

A doctoral research proposal from Joy Mounter, Academic Librarian and Research Officer at The Learning Institute, based at Roche in Cornwall. July 2015

How can I contribute to the creation and enhancement of the educational influences of a community of learners, supporting each other and their own development?

Background and Context

As part of the expression and development of my professional responsibility as an educator I research my professional learning as I ask, research and answer questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing in my professional practice?'

I recognise myself as a master educator through the successful completion of my MA in Education with the following enquiries and dissertation:

How Can I Live My Personal Theory Of Education In The Classroom To Promote Self Reflection As A Learner? First Educational Enquiry Unit, 2006.

Language Of Learning To The Language Of Educational Responsibility. Second Educational Enquiry Unit, 2006.

If I Want The Children In My Class To Extend Their Thinking And Develop Their Own Values And Learning Theories, How Can I Show The Development Of Their Learning? How Do I Research This In My Classroom? Research Methods Unit, 2007.

How Can I Work Within The Government's Perspective Of 'Gifted And Talented' But Still Remain True To My Own Living Values? Gifted and Talented Unit, 2008.

Can Children Carry Out Action Research About Learning, Creating Their Own Learning Theory? Understanding Learning and Learners Unit, 2008.

As A Headteacher Researcher How Can I Demonstrate The Impact And Self-Understandings Drawn From Living Theory Action Research, As A Form Of Continual Professional Development In Education? MA Dissertation, 2012.

Through undertaking Living Theory Action Research and exploring my living values as an educator, I have been reflective of my own development, both as a teacher/ Headteacher researcher and as a person, as well as that of my students.

Part of my role within The Learning Institute, is working with foundation degree, degree and Master' students, supporting their research and studies. As a learning community, The Learning Institute (TLI) has been built on foundations of clear and transparent values that permeate every aspect of the business and plans for the future. The commitment and heart of the founders of TLI, hold the tension of expanding to meet need and ensuring the integrity and values that have made TLI so successful, are at the heart of every decision and lived daily by all members of the team. Coming in with a research journey both behind and ahead of me, I find my footsteps falter and fall into step with TLI.

In TLI I find myself being drawn by the values lived and the integrity of building and enriching communities, so near to my own heart. Living my values as a researcher educator is vitally important to me and our paths (TLI and my own) have crossed at this point in TLI's expansion and my own reflective pause. The beginning of my doctoral journey, my change in role and age group I am working with, combined with our shared passion for researching communities and heartfelt values, draw my enthusiasm, energy and commitment.

I now wish to continue my professional development and contributions to the professional knowledge-base of education through a doctoral enquiry. Having moved on from my Headship of a primary school, I am now in the role of Academic Librarian and Research Officer. This self-study enquiry is focused on my question, 'How can I contribute to the creation and enhancement of the educational influences of a community of learners, supporting each other and their own development?'

The Living Theory approach to this question draws on my research from my Masters enquiry: 'How Can I Demonstrate The Impact And Self-Understandings Drawn From Living Theory Action Research, As A Form Of Continual Professional Development In Education?'

There was no requirement in the Masters programme to make an original contribution to educational knowledge. However, in fulfilling the requirements of a doctoral research programme I must make an original contribution. This will focus on the nature of the explanatory principles that I use to explain my educational influence in a community of learners. The explanatory principles draw on Laidlaw's (1996) insight about the living nature of both the explanatory principles and the living standards of judgment that can be used to evaluate the validity of the original contribution to educational knowledge.

My current role will develop into the research arm of TLI, as the permanent Academic Librarian returns in January. My remit will involve working on Educational/ Social research projects, liaising with our partner NFER (National Federation for Educational Research) and developing research based programs to support schools. I will work closely with two other colleagues, who are responsible for School Improvement and Initial Teacher Training. TLI are also setting up a Multi-Academy Trust called 'Cornerstone', which will be built on four, key Cornerstones.

1. TLI as a School Improvement provider
2. Research
3. Building Learning Power
4. Chosen as a strength by the joining school to share expertise.

Introduction

This is my attempt to research, develop and offer a defining exploration of building a Research Learning Community for professionals and students. This will be the change I want to see in education, underpinned by a reflection of the growth and any change to our living ontological values.

For many years I read and had training regarding children understanding themselves as learners, Thinking Actively in a Social Context (TASC) by Belle Wallace and Building Learning Power by Guy Claxton, are just two examples. I am also influenced by Gibb (2015) on the necessity of building character in students for the future.

Reviews of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) are also beginning to appear in many journals and on line, a move away from the 'Sage on the Stage' to teachers researching their own practice. This can be seen in the recent work of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), who have recently developed a Research Assessment Toolkit and Research Mark for Schools (<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/index.cfm>).

As part of my research journey through my Master's degree and now into my Doctorate, I have developed my own ontological values as a Teacher Researcher and as a Headteacher Researcher, offering my reflections and research as a gift. I am drawn to the writing of Michael Onyebuchi Eze (2010, pp. 190-191), exploring our humanity and the dynamic relationships of growth between us. This idea reflects my work with the children, and the values at TLI of supporting communities and

offering ourselves, our learning as gifts and openly creating bonds of 'Nurturing Responsiveness' (Mounter, 2012) and networks of learning.

The Learning Institute and I both have ontological values that are important to us and we live as fully as possible. It is this blend of merging these ontological values that has given me the opportunity to explore further through my doctorate, how to create and maintain energy in a research community.

My 'I' question is:

How can I contribute to the creation and enhancement of the educational influences of a community of learners, supporting each other and their own development?

To enable myself to make this contribution I will need to work with others in creating a community of learners, supporting each other and our own shared development – hence the importance of 'we' in the following research questions:

Key Research Questions:

1. How can I/ we create a dynamic community of researchers, supporting each other and their own development (student and staff)?
2. How can I/ we draw others into, and widen our research community?
3. How can I/ we maintain our momentum as a research community and share our gifts?
4. As a diverse and evolving community, how can we maintain and strengthen the values, ethos and ethics that are at the heart of The Learning Institute?

Methodology and Methods

Drawing on the work of Hutchinson (1998, p 373-379) about the: '...empowering nature of research which takes the form of action research...' I will use a Living Theory Action Research (Whitehead,1989) methodology to demonstrate the transformational nature of my research on my practice and my living values, as I ask 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead 1989).

I have examined the research of Cohen & Manion (1994, p.6) who describe education research to be 'a systematic and scholarly application of the principles of a science of behaviour to the problems of people within their social context'. This provides a scientific approach, quantitative data, and an objective means of validating your findings, but this is not suitable for my research question, where I am not an objective observer, but an influential participant. The subject matter of this enquiry requires a reflective approach, video evidence and qualitative data. The changes in Continual

Professional Development (CPD), developing educational values as a research community network and examining my educational influences will not fit this scientific framework.

The action research approach I am going to use can cause issues of validity and questions of rigour. In submitting my account for 'validation' I will draw on Habermas (1976, pp 2-3) to strengthen the comprehensibility, truth of the propositional context, understanding of the normative background of my writings and authenticity of my accounts.

To demonstrate clearly the rigour and validity of my educational research and how I influence the learning/ research of others and communicate with the wider academic community, I will draw on the work on rigour in action research by Winter (1989)

I will also draw on the writings of Dadds and Hart (2001) on methodological inventiveness.

The cycles of questioning, reflection and being part of the research in Living Theory Action Research (Whitehead, 1989), link my experiences as a visual and personal reflection of emerging possibilities, clarifying and demonstrating the transformation of my ontological values and the impact on my practise and of those around me. This will provide an in-depth perspective on my role within the creation of a self-maintaining research community.

Through this action research I am planning to make an original contribution to the Academy, exploring the dynamics of creating an action research, living community, embracing and nurturing their ontological living values, in their daily lives and practise.

As a community of researchers, involving children and adult researchers I will draw on Toffler, 2006, 'Teachers become coaches – encouraging the children to open up questions for research for themselves.'

As the organisation of a thesis is designed to explain the research and hold the reader in a place of understanding and exploration, I will link to Whitehead (2005) combining the methodology of my thesis with the narrative of a community of researchers at the heart of my question. I will use narrative methods (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990) to demonstrate the qualitative data, as well as multimedia techniques (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2014). Incorporating voice and film reflections, poems, drawings and anecdotes from child researchers, school leaders and teaching staff. It will also include photographs taken from the web site and work in schools. I will weave through the study my in depth, personal diary notes and comments, reflecting on my role as I explain my educational

influence. This research project will be a longitudinal study over two years, looking at growing an on-line presence to support the researchers and grow connections locally, nationally and inter-nationally, to make a positive and on-going contribution beyond the life of the project in a living legacy (Forester, 2015)

My methods for clarifying and communicating the meanings of my embodied values will include the process of 'empathetic resonance' (Huxtable, 2009) in which digital, visual data of my practice is included in my claims to have clarified my values. These claims, as well as the validity of my explanations of influence are strengthened through the use of validation groups of some 3-8 peers who subject my reports, at least once every three months, to the following questions derived from Habermas's (1976, pp.2-3) criteria for social validity:

How can I enhance the comprehensibility of my account?

How can I strengthen the evidence I use to justify the claim that I make?

How can I deepen and extend my understandings of the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences in my practice and understanding?

How can I enhance the authenticity of my account in showing that I am living as fully as possible the values I claim to hold?

The initial part of the research will focus on four aspects:

1. To set up a on line presence to reflect the work of the researchers in the project and share learning, as well as to link with other researchers/ groups locally. As the research moves into the main focus, this will broaden nationally and inter-nationally.
2. Develop initial materials to engage and support school research groups for leaders, students and teachers. Project outline.
3. Forge links with local school leaders interested in taking part in the research. At this point limit the number of schools taking part to trial research project.
4. Share the project outline with staff and governors of the schools.

Main Study:

- a. Widen the project to broaden the reach to schools.
- b. Develop the on line reflection and materials from the project.
- c. Use Social Media to maintain momentum of researchers.
- d. Draw in professional CPD training for all staff as researchers.

Outline Organisation, although this is likely to change due to the process of Living Theory Action Research

Chapter One – Methodology

Chapter Two – Background

Chapter Three – Research Community Network

Chapter Four – CPD - Staff

Chapter Five – Young Researchers/ Learners (exploration of learner to researcher)

Chapter Six – On line Facilitation

Conclusion

Bibliography

This process of Action Research has emphasised the need for continually regenerating and exploring our living educational values. It has emphasised the importance of rigour and validity in the explanations of learning. If we want to validate and demonstrate how our living values enhance the quality of educational knowledge, we need to show the living standards we have used to judge the impact and influences of our values. In doing this I will use to Connelly's and Clandinin's (1990, p. 7) insight regarding validity criteria for narrative inquiry.

Joy Mounter

27th July 2015

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