

How have I improved my practice and developed my living theory of mindfulness and learning since presenting at the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Conference in 2011?

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This paper presents my knowledge creation and active learning from writing and presenting my 2011 BERA paper (Hutchison, 2011) through to the summer of 2012 as I continue to evolve my living theory (Whitehead, 1989) with new insights into narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin and Connelly, 1998; Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007; Connelly and Clandinin, 1999) Living Theory TASC (Huxtable, 2012) and an educationally entrepreneurial spirit (Crotty 2012). This reflection is based on my current practice as a Chief Executive of a Carers' Centre (Centre) supporting people who care for family or friends who have an illness, disability or problematic drug and alcohol use. The methods I will use are ethnoautobiography (Kremer, 2003) using sources such as newsletters diaries and multi-media approaches (Huxtable, 2009; Jones, 2009).

September 2011, BERA Paper and Presentation

In September 2011 I presented a paper at the BERA Conference (Hutchison, 2011). My BERA paper explored how I have managed change at the Centre. This was the first academic paper I had written and the first academic presentation I had made at a conference.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDGSjkFESiU&feature=plcp>

My presentation gives a visual representation of the joy I feel at presenting my paper as the picture above shows at 11:52 when I have finished my presentation. I found both writing the paper and giving the presentation was an active learning experience as both deepened my understanding of my research. I have now realised that by using my BERA paper to reflect on my active learning and knowledge creation over the year as it has developed.

In my BERA paper I identified my living standards of judgement in:

'My epistemology of dynamic flowing energy has developed the beginning of a three-part living theory, which I can summarise as:

- ⤴ Shared and pooled vision and knowing based on the personal and professional
- ⤴ Google philosophy of creativity, fun, appreciation and work that is challenging
- ⤴ Mindfulness and learning'

Hutchison, 2011

I have grown and developed in my understanding through the year as I have lived these values which have enhanced and expanded the lived meanings. I now understand the shared and pooled vision and knowing based on the personal and professional to mean that as a team at the Centre we value having time together to get to know each other personally. That by knowing each other's stories we don't have a single story (Adichie, 2009) about each other as professionals but that we understand our personal stories that give us meaning and help us understand why we are passionate about our work and this increases our energy to do our jobs well. Despite the potential tension this can create due to balancing the boundaries of the personal and professional I have found knowing each other better personally makes us better professionals.

My active learning has shown me that even as pressures increase as issues of targets become more pressing and the work becomes more challenging it is all the more important to ensure staff are able to keep an element of creativity and fun in their work and more than ever we need to appreciate each other (Google). There are tensions in achieving the balance but I have found morale can remain high and staff can love their jobs even when the workload and pressure increases.

Finally I have been through an active learning process in understanding that I need to allow staff the time and space to be mindful (Kabat Zinn, 1994) enabling them to be in the moment so that they are aware of the external picture of targets and funding but not overwhelmed by it. I have learnt that there must always be space open for learning and that whilst being in the moment is important there is also a need to reflect and take our learning forward to improve our practice. Keeping the balance between being in the moment, looking forward and reflecting on the past can cause tensions. Through my learning I have grown in understanding that as the leader of the organisation I both need to give permission for staff to have the time and must lead by example.

I will explore in this paper how this active learning has taken place through significant events that have brought even greater changes and challenges at the Centre since sharing my BERA paper at the conference in September 2011. I will explore how I have lived and evolved my three-part living theory through reviewing the last year at the Centre as 'learning is clearly an evolutionary process of vital importance' (Rayner, 2010:3). In my BERA paper (Hutchison, 2011) I say: 'The shared vision I hold is the Centre should be carer centred empowering carers to make a difference to their lives.' I will reflect on whether I have held the vision as I reflect on the key moments in the year.

September 2011, PQASSO Quality Mark

The PQASSO Quality Mark is 'a nationally recognised award endorsed by the Charity Commission that offers users as well as commissioners and funders external verification of the quality and credibility of an organisation' (Charities Evaluation Services, 2012). At first I had thought getting the PQASSO Quality Mark would be a box ticking exercise as it is

something the Carers' Centre needed for funders and for remaining as a partner of the Princess Royal Trust for Carers now called the Carers Trust. This caused me some tension as I felt myself to be a living contradiction by having to pursue something I initially couldn't see as bringing value to carers. However, when the assessor came to visit it really affirmed that the Carers' Centre was evidencing the shared vision I stated in my BERA paper, that we were centred on carers. An extract from the on-site report said:

'From interviews with volunteers, trustees and staff it is clear that carers and their needs are at the heart of services being provided and developed in this organisation. Carers are recruited as trustees, staff and volunteers. They contribute not only a valuable service to other carers but also a wealth of experience and contacts which collectively inform the strategic direction of the organisation.'

(Adamson, 2011)



The picture above that we published after gaining the award shows the sheer joy of gaining this quality mark and that it meant more than just ticking a box for our organisation.

Pippa on the left is a carer and Vice Chair of the trustees and I am on the right, we look particularly happy because we had been in the group leading the work on PQASSO and had been working for over a year to be ready to get the quality mark. Also validating the second part of my living theory that it is important to have appreciation and work that is challenging. Although gaining PQASSO had been far from creative and fun as it had certainly needed a lot of boxes to tick, we still gained a huge amount of satisfaction and pleasure from achieving the quality mark.

We also went on to gain the Princess Royal Trusts for Carers now the Carers Trust adult carers quality mark and are now recognised as a Centre of Excellence. In order to achieve this we needed to meet the quality measurements required to show the Carers' Centre worked with carers to a high quality. An external validator interviewed carers, volunteers and staff to ensure we met the quality levels required. The report validated that I am living my three part living theory saying:

'The Centre is a dynamic and vibrant organisation that strives to improve their services and outcomes for carers, demonstrated by the enthusiasm of staff and volunteers and by the positive vibe around the Centre'.

(Arkley, 2011)

I learnt that I can live my values even through what could appear a mundane box ticking exercise. It is a question of contextualising what needs to be done to ensure it fits with the

vision and values I hold through my living theory of a mindfulness and learning.

October 2011, Annual General Meeting (AGM)

Charities must have AGMs to meet the requirements of the Charity Commission (2009). They are an opportunity to show the public what the organisation has achieved in the previous year and I used it as an opportunity for me to review whether the Centre lived my three-part living theory and made clear our vision.

The AGM was really affirming for me as we had three speakers talking about how carers had been involved and that services had been centred on carers. Ian Dagger, a carer, spoke passionately about how empowering it had been for him to be involved and how he felt carers were central to all parts of the organisation. In our newsletter Care Time the quote used from his talk summarises this “The Carers’ Centre raised my self-esteem ... They offer valuable services that help practically and emotionally. Empowering carers is to be encouraged as it leads to better and more cost-effective services.”

Ian's views were validated by Maggie Depledge from the Royal United Hospital in Bath who also spoke and said “Carers are experts. Working with the Carers’ Centre has made us better at what we do. Through our joint efforts, carers have influenced changes in our admission documentation, shared their experiences with our staff and helped us to understand their needs through joint learning.” Ian had been involved in the work at the hospital which is further evidence that we are successfully achieving our shared vision.

Caroline Hickman from the University of Bath also came to speak about carer involvement in social work teaching. She validated that carers bring learning to the students through their personal stories and experience to improve professional practice. Caroline affirmed that carers really make a difference to social work students learning saying, “Some students may forget what I teach, but I expect they will remember the carers as they really make them think.”

The picture below was used in Care Time, Ian is in the centre and Maggie is on the right and Caroline is on the left. You can see the pleasure in the photo in their faces which embodies what they had been saying at the AGM.



January 2012, Carers' Services Tender

80% of our funding was put out to a competitive tender in January 2012. The reality was clear that if we didn't win the tender we would need to wind down the charity. The previous year we had thought we would be in the same situation and a number of staff left concerned for their job security. I had learnt from this experience and agreed with the trustees that we would ensure we had enough reserves to keep all staff in post for three

months to ensure there was a suitable hand over after the 1st April when our contract would come to an end. This meant that we didn't need to hand out redundancy notices and could assure staff regardless of the outcome they would have three months guaranteed employment. I also approached the tender extremely positively assuring the staff that due to all our hard work we were in a strong position to win the tender.

When the specification was put out I realised that we only had 3 weeks to write the bid. The tender required over 20,000 words and a lot of thinking, planning and evidence to show we would be the best provider of carers' services in Bath and North East Somerset. This was a real challenge and would need support from everyone, we had a team meeting already happening and I invited the trustees to join this meeting and turned it into a meeting to present what the specification was asking for. Staff and trustees were concerned that the targets were extremely challenging. We needed to go from under 1500 carers engaging with us in a year to 3500. We needed to provide 800 carers assessments, 800 emergency cards and 500 carers with a break each year. Whilst these were extremely challenging targets, all the staff and trustees agreed we needed to go for it and that we were best placed to ensure carers would still gain a quality service and not sacrifice this to meet the targets.

I had spent the weekend writing the bid based on all the work we had been doing in preparation to meet all the areas the bid asked for. Whilst this really was 'work that is challenging' it was also affirming. My entire work at the Carers' Centre had been to ensure that as an organisation we could provide the evidence that we could meet all the requirements of the tender and for every requirement we had evidence of already delivering high quality work and being able to build on this experience. I explained to the staff and trustees that all the work we had done in the last two years meant that we had all the evidence to show we were the best provider to deliver all the services in the tender. Staff and trustees were reassured by this and morale remained high despite the potential that the charity would need to be wound up if we didn't win the contract.

This tension is now a common experience for providers as competitive tenders mean providers can lose their funding if they don't win tenders for the services they provide. I wanted to ensure I remained focused on our vision of carers being central rather than allowing the need for the funding to take over and cause us to compromise. In the writing of the tender I was able to be creative in how I showed that carers are central to the work of the Carers' Centre and that providing a quality, carer led service is paramount. I was able to share what the Centre values are and was able to say in the tender:

'The Centre values are to provide a carer-led service. Carers are involved as:

- Trustees at Board-level
- paid staff
- volunteers
- at every level of the planning, delivery and evaluation of services

This involvement empowers carers to have choice and control.'

(Carers' Services Tender, 2012)

I felt that despite the tension, the bid remained consistent with my living values and I did not feel myself as a living contradiction through out the process.

The tender was a collaborative piece of writing which I led and worked closely with the

operational manager, fundraiser, carers, trustees, my coach and the development manager from the Carers' Trust, as well as partner organisations. I found this added to the depth and quality of the tender and ensured the content was true, right, authentic and comprehensible (Habermas, 1976). Although the tender itself was not a piece of action research, Habermas's social validation was a useful check to use. I found the process used:

'four characteristics of relationships important for knowledge creation in networks: 1) knowing what others know; 2) having access to other people's thinking; 3) having people be willing to actively engage in problem solving; and 4) having a safe relationship to promote learning and creativity.'

(Cross et. al., 2000:2)

At the end of the process of writing the tender I was deeply moved by the appreciation of the staff. I had been so focussed on writing the bid and the challenging work I was involved in that when all the staff gathered to give me a huge bunch of flowers and a bottle of wine I had not expected it. I was even more moved that they had shown their appreciation for the work itself and not waited to find out what the result was but had thanked me purely for the effort I had made. The thank you card really showed their appreciation saying amongst other things:

'Thanks for the effort and your amazing dedication. Must pay off for carers.'

'Thank you so much for all your amazing hard work'

'Your deserve a medal! Thanks you so much it is much appreciated by us all'



It was a reminder that although I felt it was my job to write the tender it was really powerful for my staff to show their appreciation, that the Centre does show appreciation and that is why it is so important to show appreciation.

My confidence and that of the Centre paid off and the Centre won the contract. Through my contribution to the successful bid to sustain funding for the Centre, I discovered a new explanatory principle and living standard of judgement that I bring into the academy as part of my knowledge creation that of an 'educationally entrepreneurial spirit' (Crotty, 2012). The bid shows me evidencing my responsibility for carers and the Centre and 'acknowledging my values of passion and care ('love' of what I do), safety, creativity and excellence within my practice' (Crotty, 2012:1) as well as my authenticity as a leader (Hutchison, 2012)

May 2012, New staff

The new contract was more money and a lot more work than the Centre had done before, so we needed to recruit three new staff. I have learn from previous recruitment that it is crucial to have carers on the recruitment panel and when possible to short list. There was a tension in this process as we needed people in post as quickly as possible and needed

to recruit as quickly as possible. However I ensured that each post had a carer on the panel.

The interviews had other challenges as I had to interview two people I knew well for one post. It was even harder as the decision at the end of the recruitment process was not to employ either of them. This tension is difficult to manage, however by having a robust, fair and shared process it was made much easier.

When the new staff started it was important to ensure they benefited from my three part living theory.

The shared vision was shown right from recruitment as carers had been involved in the decision to employ them. This was verified in their induction process as all the staff showed this was lived in their practice. Great staff morale is maintained as evening get togethers are initiated by the staff and help develop the personal knowing between the staff and having fun together. Weekly catch ups and monthly team meetings also enable staff to develop their professional knowing of the team and can share learning and best practice.

I have enabled the new staff to be able to be creative by explaining what needs to be done and encouraging them to come up with creative solutions trying to support them to have the time to be in the moment and mindful as they develop and to be able to learn from the team in their development. Due to the new contract the work is incredibly challenging. Supervision and one to ones have enabled me to be able to show my appreciation and these times have enabled me to receive validation that the new staff have found the organisation to live my three-part living theory.

June 2012, Sharing the vision despite targets

A result of the new contract the Centre has challenging targets to meet. This is a change of culture and has the potential to create a living contradiction in the values I have brought to the Centre. I have worked to ensure that the targets are shared and there to motivate staff and not become the focus of what the Centre does thus contradicting the vision that the carers are the centre of what the Centre does.

The new staff structure has created a new senior management team and this is a tension for the new team, to ensure we are honest about the targets but not to make the targets take over. Carers' Officers that work directly with carers now have targets for what they need to achieve each week. The Senior Management Team have now ensured that as managers we all have targets that are shared with the staff to ensure that meeting the targets is fairly spread. An operational plan has been developed to help ensure work has some structure to help get everything get done and that everyone in the team feels included in meeting the workload, particularly the administration team who were feeling more isolated and were struggling to see what their work was doing to meet the targets and the strategic plan. Enough space is being left for creativity, this is largely by giving people their own specialisms that they can pursue and develop new ways of working and new projects.

The new staff have said they have never worked anywhere like it, that the team works together to support carers and each other, not being competitive but collaborative in reaching targets.

July 2012, Personally using services and walking the walk

This year has been challenging for me personally, my mum has schizophrenia and has injected speed since I was 18. During this time she has spent time in and out of prison and her local acute mental health hospital. Four years ago after time in prison she spent an extended period in the acute mental health hospital, then in the rehabilitation and recovery mental hospital, then the pre-discharge accommodation until supported housing was found which is where she is now. During this time she stopped taking speed and her mental and physical health massively improved. In 2011 mum started injecting speed again which I found difficult to come to terms with after such a big recovery. I supported mum at a number of reviews where mum asked for support which was given but each time mum couldn't maintain the support, until mum decided she couldn't give up the speed and was going to stop trying to do so. I found this even more difficult and decided to gain the support of services in Bristol for carers of people with problematic drug and alcohol use.

It was a big step to gain support from a carers' service as it is easy to feel as the Chief Executive of a Carers' Service I should know everything and be able to cope. I have had some support before from counselling and support services but it has only been a minimal amount. The support I gained was invaluable and I found it really helped me not only personally to be more resilient and to support my mum to rethink giving up speed but also professionally to have walked the walk as I spend so much of my time telling other carers to get support and look after themselves. I found that the services they provided were relevant to a number of staff and with their permission was able to refer them adding to the impact of the support I had gained. It has also enabled me to look afresh at the services we provide at the Centre and to think if I would use them myself as a carer. This has led to some innovative developments such as a registration app on smart phones and using tablet pcs as a tool as I know this is what I would prefer to use if I was registering at the Centre.

Always more to Improve

Since writing my BERA paper I have stopped running lunch time Tai Chi sessions, I have found it hard to make the time and as the team has grown there is not a space big enough at the office. I feel whilst this wasn't the only way the Centre displayed mindfulness, it is a symptom that with such demanding targets and workload it has become harder to be mindful. I believe as a leader one of my roles is to keep the space open for myself and the staff to be mindful. I need to ensure I make time myself and empower my staff to take the time to be able to be fully in the moment in their work not feeling they need to be trying to do everything at once. I have begun to address this and so have my managers by giving time slots for pieces of work so staff can concentrate on what they are doing in that moment. For example all the senior managers now have time booked out for fundraising which is an area we were struggling to make time and space for in our diaries. Staff also have times booked for completing carers' assessments, outreach and their specialisms.

I have not overtly brought the Thinking Actively in a Social Context (TASC) (Wallace, 2004) wheel as a tool to use at the Centre, although I have been using TASC as a method for my own research. Whilst this was an intention I had in my BERA paper I have not introduced this to my staff or carers. This is also about not making the time and space to introduce this tool. However, as part of Habermas (1976) social validation process, I have shared my BERA paper which explains TASC and my first unit for my Master on Authentic leadership which explains Living Theory TASC (Huxtable, 2012). By sharing my learning I am taking the first steps to introducing TASC and Living Theory TASC as a model for

others to use in their work and involvement. Living Theory TASC is an expansive model of action research as it enables people's learning to be transformed into the unique narrative of an individual's living theory through the emancipatory influence of living-theory TASC. I want to make time and space to help staff and carers to use these models to improve their practice and involvement at the Centre.

Some staff, volunteers and carers have felt isolated, undermined and upset at times. It is always a challenge to ensure everyone is included and mistakes always happen. By reviewing the last year and looking at whether I have lived my three-part living theory and the vision in my BERA paper it has helped me to see that this does provide solutions to these issues and by coming back to my core values I can improve my practice.

How has my understanding of Living Theory developed?

My research uses a living theory methodology. My understanding of living theory has developed over the year through my active learning as I have been living my values as they evolve in my practice, researching my practice to improve it, attending a living learning validation group and reading living theory literature. Before this year I thought my work had to be generalisable but now I have actively learnt that I have chosen to use a living theory methodology because I am not interested in generalisability of my research as it would be applicable for a propositional form of research where quantitative methods would be used and a theory that could be formed and replicated in any situation. I am aware that my situation is unique and that the living theories I generate could not be replicated in a different situation to gain the same results. However, I have learnt my learning can influence the learning of others and that of society.

'In a traditional theory an explanation is produced as a set of propositional relationships. These relationships are abstract and general. One of the characteristics of a traditional theory is that it is a general theory from which an explanation can be derived that applies to a particular case. Living theories are different. They are the explanations that individuals produce for their educational influences in learning. They are grounded in the relational dynamics of everyday life and explain the receptively responsive educational influences of individuals in their own lives. They are unique.'

(Whitehead, 2008:14)

This is something about living theory that I become more excited about as I have reflected on my learning since writing the BERA paper in 2011. This reflection shows that I have learnt that rather than providing a blueprint to enable people to replicate what I have done at the Carers' Centre I am providing the opportunity for people to be influenced by my learning and develop their own unique living theories to fit their lived experience and setting. This enables people to gain the insights I have learnt through my practice without feeling they must duplicate them faithfully losing their authenticity and their own strengths, insights and development. In the process of researching my practice and enquiring with myself and everyone I work with I have increased my influence through the process rather than just developing a product to influence people, I am actually living the process.

I have found that the methodological approach of Living Theory has enabled me to develop and evolve my living theory as it is not a methodological approach that is about being static in my research but is about active learning and knowledge creation as I research my practice. As what I do at work is always changing and developing this is already not static and would therefore not fit a static methodology. Instead I am able to

always improve what I am doing and find new ways of achieving this, 'asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' (Whitehead, 2008:12).

I have found Living Theory challenging as sharing my claims through my writing has meant making myself vulnerable. I have sent my writing to my staff to check the social validity of my claims using Habermas's criteria in effect saying:

'I'm here asking you for some of your time, your life, because there is something I really want to know and I think you can help me. And that just changes the dynamics, shifts the power relationship ... The place of not knowing is a risky place, it involves making oneself vulnerable to discovery, letting go of control in the sense of being willing to be surprised or to be wrong'.

(Kiegelmann, 2009:31)

I was worried about where I have reflected on being a 'living contradiction' that this would upset people and that people would say I am wrong in my conclusions. However, this has turned out to be extremely affirming as my staff and trustees have validated my writing telling me it meets Habermas's criteria of social validity that what I claim is true, right, authentic and comprehensible. This has helped me to grow in my understanding as a leader that to be authentic I do need to make myself vulnerable.

Over several years I can chart my growth in leadership qualities. Below shows video as a Young Carers Manager where I show participative leadership qualities where we are literally pooling our energies together as we are dancing at the young carers festival.



www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ba6LAIBwISk&feature=plcp

However Rosie, a carer and trustee, in the video below explains the development I have made as a leader since I have been at the Carers' Centre.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyHP-554ilq>

Rosie says at 1:46 that I give 'great direction and tremendous leadership' and that I have kept the value of participation as Rosie says I have continued to be inclusive of everyone at 4:01. Through this inclusional (Rayner, 2010) approach a new claim to originality is that I am bringing new understandings of leadership in working within a Carers' Centre through my explanation of my influence in enhancing a pooling of life-affirming energy with values that carry hope for the future of humanity as represented in a picture I drew in my teenage diaries below:



In reviewing my practice since my BERA paper I am aware that I could have chosen a different methodology. Ennals 2009:415 criticised McNiff and Whitehead (2009) because 'there are "57 varieties" of Action Research, each apparently convinced that it offers the true way forward.' Other forms of Action Research have their strengths, however, for me Living Theory has unique elements that fit with my ontological beliefs. These are researching based on values, researching with questions including 'I' rather than in the third person and to include multi-media representations that give representation to life-affirming energy (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009). These unique elements are important to ensure I feel authentic in my research and are why I have chosen Living Theory rather than other research methodologies.

In conclusion as an active learner this year my knowledge creation has developed two new living standards of judgement to hold myself to account; my 'educationally entrepreneurial spirit' (Crotty, 2012) and new understandings of leadership through my explanation of my influence in enhancing a pooling of life-affirming energy with values. I have also continued to expand my understanding Living Theory methodology and of my living theory of mindfulness and learning in my practice.

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