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Enacting Educational Reflexivity in Supervising Research into Creating Living-Educational-Theories

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Abstract

To show how enacting reflexivity in research supervision in creating a living-educational-theory can address the notion of self in ways that go beyond navel-gazing in both improving practice and generating knowledge in making scholarly, academically legitimate, and original contributions to educational knowledge. This paper on educational reflexivity in supervision stresses the importance of clarifying and communicating the values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity in explanations of educational influence from self-study researchers. In the same way that not all learning is educational, not all reflexivity supports the values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. Hence, the paper is focused on educational reflexivity in supervision to emphasise the importance of living these values as fully as possible in the creation of living-educational-theories.

Keywords: educational reflexivity; supervising research; living-educational-theories

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Introduction

This contribution responds to the aims of the special issue by foregrounding the relational dimensions of enacting reflexivity through critical perspectives in educational research into research supervision. It includes an engagement with self-study research, across academic disciplines and institutional contexts in South Africa and internationally, in grappling with complex questions such as, "How does reflexivity influence my research supervision?" It includes a living-theory approach to educational research that contributes to both a representation of the social world and to influencing the social world in a way that enhances the flow of values that contribute to the flourishing of humanity with *ubuntu* (Charles, 2007). An English translation is "I am because we are". More details of *ubuntu* are given below.

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A living-educational-theory is an explanation produced by a self-study researcher to explain the educational influence in his or her own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations in which we live, work, and research (Whitehead, 2008, 2012a). The self studied is the ontological, relational self whose explanations and standards of judgment are constituted by that self's life-affirming and life-enhancing values. These are clarified and communicated as they emerge through the research.

Living Theory research is distinguished from a living-educational-theory in terms of the abstract, general principles that can be used to characterise this approach to research. In contrast to these general principles a living-educational-theory is the unique explanation produced by an individual. I shorten living-educational-theory to living-theory in this paper.

A distinction is also drawn between reflection and reflexivity. By reflection I mean a process of consciously thinking about our experiences, feelings, actions, and responses through which we learn in self-study-enquiries of the kind, "How do I improve what I am doing?" By reflexivity I mean a process through which we clarify and communicate the ontological values we use to give our lives meaning and purpose, and which form the explanatory principles and living standards of judgment in our explanations of educational influence in self-study enquiries of the "How do I improve what I am doing?" kind.

Approach

The approach generated through enacting educational reflexivity into research supervision, is known as Living Theory research (Whitehead, 2008, 2012b). This is grounded in what Dadds and Hart (2001, p. 169) referred to as methodological inventiveness. In this approach, self-study researchers explore the implications of asking, researching, and answering questions of the kind, "How do I improve what I am doing?" The "I" is a relational "I" perhaps best represented as *i*~*we* to recognise the mutual influence of an individual with other/s in relational contexts. Insights into an ubuntu way of being (Mandela, 2006) are drawn on to distinguish the values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. My living-theory methodology draws insights from approaches such as action research and others such as those Creswell (2007) summarised: phenomenology, case study, narrative inquiry, ethnography, and grounded theory. The approach has much in common with autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bocher, 2011, p. 273) in that the researcher seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. It differs with its emphasis on the priority given to the knowledge-creating capacities of the individual. A living-theory methodology also engages in making contributions to the generation of a culture of inquiry (DeLong, 2002, 2013, 2014) as well as understanding cultural experience and influence.

The approach also draws on digitalised visual data from professional practice in a process of empathetic resonance (Whitehead, 2012b). Huxtable (2009) described how this can be used to clarify and communicate the meanings of the embodied expressions of energy-flowing, ontological values that the self-study researcher uses to give meaning and purpose to existence and to explain educational influences in learning. This approach informs many living-theories, such as those in the December 2013 issue of the *Educational Journal of Living Theories*. That issue, with contributions from DeLong (2013), Campbell (2013), Griffin (2013) and myself (Whitehead, 2013) is particularly relevant to this paper on research supervision because it explains how I influenced, as supervisor, DeLong's living-theory doctorate and how DeLong influenced, as supervisor, the living-theory master's dissertations of both Campbell and Griffin.

I am also using the values I identify as carrying hope for the flourishing of humanity, to distinguish what I mean by *a critical perspective* in my research supervision. By a critical perspective, I am not meaning the application of critical theory (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) to the generation of a living-educational-theory. This is because of a limitation in the application of any pre-existing theory as the dominating explanation in the generation of a living-educational-theory. In generating a living-educational-theory, an individual

transcends the limitations of applying abstract concepts to explain his or her educational influence. An individual's living-educational-theory is unique and irreplaceable. It can draw insights from the conceptual frameworks of existing theories but always engages with these frameworks in a creative and critical way.

Being Critical and Enhancing Reflexivity

In enacting reflexivity in creating a living-educational-theory it is always possible to strengthen the objectivity of the explanation where objectivity is understood, in Popper's (1975, p. 45) terms, to be grounded in intersubjective criticism in the mutual rational controls of critical discussion. To overcome limitations in the subjective grounding of knowledge claims, and criticisms of navel-gazing or being merely anecdotal, I use four questions with my students. These are derived from Habermas' (1976, pp. 2–3) four criteria of social validity in validation groups of between three and eight peers.

The questions are:

- 1) How can I enhance the comprehensibility of my explanation?
- 2) How can I strengthen the evidence I use to justify my assertions or claims to knowledge?
- 3) How can I deepen and extend my sociohistorical and sociocultural understandings of their influence in my writings and practice?
- 4) How can I improve the authenticity of my explanations in showing over time and interaction that I am truly committed to living as fully as possible the ontological values I claim to hold?

As well as stressing the importance of enhancing social validity in relation to the explanations produced by my students, I always stress the importance of their personal responsibility for telling the truth as they see it, in terms of Polanyi's (1958) post-critical philosophy. In this philosophy, an individual decides to understand the world from his or her point of view "as a person claiming originality and exercising . . . judgment responsibly with universal intent" (p. 327). In other words, enhancing reflexivity involves both a personal and democratic commitment to being critical. The democratic processes of enhancing criticism in a validation group, using the above questions, do not determine the truth of an explanation. The individual researchers accept responsibility for telling truth as they see it with the help of insights from a validation group.

The critical perspective I am using is focused on the use of the ontological values of the individual. These are the values individuals use to give meaning and purpose to their lives and to which they hold themselves accountable. These values are the explanatory principles they use to explain their educational influences in learning, and the critical principles they use in evaluating the validity of their claims to be improving their practice. This is not to deny the value of critical theory in unmasking the political, economic, and cultural hegemonies that can distort our understandings of the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences in our writings and practice. It is, however, to insist that living-educational-theories transcend the limitations in critical theory to explain the educational influences of individuals in their own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations in which we live, work, and research.

Results

The following brief overview of the results is focused on the aim of showing how enacting reflexivity in supervising living-educational-theories for higher degrees can address the notion of self in both improving

practice and generating knowledge in making scholarly, academically legitimate, and original contributions to educational knowledge.

The evidence to justify this claim is focused on the living-educational-theory doctorates, including my own, that have been legitimated as original contributions to educational knowledge. I include the original contribution in my doctorate because of the principles I clarified and communicated in distinguishing my educational reflexivity. I also include this contribution because of the importance my students have given to seeing me research my own practice alongside their own research as I practice and evolve the living of the principles of reflexivity that I bring into my supervision.

All Living Theory researchers enact reflexivity in clarifying and communicating their meanings of the embodied expressions of the ontological values that form the explanatory principles in their explanations of influence. In supervising living-theory research, and in clarifying and communicating these meanings, I draw on Feyerabend's (1975, p. 17) insight that meanings are clarified in the course of their emergence in practice. My focus on the importance of life-enhancing values as explanatory principles is because they are the values that individuals use to give their lives meaning and purpose and to which they hold themselves accountable for living as fully as possible in their practice.

The evidence for these claims is publically available from the online database at <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml> . It includes more than 30 of the living-theory doctorates I supervised to successful completion between 1996 and 2012 that explicitly enact this reflexivity. The living-theory doctorates of Phillips (2011) and Charles (2007) could be of particular interest to researchers in South Africa because of the inclusion of ubuntu ways of being as explanatory principles and living standards of judgment to which the researchers held themselves accountable.

I shall now focus on how I enact educational reflexivity in my supervision as I explain my educational influence in my own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations in which the research is located. These explanations are related. In explaining my educational influence in the learning of others, I recognise the validity of including insights from what I have learned of my educational influence in my own learning. For example, I stress the importance of the influence of social formations in the learning of myself and of others. This is because whatever we do is located in particular social contexts that influence what we do; hence the importance of including an understanding of the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences in explanations of educational influences in learning.

The relationship between these three explanations has been a continuously evolving characteristic of my enacting reflexivity in my supervision.

i) Enacting educational reflexivity in explaining my educational influence in my own learning.

Here are three principles that distinguish the enactment of my educational reflexivity. I include these in explaining my educational influences in my own learning and that I bring into my supervision. The first is recognising my "I" as a living contradiction through the use of visual data. By a living contradiction, I mean that one's "I" in exploring the implications of asking, researching, and answering a question of the kind, "How do I improve what I am doing?", holds together the experience of holding an ontological value, and of negating the value. It is important to recognise that the experience of existing as a living contradiction may be grounded in a social context where the contradiction is not from self but from others or from social formations.

The second principle is the decision of personal knowledge above—taken from Polanyi (1958). This principle is particularly important in enacting educational reflexivity by helping to resist the hegemonic

pressures in academic cultures to explain one's own life and influences in terms of the abstractions of conceptual theories.

The third principle is the use of multimedia narratives for clarifying and communicating the meanings of embodied expressions of ontological values as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influences in learning.

a) Recognising "I" as a living contradiction.

I cannot overemphasise the importance of recognising oneself as a living contradiction in one's practice. In my case, I believed that I had established enquiry learning in my science classrooms when teaching science in a London comprehensive school during 1972–73. The inspectorate provided me with a video-camera and recorder and asked that I explore its potential as an educational aid in the science department where I was Head of Science. I turned the video on myself and viewed myself teaching science. My shock in seeing myself as a living contradiction was in recognising that I believed that I had established enquiry learning in which pupils were asking their own questions and that I was responding to their questions. The video showed that I was providing the pupils with the questions and that not one of the pupils was asking their own question. This triggered my imagination to think of ways in which I could improve my practice, and within eight weeks I could show evidence that some of the pupils were asking their own questions and that I was responding to their questions. This quality of reflexivity in learning to question my own assumption has remained with me and I emphasise it in my research supervision.

b) Learning to resist the imposition of abstract conceptual theories on explanations of educational influence.

My second experience of enacting educational reflexivity was in the mixed ability exercise in science (Whitehead, 1976a, 1976b) when I researched, with six teachers over some 18 months, improving learning for 11–14 year olds in mixed ability science groups. In conversation with the teachers, I asked about their concerns and what mattered to them. Martin Hyman, one of the teachers, explained:

By the time they come to us a lot of people have lost their trust, confidence and eagerness to learn. We have to start trying to get it back and we succeed only partially. All the children, even the non-exam children are bound by the constraints of teachers who feel obliged to cover exam syllabuses. I think this is where the confidence goes. (as cited in Whitehead, 1976b, p. 3)

Hyman highlighted the importance of trust, confidence, and eagerness to learn as values that he held himself accountable to, and which distinguished his reflexivity.

My own learning in this research was focused on a mistake I made in my first research report (Whitehead, 1976a) in which I explained the learning of the teachers in terms of academic models of teaching and learning, evaluation, and innovation. My academic colleagues praised the report for the way I had used these academic models. After I submitted this report to the teachers, they all commented that they understood the way I had used the academic models but that they couldn't see themselves in the report. Immediately this criticism was made, I could see that it was justified. I had replaced the explanatory principles used by the teachers with the abstract conceptualisations of academic models. With the help of Paul Hunt, a former postgraduate education student in his first year of teaching, we reconstructed the report (Whitehead, 1976b) in a way that the other teachers accepted as containing valid explanations of their practice and learning. The constraining power of academic cultures to influence the explanations of individuals within the theoretical frameworks of abstract theories continues (Whitehead, 2014a).

This second report also explicated, for the first time in my research, an action– reflection cycle for exploring the implications of asking, researching, and answering questions of the kind, “How do I improve what I am doing?” This action–reflection cycle was constituted by:

- expressing concerns when values are not being lived as fully as they could be;
- revealing the values that explain why the individual is concerned;
- developing and choosing an action plan to enact;
- acting and gathering data to make a judgment on educational influence;
- evaluating the educational influences in learning;
- producing an explanation of educational influences in learning and submitting this to a validation group.

This action–reflection cycle marks a transformation from reflection to reflexivity in explicating explanatory principles. The action–reflection cycle was used to explain *how* the research was carried out. The action–reflection cycles were also useful in clarifying and communicating the meanings of the embodied energy-flowing values in the course of their emergence in practice. These values were used as explanatory principles in explaining the educational influences of individuals in their own learning and in the learning of others.

c) Using multimedia narratives with digital video for clarifying and communicating meanings of embodied expressions of ontological values.

I have analysed and explained the enacting of my educational reflexivity in the creation of my living-educational-theory, as an explanation of my educational influence in my own learning, in several publications (Whitehead, 1985, 1989, 1999, 2008, 2013). In the most recent (Whitehead, 2013) I focused on the use of a multimedia narrative to communicate the meaning of the expression of embodied values of *loved into learning* with Jacqueline DeLong, Liz Campbell and Cathy Griffin:

We do not want to overload you with all the material in the following video, but we hope that you will access minutes 11:14 to 12:33 of Jackie, Liz, and Jack in a conversation about our inquiry and presentation for the American Educational Research Association (AERA) 2013.

Video 1: Loved into Learning A

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MPXeJMc0gU>



During minutes 11:14 to 12:33, the conversation consists of:

Jack: Your phrase, loved into learning . . . you experienced this being loved into learning with Jackie and possibly some of the other participants on the master's program.

[Liz is nodding and smiling.]

Jack (11:34): Could I just check that? It seemed very important because I don't think Jackie and myself have focused on Jackie's influence in those terms yet it seemed really important to you that you had experienced that loved into learning that you were able then to communicate, I think, to your own students.

Liz (12:01): That's exactly the point I was trying to make, Jack, and I have written about it before in different pieces in my master's and in something I did in your class, Jackie.

Jackie: Yes.

Liz: I don't know if I actually called it loved into learning, but that is my concise way of explaining what happened.

I was introduced to the idea of being loved into learning in a conversation where Cathy and Liz explained Jackie's influence in their learning for their master's degree in terms of being loved into learning.

Video 2: Loved into Learning B

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcDSqryJ6Jg>



The image above at 1:35 minutes of the 9:45 minute clip above is taken where we are talking about being loved into learning. As I move the cursor backwards and forwards around 1:35 minutes I experience the

empathetic resonance (Huxtable, 2009) of Liz's, Cathy's, Jackie's, and my own energy-flowing value of being loved into learning. To communicate my embodied expression of meaning I need both the visual data showing the expressions above and my linguistic expression of being loved into learning. I am now bringing this meaning into my understanding of a culture of inquiry. Liz and Cathy also brought into Jackie's awareness the quality of loving into learning they experienced in Jackie's tutoring. (Whitehead, 2013, p. 14–15)

ii) Enacting educational reflexivity in explaining my educational influence in supervising my students' research programmes.

In explaining my educational influence as a supervisor, I focus on my recognition and communication of the relational and ontological values the students use to give meaning and purpose to their life. By sharing my intuitions and insights about the students' expression of these values, their responses help me to evaluate their validity. The meanings of these values often take months to clarify and communicate in the course of their emergence in the practice of the enquiry. The importance of these meanings is that they often provide the explanatory principles and living standards of judgment that distinguish the student's original contribution to knowledge.

Take, for example, Eden Charles' (2007) doctoral enquiry, *How can I bring ubuntu as a living standard of judgement into the academy? Moving beyond decolonisation through societal reidentification and guiltless recognition*.

In the abstract below, I believe that there is clear evidence of the influence of my ideas in the language of "a living-theory thesis", "how I can improve my practice", "a living standard of judgment", and "visual narratives are used to represent and help to communicate the inclusional meanings of these living standards of judgment". In my dialogues with my students, I enact my educational reflexivity by including these meanings, as principles, in all my supervisions. Students' integration of these ideas in their thesis in no way detracts from the uniqueness and originality of their own living-theory and contribution to knowledge. Part of the enactment of my educational reflexivity is in discerning the unique constellation of values and understandings that distinguish this originality and in sharing these understandings with my students.

The originality of Charles' thesis is in bringing ubuntu, as a living standard of judgement, into the academy and in showing how the genesis of a living-theory can move beyond decolonisation through societal reidentification and guiltless recognition. These ideas may have particular significance to South African researchers because of the focus on ubuntu.

Abstract

This is a living-theory thesis which traces my engagement in seeking answers to my question that focuses on how I can improve my practice as someone seeking to make a transformational contribution to the position of people of African origin. In the course of my enquiry I have recognised and embraced Ubuntu, as part of an African cosmology, both as my living practice and as a living standard of judgement for this thesis. It is through my Ubuntu way of being, enquiring and knowing that my original contribution to knowledge has emerged.

Two key approaches are identified and described in depth: 'guiltless recognition' and 'societal re-identification'. These emerge from a perception of self that is distinct within but not isolated in an awareness of 'inclusionality'. They are intimately related concepts. Guiltless recognition allows us to move beyond the guilt and blame that maintains separation and closes down possibility. It provides a basis for action and conception that moves us towards the imagined possibilities of societal reidentification with Ubuntu.

Both 'guiltless recognition' and 'societal reidentification' embody strategic and epistemological practices that move away from severing, colonising thought, towards ways of being that open up new possibilities for people of African origin and for humanity generally.

Visual narratives are used to represent and help to communicate the inclusional meanings of these living standards of judgement. The narratives are focused on my work as a management consultant and include my work with Black managers. They explain my educational influence in creating and sustaining the Sankofa Learning Centre for Black young people in London. They include my living as a Black father seeking to remain present and of value to my son within a dominant discourse/context in which this is a contradiction to the prevalent stereotype. (Charles, 2007)

I think it worth stressing that in enacting my educational reflexivity in explaining my educational influence in supervising my students' research programmes, I share ideas from my own research programme into living-educational-theories that I believe may be helpful to students in the generation of their own. I take care to explain to every student that there is a danger they should consider: of me unwittingly imposing my ideas on them because of the differential power relation between student and supervisor. I am thinking here of the ideas that distinguish the principles in my educational reflexivity and that are worth emphasising:

- generating a living-educational-theory as individuals' explanation of their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations that influence the practice and the writings;
- exploring the implications of asking, researching, and answering questions of the kind, "How do I improve what I am doing?" in which "I" can exist as a living contradiction;
- using visual narratives with digital technology to clarify and communicate the meanings of embodied expressions of ontological and relational values in explanatory principles and living standards of judgment;
- submitting explanations of educational influence to a validation group of between three and eight peers with questions such as those described earlier.

The fact that so many (some 32, between 1996 and 2012) of my doctoral students have been recognised by internal and external examiners as making their own original contributions to knowledge is an indication that I have succeeded in enacting my educational reflexivity in a way that supported, rather than constrained, my students' creativity (Pound, Laidlaw, & Huxtable, 2009).

iii) Enacting educational reflexivity in explaining educational influences in the learning of social formations.

Individuals cannot avoid the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences in their practice and their writings. Hence, it is important to demonstrate, in valid explanations of educational influence, that the individual is aware of these influences. This awareness is supported by the third question in a validation group: "How can I deepen and extend my understandings of the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences in my writing and practice?" In helping me to focus on this aspect of enacting educational reflexivity, I am indebted to the following insight offered by the late Susan Noffke about the process of generating living-educational-theory:

As vital as such a process of self-awareness is to identifying the contradictions between one's espoused theories and one's practices, perhaps because of its focus on individual learning, it only begins to address the social basis of personal belief systems. While such efforts can further a kind of collective agency (McNiff, 1988), it is a sense of agency built on ideas of society as a collection of autonomous individuals. As such, it seems incapable of addressing social issues in terms of the interconnections between personal identity and the claim of experiential knowledge, as well as power and privilege in society (Dolby, 1995; Noffke, 1991). The process of personal transformation through the examination of practice and self-reflection may be a necessary part of social change, especially in education; it is however, not sufficient. (Noffke, 1997, p. 329)

I agree with Noffke's criticism, which focuses on the need to address social issues in terms of power and privilege in society and the interconnections between personal identity and the claim of experiential knowledge.

In enacting educational reflexivity in the generation of living-educational-theories, it is not possible for every individual to address all of the social issues—economic, political, sociohistorical, and sociocultural—that influence our enquiries. Many practitioner–researchers understandably focus on making changes in everyday workplace and community contexts without engaging with these wider social influences. Yet, as Susan Noffke has pointed out above, we will need to collectively engage in such issues if we are to contribute to both personal and social transformations in enhancing the flow of values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

One complex value that all practitioner–researchers could hold themselves accountable to living as fully as possible is that of living global citizenship (Coombs, Potts, & Whitehead 2014). Each one of us is likely to give our own unique meaning to living global citizenship because of the particular constellation of values we use to give meaning and purpose to our lives. In fulfilling my own responsibility to this complex value, I bring it into my supervisions and public presentations on my research. For example, in a keynote presentation in Singapore on improving learning and practice in the workplace through Living Theory research (Whitehead, 2014b), I emphasised the importance of focusing on workplace learning in the creation of living theories with values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. This inclusion of such values is of paramount importance in cultures such as Singapore and other economies, both successful and unsuccessful, where the language of economics dominates workplace learning. This is perhaps one of the world's greatest global challenges. To meet it will require supervisors of adult learners in the workplace to support the generation of living theories that are both focused on improving practice and contributing to economic well-being, and on enhancing the flow of values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

When thinking of an example of living global citizenship, the life of Nelson Mandela is accepted by many as expressing this value—as I explained in my Mandela Day Lecture on July 18, 2011 (Whitehead, 2011). The idea of Mandela Day is that each one of us:

devote just 67 minutes of their time to changing the world for the better, in a small gesture of solidarity with humanity, and in a small step towards a continuous, global movement for good. (<http://www.unric.org/en/nelson-mandela-day/26957-can-you-spare-67-minutes-of-your-time-helping-others>)

Mandela (2006), like Charles (2007) above, has stressed the importance of ubuntu as a way of being and a value that carries hope for the flourishing of humanity.

In enacting educational reflexivity in explaining educational influences in the learning of social formations, I am stressing the importance of holding ourselves and each other to account for living, as fully as we can, ubuntu ways of being in our social contexts.

Conclusion

Evidence has been provided to justify the claim that supervising the enacting of educational reflexivity in creating a living-educational-theory can both improve practice and generate knowledge in making scholarly, academically legitimate, and original contributions to educational knowledge.

The implications of legitimating and spreading the influence of educational reflexivity in living-educational-theories are far reaching as individuals explain their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of social formations.

Perhaps the most significant implication is in contributing to a social movement, across cultural boundaries, that can contribute to enhancing the flow of ontological, energy-flowing, values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity in ubuntu ways of being (Whitehead, 2011). This contribution will meet resistance from those pressures for economic globalisation that are contributing to increases in inequality around the world (Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2013).

The supervision of living-educational-theories is not opposed to economic well-being. It includes economic well-being as an ontological value. The way this can be done has been demonstrated in Kaplan's (2013) research in South Africa in generating her living-educational-theory with her question: "How do I use my living and lived experience to influence creative economic independence in others?"

Making these values the distinguishing qualities in enacting reflexivity in supervision is a necessary but not sufficient condition for making the world a better place to be. We must also make these values public in our explanations of how we are accounting to ourselves and to each other for living these values as fully as possible in supervising research into creating living-educational-theories.

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