Researching into Higher Education: Innovative Research Methods

Friday 8th May 2015 | 10.00-15.00, Institute of Education, London

How does Living Educational Theory research enable individuals to research into their higher education to improve it and contribute to educational knowledge?

Marie Huxtable and Jack Whitehead, University of Cumbria

Introduction

Living Educational Theory researchers ask, research and answer questions of the form, 'how do I improve what I am doing', by generating valid, values-based explanations of their educational influence in their own learning, the learning of others and the learning of the social formations in which their practice is located. Accounts of these explanations constitute an individual's living-educational-theory (Whitehead, 1989). The ontological and relational values that form the researcher's explanatory principles and living standards are clarified as they emerge in the course of their enquiry.

The self that is researched is not an egotistical 'I' but a self that is distinct, unique *and* relational. A sense of self is similar to that expressed by an African sense of Ubuntu often communicated in the phrase, 'i am because we are', together with the phrase 'we are because i am'. We represent this as 'i~we~i'. We use 'i' and 'we' to point to a relationship where individuals and collectives are neither subordinated nor dominant but exist in an inclusive, emancipating and egalitarian relationship. We use ~ to stand for living-boundaries (Huxtable, 2012): trustworthy, respectful, co-creative space, where individuals, collectives and the complex worlds of practice, knowledge and socio-historical cultures they inhabit and embody, touch.

We make a distinction between Living Educational Theory research and a living-educational-theory. The meanings of Living Educational Theory research are paradigmatic in the sense that they are the abstract concepts that define the field of Living Theory research. A living-educational-theory is the unique explanation produced by an individual to explain their educational influence in learning. By 'educational influence' we mean the values-related influence we have in learning that contributes to the flourishing of humanity.

Our innovative, relationally-dynamic, multimedia research methods were developed from educational enquiries within Living Theory research. Whilst Living Theory researchers employ a variety of methods used in other methodologies the innovative methods below were generated specifically in response to issues raised in the generation of living-educational-theories. The

methods included below are: the use of visual data to help a researcher to see themselves as a living contradiction; a process of empathetic resonance; the creation and transformation of writerly into readerly accounts and; a process of validation.

Innovative research methods in researching the higher education of individuals.

i)   The use of visual data

a) Experiencing living contradiction

Much academic writing is governed by Laws of Logic dating back to Aristotle with his Law of Contradiction, which states that two mutually exclusive statements cannot both be true simultaneously. Living Theory researchers can include visual data from their practice to show their 'i' existing as a living contradiction in their explanations of educational influence, as can be seen in Jones (2009).

b) Clarifying values

The ontological and relational values of the practitioner-researcher are embodied and expressed in practice and their meanings are clarified in the course of their emergence as the Living Theory researcher researches their practice to improve it. Visual data can be used to clarify these values as they emerge in the course of an educational enquiry as can be seen in Naidoo (2005) and Huxtable (2012).

ii) Empathetic resonance

We use Sardello's phrase 'empathetic resonance' (Sardello, 2008, p. 13) to communicate a feeling of the immediate presence of the other as we see evidence of their energy-flowing values that give meaning and purpose to their life. Our method of empathetic resonance involves the use of digital video of professional practice. The cursor is moved backwards and forwards along a clip to where the viewer experiences an expression of a value they recognise as flowing with the energy that connects with the meanings that both practitioner and viewer identify as expressing meaning and purpose in the sense of carrying hope for the flourishing of humanity. Further description can be found in Huxtable's paper in Research Intelligence (Huxtable 2009). This innovative method was developed in Living Theory research because of the importance of clarifying, communicating and evolving the embodied expressions of the meanings of values in explanations of educational influence in learning, which text alone cannot do.

iii) Validation

Living Educational Theory research has legitimated an educational epistemology in terms of a unit of appraisal, standards of judgement and logic. The unit of appraisal is the individual's explanation of educational influence. The living

standards of judgment (Laidlaw, 1996) are the embodied, energy-flowing values that are used by the individual, together with their insights from conceptual theories, to explain their educational influences in learning. The living logic (Whitehead, 2013) of each living-theory is the mode of thought, used by each individual, for comprehending the real as rational (Marcuse, 1964, p. 105) in their explanation of educational influence.

Living Theory researchers needed an innovative method of validation to support academic legitimation. This was developed from Habermas' (1976, pp. 2-3) original ideas on communication and validity.

The researcher produces an explanation of their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations that includes the influences of other knowledge in their writings, practice and understandings. They submit it to a validation group with questions about improving: comprehensibility; evidence; authenticity; sociohistorical and sociocultural understandings of the normative and personal contexts that influences practice, understandings and writings.

iv) Transforming writerly into readerly texts

Living Theory researchers have found it necessary to develop an innovative method for deepening and communicating their meanings in their explanations of educational influence. They use a process of creating and transforming writerly into readerly, relationally-dynamic multimedia narratives. These can be accessed from http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml. The method involves the recognition that the writerly account is the researcher's clarification of their meanings to themselves, as these emerge in the course of first creating a multimedia account. The readerly account involves a transformation of the writerly account . This transformation often occurs when what is clarified towards the end of the writerly account is brought to the beginning of the readerly account as a 'framing' to take the reader through the meanings of the living-theory account.

References

Habermas, J. (1976) *Communication and the evolution of society*. London: Heinemann.

Huxtable, M. (2009) How do we contribute to an educational knowledge base? A response to Whitehead and a challenge to BERJ. *Research Intelligence*, 107: 25–26. Retrieved 11 April 2015 from http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/huxtable/mh2009beraRI107.pdf

Huxtable, M. (2012). How do I Evolve Living-Educational-Theory Praxis in Living-boundaries? PhD thesis, University of Bath. Retrieved 15 April 2015 from http://www.actionresearch.net/living/mariehuxtable.shtml

Jones, C. (2009). *How do I improve my practice as an inclusion officer working in a children's service.* MA dissertation, Bath Spa University. Retrieved 15 April 2015 from http://www.actionresearch.net/living/cjmaok/cjma.htm

Laidlaw, M. (1996). *How can I create my own living educational theory as I offer you an account of my educational development?* PhD thesis, University of Bath. Retrieved 1 April 2015 from http://www.actionresearch.net/living/moira2.shtml

Naidoo, M. (2005) *I am because we are (A never ending story). The emergence of a living theory of inclusional and responsive practice.* PhD Thesis, University of Bath. Retrieved 15 April 2015 from http://www.actionresearch.net/living/naidoo.shtml

Sardello, R. (2008) *Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness.* Berkeley: Goldenstone Press.

Whitehead, J. (1989). Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19(1): 41–52. Retrieved 15 April 2015 from http://actionresearch.net/writings/livtheory.html

Whitehead, J. (2013). A living logic for educational research. *In: Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association*, 5th September 2013, University of Sussex. pp. 12. Retrieved 1 April 2015 from http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/bera13/jwbera13phil010913.pdf