A living theory approach to teaching in higher education

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Schön contends that Boyer's vision for a new paradigm of scholarship, which includes research, teaching, application and integration, requires a new epistemology of practice that would take the form of action research. This article explores the validity of Schön's assertion through the use of a living theory approach to teaching 'active participation in learning' to a group of second-year undergraduate students, influenced by an ontology of a participative reality and a pedagogy of whole-person learning. The level of engagement by the students, and their reflections on their experience of the module, support Schön's claim; and demonstrate the significance of a living theory approach to action research in realising Boyer's vision as a means of enhancing the quality of students' learning in higher education.

Keywords: scholarship; living theory; active participation in learning; epistemology of practice; whole person learning; participative reality

Introduction

As a lecturer in higher education, I take a living theory approach to action research in asking and responding to the question: 'How can I improve my practice in my work as an educator and researcher?'

This article presents an account of engaging in this enquiry with a small group of second-year undergraduate students, who had selected a year-long module entitled 'Active Participation in Learning'. I consider the educational influences both on my own learning, and on the learning of the students with whom I have been working. Paying attention to the question concerning how I improve my practice requires me to integrate both self-evaluation and student evaluation into the action research process.

I also consider the epistemological significance of the inquiry within the context of Schön's (1995) contention that a new epistemology of practice in the form of action research would be required to realise Boyer's (1990) vision for a new paradigm of scholarship, which includes research, teaching, application and integration.

Ontology, epistemology and pedagogy

My approach to learning and teaching is informed by my ontological view of the world, which has been greatly influenced by John Heron's (1996) views of a

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'participative reality'. This world view challenges the 'subject–object' divide that forms the basis of positivist perceptions of the world, and also challenges constructivism, which suggests that reality is a construction of the individual mind and can only be known subjectively (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

A participative reality (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Bateson 1979; Reason and Rowan 1981; Skolimowski 1994) sees the world as subjective–objective, where there is an: 'intermarriage between the creative construing of the human mind and what is cosmically given . . . This ontology calls for a new view about truth and ways of knowing . . .' (Heron 1996, 162).

A participative view of reality has major implications for the way we view ourselves, and others in relation to ourselves. It deeply challenges the power imbalances inherent within social structures that are established in contexts that ascribe value to a person or thing according to its perceived status in a hierarchically structured universe of independently existing 'objects'. Within a participatory worldview, we do not discover a world just waiting to be known; but we co-create a reality that is shaped by the nature and quality of our subjective–objective relationships:

> In meeting people, there is the possibility of reciprocal participative knowing, and unless truly mutual, we don't properly know the other. The reality of the other is found in the fullness of our open relation (Buber 1937), when we each engage in our mutual participation. (Heron 1996, 11)

From this ontology emerges an epistemology that emphasises a participative relationship between the knower and the known, and between knower and knower – there is no separation within these interactive relationships.

A participative paradigm promotes a view of human interaction that sees all as of equal significance and value in an ever-evolving, co-created view of reality; where 'human flourishing' is perceived as a valuable end in itself:

> What is valuable as a means to this end is participative decision-making, which enables people to be involved in the making of decisions, in every social context, which affect their flourishing in any way. (Heron 1996, 11)

When reading pedagogical literature, I evaluate its usefulness in relation to the extent that it helps me to improve my practice in teaching and learning within this participative paradigm. I am looking for literature that acknowledges that, within any learning environment, we are all teachers and all learners. Indeed, within my worldview, I see 'life as inquiry' (Marshall 1999), and every experience provides a learning opportunity. This creates a certain kind of humility, as it ensures that 'expertise' is assessed in relation to the qualities and experience of the individual, and is not contained within their role or hierarchical position. There are, I would suggest, no limits to this. So, for example, when I am with very young children, I learn a considerable amount from them: from the honesty of their expression; from their creativity and imagination; and from their capacity to develop trusting and non-judgemental relationships. These are qualities that are often lost in the adult world; but are qualities that I like to see re-created in formal and informal learning environments.

However, much of the theory on teaching and learning focuses on the 'separation' between teacher and learner, rather than on the development of a mutually informing relationship. For example, Biggs and Tang (2007) differentiate between three levels of thinking about the effectiveness of teaching. The first level suggests

that the teacher is the 'expert', and transmits knowledge, normally by lecturing. Generally, students are assessed through being given 'marks' according to how accurately they can reproduce the knowledge received; and if they get a low mark, this is because they have been a poor student. When a teacher evaluates their sessions, they are in effect evaluating the ability or motivation of the students rather than the competency of their own teaching.

In the second level, the emphasis is still on the transmission of knowledge; but the teacher takes greater responsibility for developing a range of teaching methods that are likely to better communicate that knowledge. In evaluating their sessions, the teacher will evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching methodologies, and how they might adjust these for better outcomes.

In the third level, the focus returns to the student, but centres on what the student learns, and whether that learning achieves identified outcomes. Within this context, Biggs has developed the well-recognised process of 'constructive alignment', an approach to curriculum design that aims to optimise the conditions for quality learning (Biggs 1996; Biggs and Tang 2007).

In a number of ways, constructive alignment addresses my concern that effective learning emerges from a relationship between teacher and learner. In constructive alignment, it is recognised that the quality of the learning of the student is influenced by the nature of the learning activities. The learning is not transmitted from teacher to student, but is something the students have to create for themselves. Teaching in this context is seen as a catalyst for learning.

The teacher's responsibility, then, is to establish a learning environment that ensures that the activities undertaken by the students are likely to achieve the learning outcomes. Consequently, it is important to 'align' planned outcomes, learning activities, teaching methods and assessment tasks. They evaluate their sessions on the basis of the extent to which this alignment has been effective, and whether the student has achieved the level of understanding they want them to achieve.

Much of the current pedagogical literature focuses on models of learning that closely reflect or are directly based on Biggs and Tang's 'third level' to form appropriate theoretical frameworks that guide curriculum planning and implementation (Hoddinott 2000; Savin-Baden 2004; Walsh 2007; Treleaven 2008):

> Traditional learning, with the teacher spouting facts and figures, and with participants regurgitating the information without deeper involvement, is a very ineffective form of learning. A much more effective and long-lasting form of learning is to involve the learner by creating a meaningful learning experience. (Beard and Wilson 2006, 1)

There is also a growing emphasis on the value of reflective practice as a means of enhancing the learning of both teachers and students (Cowan 2006; Brockbank and McGill 2007).

However, there is still a separation between lecturer and student in that most of the literature assumes that the teacher will determine the curriculum without involvement of the student. This assumption is being challenged by the idea of promoting 'student voice', which although originating in the school environment is also relevant for university students. The idea goes back as far as Dewey (1916), but is gaining renewed attention with the view that students should be more actively involved in decisions affecting their own education (Fielding 2004; Lodge 2005; Cook-Sather 2006; Taylor and Robinson 2009).

Heron suggests:

> ... a fully educated person is, among other things, an awarely self-determining person, in the sense of being able to set objectives, to formulate standards of excellence for the work that realises those objectives, to assess work done in the light of those standards, and to be able to modify the objectives, the standards or the work programme in the light of experience and action; and all this in discussion and consultation with other relevant persons...

> Unfortunately, the educational process in most of our major institutions does not prepare students to acquire this kind of self-determining ability. For the staff in these institutions unilaterally decide student objectives, work programmes and assessment criteria, and unilaterally do the assessment of student work. This goes on until graduation, so that fledgling professionals are undereducated so far as the *process* of education is concerned; they have had no experience in setting objectives, planning a work programme, devising assessment criteria, or in self-assessment; nor have they acquired any skills in doing any of these things co-operatively with others. (1999, 131)

Taylor (2007, 41) accepts the desirability of students being centrally involved in all aspects of the learning process, and has developed the concept of 'whole person learning' that has integrated within it the following principles:

(1) The more involved the learner is required to become in their own learning, the more the conditions of that learning need to reflect the nature of an adult-to-adult relationship.
(2) 'Communities of practice' are successfully able to evolve without hierarchical authorities.
(3) Individuals can be involved not only in what they are learning, but in what they are going to learn, in how they are going to do that learning, and also in assessing how successfully they have accomplished their learning.

Taylor (2007, 132) differentiates between what traditional learning expects, and what whole-person learning encourages (Table 1).

I was reflecting on these ontological, epistemological and pedagogical issues as I approached my teaching commitments in my first year as a lecturer in higher education.

Methodology

My approach to evaluating the learning both of myself and of students is greatly influenced by the work of Whitehead (1989), who has developed a 'living theory'

Table 1. Comparing traditional and whole-person learning (Taylor 2007, 132).

Traditional learning expects	Whole-person learning encourages
Acceptance of external decisions	Participant involvement in planning
Respect for those in authority	Participants developing a questioning attitude
Acceptance of predetermined objectives	Participants identifying their own learning objectives
Adherence to aims based on content	Objectives based on participants' needs
Formal procedures and relationships	Individual focus on personal objectives
Focus upon content and presentation	Process: learning how to learn

approach to action research. Living theory starts with the values that matter to the researcher, who then engages in an enquiry into how those values might be lived more fully in practice. Their actions are evaluated through the accounts they provide of their learning, using evidence gained in the process of their enquiry to validate their account.

In undertaking a living theory approach to research, I will provide a narrative describing what my concern was and why I was concerned; what action I chose to take; how I evaluated the educational influence of my actions; and, finally, what my conclusions were as a result of my evaluation, and what evidence I could produce to validate my conclusions (Whitehead and McNiff 2006).

What was my concern and why was I concerned?

I was concerned when, at the beginning of the academic year, I was without consultation given sole responsibility for a module that I did not feel I had the knowledge to teach. 'Active Participation in Learning' was an optional module for second-year undergraduate students. I did not understand the nature of the content on the course specification, and I was worried that, in seeking to put a course together, I would be artificially presenting myself as knowledgeable in the subject matter. As this would be an inauthentic representation, I feared it would end up being a meaningless experience for both myself and the students, where I would feel I had let down everyone involved.

What action did I choose to take?

Whitehead states that the starting point of our research is when 'we experience ourselves as living contradictions when our values are denied in our practice' (Whitehead and McNiff 2006, 25). Based on my ontology of a participative reality, and in promoting whole-person learning, the values guiding my relationship with students include respect, participation and mutual empowerment. Respecting students as individuals whose learning I have the privileged opportunity to influence seems to be an essential quality in a context where I consider I too am learning. The learning opportunities of all involved will be enhanced by creating an environment that encourages the participation of us all. However, as I work in contexts where students often defer to the traditional authority of the teacher, it is important to enable all students to feel empowered to fully contribute, and to encourage others in the group to do the same. These values of respect, participation and mutual empowerment are interconnected, as facilitating a process that supports mutual empowerment can only authentically be achieved through respecting those with whom I am working, in an environment where everyone has equal right and opportunity to participate in the decision-making.

The challenge was how to act in this situation in a way that was true to my values, when it seemed that I would not be able to avoid reading information from books with which I was not familiar, in order to transmit that knowledge to the students. I could not see what else I could do differently. However, Dadds and Hart have talked about 'methodological inventiveness':

> Perhaps the most important new insight for both of us has been awareness that, for some practitioner researchers, creating their own unique way through their research may be as important as their self-chosen research focus ...

> ... what genuinely matters are the purposes of practice which the research seeks to serve, and the integrity with which the practitioner researcher makes methodological choices about ways of achieving those purposes. No methodology is, or should be, cast in stone, if we accept that professional intention should be informing the research process, not pre-set ideas about methods or techniques. (2001, 166, 169)

In responding to my question 'How can I improve my practice in my work as an educator and researcher?' within this current situation, I felt that the only way I could move forward staying true to my values was to share with the students the challenge I was experiencing, and to encourage them to participate in a process of decision-making where we agreed together how to move forward.

It was evident from the outset that my decision to do this was surprising for the students. When writing about her experience of this at a later stage, one of the students wrote:

> The first session with Joan was a revelation, the most startling part, her honesty. We as a group agreed the synopsis of the module had left us with little idea of the subjects to be covered ... Joan herself admitted that she did not know what she was supposed to teach us, and so it was decided that we would agree the curriculum together.

I was indeed in a learning situation here myself; although responsible for the education of professionals for many years, I had never found myself in this situation. However, my commitment to a living theory approach to researching 'How do I improve my practice as an educator and researcher' with a commitment to values of respect, participation and mutual empowerment, meant that when faced with a situation that threatened my ability to live those values, I had to throw myself into the unknown, and test out my theoretical belief in the subjective–objective which 'calls for a new view about truth and ways of knowing ...' (Heron 1996, 162).

The group then worked with me to determine a programme that met the criteria of constructive alignment – we collaboratively planned the learning outcomes, and decided the learning activities, teaching methods and assessment tasks. As the module title was 'Active Participation in Learning', it was established that at all stages of the module we should ensure that the principle of active participation was encouraged. To this end, each group member agreed to take responsibility for planning and running one of the sessions, which would focus on an interest of theirs that they wanted to research; and they would communicate their findings to the other members of the group using methods that encouraged the active participation of us all.

This course of action involved each student going outside the university to engage in research concerning their chosen interest; and then to present their experience and findings in as stimulating a way as possible. Several of the students arranged voluntary placements in settings that involved working with children. In planning the teaching sessions they were to be responsible for leading, some focused on issues that were directly relevant to their university studies: for example, one student engaged the group in play-dough modelling and storytelling. Another showed a video she had filmed in which she interviewed individuals from different

generations (aged 5 to 65), exploring their wide-ranging views and experiences of formal education. She then facilitated a group discussion on the purposes of education, referring to the different perspectives included in the video.

Others focused on issues more relevant to their personal lives and interests. For example, one young man who was bi-polar gave a dynamic presentation demonstrating how music helped him manage his mood swings; then continued to explore the role that music plays in a wide range of other situations, such as in healing therapies, and in generating hope through gospel songs.

As part of this process, two forms of assessment were agreed. One was an evaluation of the session run by each student, which would include an element of peer assessment. Another assessment task would be undertaken towards the end of the year, when they would each write a reflective account of their experience, based on entries they had written in a reflective diary throughout the year. Finally, for the purposes of participation and evaluation, although not part of the assessment process, there would be an ongoing dialogue on Moodle (a virtual learning environment used by the university), where students could exchange thoughts and provide feedback on how they were experiencing the module.

How did I evaluate my educational influences in learning?

Evaluation was built into the very fabric of the module, in that I sought feedback from the students at every stage of the process. However, I was aware that students might not feel sufficiently trusting to provide me with critical feedback, perhaps fearing that it may influence the assessment process. Consequently, at the end of the first semester, I gave them an evaluation form to complete, giving them the option to remain confidential. The exchange on Moodle provided useful feedback on the students' experience. Finally, the reflective accounts that they presented at the end of the module provided a rich resource of information concerning my educational influences in their learning.

What were my conclusions as a result of my evaluation, and what evidence can I produce to validate my conclusions?

A living theory approach to action research stresses the need for the researcher to provide evidence for their account of the educational influences on their own learning, and their influence on the learning of others. In order to do this, they need to identify 'standards of judgement which enable us to make value judgements, from a reasoned position' (Whitehead and McNiff 2006, 82). The values I use as the standards of judgement to which I hold myself accountable in relation to the work I do with students are those of respect, participation and mutual empowerment. I described earlier how it was that, in seeking to live according to those values, I chose to introduce the module to the students in the way that I did. Now, in evaluating the module, I need to be able to provide evidence of how I continued to live according to these values.

Because I am a reflective practitioner who reflects-in-action and reflects-on-action (Schön 1983), it was important to gain feedback on a continuing basis to ensure that my facilitation of the module was supporting the students' learning. After the first session at the beginning of the year, I wrote on Moodle:

As discussed last Friday, I would like you to include on Moodle your reflections on what is happening on the programme, and your views on being invited to 'actively participate in your own learning' by working collaboratively with others to plan the year, and to identify the learning objectives you want to achieve during the year. Include both your thoughts and feelings as much as you are able to at this stage.

Three weeks later, after I had received a number of contributions on Moodle, I wrote the following:

Hi, thank you for that, your response is really useful. I want to make sure I get this module right for all of you, especially as we are trying something rather different within the higher education world – so your feedback (critical points as well as positive ones) will be helpful to me in ensuring I get the balance right in providing an appropriate level of structure for this course – neither too much nor too little.

I was seeking to create a culture where students felt comfortable to say what they thought and felt. Throughout the year, I continued to encourage the students to evaluate the programme both verbally and in writing using different forums to do so; during formal sessions, via email, on Moodle, on the formal feedback sheet at the end of the first term, and from their final assignment that was a reflective account of their experience of the module. There was no one 'moment' when I provided them with a structured opportunity for feedback; rather throughout each session, and in response to any writing I received, I would pay attention to what was said, and seek to improve what I did. Researching my practice within a living theory process, I used the feedback I received to reflect and modify what I was doing, with the aim that the students would reach the end of the year having learned about the benefits of 'active participation in learning' through experiencing it.

In the selection of student comments that I include below, it is my intention to provide evidence of my claim that in working with students in this way, I am living my values of respect, participation and mutual empowerment, to the benefit of the learning and experience of the students and of myself:

I am excited at the prospect of being included in the planning process of the course. This is a really unusual way of running and participating in the course. It will involve a lot more direct student / teacher interaction. I think overall it is an excellent idea. It is motivational and very relevant. (Moodle in early part of course)

I am very excited at the prospect of being able to aid our own learning, I think that we become lazy when we expect our tutors to have everything prepared for us so this is a very good opportunity for us to really get into this particular module. I do think it is going to be hard as most of us have never experienced something like this before but as long as we all work together and share our worries I think it will be very beneficial to us all to have this sort of experience behind us. (Moodle in early part of course)

Throughout the year, it became apparent to the group that we created our own learning community; this required us to rely on one another to actively participate and be enthusiastic, otherwise it would have been difficult to have the discussions and develop our ideas without the support from one another. (Final reflective account)

This course to us was a huge opportunity to create our own aims and learning objectives as well as our assessments ... it motivated each student ... we were the change that we wanted to see in the world. (Final reflective account)

I feel that the successful delivery of my session was related to the trust that had been developed by the group as we evolved into a 'community of practice' and that we had been drawn together by what we have learned through our mutual engagement in these activities. (Final reflective account)

For the most part university is very much about being given a lot of new knowledge and being told to go and write about a certain piece of knowledge. And what we didn't understand at the time is that this aspect of university is actually the easy part. The hard part is what we had signed up to do, develop our own curriculum, decide what type of assessments we would undertake and how they would be marked ... After taking this module on for one year my mind has been completely turned, I now wish that every one of my lessons was like this. Even if they incorporate a small amount of Active Participation I think that pupil engagement would go a lot higher, the thought that you are in charge of your own learning is a very liberating experience, and for me I worked all the harder at it. (Final reflective account)

From my own experience of this module I would confidently say that actively participating in your own learning raises self esteem, self motivation and confidence as the learner sets challenges for themselves and overcomes them. (Final reflective account)

The reason this course worked so well was due to the fact that whatever problems we faced, we communicated, supported each other, came up with suggestions to overcome our obstacles, and put our ideas into actions. (Final reflective account)

I feel the main difficulty is breaking down the barriers of the traditional learning method and take on this new active role in your own learning. I felt at first it was difficult to trust the teacher and as a class we strived for more direction and were scared to let our own ideas evolve. Having a teacher who was willing to spend time discussing our ideas with us as a class alongside other students built self esteem until all the students were making positive contributions and listening to what others had to say. (Final reflective account)

Discovering what you need to reflect upon, and the route to altering things is an exhilarating journey ... From this we aspire to reach our goals in the future. The past academic year has been an extremely positive one. (Final reflective account)

Comments on ethical dimensions

Whitehead and McNiff (2006) emphasise the need to gain permission from all participants who are involved in a reflective exercise involving self-study. From the outset of this module, the students were aware that I was developing my own learning in this as an action research process, and expressed themselves as willing to fully contribute at each stage of the process. Because they knew that this was not a 'normal' way of leading a module, the students themselves were motivated to evaluate it from their own perspective, and compare it with their experience on other modules. All of them have expressed an interest in collaborating with me to write an article for a peer-reviewed journal that focuses on their experience and learning from the module; and have already presented an account of their experience at a national conference, indicating that they see themselves as full participants in the process.

A further ethical issue that is relevant to this context is raised by Norton (2009, 179) when she asks: 'What happens if (the research we do) shows the institution where we work in a bad light?' This has been an issue I have had to consider. My

response to how I felt about being directed to lead this module contains, I feel, an implicit criticism about how teaching is allocated in the university. I have not explored this within the present article, as I understand that as a member of staff I am required to teach whatever is given to me on my timetable. However, given that my value base includes participation in decision-making and mutual empowerment, I knew that it would be clear to any reader that I would not be happy with how that decision was made; and the outcome was that I had to 'take a risk' in how I dealt with the situation to ensure that I remained true to my values.

From the point of view of my own integrity, I had no choice but to respond in the way I did. The module has had a positive outcome, evidenced, for example, in the quality of the work produced by the students, in the feedback they have given on their formal evaluation sheets, and in their final reflective accounts. I have not been asked to account for my critique of how I came to be responsible for this module in the first place; but were I to be so asked, I would seek to present my experience in a way that would contribute to the learning of the institution as a whole. If the receiver of the feedback did not see it in that way, then I would need to plan a way forward that was in keeping with my values, in the same way that I facilitated the module in a way that was in keeping with my values. A major principle of living educational theory is its commitment to paying attention to the congruence between values and action, which for me would take precedence in any decision-making. Living according to values emerging from a participative worldview within an institutional context that privileges the hierarchical ordering of separate 'subjects' and 'objects' is not always easy, and can raise a number of ethical challenges. A living theory approach to developing our teaching does not in itself dissolve these challenges, but can help to chart a way through them that allows me (and others) to stay true to our living values.

A new epistemology for a new scholarship

Boyer (1990) proposed that there needed to be a new paradigm for scholarly activity in universities by adding the scholarships of teaching, application and integration to that of research. Schön (1995) argued that this would require a new epistemology of practice, which he suggested would take the form of action research. The epistemological significance of this article is demonstrated through the use of a living theory approach to action research that focuses on an integration of teaching, application and discovery.

Boyer suggests that teaching means 'not only transmitting knowledge, but transforming and extending it as well', in ways that stimulate 'active, not passive learning and [encourage] students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning' (1990, 23–4). As a consequence of teaching the students to be reflective practitioners, and to be active participants in their own learning, they in turn facilitated a process whereby they continued to extend those capacities in other group members.

In considering the scholarship of application, Boyer states that it engages the scholar in asking 'How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems?' (1990, 22). Not only was I exploring how I could apply my knowledge of teaching and learning to the challenge of leading a new module, but the students were applying their research to challenges that were real for them. For example, the student with bi-polar disorder was applying the learning he gained from his

experience of music to manage his own mood swings; and to developing an understanding of how the influence of music might be extended in other contexts.

And finally, as I was researching my own practice grounded in values of respect, participation and mutual empowerment, an outcome was the motivation shown by the students to research issues that were meaningful to them in their lives. We were all committed to, 'knowledge for its own sake, to freedom of inquiry and to following, in a disciplined fashion, an investigation wherever it may lead' (Boyer 1990, 17).

Following a living theory approach to the planning and delivery of the module 'active participation in learning' allowed me to inquire into the validity of Schön's claim that action research would contribute to a new epistemology of practice that would support Boyer's proposal for a new paradigm in scholarly activity. My contention is that the outcomes of my living enquiry, including the comments of the students, do support Schön's claim; and demonstrate the value of integrating research, teaching and application as a means of enhancing the quality and significance of students' learning in higher education.

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