DRAFT

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Living Theory Research Group –a model of participatory and sustainable learning for the 'flourishing of humanity'

Abstract

To be added at the end

Introduction

Research groups are common place and have been a key part of research for many years. However, with the emergence of new technologies that enable video conferencing becoming more common place and increasing their use in universities (Blankenship, 2011). Whilst this technology is common place in teaching and disseminating information, little has been written about using Skype as a form of sustaining research by bringing together like minded researchers in groups to develop, critically engage, encourage and act as a validation group. This paper provides the basis of an experiential workshop at ALARA World Congress in Pretoria in South Africa. My proposal set out the purpose of the workshop:

> The purpose of the workshop is to challenge participants through participatory learning to develop new understandings that they can take forward to improve their research. I will share my experience, learning and the transformatory nature of being part of a Living Theory research group, comprising practitioner-researchers situated in a variety of contexts, both resource rich and socio-economically challenged. I will engage delegates in evidence based learning activities to study multi-modal resources using clips from Skype, pictures and video to introduce the participants to the research group. I will challenge delegates to construct their own expanded understanding of Living Theory research. Participants will learn that Living Theory is ethically driven where researchers take a personal responsibility for what they are doing. Participants will learn how our research group has helped me, as a member of the group, to identify values as they emerge in practice. Living Theory encourages a methodological 'inventiveness' (Dadds and Harts, 2001) enabling methods to be chosen in line with researcher's value base. Participants will learn how our research group sustains and challenges ourselves, and each other, to constantly improve our practice, and how they can adapt this model themselves. I will provide practical learning in how to use technology to create a sustainable group online

> I will challenge the participants to engage, critique, challenge, affirm and transform their own learning through a mixture of presenting my learning and getting participants to work in small groups to construct their own ideas. I will

ask the group to focus on their own unique situation, working with other participants to adapt my learning from our research group and how insights into Living Theory may benefit their approach. I will support and inspire delegates to generate their own ideas and plans to put their learning into action in their own settings.

This paper will provide a more in-depth analysis of the Living Theory Research Group I am part of and how the group might provide other with a model for participatory and sustainable learning for the 'flourishing of humanity'.

New Technologies

The Living Theory Research Group I am part of meets every Sunday evening at 8pm GMT. This time was chosen because it has enabled participant from Canada and the USA to participate. The research group uses the latest release of the Skype platform which is free to download and allows nine people to simultaneously be on the screen and communicate together. New video conferencing technologies are now free to use and for us have enabled the move from purely face to face research groups to a regular international research group.

Blackenship (2011) enthuses about Skype for teaching and disseminating knowledge. However, he misses some key benefits the use of Skype brings as he does not explore the use of Skype as a tool to get together as a regular research group. Our group has come together with the purpose of shared learning, development, sustaining research and finding other researchers that share our values from the flourishing of humanity.

I have found the key benefits to be

- Skype has changed the nature of the experience of getting together as we have the perspective of seeing ourselves amongst others on the screen - we see ourselves as part of the group in a way that is impossible in the physical world. This adds to the sense of collegiality.
- Participatory and collaborative (Heron and Reason, 1997) due to everyone sharing their research and supporting each other to improve the validity and rigour of their research
- Sustainable, both financially as there is no cost to Skyping, and emotionally. The group provides support to continue in our research even when the going gets tough. The support has been especially helpful as a practitioner researcher that studying long distance. Also due to feeling disconnected due to the focus on research in practice creating a tension with the traditional academic structures of university.
- The ability to record the sessions and reflect on them later. This helps me develop my learning and understanding in ways I am unable to do from other forums where even if it is videoed I am unable to see myself amongst the whole group as you can on the Skype recordings.

However, the use of digital platforms has problems as well as benefits. The technology can sometimes encroach or take over the conversation. We have some meetings where poor connections can disrupt conversations. As the group members

are positioned in countries of varying socio economic situations the internet connections vary. Although it is often those from wealthy countries that have poor connections. When the connection breaks down or people are unable to get the video working and we only have a still picture of them it can often become the focus of the conversation. One week a whole conversation took place when one members video was not working over whether that member could change their picture from their dog, which whilst very beautiful, made the group feel even less connected to her. I have also had frustrations where my video is poor that I miss parts of the conversation and get cut off mid flow when I am speaking. All these issues are unique to a digital platform and create challenges which the group needs to persist and overcome as the benefits I have found outweigh the technical problems.

Rheingold (2010) focuses on the need to create new ways to manage our use of social media. These have relevance and are useful to develop when using a multi media online platform such as Skype to create a research group.

'I focus on five social media literacies:

- Attention

- Participation

- Collaboration

- Network Awareness

- Critical Consumption' p.16

I will look at each of these areas to explore how developing these literacies will be of use for setting up a Skype research group and for learning within the the Living Theory Research Group I am part of.

Attention

I am part of a generation who is used to splitting my attention which Rheingold describes in his classroom. I often have my laptop open in meetings, enjoying being able to take notes and being able to look up on the internet points that are raised. Rather than wait to look at them afterwards I find it can often add to the conversation as it often provides more depth of knowledge than is held in the room at that moment. However, I am aware this often creates barriers as Rheingold describes:

'In the Japanese language, one pays attention with ki, which means "life energy." Any public speech is an exchange of ki. For me, I felt this exchange was broken when students were not looking at me while I was talking to them.' (p.16)

In the Skype Group I feel we create this same "life energy" as in a physical space. When I was a teenager I drew a picture which I feel helps describe this sense of ki, at the time I was trying to represent "conscious conversations" (p.137, Redfield, 1993) which I had been reading in the Celestine Prophecy. In the Celestine Prophecy Redfield describes a conscious conversation as:

"As the members of a group talk, only one will have the most powerful idea at any one point in time. If they are alert, the others in the group can feel who is about to speak, and then they can consciously focus their energy on this person, helping to bring out his idea with the greatest clarity. Then, as the conversation proceeds, someone else will have the most powerful idea, then someone else and so forth. If you concentrate on what is being said, you can feel when it is your turn. The idea will come up into your mind." (p.137)

This sounds mystical, but actually when a group is having a conversation where you feel energised, I find this description very accurate and is what I tried to depict in the picture below.

Image 1. Conscious Conversations

I find used well I can add to the conversation on Skype when I look up something at the same time. However, I agree with Rheingold I need to be aware when I am being distracted and have lost my attention on the group and given my attention over to what I am searching for on my computer.

Participation

Rheingold discusses the idea of participation from a digital perspective and how that is changing the nature of participation:

Today's media enable people to inform, persuade, and influence the beliefs of others and, most important, help them to organize action on all scales. In doing so, people move from the literacy of participation to the literacy of collaboration. (p.20)

In the Living Theory Research Group each session starts with each member giving their buzz from the week. This can about our academic work, our practice or our personal life. By starting with a buzz we are informing each other of where our

current excitement lies. This often leads the discussion as we influence other member to get excited. Other times the session focuses around some writing or reading that was circulated by email during the week. As the group focuses together to different members bring their perspectives, other literature to help to inform the group of work that will challenge or support their research. The group also helps to organise our actions, many spin offs have come from the group discussions with further actions being created. Two members managed to get funding to enable them to work together which involved travelling from Denmark to Albania to develop a project.

Collaboration

Rheingold says 'in general doing things together gives us more power than doing things alone' p.20. As a group the power has been in coming together. Many of the group have found opposition or challenge from their university in using a Living Theory methodology. I shall expand on Living Theory Methodology later in the paper. In terms of analysing the group against Rheingold's social media literacies I have found the collaboration we have is in part the peer support we provide that sustains each member to continue their research. Some sessions have focussed on how to defend using a methodology that is highly criticised in the academy. Others have been how to defend using first person in academic writing. Other sessions have been about how to defend practitioner research as being of at least equal importance to academy led research. Having the group has empowered the members to continue in their research and be resilient in the face of opposition.

Network Awareness

The group's network awareness is not just of bringing members of the group together across various countries and locations but also to link into other networks. A new method has recently been developed to facilitate this called Living Posters (find reference). These can be found at
http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/arna/1aARNAposterhomepage270415.pdf
This provides the equivalent of "speed dating" for researchers giving an attractive visual and narrative depiction of the Living Theory research people are involved in across the world. This was developed to facilitate a town hall style meeting at the Action Research Network of the Americas conference in Toronto which facilitates both people being physically in the room and Skyping in from across the world. I was able to Skype into the Town Hall meeting and found the experience extremely exciting as I was able to network with people from across the world and influence the participants by my participation all from the comfort of my own home. This has led to the development of the workshop at ALARA that this paper is written for. The intention is to enable the same international collaboration through Skype at the workshop and if possible to join the CARN and ALARA groups together as well as other individuals across the world.

Critical Consumption

Often the writing group members send round has an argument that is trying to pursued or influence the reader. The group provides a platform to test if the writing is

valid, the group uses ideas developed from Habermas (1976) tests of validity of being truthful, comprehensible, right and true or we use the term authentic. We also test writing for rigour to help the group have greater influence. The group often focuses on other writing or mediums and the session is used to develop critical responses.

Interconnection

Methodology – explain living theory

Findings – what does the group say and what are my experiences, do the Skype clips show this to be true

Quality of relationship which I see myself with everyone else – creates new epistemology – how and why?

The experience of Ubuntu – An international feeling of I am because you are? And also we are because I am and you are

Learning from across greater distances and also a feeling of we are all facing the same difficulties despite the cultural and location specific differences.

Ability to sustain learning even when you are moving in different locations.

Ability to grow into new areas both geographically and research

https://youtu.be/2Ugi2TmP1gE Ari 32.00

What does everybody else think the group gives and what the group means to them?

Arianna:

What I feel about this group getting together every week and then in other occasion like when Sonia and myself met in Cumbria or Per and myself met here in Albania. I think there is all created by the relationship we manage to create through the Skype Sunday conversation group and to me as I've said it very often transcends the conversation on a Sunday it really it lives here in my apartment whenever I approach a new concept or a new writing I think of you guys and the inputs you are giving to me. The quality of the relationship that we are building together it's for me fundamental for me writing my doctoral research but even beyond that for understanding really myself and what I am and how I'm trying to express myself in my practice and be the best I can be.

What is also overlapping now in my head is a conversation that I had two days ago with my manager and we were discussing a project, we were not trying to get deeply into the philosophy of that. But then because I am considerate everywhere I go. I am considerate as a Western person which I am coming from a European country, Very often I'm constantly, I just know what we are are talking about because I am coming from a very different context and my socio historial context is very different from theirs. They have a kind of prejudice and I often get the response what do you know about that? What do you know about problems? And I'm used to that because this is something that for me is daily life you know. So I have to deal with it and I have establish trust and our relationship has to be based on trust to allow them to communicate openly with me and allow me to be helpful.

So this is no news but the good thing about the conversation with my manager was that she looked at me and said for you are already so. You are not from here, you are not a Balkan person I mean. Being Balkan here according to the Balkan people is something extremely special and very complicated to understand. But she said you are not a Balkan person but you fit because you understand people because you can establish a relationship with us. This meant everything to me you know this is one of the most beautiful things that I've heard about myself.

So this goes back to the quality of the relationship we are able to build, we as a group and then in way me as a professional. This is a portrayal of a relationship of the relationships I want to mirror in my daily life and daily practice because if I can't use this quality of foundation and quality of relationship with the people I work with I'm useless, I'm a useless instrument. So it's not really about the relationship it's about the quality based on trust that I can develop and as I said this that I am also saying and seeing on the screen and ALARA the purpose of your conference is exactly this so I would like people to really understand this is much more than just getting together and exchanging buzzes every Sunday. It is for me the foundation of my job.

Sonia

It's not just the mechanics it the intention – it's because we share this value of doing something that will benefit someone else.

Jack

Is it also to with something that Tammy certainly has inspired me with since I've know her a sense of resilience now until tammy emphasised the importance of resilience I really hadn't focussed on it. So again as well as that trust you know I;m just curious about whether I don't know we are all in inspired and enjoying each other in the conversations because we feel that sense of sustaining commitment and resilience and I'm just curious about that because Tammy has focussed on that and certainly brought it into my own sense of what's important… it's like with Sonia with care for the self we need to have that care otherwise we don't continue we can't sustain what we do. So I love what you just said Arianna it's really powerful.

Tammy

I think as well for me going into this final school there is still resilience needed you've got the old kids that were at private and the new kids that have come in and a lot of the teachers haven't been resilient they've left, the old guard can't cope with the Ofsted bit and things like that now and maybe there was something if I'd have gone in earlier there's something I could have done to help them be resilient enough to stay because like any public service education is an absolute nightmare at the moment .

Marie

It's each person in their situation, it's the resilience of the youngsters, it's the resilience of the adults working with them, your own resilience.

Liz

I was absolutely devastated that everything I thought had meaning and purpose etc etc I'd been a teacher in a high school for 20 years thinking I'd been making a difference and certainly getting that kind of feedback from my students and my critical friends and this supervisor I allowed to take the feet from underneath me. I allowed him to do that and I don't know that I would have seen that or I would have been able to get over it without the support of my Skype community. The people who

really know me the people who know what my values are and that those are the things that drive me and give me meaning and purpose and that even if it doesn't fit academia or it doesn't fit the particular template that's in existence there is a way to appease both the university and your own integrity. There is a way to do it and it's with love and community and trusting yourself.

Marie

It's also who you give authority in the academic community like all communities there are differences of opinion one is not right and one is not wrong there argument not quarrels that need to be gone through. You need to have the confidence to say ok I disagree with what you are saying, you've yet to learn to say it nicely in ways that can be listened to but aren't hurtful. And as you say people don't necessarily mean to hurt you. I know I've hurt a lot of people I don't mean to but it's also to recognise there are difference of opinion and we've got a conversation going with some people who are supervising and they've got profound differences of opinion. You'll go to ALARA Soia and you'll find some people who'll rubbish Living Theory but it's a bit like someone who really loves Bottecelli criticising Picasso. You need to think about what is it that you are doing and which voices do you want to give authority to.

Liz

Martin Buber said that before you can say I agree or disagree you must be able to say I understand. And Jack I was reading it again today you wrote about in your methodology paper that you put out for masters and PhD students having to defend their methodology. It's not so much about the short comings or the weaknesses in Living Theory it's really about the short comings and misunderstandings and ignorance of the supervisors. So perhaps just responding with I appreciate like Marie said with loving kindness. I appreciate your honesty you know what is that you don't understand?

Ari thinks about this groups and getting together physically – all comes down to the relationship that we managed to create – it transcends the conversation and lives in my apartment. It is beyond just the writing but being able to know myself. Considerate as a Western person wherever I go – coming from a different context and the socio historical development is very different. Questioned about what do you know about problems – used to this and know I need to develop Trust. Know that Ari is not Balkan but that Ari fits because I can have a relationship with people. Goes back to the group we can have relationships with each other and use this in the daily practice. About the quality of the relationship based on Trust – what I see on the screen is just this. It is much more than just getting together but it is much more.

Tammy focussed on resilience as well as Trust – inspired and develop Trust but also understand it is important to sustain and develop resilience.

Care for the self and for the other to sustain what we do.

Tammy – going into the final school – a lot of the private teachers have left because they couldn't cope with Ofsted and didn't have the resilience. Trying to do this now to develop resilience with the teachers as well as the children. Tammy has taken 6 months off but will continue with the group.

Marie – When things can go wrong they do go wrong. Each person in their situation is needing to develop their own resilience where they can feel excluded from a space.

Robyn – what have you learnt already

Liz – Skype group gave me the strength to stand up for what I believe in through love and community and to challenge what is seen as academic.

Marie – need to remember too that there are differences of opinion and that part of the process is the argument, Need to think who we give authority to.

Liz Before I can agree or disagree I must understand. Buber. We have to defend our methodology and ask what it is you don't understand and how can I help you understand?

Purpose of workshop: The purpose of the workshop is to challenge participants to develop new ways of working that they can take forward to improve their research.

What you will do: I will use multi-modal resources with clips from Skype, pictures and video to introduce the participants to the research group and give practical knowledge on how to use these technologies to set up their own groups. I will expand participants understanding of Living Theory research methodology and how to apply it to their own settings. I will support delegates to generate their own ideas and plans to put their learning into action in their own settings.

How participants will be involved: I will challenge the participants to engage, critique, challenge, affirm and transform their own learning. I will ask the group to focus on their own unique situation and work with other participants to adapt the learning we have gained from our research group and how insights into Living Theory research may benefit their approach. Participants will be shown multi-modal methods and asked to discuss in small groups how they can take these forward to benefit their practice

What participants will learn: The workshop will expand participants understanding of Living Theory methodology. Participants will learn that Living Theory is ethically driven where researchers take a personal responsibility for what they are doing. Participants will learn how our research group has helped each of the members to identify values as they emerge in practice. Living Theory enables a methodological 'inventiveness' (Dadds and Harts, 2001), participants will learn about my research groups practice of actively looking for methods which fit within our value base. Living Theory encourages all researchers to make a difference to people in a positive way. This is not always an emotionally easy path and we often find there are many living contradictions we must overcome. For example, when we seek to achieve 'flourishing for humanity' we may cause unintended harm and find ourselves living outside of our values. Participants will learn how our research group sustains and challenges ourselves and each other to constantly improve our practice. Participants

will gain practical learning in how to use technology to create a sustainable group online.

Workshop plan

Purpose – to enable participants in the workshop to gain an understanding and have an experiential experience of how our Skype research group works, what living theory is and how all this might benefit their research. Challenge the participants to plan how they might use these models in their own research.

People - Action learners and Action researchers

Process -

Explain the workshop will be interactive with the benefit some of my research group members being able to join us via Skype enabling the participants to experience first-hand how Skype interaction in research groups can be beneficial.

Get them in twos or threes to introduce themselves and say why they are there and what they hope to get out of it – get them to feedback – to help me to know what I'm responding

Me and the group to introduce our current buzz from our research (giving a brief overview of who we are and our research for context) and then ask the rest of the group to introduce their research – quick and clear

Explain in our research group each session would start like this with us all sharing our current buzz.

We would then focus on one issue that is linked with someone's research – give some examples – get the group to split up and spend time focusing on an issue they might have in their research, if they can't think of an example go and help someone who has one.

Get the group to share what they spoke about and how the group ended up helping. Ask where the participants are from in the world in each group.

Explain that Skype research groups have the benefits we just experienced but sustained over time and with no cost as they are via Skype and can be accessed from the comfort of you home. Show some stills of our research group with cups of tea, cats and on our bed!

Talk about Living Theory as a methodology and how our research is sustaining our research model and how this might be useful. Introduce Living Posters as a way of 'speed dating' to find other researchers that are doing research that resonates with them. Also a useful method for reflecting on where you are in your research at a single point.

Get the group to think what living theory may be able to offer the group to further their research and to think about creating their own living poster – what would they include?

Finally ask the group to think how they will take back the learning from this session into their research and how do they envisage this bringing hope for the flourishing of humanity? Ask those who are willing to share this with the group and ask everyone to write it down on a memo to themselves. Give my email and ask for people to let me know whether they did what it said on their memo or something else for me to evaluate the influence of this workshop.

Invite to send living posters to Marie.