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Action Research for Self-study and living-educational-theories

by Jack Whitehead to be published in 2019 in Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt and Leslie Wood (Eds.) *Demystifying Action Research*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing.

Chapter Outline

This chapter focuses on the contributions to creating and democratizing knowledge that action researchers are making as they engage in self-study and Living Theory research. It focuses on the *what*, *why* and *how* of this particular approach, including challenges to the approach and how these have been overcome. The *what* of the approach is distinguished by evidence of the uniqueness and originality of the researchers' explanations of their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations that influence the researchers' practice and understandings. The explanations draw insights from the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of theories from the disciplinary approaches to knowledge. The *why* includes the evidence on the ontological values that are used by Living Theory researchers to give meaning and purpose to their life. These values are clarified and communicated in the course of their emergence in practice, with the help of digital visual data from practice. They are used as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influence and related to the values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. The *how* of the approach includes the methodological inventiveness of the practitioner-researcher in creating their own living-theory and living-theory methodology. This includes insights from the methodologies of Phenomenology, Action Research, Living Theory Research, Self-Study Research and Narrative Research.

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the contributions to creating and democratizing knowledge that action researchers are making through their self-studies and living-educational-theories. In this introduction, I first explain my understanding of living-educational-theories, knowledge democracy and action research. In the main body of this chapter I discuss self-study of teacher education practices and the *what*, *why* and *how* of a Living Theory approach, including research processes and supervision of masters and doctoral theses, as well as challenges to a Living Theory approach.

Living-educational-theories

The idea that individuals could create their own living-educational-theories was developed as an alternative approach to what was known as the ‘disciplines’ approach to educational theory. This approach was constituted by the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education. My main objection to this approach was that the practical principles I used to explain my educational influences in learning were regarded as 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 (Hirst, 1983, p. 18). I don’t want to be misunderstood in developing this alternative. I value insights from the disciplines of education in generating a living-educational-theory. I reject the idea that the disciplines of education taken individually or in any combination can produce a valid explanation for my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others, or in the learning of the social formations that influence practice and understandings.

I think it is worth emphasizing that a living-educational-theory can draw insights from the theories of the disciplines of education and other disciplines, but the individual’s practical principles are not replaced by principles from the disciplines. They are a necessary component in the individual’s explanation of educational influence (Whitehead, 1985, 1989, 2018a&b) in their knowledge-creation. When I use the term ‘educational influence in learning’ I am focusing attention on the idea that what is educational necessarily involves learning, but that the learning, to be educational, must include values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

Glenn, Roche, McDonagh and Sullivan (2017) have focused on action research for self-study and living-educational-theories in their research on learning communities in educational partnerships, with a focus on action research as transformation. They developed their living-educational-theory of learning communities as each participant evolved their understanding of their practice. They focused on living their values around knowledge creation. Each participant created and articulated their own new learning in relation to their values. Glenn et al. argue that all participants can recognize the potential for knowledge creation in the other, in a merging of ontological, epistemological and methodological values.

The Living Theory approach acknowledges that each group must create the community that best suits their situation. Readers are invited to reveal their passions and enthusiasms for learning together, for our own benefit and the benefit of those with whom we work. We are invited by Glenn et al. (2017) to continue this narrative by sharing our stories on www.eari.ie (p.164).

Knowledge creation

One of the distinguishing characteristics of any form of research is that it is concerned with knowledge creation in the form of information gathering and theory generation and testing. At the heart of knowledge creation is making public the data gathering and analysis so that its validity can be publicly tested. In Living Theory research I

advocate using two related processes to test and enhance the validity of the knowledge being offered in explanations of educational influence. The first draws on Popper's (1975) insight about the mutual rational control by critical discussion:

... inter-subjective *testing* is merely a very important aspect of the more general idea of inter-subjective *criticism*, or in other words, of the idea of mutual rational control by critical discussion. (p. 44)

The second draws on Habermas' (1976) four criteria of social validity in reaching an understanding with each other in terms of comprehensibility, evidence, normative influences and authenticity (pp. 1-2). For example, I advocate that the following four questions are included in the responses of a validation group made up of three to eight peers:

Full sentences; keep upper case opening

- How could the comprehensibility of the explanation be strengthened?
- How could the evidence used to justify assertions be improved?
- How could the normative understandings of socio-historical and sociocultural influences be deepened and extended?
- How could the authenticity of the explanation, in terms of living values as fully as possible, be enhanced?

As well as generating explanations of educational influences in learning, Living Theory researchers create their own living-theory-methodology as they ask, research and answer questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing in living my values as fully as I can?'. These contributions to the creation of knowledge are consistent with Dadds' and Hart's (2001) idea of 'methodological inventiveness': "... to create enquiry approaches that enable new, valid understandings to develop; understandings that empower practitioners to improve their work for the beneficiaries in their care" (p. 169).

Knowledge democracy

Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon (2016) refer to three interrelationships in knowledge democracy: (1) the importance of the existence of multiple epistemologies or ways of knowing; (2) the knowledge both created and represented in multiple forms including text, image, numbers, story, music, drama, poetry, ceremony, meditation and more; and (3) the intentional linking of values of democracy and action to the process of using knowledge.

Rowell (2017) stresses the importance of knowledge mobilization (ARNA 2017a) in developing such an approach, in supporting seven participatory workshops around the world in preparation for the Action Research Network of the America's (ARNA 2017b) Conference in Cartagena, Columbia, on '*Participation and Democratization of Knowledge: New Convergences for Reconciliation*'.

Action research

Stephen Corey (1953) produced the first book on Action Research to improve school practices. Several different forms of research, all claiming to be action research, have developed over the past 70 years through the global spread of action research. I first explicated my use of action-reflection cycles whilst evaluating the Schools Council Mixed Ability Exercise in Science (Whitehead, 1976). I identified these cycles as insights from Dewey's (1938/1997) ideas on learning from experience. In the 1980s, I used the definition of action research provided by Carr and Kemmis (1986).

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out. (p. 162)

Another tradition of action research is "the systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change" (Bogdan & Biklen 1992, p. 223). Bogdan and Biklen claim that action researchers marshal evidence or data to expose unjust practices or environmental dangers and recommend actions for change. This tradition of action research, whilst exposing unjust practices and recommending actions for change, differs from Living Theory research because it does not place any responsibility on action researchers to account for their own lives and influence as they explore the implications of their recommendations. This responsibility is a characteristic of Living Theory research. Living Theory research also differs from community-based action research as developed by Stringer (1999). In Living Theory research it is not necessary to commence with an interest in the problems of a group, a community, or an organization. It is, however, necessary to ground the Living Theory research in an individual who is living, as fully as possible, their ontological values that they use to give meaning and purpose to their lives.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, pp. 5-6) also stress collective and collaborative forms of research in distinguishing action research, whilst acknowledging the importance of critically examining the actions of individual group members. This approach, unlike Living Theory research, does not stress the importance of the knowledge-creating capacities of individuals to make original contributions to educational knowledge.

The working definition of action research put forward by Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart and Zuber-Skerritt (1991) includes both individuals' reflections and enquiries into improving their practice and their own situations and increasing participation and collaboration. This is consistent with Living Theory research.

Like Altrichter et al., Skolimowski (1994) lists some of the main characteristics of a participatory research program and points to love as the deepest form of participation:

Love is the deepest form of participation.
Where there is love there is participation.

Loveless participation is an anaemic involvement.
To participate is the first step to loving. (Skolimowski, 1994, p.159)

The inclusion of love within a research program may be too much for minds trained in the rigors of objectivity. Yet, many of us recognize the importance of love in loving what we are doing. Lohr's (2016) doctoral thesis on 'Love at Work' uses Love as an explanatory principle and living standard of judgment.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach to research in communities that emphasizes participation and action. It seeks to understand the world by trying to change it, collaboratively. PAR emphasizes collective inquiry and experimentation grounded in experience and social history. Within a PAR process, communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers.

The Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda and others organized the first explicitly PAR conference in Cartagena, Colombia in 1977. Based on his research with peasant groups in rural Boyaca and with other marginalized groups, Fals Borda and Rahman (1991) called for the 'community action' component to be incorporated into the research plans of traditionally trained researchers. For the work of Rajesh Tandon and others, see Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) at <https://www.pria.org>.

Cooperative inquiry, like participatory inquiry and some other forms of action research, defines the research in terms of all participants working together in an inquiry group as co-researchers and as co-subjects. In Heron's and Reason's (2008) definition of cooperative inquiry, everyone is engaged in the design and management of the inquiry and is involved in making sense and drawing conclusions.

It isn't that Living Theory researchers deny the value of cooperation. A Living Theory researcher can and does engage in cooperative activities and enquiries, without the necessity of defining their research as participatory or cooperative as understood in the above definitions. Living Theory research, whilst being grounded in self-study, requires the generation of evidence-based explanations of educational influences in learning.

Self-study of Teacher Education Practices

In 1995, the Journal *Teacher Education Quarterly* published a special issue on *Self-Study and Living Educational Theory*. The contributors invited me to respond to their papers. What I focused on (Whitehead, 1995) was what I continue to emphasize. I focused on the importance, in a self-study of a teacher's education practice, of including an evidence-based explanation of the educational influence of the self-study researcher in the learning of students. In *What Counts as Evidence in the Self-studies of Teacher Education Practices?* (Whitehead, 2004) I focused on the nature of evidence, in an evidence-based explanation of educational influences in learning. I

pointed to limitations in purely printed-text of communicating the embodied expressions of meanings of energy-flowing values in explanations of educational influence and have emphasized this point in later writings (Whitehead, 2014)

In responding to a text on *Being Self-Study Researchers in a Digital World* (Whitehead, 2017a), I recognized the importance of the claim to be presenting research on the intersection of self-study research, digital technologies and the development of future-orientated practices in teacher education. The text fulfilled its aim of highlighting how digital technologies can enhance pedagogies and the knowledge-base of teacher education. However, I also pointed out that, as a printed-text communication of self-study and educational action research, its communications are limited by the domination of printed text. I should have also appreciated some engagement with the most advanced social theories of the day, such as the ideas of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), to explore the possibility that the logic and language used in this book are contributing to what Santos has referred to as ‘epistemicide’ in terms of the killing off of indigenous knowledges.

The text offers no discernible challenge to the dominance of what Santos refers to as the Epistemologies of the North. I know that it is difficult to include digital visual data in solely printed text. However, it is becoming increasingly important to acknowledge the limitations of solely printed text for communicating these explanations, particularly the meanings of embodied expressions of the use of values as explanatory principles.

The *What* of a Living Theory Approach

The *what* of a Living Theory approach is focused on the asking, researching and answering of questions of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’, [in which? where? the question is grounded in the social, cultural and historical context in which the researcher is living and working. The focus on improving practice highlights the importance of clarifying and communicating the meanings of the values that will distinguish something as an improvement. Values can be talked about and written about lexically in the sense that the meanings of value-words are defined in terms of other words rather than by reference to embodied expressions of meaning. Values can also be understood ostensively in the sense that they are clarified in the course of their emergence through practice. Ostensive expressions focus attention on embodied expressions of meaning. We cannot do anything without the expression of energy. The *what* of a Living Theory approach always recognizes the importance of including flows of energy with values that the individual believes carries hope for the flourishing of humanity. The *what* of a Living Theory approach also recognizes that whatever we are doing to improve our practice can include socio-cultural and socio-historical influences. These need to be taken into account if we are to be as effective as possible in improving what we are doing. A Living Theory approach must include the generation and testing of explanations.

Hence, the *what* of the approach is also distinguished by the uniqueness and originality of the action researchers' explanations of their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations that influence their practice and understandings. The explanations draw insights from the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of theories from the disciplinary approaches to knowledge. I think it is worth repeating that the focus on explanations in Living Theory research is because of a requirement of research that it is focused on data gathering and theory generation and testing.

The *Why* of a Living Theory Approach

I understand the '*why*' of Living Theory research in terms of Erich Fromm's (1960) humanistic ethics, with a point from his *Fear of Freedom*. Fromm says that if a person can face the truth without panic, they will realize there is no purpose to life other than that which they create for themselves through their loving relationships and productive work (p.18). I agree with Fromm that we are faced with the choice of uniting with the world in the spontaneity of love and productive work, or of seeking a kind of security that destroys our integrity and freedom. So, the '*why*' of Living Theory research is grounded in exploring the implications of engaging with the world with love and productive work. The '*why*' can also be understood in terms of Foucault's reflections on death, cited by Eribon (1989):

In considering oneself on the point of dying, one can judge each of the acts that one is in the process of committing according to its own worth - "Concerning the moral progress that I shall have been able to make... I am waiting for the day in which I will become my own judge and I will know if I have virtue on my lips and in my heart."(pp. 331-332)

Living Theory research enables a practitioner-researcher to document the explanations of educational influences in a way that creates an archive of living-theories. This offers the possibility of judging the extent to which one has managed to live a worth-while life with love and productive work that carries hope for the flourishing of humanity.

The *why* of a Living Theory approach also shares a desire with all researchers to find answers to questions that the individual cares about and to contribute to knowledge. It is distinguished from other forms of research in that, for a Living Theory researcher, the research is a way of life in seeking to live as fully as possible the values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity (Whitehead, 2018a&b).

Hence, the *why* includes the energy-flowing ontological values used by the Living Theory researcher to give meaning and purpose to their life. These values are clarified and communicated in the course of their emergence in practice with the help of digital visual data from practice. The digital visual data is necessary because it can focus attention on the embodied expressions of these energy-flowing values. The values are

used as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influence and related to the values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. The epistemological significance of the energy-flowing values is that, as well as providing explanatory principles, they form the living-standards of judgment that can be used to evaluate the validity of the contribution to knowledge.

The *How* of a Living Theory Approach

The *how* of the approach includes the methodological inventiveness (Dadds & Hart, 2001, p.166) of the Living Theory researcher in creating their own living-theory methodology. This methodology can include insights from Phenomenology, Action Research, Living Theory research, Self-study research and Narrative research (Whitehead, 2018b). For example, Husserl's (1912) insight about the resistance of phenomenology to categorizations by "methodologically devised schemes of constructive symbolism" (p.12) can be used to understand the importance of methodological inventiveness in making public the educational influences of the embodied expressions of values and personal knowledge.

The resistance of embodied values and knowledge, to the application of methods in representing their educational influences in learning, highlights the importance of self-study and narrative research in representing and explaining the educational influences of embodied values and knowledge. Laidlaw (1996), for example, used the metaphor of Coleridge's poem *The Ancient Mariner*, to explain in her narrative, her educational influences in a living-theory self-study.

Living Theory researchers can use action-reflection cycles to express values-based concerns, to develop action plans, to act and gather data, to evaluate the effectiveness of the actions, and to modify the concerns, plans and actions in the light of the evaluations. In locating their research as Living Theory research, the researcher is committed to generating and sharing an evidence-based explanation of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations that influence their practice and understandings.

In many research programs, especially those being legitimated by Universities, practitioner-researchers are often asked, and sometimes required, to specify in a research proposal the methodology that they will be using at the beginning of their research. The recognition that a Living Theory researcher will be creating their living-theory methodology in the course of their inquiry, can create some problems if a research committee requires that the methodology is pre-specified before it is generated through the research. The following processes for Living Theory research might help Living Theory researchers to emphasize the importance of their methodological inventiveness and to avoid the imposition of inappropriate methods and methodology.

Living Theory research processes

In a Living Theory research process it is important to bear in mind the two intentions of improving practice and generating knowledge that contribute to the flourishing of humanity. Improving practice relates to the ‘why’ by including ontological and relational values, and using them to judge improvements in practice and in generating knowledge. Generating knowledge involves the creation of your own living-theory as an explanation of your educational influences. It includes the generation of your living-theory-methodology. The originality of a Living Theory researcher can be understood epistemologically in that it includes the values-based, living standards of judgment that can be used to judge the validity of the contribution to knowledge.

Masters and doctoral programs

I make a distinction between the Living Theory research processes involved in supervising those involved in master’s and doctoral research programs. In a master’s program there is no requirement to make an original contribution to knowledge. This requirement is part of the award of a doctoral degree. Here are some suggestions and reflections for those involved in the supervision of Living Theory research master’s and doctoral programs. For masters programs – see <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/mastermod.shtml>.

When supervising Living Theory doctoral students, I usually begin by asking for clarification about the context in which the practitioner-researcher is working and what they would like to focus on in improving their practice. I focus on questions such as ‘What motivates you?’, ‘What excites you?’. I sometimes ask about if or when they experience themselves as ‘living contradictions’, in the sense of not doing what the person wants to do.

My intention is to help me to understand the ontological and relational values that the researcher uses to give meaning and purpose to their lives and to help them to clarify and to understand these for themselves. I ask them to, for example,

- select an area of practice that they can work on to improve;
- tell me the possible steps they might take to improve their practice and to develop an action plan;
- collect data to make a judgement on their influence; and
- produce an evidence-based explanation of their educational influences in learning, which includes embodied expressions of energy-flowing values as explanatory principles and standards of judgement.

I also ask them to:

- ensure that ethical guidelines are followed;
- ensure that their explanations include evidence of educational influences in learning; and

- use a validation group to strengthen the validity of the explanation in terms of its comprehensibility, evidence, normative understandings and authenticity.

Erica Holley's reflections on her M.Phil. journey provides an example of how a student has experienced this approach to supervision:

You offer acceptance of me for what I am and push at the boundaries of what I could become. You accept ideas, puzzlement and confusion from me as part of a process of me coming to understand, but the understanding reached seems always a new understanding for us both. I think I've seen our work as collaborative parallelism. *(personal e-mail)*

Jane Spiro's (2008) epilogue to her thesis titled, *Learner and Teacher as Fellow Travellers: A story tribute to Jack Whitehead*, is another example of how a doctoral researcher has experienced this approach to supervision.

What I hope I am communicating in this section on supervising Masters and Doctoral Living Theory research programs is the importance of a supervisor of Living Theory research trying to understand the unique responses of each individual that enables them to generate their own living-educational-theory and living-theory-methodology. The responses include a concern with scholarship and rigor in engaging creatively and critically with the ideas of others and in subjecting evidence-based explanations to rigorous academic criticism in validation groups. It is important in Living Theory research to show an awareness and response to criticisms of the approach.

Challenges to a Living Theory Approach

I would say that the most helpful criticism of the development of a Living Theory approach is the point made by Noffke (1997) that:

... 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. (p. 329)

Evidence that a Living Theory approach is addressing these issues can be seen in the 2018 homepage of living-theory-posters at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/homepage020617.pdf>

If you access the 2018 living-poster of Network Educational Action Research Ireland (NEARI), you can access the evidence from Mairin Glenn, Bernie Sullivan, Caitriona McDonagh and Mary Roche that shows how they are 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.

Norton's (2009) criticism is that a living-educational-theory is an extreme position on the positivism-interpretivism dimension that does not reflect the capacity of educational action research to embrace the rich middle ground.

The idea of a positivism-interpretivism dimension can be challenged on the grounds that the conceptualization of such a 'dimension' is mistaken. There are epistemological differences between positivism and interpretivism, which mean they should not be placed within a 'dimension'. For example, positivists usually follow the Aristotelean Law of Contradiction, which rejects the idea that mutually exclusive opposites can be true simultaneously, and the Law of Excluded Middle in the sense that everything is either A or Not-A. Interpretivists, influenced by dialectics, include contradiction as the nucleus of correct thought with the acceptance of an Included Middle. The 2,500-year history of battles between these researchers can be illustrated in Popper's (1963, p. 317) rejection of dialectics as being entirely useless as theory, and in Marcuse's (1964, p. 111) point that formal logic masks the dialectical nature of reality (p. 64).

These differences can be transcended in a living-logic for Living Theory research (Whitehead & Rayner, 2009).

Conclusions

In my reviewer's comments to *Conferences as Sites of Learning and Development* (Zuber-Skerritt, 2017), I wrote that:

The discussion focuses on working and researching together as global citizens to transform the conditions of social life that sustain poverty, oppression and suffering. It does this by focusing on the creation of the conditions that can sustain justice and satisfying forms of human existence... Shared understandings of present contexts and practices are related to an evaluation of the past contributions of ALARA together with intentions to contribute to the future through participation in conferences as sites of learning and development.

In this present chapter on *Action Research for Self-study and Living-Educational-Theories* I have emphasized the importance of educational learning in the sense that not all learning is educational. I am distinguishing educational learning from learning, with the necessary condition that for the learning to be educational it must include values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

In making explicit a Living Theory research process above, I include an action-reflection cycle whilst emphasizing the necessity of generating an individual's explanation of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of

others, and in the learning of the social formations that are influencing and being influenced by the researcher. The explanatory principles in the explanation include the ontological and relational values the researcher uses to give meaning and purpose to their life. The 2018 living-poster homepage (see above) demonstrates how Living Theory researchers can contribute to a global movement of researchers who are clarifying, communicating and responding to each other's enquires. This movement goes beyond the creation and sharing of individual living-educational-theories in a global process of Living Theory research that is contributing to the enhancement of flows of values and understandings that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity.

Topics for discussion

1. As you produce an evidence-based explanation of your educational influence, how could you engage with and include your influence in a global social movement to enhance the flow of values and understandings that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity?
2. If you are seeking to gain academic accreditation for your living-theory, how do you analyze the responses of ethics committees, institutional review boards and research committees that have hindered and/or supported your research?
3. As you seek to live your values as fully as possible, how do you understand the power relations that can both hinder and support your enquiries?
4. What problems and possibilities have you encountered with accessing appropriate supervision for the generation of your living-theory?

Further Reading

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