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# **A Living Educational Theory approach to professional learning and educational research: Evidence-based explanations for educational influences in learning.**

For presentation at BERA 2024 in the University of Manchester 8-12<sup>th</sup> September 2024

**DRAFT 18<sup>TH</sup> August 2024**

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## **Abstract**

On this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of BERA in 1974 we are questioning the dominant units of appraisal, standards of judgement and logics used to define the nature of educational research. We offer alternative units, standards and logics for defining educational research. These have emerged from a Living Educational Theory approach to professional learning and educational research in evidence-based explanations of educational influences in learning. Our alternative rests on a distinction between education research and educational research. We understand education research to be constituted by research carried out within, or making original contributions to, the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of the disciplines and fields of education such as the philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, economics, politics, leadership and administration of education. We understand educational research to be research that generates valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanations for educational influences in the researcher's learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which the research is located. Our alternative is grounded in an understanding of professionalism that includes the professional responsibility to research questions of the kind, 'How do I enhance the educational influences of my professional practice, with values of human flourishing?'

## **Introduction**

At one level we share BERA's:

'Charitable' Objective - to encourage the pursuit of educational research and its application for both the improvement of practice and the public benefit.

Vision - for educational research to have a profound and positive influence on society across the four nations and internationally.

Mission - to foster engagement with educational research, build capacity for carrying out educational research, and advance quality of educational research.

However, implicit is that, as it is in most publications and research, all agree as to the meaning of 'educational', 'education', 'practice' and 'public benefit' and whose, and what purposes, associated 'research' is intended to serve – and therein lies a fundamental problem. This lack of clarity is one of the causes of an argument, which has raged in BERA

and beyond, about what constitutes 'educational research' as distinguished from 'education research', and what, if any, relationship exists between them. The use of the word 'raged' is deliberate: It is an emotionally charged word. Most people engaged in academic, intellectual and scholarly discourses concerned with 'education', are not only cognitively invested. It has long been acknowledged that; ontology, methodology, axiology and epistemology, are inter-related. It is now generally recognised that a person's 'positionality', created, for example, by their worldview, beliefs and values (e.g. Holmes, 2020), is also influential in shaping their practice and research and that of others.

Words not only describe what is. In the course of their use, words also bring a reality into existence, as Lakoff's (2004) idea of using language that evokes particular 'deep frames' and Orwell's (1949) novel, 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' illustrate. So, it is very important that BERA, if it is to realise its vision and fulfil its intention, of representing a "community of scholars, practitioners and everyone engaged in and with educational research both nationally and internationally" 50 years after its genesis, is clear about the meaning and the social and political implications of the words they use.

So, to 'walk our own talk' we begin by clarifying our meaning of 'education, a word that forms the bedrock of the argument presented in this paper: 'Education' – a life-long, life-wide educational process of learning to live humanely a satisfying, socially productive and worthwhile life with values of human flourishing, helping others to do so too, and contributing to Humanity, our species, learning to flourish as a benign presence in and of the world.

We intend to our paper to contribute by:

- i) Distinguishing between educational research and education research and pointing to some of the implications for members of the BERA community.
- ii) Clarifying the responsibilities of professional practitioners beyond doing what is required to join and maintain membership of a professional body and the implications for members of the BERA community developing their professionalism.

The structure of the paper follows that in the BERA 2024 guidelines for the submission of proposals in relation to: Focus; Originality; Validity and Rigour and Significance.

### **Focus**

We accept the assumption that taking research seriously requires a thorough knowledge of the context in which one is conducting the research, including the [academic] intellectual [and scholarly] context, the historical context and the political context (Biesta et al., 2023, p. 1139).

A focus of our response acknowledges the importance of clarifying meanings of what constitutes 'the Disciplines of Education', 'the Discipline of Education', and 'the Discipline of Educational Enquiry' in relation to the purpose, creation and nature of 'educational theory'.

*A disciplinary base for educational research?*

In the 1960s there was an influential attempt to replace, what Peters (1966, p7) referred to, as the 'undifferentiated mush' that counted as educational theory, with educational theory constituted by the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education (Peters, 1963/1980). A limitation in this approach was pointed out by Hirst (1983), one of its main proponents, when he acknowledged a mistake in thinking that justifications of practical principles in individual activities and practices were:

... at best pragmatic maxims having a first crude and superficial justification in practice that in any rationally developed theory would be replaced by principles with more fundamental, theoretical justification. (p. 18)

The debates about the distinction between education research and educational research and its significance have continued in various contexts as illustrated by papers by McCulloch (2002), Bridges (2006, 2019), Zapp et al (2017), Little et al (2018), Keiner (2019). It has also continued in BERA. For example, see Whitehead's (Whitehead, 1989) Presidential Address to the British Educational Research Association, and Whitty's in 2005 (Whitty, 2005). Whitehead's positionality include that of a professional educator and practitioner-researcher, Whitty's included that of a professional sociologist researching in 'education'. Whitehead used the term 'educational research' with respect to creating knowledge that enhances learning with values of human flourishing, whereas Whitty used the term 'education research' to characterise the 'field' whilst reserving the term 'educational research' for work that is consciously geared towards improving policy and practice as prescribed by the government of the day. Whitty acknowledge that if his distinction was taken up it would mean that BERA, as the British *Educational* Research Association would have to change its name to the British Education Research Association!

In answering his question, 'Why has educational research been so uneducational?' Torbert (1981) proposed a new model in which the educational researcher is an interactive participant rather than a detached observer. Torbert considered this new model of collaborative inquiry as an opportunity for studying the self as a professional educator, in a way that would require a new politics and a new ethics. Whitehead (1999) took up the challenge by proposing a new Discipline of Educational Enquiry generated from researching questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'. To avoid confusion between the 'One' discipline of education, that could hold ideas together under a general idea, and the 'Many' disciplines of education, such as the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education, Whitehead generated a discipline of educational enquiry to hold both the One and the Many together

#### *Values and Evidence-based explanations of educational influences in learning*

Whitehead (2019) has made the following distinction between education research and educational research: Education researchers conduct their research within the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of the Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy and History of Education, whereas educational researchers generate valid, values-laden and evidence-based explanations for their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which the practice is located. Whitehead (1985) coined the term living-educational-theories for these explanations to

distinguish them from theories of education generated within the Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, History of Education and other Disciplines.

Our justification for encouraging professional practitioners to develop their knowledge, understanding and practice of Living Educational Theory Research is that in doing so they realise their responsibilities as professional practitioners to hold themselves to account for their practice and to contribute the valid, values-laden and evidence-based explanations for their educational influences in learning to a global knowledgebase for the benefit of all. Living Educational Theory Research, as a form of professional practitioner educational research generating academic, intellectual and scholarly knowledge, has now been well established globally over 50 years. This claim is supported by reference to over 60 evidence-based and values-laden explanations by professional practitioners for the educational influences in their own professional learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which the practice is located, with values of human flourishing. Examples of these legitimated by universities around the world are freely available from <https://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml>

### *Knowledge of the context*

There are two insights from Wittgenstein's (1953) that we draw on. The first is from section 43, "The meaning of a word is its use in the language". The second is from section 410, "'I' is not the name of a person, nor 'here' of a place, and 'this' is not a name. But they are connected with names. Names are explained by means of them. It is also true that it is characteristic of physics not to use these words." This is relevant in focusing on researching questions of the kind, 'How do I improve **this** process of education, **here**?', means including 'I', 'this' and 'here' in our contributions to educational knowledge.

In the generation and sharing of evidence-based and values-laden explanations for educational influences in learning we understand the importance of contextual influences, especially in terms of sociohistorical and sociocultural influences. Hence, we hold ourselves accountable for explicating our understandings of these influences in generating and sharing our knowledge of context in our explanations of educational influences in learning.

We accept the Australian Council of Professions' (2003, p. 1) definition of a profession as a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards to which they hold themselves accountable. They are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others. (p.1). We make a clear distinction between continuing professional development that is grounded in the requirements of professional organisations and continual professional development that is grounded in a sustained commitment to realising values of human flourishing in practice. We accept that being a professional includes conforming to the professional standards of a professional body. We extend this idea of being professional to include the acceptance of a responsibility to continuously improve the educational influences in one's professional practice through research that can contribute to the global educational knowledge base of education.

As professional practitioners, living in England and practicing in international contexts, we identify with and hold ourselves accountable in terms of the statement of the Secretary General of the United Nations (Guterres, 2023, p.27) on the need for collective action in a global context for transforming education (GENE, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). We engage with the European Declaration on Global Education to 2050 with its definition of Global Education as empowering people to understand, imagine, hope and act to bring about a world of social and climate justice, peace, solidarity, equity and equality, planetary sustainability, and international understanding. (Dublin Declaration, 2023). We also hold ourselves accountable to the principles of human flourishing in the Magna Charta Universitatum (MCU 2020) including the point that teaching and research should be inseparable, with students engaged in the search for knowledge and greater understanding. In our work and research we are focused on contributing to the global spread of knowledge, understanding and practice of a Living Educational Theory Research approach to professional learning and development. We do so to influence and contribute to the educational influences of these Global, European and Higher Education contexts.

The clarifications and communications involve both ostensive expressions of meaning and lexical definitions of meaning in making public the knowledge-claims. The practitioner collects and analyses data to clarify their embodied values of human flourishing that gives their practice purpose and meaning, as they emerge in the course of their research, identify where the practitioner experiences themselves as a 'living contradiction' and/or these values are contradicted by others, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the changes they make to their practice to improve matters.

In generating a valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanation for their educational influence in learning, practitioners create their own, living-educational-theory methodology. Their explanations for educational influences in learning also constitute original contributions to knowledge. These original, epistemological contributions are focused on the units, logics and standards of judgement in the knowledge-claims. We understand logic as the mode of thought appropriate for comprehending the real as rational (Marcuse, 1964, p. 105). Using values, as- standards of judgements in evaluating the validity of knowledge-claims, involves both the clarification and communication of shared meanings and a justification that these values are indeed values that carry hope for the flourishing of Humanity.

In analysing the rationality of living-educational-theories we have found it necessary to define the living-logics that define their rationalities. In explanations of educational influences in learning we believe that we are transcending the debates between formal and dialectical traditions in which adherents to the rationality of one of these traditions in conflict denies the rationality of the other. In the living-logic, of an explanation of educational influence in learning the rationality, includes insights from both dialectical and formal traditions (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2024)

### **Originality**

The originality of accounts of Living Educational Theory Research has been recognized in the award of doctorates for these explanations for educational influences in learning by

universities around the world. This originality is both methodological and epistemological. It includes clarifying and communicating the meanings of the embodied values that are expressed in explorations by professional practitioners of the epistemological implications of asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, 'How do I enhance the educational influences of my practice in the learning of social formations to realise its *raison d'être* with values of human flourishing, the learning of those who comprise them and in my own learning to realise my responsibilities as a professional practitioner?.

### *Methodological*

In much educational research the researcher chooses a methodological approach before the commencement of the research (Creswell, 2007). In Living Educational Theory Research, the researcher generates their original methodology in the course of researching the implications of asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my educational practice and generate a valid explanation of my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which my practice is located?'. A living-educational-theory methodology is generated in the course of researching an educational process of living as fully as possible the individual's unique constellation of values that constitute their values of human flourishing.

### *Epistemological*

The epistemological originality is grounded in the fact that each practitioner-researcher has a unique constellation of values that they use as explanatory principles in evaluating their claims to have improved their practice and for evaluating the validity of their knowledge-claims (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2024).

In generating a valid, evidence and values laden, explanation of educational influence in learning, each practitioner-researcher creates their own original, living-educational-theory as an explanation of educational influences in learning that constitutes their original contribution to knowledge. These original, epistemological contributions are focused on the unit of appraisal the logics and the standards of judgement in the knowledge-claims. Over 60 of these living-educational-theories that have been accredited by universities around the world for the originality of their contributions to educational knowledge can be accessed from <https://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml> .

The originality of the unit of appraisal is grounded in the educational researcher's responsibility for their own professional learning and development. This involves asking, research and answer questions of the kind 'How do I improve my professional practice and explain my educational influences in learning?' This responsibility includes the generation and sharing of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which their practice is located and that forms the unit of appraisal in their claim to knowledge.

The originality of the standards of judgement is in the use of each educational researcher's unique constellation of embodied values of human flourishing that they use as the living standards of judgement they use for evaluating the validity of knowledge-claims. This

involves both the clarification and communication of their embodied meanings of life-affirming and life-enhancing values and a justification that these values are those that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

### **Validity and Rigour**

Irrespective of the Discipline within which knowledge is created, ensuring that the knowledge-claims are tested for academic, intellectual and scholarly validity and rigour is very important. We use insights from Popper (1975) and Habermas (1976) when strengthening and testing the validity of claims to have created knowledge with values of human flourishing that contributes to the global growth of an educational knowledgebase. We agree with Popper that the objectivity of scientific statements lies in the fact that they can be inter-subjectively tested. We also agree with Popper that inter-subjective testing is part of the more general idea of inter-subjective criticism. That is the idea of the mutual rational control by critical discussion (Popper, 1975, p.44). We use this idea in validation groups to both make a judgement about the validity of an explanation of educational influence and to offer recommendations on how to strengthen the validity of explanations.

From Habermas' (1976) ideas on social validity, in communications and the evolution of society, we use validation groups to strengthen the research and practice as the research progresses and then to evaluate the validity of knowledge-claims made in the account of the research. 'Peer validation groups' are formed by the practitioner to ask them to make a judgement about the validity of an account and to help to strengthen the validity of draft accounts of the practitioner's explanations for their educational influences in learning by asking questions such as:

- How could I improve the comprehensibility of my explanation?
- How can I strengthen the evidence I use to justify my knowledge-claims?
- How could I deepen and extend my socio-cultural and socio-historical understandings of their influence in my knowledge-claim?
- How could I enhance the authenticity of my explanation to show that I am living my values of human flourishing as fully as possible?

Such questions are rephrased when testing the validity of knowledge-claims in an account of the research:

- Is my explanation comprehensible?
- Do I provide sufficient evidence to justify my knowledge-claims?
- Have I given sufficient details of the socio-cultural and socio-historical, political, and academic, intellectual and scholarly context of the research?
- Have I given sufficient evidence of the authenticity of my claim I am holding myself to account to contribute to the learning with values of human flourishing of the social formation, which is the context of my practice, those who comprise it and my own learning to realise my responsibilities as a professional practitioner to contribute to the flourishing of Humanity?



Both validity and rigour are important in justifying the validity of knowledge-claims made from within a Living Educational Theory Research perspective. We use both insights from Popper (1975) and Habermas (1976) to strengthen the validity of knowledge-claims. We can also draw on Winter's (1989) 6 criteria of rigour to strengthen the rigour of knowledge claims. These criteria are reflexive and dialectical critique, risk, plural structure, multiple resource and theory-practice transformation. Whilst we implicitly hold these 6 criteria in enhancing the rigour of our research there are researchers such as Kok (1991) who has provided a good example of the explicit application of the 6 criteria in evaluating the rigour of her research.

### **Significance of the research**

The significance of the research is based on a definition of Educational Research in which researchers generate valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanations for educational influences in the researcher's learning the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which the research takes place. We have presented an evidence-based argument (Whitehead, 1999) that educational enquiry is a discipline with an epistemology that is distinguished by its units of appraisal, logic and standards of judgement that are grounded in values of human flourishing. It includes the recognition by the educational researcher that they are researching their experiences as living-contradictions in holding certain values whilst denying these in practice, in order to live their values of human flourishing as fully as they can. In this research they create their living-educational-theory as a valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanation of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which their practice is located. Such explanations draw insights from the disciplines of education to enhance the validity of their explanations of educational influences in learning with values of human flourishing. They do this without being subsumed by any discipline either individually or in any combination. Such living-educational-theories can be accessed from <https://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml> and the archive and current issue of EJOLTs (2023) at <https://ejolts.net/node/394>. The 2023 issue of EJOLTs includes contributions from Malaysia, Nepal, South Africa, Canada and the UK.

We have explained that the significance of the research is based on the following distinction between educational research and education research. Education research is research carried out within the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of the forms and fields of education. Educational research generates valid, evidence and values-laden explanations of educational influences in the researcher's learning the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which the research takes place. Whilst education research is still very much a field and not a discipline (Biesta et al. 2023, p. 1134), we have presented an evidence-based argument (Whitehead, 1999) that educational enquiry is a discipline with an epistemology that is distinguished by its own unit of appraisal, living-logic and standards of judgement that are grounded in values of human flourishing. The explanations of living-educational-theories draw insights from the disciplines of education without being subsumed by any discipline either individually or in any combination. Such living-educational-theories can be accessed from <https://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml> and the searchable archive, advice for

authors and lexicon at <http://www.spanglefish.com/ejolts/index.asp>. The 2023 issue of EJOLTs includes contributions from Malaysia, Nepal, South Africa, Canada and the UK.

The significance of the research can be related to BERA (2018) statement on ‘Close-To-Practice Educational Research’. BERA has adopted the term ‘close-to-practice (CtP) research’ as a shorthand for any research that focusses on educational practices in order to better understand or improve them. BERA offered this statement to serve as a shared reference-point for high quality research, conducted within diverse research traditions. In this diversity they share the central aim of making a contribution to educational practice. In it, we define high-quality close-to-practice research as follows. We agree that the research process will be well documented and the conclusions that are drawn will be appropriate to the strengths and weaknesses of the design, theory and methods used. We also agree that such research will draw upon practitioners’ and researchers’ reflections on both practice and context.

Where we differ from BERA’s definition of CtP is in defining a Living Educational Theory Research approach as a professional practice. In this approach professionals ask, research and answer questions of the kind, ‘How do I improve my professional practice, generate and share explanations of my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which my practice is located?’. This means that the practice is not close-to-practice. It is a practice in which professionals use a Living Educational Theory Research approach to their professional learning and development. In our definition of professionalism, professionals continuously seek to improve their professional practice and to generate valid evidence and values-laden explanations for their educational influence. These educational influences are in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which their practice is located, with values of human flourishing.

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