influenced by Aristotle’s law of contradiction that eliminates contradictions between statements from correct thought. The idea of ‘I’ as an autonomous and discrete being together with a logic that eliminates contradictions between statements, continues to dominate Western Academies and has had a colonizing influence in Universities in Africa. I am suggesting that the reimagining of the identity and work of the Nigerian Academic Researcher could rest on the development of living educational theories from exploring the implications of asking, researching and answering action research questions of the kind, “How do ‘we~I’ improve what ‘we~I’ are doing?” In the development of my

I now wish to draw your attention to two doctorates on the web that I think will repay a careful reading. The first is Snoek Desmond’s (2010) *‘A journey in family literacy: Investigation into influences on the development of an approach to family literacy.’* at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/southafrica/SnoeksDesmondphdopt.pdf>

*The Family Literacy Project in this study is situated in deeply rural KwaZulu Natal, where the existing extensive knowledge base is almost exclusively oral, and informed by well established insights, understandings and values. In this context, I have examined the roles of families, adult literacy and early childhood development to establish their impact on the development of literacy in families.*

This thesis emphasizes the importance of the relational dynamic of families and their indigenous knowledge in the development of family literacy within an African rural community with a strong oral tradition in the communication of knowledge.

The second is Eden Charles’ (2007) Ph.D. on *‘How Can I bring Ubuntu As A Living Standard Of Judgment Into The Academy? Moving Beyond Decolonisation Through Societal Reidentification And Guiltless Recognition.’* at:

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

In Section Three on the 'Influence of an African Cosmology with Ubuntu' Charles shows his use of art in sustaining a commitment to his humanizing values at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/edenphd/section3.pdf>

In Section 6 on 'Me as Consultant' at

<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/edenphd/section6.pdf>

Charles explains in a video-clip the humanizing influence in his own learning of working with women who have been violated in the civil war in Sierra Leone:



*In this clip I am recounting an experience from a working trip to Sierra Leone to my research supervisor, Jack Whitehead. I went not long after the end of the devastating civil war there. I think that this clip contains something of the living dynamic of my Ubuntu way of being. I am speaking about people who have gone through the most horrific of experiences and who will live with the consequences of that for the rest of their lives. I am not dwelling on the horror of the tragedy of that civil war, even though I am visibly moved by it. Instead I am praising the humanity of the women rather than condemning or dwelling on the evils. I am also demonstrating my connection with the women in Sierra Leone and seeing, feeling themselves as part of me. Despite living and working in Europe I feel and not just understand the oneness of our condition. My values of humanity, my ontological and political urges are provoked and I am filled with generative passion to engage in work that can bring about a better situation. I carry this spirit into my work a consultant in which I see it as a site for being a positive influence on restorative processes of reidentification characterised and enabled by a guiltless recognition.*

In my visits to Africa I have been impressed by the spontaneous expressions of life-affirming energy in welcoming the other, in dance and in music. I don't want to underestimate the importance of including such expressions of life-affirming energy in one's explanations of educational influence in reimagining the identity of the Nigerian academic researcher. Here is a moment in which Eden evokes a flow of such life-affirming energy through me.



In the following section I am going to focus on the resources you can access which might help you in creating your own living educational theory as you research your own practice in contributing to the generation of the Nigerian academic researcher.

**Creating Living Educational Theories through asking, researching and answering, action research questions of the kind, “How do ‘we~I’ improve what ‘we~i’ are doing?”**

Professor Jean McNiff, in her keynote to 2011 WARP, will be focusing on the transformative power of action research and why it is needed in African contexts today. If you access Jean’s web-site at <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/> and click on the Worldwide section, you can access reports on her support for action research in Kayelitsha, Israel and Qatar. Click on Qatar and you can access the Teacher Enquiry Bulletin edited by Jean on ‘*Action Research for Teachers in Qatar*’. For anyone who wishes to develop an action research approach to improving practice and generating knowledge I do advise you to look at the importance of the initial generative processes in action research that are so well understood by Jean. If you move from the initial phases of action research into the generation of your own living educational theory I think you will find inspiration in Jean’s ‘My Story Is My Living Educational Theory’ (McNiff, 2009).

I now want to focus on the importance of making public your embodied knowledge as educators, through e-forums such as the Educational Journal of Living Theories (EJOLTS). By clicking on <http://ejolts.net/> you can access the living theories of practitioner-researchers from all around the world. Here are the contents of the latest issue with contributions from Germany, Ireland, the UK and Turkey:

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**Foreword** (pp.i-ii)

*Margaret Farren*

**How can I improve my communication with my sister, so that I can lead a more loving, consistent and harmonious life with her? A personal action research inquiry into family-displacement in the former eastern zone and as a symbol of the reunification of Germany** (pp. 119-169)

*Anke Jauch*

**How do I enhance motivation to learn and higher order cognition among students of Science through the use of a virtual learning environment?**  
(pp.170-192)

*Mary McMahon*

**Exploring an extended role for coaching – through the eyes of an action researcher** (pp.193-211)

*Jacqueline J. Scholes-Rhodes*

**How to improve the society-service course: Early childhood education teacher-candidates' experiences in the project "Do you want to be a child for one-day?"** (pp. 212-234)

*Hatice Zeynep Inan*

For those of you who wish to work with students and pupils as co-researchers I do urge you to access the paper by Branko Bogner and Marica Zovko (2008) on Pupils as action researchers: improving something important in our lives at <http://ejolts.net/node/82> .

As I am speaking the embodied knowledge which practitioner-researchers around the world have made public is flowing through us in space. You can access some of the doctoral theses flowing through you at this moment by clicking on:

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

Just browsing down the list of titles, you will see that many of the researchers have included 'I' within their enquiries. No one has included 'we~i' within their title. If you felt it desirable you could engage in collaborative or cooperative research with others in your 'we~i' relationships as you work and research to improve your practice and generate knowledge. You could make your living theories freely available in the global flow of our e-communications and develop a distinctive contribution to educational theory of knowledge of the Nigerian

academic researcher.

To conclude I want to emphasise the importance of the OpenSpace side-event later this week in which the organizers intend that we contribute to the creation of a decentred arena for the free critique of assumptions about issues and positions pertinent to the Workshop discourse. They hope that we will integrate participant-learning processes into our workshop format to help to perpetuate discourse after the Workshop is concluded. Here are five forums that you could contribute to in helping to sustain our conversations.

- 1) The Practitioner-Researcher e-forum - you can join this at: <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?SUBED1=practitioner-researcher&A=1>
- 2) The Action Research Africa Network at <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?SUBED1=ARAN&A=1>
- 3) The LivingLearning space at: <http://www.livinglearning.org.uk/>
- 4) Presenting at the DIVERSE (Developing Innovative Visual Educational Resources for Students Everywhere), June 28-30, 2011 at Dublin City University, see: <http://diverse2011.dcu.ie/welcome.html>
- 5) Submitting your explanation of your educational influence in contributing to the development of the Nigerian Academic Researcher in EJOLTS at <http://ejolts.net/>

## References

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