

Living Standards of Reflection, Research and Renewal

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The superiority of one writer to another is not just in the quality of language; but also in the quality of the story and the story-telling; the quality of enchantment; and the timelessness of that enchantment. It is therefore futile to speak of superiorities. There is only that which lives, and which keeps on living. (Ben Okri, p.31, 1996).

In beginning with this quotation from Ben Okri I want to continue in the spirit of enquiry described on the cover of his *Birds of Heaven*:

*'We began before words
And we will end beyond them'*

*In these two inspirational essays, Ben Okri returns to the themes of his novel, *Astonishing the Gods*. He explores the meaning of language, its unique power to shape and direct our lives, and the special responsibilities that belong to those who make words their weapons. Part rallying cry, part poetry, they suggest an alternative spiritual response to the problems of the present day and urge the case for contemplation and renewal.*

One of the great pleasures in sustaining and renewing my relationships with my members of this audience is that one can look back with some historical perspective on where we have come from. We can do this with some understanding of the political, economic and cultural changes we are living. We can speculate about our possible influences on the future of such changes. Let me begin by locating this talk in Ontario on living standards of reflection, research and renewal in relation to living and global standards of judgement about human development. When I have done this I want to focus on the ways our own values form our living standards of educational practice as we act locally and communicate globally.

In our global context I am thinking of The United Nations', Human Development Report 2000. This once again, places Canada at the top of its human development index. The index measures average achievements in basic human development in one simple composite index and produces a ranking of countries in terms of life expectancy at birth, adult literacy, school enrolment and per capita income (United Nations, 2000, p.149). Let me give you a few seconds to feel good before I go on to the following point about Mike Harris from the same report.

"In Canada, Ontario is the only province that provides full public funding for the religious schools of just one group – Roman Catholics....." The report includes a statement made in February 2000, from the premier of the Ontario Government that *"When the United Nations says we're the best country in the world to live in I assume*

that this means our education system as well, and it means how we treat minority religious groups as well”:

The report goes on:

“But ranking in the HDI promises no such thing. The HDI simply captures average national achievements in the most basic outcomes, including adult literacy rates and school enrolments. Canada’s high scores in adult literacy and combined gross enrolments do not disprove religious discrimination in access to public education – and in no way waive the need for Ontario to provide a remedy.” (p. 93).

I want to return to Mike Harris' assumptions about education (and economic rationality) later.

The report also lists the following seven freedoms:

Human rights and human development share a common vision and a common purpose – to secure the freedom, well-being and dignity of all people everywhere. To secure:

Freedom from discrimination – by gender, race, ethnicity, national origin or religion.

Freedom from want – to enjoy a decent standard of living.

Freedom to develop and realize one’s human potential.

Freedom from fear – of threats to personal security, from torture, arbitrary arrest and other violent acts.

Freedom from injustice and violations of the rule of law.

Freedom of thought and speech and to participate in decision-making and from associations.

Freedom for decent work – without exploitation.

When I am talking about living standards I am meaning the values we use to hold ourselves accountable for the lives we lead and the influences we have. By 'values' I am meaning the human goals we set for ourselves and which we use to give meaning and purpose to our lives. I see values, not as words, but as motivating passions, as active principles in my explanations for my learning and for why I do what I do.

In talking about **living standards of reflection**, I am focusing on the values which focus my reflections on what matters to me, on what concerns me as I explore the implications of questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'

In talking about **living standards of research** I am focusing on the values I use:

- a) As my standards of practice in holding myself to account as I seek to live a productive life in education and
- b) as my standards of judgement in testing the validity of my account to know my own educative influence on myself, on others and on our social formations.

In talking about **living standards of renewal** I am focusing on those painful human experiences which our human spirit enables us to transcend in a process of renewal and sustained commitment to education. I am also focusing on those life-affirming experiences we most associate with pleasure and celebration.

Let me see if I can share my living standards of reflection in defining some matters of common concern about the definition, communication and imposition of professional standards of practice in the context of Ontario.

Two years ago , in a keynote to a conference of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland, I was recommending that the moves to create a Council of Teachers in Ireland should be informed by the mistakes of the Teacher Training Agency in England and Wales and the creative ideas of Linda Grant and Fran Squire in the Ontario College of Teachers.

Here is what I believed in November 1998 in the keynote presentation to the ESAI (Whitehead, 1998).

Learning from the Teacher Training Agency in England and Wales

In England and Wales the Teacher Training Agency has produced a framework for the professional development of teachers. At the present time it includes some 63 standards of practice which novice teachers must meet for them to be awarded their credentials of Qualified Teacher Status. It also includes the national standards for Subject leaders, for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators and for Headteachers. A General Teaching Council is in the process of being established and a College of Teachers has recently been created from the College of Preceptors and The Education Council. These developments give some indication of the importance being given to the professional development of teachers in England and Wales. This concern is accompanied by a major recruitment crisis. The professional status of teaching (and I include pay within this) is not sufficiently high in England and Wales to attract sufficient numbers of good quality entrants into the profession and to retain the numbers we need. It will require a major cultural shift to change the public perception of teaching as a profession. Quotes from Ted Wragg (1998) highlight the problem when he talks of:

“... the zombie method of training heads or teachers, whereby complex human behaviour is atomised into discrete particulars, or “competencies”. This mechanical approach, much favoured by the hapless Teacher Training Agency, is an unmitigated disaster..... The tyranny of brain-corroding bureaucracy must end.... Most important of all is to

support creativity and imagination, collegiality and trust, not just foster the mechanical implementation of dreary, externally driven missives.”

I hope that, in Ireland, you will avoid some of the problems associated with the way the TTA has set out its standards in its professional framework. Jim Graham (1998) in an excellent article on teacher professionalism has added his voice to the growing criticism of the negative influences of the TTA when he says:

For teacher professionalism, the over-prescribed, centralist regulation by the TTA established a technicist model of teaching at variance with the autonomy, flexibility, collegiality necessary to create the learning organisations required to socialise the new generation of knowledge workers. (Graham, p. 17, 1998).

In contrast to the errors of the TTA I want to recommend the work of the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) as it develops its standards of practice. Explicitly influenced by action research approaches (Squire 1998), OCT appears much more aware of the need to view standards of professional practice in terms of the living values which teachers use to give meaning and purpose to their productive lives in education.

Fran Squire works with Linda Grant of the Ontario College of Teachers on the development of standards of practice. Her enquiries are focused on the questions,

What implications arise when standards of practice are linked to action research endeavours?

How do we keep the spontaneity and individualism inherent in action research as we establish criteria for its recognition in the educational community?

The reason I think that the work of Fran Squire, Linda Grant and the OCT is so important is that they are developing, to use Jean McNiff's phrase, a 'generative' form of action research. Unlike the Teacher Training Agency, they appear to understand that the standards of professional practice are the living values used by teachers in their educative relationships with their pupils. OCT is a learning organisation which is enquiring into the process of relating standards and professional learning in relation to the creation of a professional learning community which is concerned with the development of required professional knowledge.

I have been invited back to Ireland in March 2001 to give an update on my thoughts on how to enhance teacher professionalism and improve student learning through the creation and testing of living educational theories.

Because of the way the Ontario Government is intervening in the matter of 'teacher testing' and in defining what counts as educational standards of professional learning, I now believe that we should be seeking to transcend such national and provincial political pressures on organisations such as the TTA and OCT through our newly developing

capacities to connect and communicate with professional educators, policy makers, and citizens on a global basis through the Internet.

I have in mind the development of a global profession of educators in which we learn how to express, communicate and accredit our own professional standards of practice through our global communications networks on the internet.

Let me focus on our local actions, educative relationships and influences to show what I am meaning by acting locally and communicating globally. The new digital technology has made it possible to focus much more easily than in the past on the images of our practices which we can use to show the meanings of our living standards of reflection, research and renewal which both help us to sustain our commitment to education and form the principles we use to account to ourselves for our influence on the learning and lives of our students. Let me show you what I am meaning with the help of some video-clips from my own classroom. The following clips of Lindy Zaretsky, Geoff Suderman-Gladwell, and Cheryl Black were taken during May/June 2000 when I tutored a masters module for Brock University and worked with Jackie DeLong (2000) on her Ph.D. programme. I want to concentrate on the meanings of our human values, which are embodied in what we do, and which can be clarified in the course of their emergence in our practice.

(Clips from the masters programme at Brock University, May/June 2000)

I must be careful now in moving from my own 'I-knowledge' to statements containing 'we'. I want to avoid any feeling in you that I am including you in my 'we' statements without your consent. Yet I do want to see if 'we' can agree on the meanings of living standards of reflection, research and renewal. I want to do this because I am exploring the possibility of establishing a research-base for the creation, representation and communication of new living standards of educational practice and judgement which could help to develop, from researching our educative influences, a new knowledge-base for our global association as professional educators.

Living standards of reflection.

I have suggested that we might agree about the need to be clear about the assumptions being made in the application of economic rationalist policies to improving the processes of education. Without clarity, we might be in danger of making the kind of false assumption revealed by Mike Harris about education in Ontario in relation to discriminatory practices. Applying such policies, without Sen's (1998) appreciation of the need to live more fully the values which enhance human existence, could lead to the demoralisation and devaluation described so well by McTaggart (1992).

“Seeing human qualities in terms of their importance in promoting and sustaining economic growth, significant as it is, tells us nothing about why economic growth is sought in the first place, nor much about the role of enhanced human qualities in making it directly possible for us to lead freer and more fulfilling lives....”

To correct what is missed in the narrower perspective of 'human capital' and 'human resource development', we need a broader conception of development that concentrates on the enhancement of human lives and freedoms, no matter whether that enhancement is - or is not - intermediated through an expansion of commodity production" (Amaryta Sen, 1998).

Geoff Suderman Gladwell and Lindy Zaretsky are two educators who embody such enhanced human qualities and the commitment to live them as fully as they can in their practice. Here are two clips which show them expressing their living standards of reflection.

(Video-clips of Geoff Suderman-Gladwell and Lindy Zaretsky, talking about their own living standards of reflection)

Living standards of research.

In living standards of research I am advocating forms of educational action research which express our originality of mind and critical judgement as we explore questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'. I value this kind of research because it enables me to enhance my professional knowledge in a way which does not lose a connection with my educational practices. The primary living standard of educational action research is the inclusion of 'I', with embodied values, in the enquiry and claims to knowledge. Other living standards are focused on the values we use to give meaning and purpose to our lives. I am thinking of our spiritual, aesthetic and ethical values. I am not underestimating the difficulty of expressing and communicating the values we embody in our practices as we seek to improve our own lives, the learning of our students and the social formations in which our enquiries take place. I am advocating the use of digital video as a primary mode of communication for sharing our understandings of the meanings of our values as we clarify their meanings in the course of their emergence through practice.

My colleague Moira Laidlaw helped me to understand the nature of living standards of research as she created her own living educational theory as part of the process of improving the quality of her educative influence with her students. Here is a clip of Moira, immediately after an english lesson. She is integrating her reflections within her post-doctoral research on living her values more fully in her professional practice.

My colleague Sarah Fletcher (2000) is also developing her own living standards of research in a self-study of her professional practices as an educational researcher and educator. Sarah is using video clips of her own practice to analyse her educational values. She is integrating her values of learning, self-actualisation and multiplicity of self, within explanations of her educative influence with her students. Some of Sarah's work can be accessed at mentorresearch.net.

I now want to consider the importance of living standards of renewal. No matter where we are conducting our action research there are likely to be times when personal or social events affect our spirits and we feel the need for renewal.

Living standards of renewal.

Living standards of renewal are perhaps best understood through experiences, images and ideas of parenting and grandparenting. My colleague Kate Hawkey has three children and, together with Sarah, we recently video-taped her with Ben her six year old and her 10 month old twins. I have a clip of Kate with Ben and the twins to show you and I would like to do this in our round table session after the keynote. In her work with parents and children Robyn Pound (2000) has developed the idea of 'alongsideness' which carries for me her embodied standards of renewal. You can access Robyn's paper in the Values section of actionresearch.net.

There are other, more painful, yet life-affirming qualities which I associate with renewal. Geoff Mead (2000), a Ph.D. researcher at Bath has written an account of some of these painful experiences associated with the death of a parent, divorce and illness in the family, in a way which renews my own faith in the human spirit.

There are photographs outside my office at Bath, of Martin Dobson, a colleague for some 21 years and whose retirement party I helped to organise in our Department of Education on the 1st November 2000. I felt Martin's qualities of human affection, courage and humour, throughout the celebration. I knew that in August 2000 Martin had received the news of his liver cancer. Martin referred to his certainty of death in relation to the importance of our time to live. The pictures outside my study show Martin and my colleagues within a quality of community which expresses my own values. These images help me to renew my faith in these qualities as I continue to work in contexts where the daily tensions serve to undermine the expression of these qualities. Thanks Martin.

I want to end with two clips/photographs which embody for me qualities of renewal in the classroom in a way which celebrates Martin's support for the spirit of education.

Here is one of Moira Laidlaw with her year 7 English group and one of Cheryl Black with her last lesson with her Music Group in June 2000 in a school in the Grand Erie District School Board before moving on to her present post as Vice-Principal. They carry for me the living standards of renewal I associate with the embodied values of professional educators.

One of my own enquiries is focused on the possibility of using such image-based research to develop a shared understanding of the ways in which our living standards of reflection, research and renewal can be developed and extended within our different social formations. Unless we learn how to do this more effectively my anxiety is that the assumptions of economic rationalism will come to dominate further our social lives. I think we can serve the interests of our living standards of reflection, research and renewal

by extending our local networks of practitioner researchers, supporting local democratic forums whenever possible and by publishing and communicating globally.

As we move into the educative conversations of our round-tables (with thanks to Tom Russell for the idea) I hope that my contribution this evening may have helped to focus on the importance of researching and communicating our own living standards of reflection, research and renewal. I am thinking of researching, within our workplace contexts, questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'. I am thinking of research within which we are acting locally and communicating our knowledge globally, through publications such as the Ontario Action Researcher (OAR, 2000 - Ron Wideman from the University of Nipissing and Jackie Delong from the Grand Erie District School Board) did much to establish this forum for our publications). Jean McNiff's (2000) latest publication, on Action Research in Organisations, shows what I have in mind. I am thinking of communications which might help to develop our relationships still further into communities of practitioner-researchers who are exploring together how to live more fully our own living standards of reflection, research and renewal. In particular, I hope that I have helped to focus on the importance of showing, with the help of digital video, the meanings of our own values which we can clarify in the course of their emergence in our practice and educative relationships with our students and colleagues.

My thanks, once again, to those involved in the OERC and Act, Reflect, Revise Conferences for inviting me to contribute to and to share in our continuing educational conversations.

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