Practice and Theory in Action Research:

Living Theories as Frameworks for Action

Pre-publication DRAFT

Introduction

This chapter is divided into three parts. Part One focuses on approaches to theory and practice which have implications for the way in which action research is used to improve practice and to generate knowledge.

Part Two describes the living-theories framework for action that is relationally dynamic and draws insights from the most advanced social theories. Evidence is provided to illustrate how living-educational-theories have faced and transcended criticisms related to: Objectivity; Validity; Rigor; Generalizability.

Part Three revisits the formation of a living-educational-theory in the 1980s (Whitehead, 1985, 1989) to trace its influence in the many local, national and international contexts. The website, *Action Research*, the journal, *Educational Journal of Living Theories* (EJOLTS) and discussion forum provide opportunities for participation within the living theories community.

Part One: Theory and Practice in Action Research

Theory in Action Research

Action researchers can create their own unique explanations of their influence as they explore the implications of asking, researching and answering their question, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' At the heart of enquiries that are

educational are values in learning that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. This is what distinguishes educational action research from action research. Action research, as a method, can be used for any purpose, including ones that negate the values of humanity. By holding ourselves to account for living educational values as fully as possible, we educational action researchers are committed to sharing our accounts in public forums that can evaluate our claims to be living as fully as possible, the values and understandings that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. There are many approaches to Action Research. What distinguishes a Living Theory approach to Action Research from other forms of Action Research is the focus on the life-affirming and life-enhancing values of the researcher as explanatory principles and standards of judgment for evaluating the validity of the contribution to educational knowledge.

As practitioner-researchers we can produce our unique living-theories that include our evaluations of our past, to make sense of our present with intentions to create a future that is not yet realized. In the process of producing a unique living-theory, the practitioner-researcher evolves their living-theory-methodology (Whitehead, 2008) which is grounded in what Dadds and Hart (2001) refer to as 'methodological inventiveness:'

The Importance of Methodological Inventiveness

Perhaps the most important new insight for both of us has been awareness that, for some practitioner researchers, creating their own unique way through their research may be as important as their self-chosen research focus. We had understood for many years that substantive choice was fundamental to the motivation and effectiveness of practitioner research (Dadds, 1995); that what practitioners chose to research was important to their sense of

engagement and purpose. But we had understood far less well that how practitioners chose to research, and their sense of control over this, could be equally important to their motivation, their sense of identity within the research and their research outcomes. (Dadds & Hart, 2001, p. 166)

In producing our living-theory and living-theory-methodology we can draw on a unique constellation of values and insights from a wide range of theorists including those engaged in Action Research and those who have integrated ideas from Action Research and other approaches, such as Critical Theory.

For example, the ideas of Jürgen Habermas have been influential in the development of a critical theory school of action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1985). Critical theorists influenced by Habermas point to the importance of raising awareness of the political, economic and cultural influences in what an individual or group can do. In enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' it is wise to engage with the most advanced social theories of day, to understand the influences of political, economic and cultural relationships in both constraining and opening opportunities for improving practice. An action researcher influenced by Habermas' (2002) claim that the private autonomy of equally entitled citizens can only be secured only insofar as citizens actively exercise their civic autonomy, could provide evidence of their embodied expression of social justice by clarifying the meaning of meaning of this values as it emerged in their practice of exercising their civic autonomy:

The dispute between the two received paradigms - whether the autonomy of legal persons is better secured through individual liberties for private competition or through publicly guaranteed entitlements for

clients of welfare bureaucracies - is superseded by a proceduralist

concept of law. According to this conception, the democratic process

mush secure private and public autonomy at the same time: the

individual rights that are meant to guarantee to women the autonomy to

pursue their lives in the private sphere cannot even be adequately

formulated unless the affected persons themselves first articulate and

justify in public debate those aspects that are relevant to equal or

unequal treatment in typical cases. The private autonomy of equally

entitled citizens can only be secured only insofar as citizens actively

exercise their civic autonomy. (p. 264)

Individual practitioner-researchers can also create their unique constellation

of insights from a wide range of theorists in other fields. For instance, some have

shown how they have been influenced by theologians such as Thomas Merton

(Cunningham, 1999). Others have shown how they have been influenced by Mitroff

and Kilman's methodological approaches to the social sciences (Whitehead, 1999);

by psychological theories of learning (Huxtable, 2012); by theories of drama

(Naidoo, 2005; Rawal, 2006); by theories of nursing (Adler-Collins, 2007); by

environmental theories (Tattersall, 2011); by theories of entrepreneurship (Crotty,

2012); by economic theories (Kaplan, 2013; van Tuyl, 2009); by theories of

creativity (Spiro, 2008); by theories of citizenship (Potts, 2012); and by theories of

public health (Wolvaardt, 2013)

Each of these living-theory practitioner-researchers has shown how their

living-theories constitute a relationally dynamic framework for action.

Practice in Action Research

I focus on two distinct meanings of practice. For much of my research program I understood practice in terms of what I was doing. Hence I saw my question, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' as a practical question. Through my studies of cultural-historical perspectives I came to understand that a practice can also be seen as arising in response to general demands of societal need and that a practice can be conceptualized as a historically developed and conditioned tradition of action for addressing societal formed needs (Chaiklin, 2011):

> Human practices are manifest in institutionally structured traditions of action, which are organised in relation to the production of collectively needed products. (p. 227)

> A practice is reflected in a historically developed tradition of action that grows up around producing products that satisfy a generalised need (in relation to reproduction for conditions of life). The term generalised is meant to emphasise that a need is found among many persons, as opposed to a single individual. (p. 233-4)

Action Research has developed as a way to introduce change to practice and help refine understandings that create and connect to theory. There are many excellent histories of Action Research (Altrichter et. al., 1990) that trace the evolution and transformation of approaches to action research from the early work of Lewin and Collier in the 1940s to the national and international networks of practitioner-researchers in the Collaborative Action Research Network, The Action Research Network of the Americas, Action Research Africa Network and the Action Learning Action Research Association.

Part Two - Living Theories as Frameworks for Action

I use a living-educational-theory to distinguish the explanations generated by individuals to explain their educational influences, from the explanations derived from propositional and dialectical theories to explain the actions of individuals. I was moved to make this distinction because of a limited stance in the approach to educational theory that claimed that it was constituted by the disciplines of education such as the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education. In rejecting this approach to educational theory I don't want to be misunderstood as rejecting useful insights from the disciplines in explaining the educational influences of individuals. While the insights have value, I reject the approach that suggests that such theories should replace the principles of understanding –personal theories-developed by practitioners over years of experience to explain their influence because they are viewed as simply "pragmatic maxims. Consider this statement:

> In many characterisations of educational theory, my own included, principles justified in this way have until recently been regarded as at best pragmatic maxims that had a first crude and superficial justification in practice that in any rationally developed theory would be **replaced** (my emphasis**)** by principles with more fundamental, theoretical justification. That now seems to me to be a mistake. Rationally defensible practical principles, I suggest, must of their nature stand up to such practical tests and without that are necessarily inadequate. (Hirst, 1983, p. 18).

It was this replacement that I objected to. I put forward the idea of a living-educational-theory as an individual' explanation of educational influence to ensure

that these practical principles –knowledge from practice- were not lost and replaced by principles from the disciplines of education.

Living-theories, like life itself, are relationally dynamic and continuously evolving in a non-linear and non-dialectical process. This does not mean that linear or propositional and dialectical theories are useless in the generation of a living-theory. It means that a living process can integrate insights from propositional and dialectical theories into a living-theory that provides a continuously evolving framework for action.

At the heart of these unique frameworks, in each living-theory, are the relationally dynamic and energy-flowing values that are used by an individual to give their life its meanings and purpose. I am thinking of ontological values that distinguish an individual's way of being and making sense of the world. These are the values that an individual uses in judgments about what constitutes an improvement in practice. They also form the living standards of judgment an individual uses to evaluate the validity of their claims to be contributing to educational knowledge.

The relationally dynamic framework of each unique living-theory emerges in the course of practice in an enquiry of the form, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' It is important to stress the relationally dynamic nature of such frameworks to avoid thinking of a framework as a static structure that is imposed on an inquiry. The relationally dynamic nature of living-theories, as frameworks for action, can perhaps best be understood in the movement within and between the 5 action reflection cycles in the *Advanced Bluffers Guide for Action Researchers* (Whitehead, 1995). Each action reflection cycle is focused on improving practice with a

continuously evolving deepening and extension of insights, from propositional and dialectical theories, in both improving practice and in generating knowledge.

Throughout my working life in education I have been concerned with enhancing the professional knowledge base of education with the living-theories of practitioners. Because of the role of Universities in accrediting knowledge I have focused on the accreditation of the living-theories of practitioner-researchers for their Masters and Ph.D. and Ed.D. Degrees. This accreditation has meant facing questions and overcoming criticisms from researchers schooled in the disciplines of education in terms of the objectivity, validity, rigor and generalizability of the living-theories.

Objectivity

A common critique of action research is that it is merely anecdotal and subjective. This criticism often comes from those who have been schooled to think within the tradition of positivist science. I include myself with those influenced by this tradition of research and scholarship with my first degree in the physical sciences followed by a year of research in electrochemistry. The idea of objectivity in this tradition included a view of the value-free researcher, impossible to realise in practice. I continue to value the concern to reduce bias in this tradition of enquiry. The idea of objectivity was closely related in this tradition to the use of controlled experimental designs. Through the use of these experiments the causal effect of individual variables could be examined. A theory in the empirical sciences was held to be a set of determinate relationships between a set of variables in terms of which a fairly extensive set of empirically verifiable regularities could be explained.

For me, one of the great strengths of a Living Theory approach to action research is that it is focused on an individual's commitment to improve their practice

and to share an account of the learning process that is involved in the enquiry into improving practice. Whilst the grounding of a living-theory is in the individual's subjectivity and narrative, this is not to say that the explanations of influence lack objectivity. As Karl Popper has said, the words 'objective' and 'subjective' are philosophical terms heavily burdened with a heritage of contradictory usages and of inclusive and interminable discussions. Here is a way of thinking, drawn from Popper's ideas, about a relationship between objectivity and subjectivity that can help to strengthen, with the following ideas on validity, the objectivity of an individual's explanation of their influence.

Popper's use of the terms 'objective' and 'subjective' is not unlike Kant's who uses the word 'objective' to indicate that scientific knowledge should be *justifiable*, independently of anybody's whim: 'If something is valid', he writes, 'for anybody in possession of his reason, then its grounds are objective and sufficient.' However, Popper holds that scientific theories are never fully justifiable or verifiable, but that they are nevertheless testable. He therefore says that the objectivity of scientific statements lies in the fact that they can be inter-subjectively tested. Popper has generalized the idea of inter-subjective *testing* in his idea of inter-subjective *criticism*, or, as he says into the idea of mutual rational control by critical discussion. (Popper, 1975, p.44)

I have used this idea of the mutual rational control by critical discussion with the following four questions, derived from the work of Habermas (1976) on communication and the evolution of society. These are used in groups of between 3-8 people in the ways described below for enhancing the objectivity and validity of the explanations of action researchers.

Validity

In enhancing the validity of living-theories I recommend the use of a validation group of some 3-8 peers. I also recommend the use of the four questions below. These are derived from Habermas' (1976) ideas on what he calls the universal validity claims we make of each other as we reach an understanding with each other. For Habermas reaching an understanding with another involves: uttering something understandably; giving (the hearer) something to understand; making himself thereby understandable; coming to an understanding with another person.

For Habermas , the speaker must choose a comprehensible expression so that speaker and hearer can understand one another. The speaker must have the intention of communicating a true proposition (or a propositional content, the existential presuppositions of which are satisfied) so that the hearer can share the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must want to express his intentions truthfully so that the hearer can believe the utterance of the speaker (can trust him). Finally, the speaker must choose an utterance that is right so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background. (Habermas, 1976)

An Action Researcher could use the following questions I derived using Habermas' ideas to enhance the validity of their explanations of their educational influence. The first question is directly derived from Habermas' idea of comprehensibility:

1) How can I enhance the comprehensibility of my explanation?

The second question is derived from the intention of communicating a true proposition and is focused on the evidence used by a Living Theory researcher to generate a valid explanation of influence:

2) How can I strengthen the evidence I offer to justify the assertions I make?

The third question is derived from Habermas' idea of trust and is focused on the authenticity of the action research in living as fully as possible the values that give meaning and purpose to his life:

3) How can I improve the authenticity of my explanation in showing over time and interaction that I am truly committed to living as fully as possible the values I claim to hold.

The fourth question is derived from Habermas' idea of generating an agreement with respect to a recognised normative background. All action research takes place in social contexts that are subjected to the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences that constitute the normative background. The fourth question focuses on the explicit awareness of the action researcher of these influences:

4) How can I deepen and extend my understandings of the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences in my practice and my explanation of my influence?

Rigor

To enhance the rigor of an action research enquiry I advocate the use of the six principles described by Richard Winter (1989) as reflexive critique, dialectical critique, collaborative resource, risk, plural structure, theory practice transformation.

Principle No. 1: Reflexive critique

Winter (1989) explains the first principle, that of reflexivity as making judgments from various personal experiences rather than on representative samples of universally agreed categories. In Winters' focus on rigor rather than validity the result of a reflexive critique takes the form of a dialogue between writers and readers about possible interpretations of experience. In the above section on validity the concern is with justifying a claim to know. In Winter's approach to rigor, the focus is on transforming claims to know into questions that can move an enquiry forward. My analysis of years of enacting educational reflexivity in supervising research into creating living-educational-theories are described in a recent paper available online (Whitehead, 2014).

Principle No. 2: Dialectic critique

This principle is based on the idea of 'dialectics' as a general theory of the nature of reality and of the process of understanding reality. I owe much of my understanding of dialectics to the work of Ilyenkov (1977) who emphasized the importance of contradiction as the nucleus of dialectics. In Winter's approach to dialectic critique the overall context of relations is seen as a unity in the face of their apparent separateness. Within the unit the researcher looks for the internal contradictions that provide the reasons to explain changes and transformations. In the generation of living-theories the existence of 'I' as a living contradiction in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' emphasizes the importance of dialectic critique. A detailed and rigorous analysis of my use of dialectic critique can be explored in Whitehead (1982).

Principle No. 3: Collaborative resource

The principle of collaborative resource promotes the inclusion of understandings from a range of different sources whilst deconstructing these contributions in the reconstruction of new categories and interpretations. This process of deconstruction and reconstruction is unlike positivistic research where the researcher claims to be detached from those he or she is observing. The process enables a movement from a personal and subjective starting point towards meanings that have been interpersonally negotiated.

Take for example the use of the idea of 'empathetic resonance' in my own living-educational-theory. I first encountered the idea of empathetic resonance in the writings of Sardello (2008). For Sardello, empathetic resonance is the resonance of the individual soul coming into resonance with the Soul of the World (p. 13) and carries a religious meaning. I am using *empathetic resonance,* as a humanistic educator with no theistic commitments, to communicate a feeling of the immediate presence of the other in communicating the living values that the other experiences as giving meaning and purpose to their life. Using digital video of my collaborative practices with others I have interpersonally negotiated meanings of 'being loved into learning' from the shared communication of these meanings with the experience of empathetic resonance in viewing digital video. You can access details of the way in which this was done with Elizabeth Campbell, Jacqueline Delong and Cathy Griffin (Campbell et. al., 2013). Such enquiries are not without risk.

Principle No. 4: Risk

Some Action Researchers are willing to risk the implications of seeking to live their values as fully as possible within their social context. We accept the risk of placing ourselves, as living contradictions, in the change process as we are seeking to

learn as much as possible in the process of improving our educational influences in our own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work.

I documented and analyzed the risks I encountered and responding to in The Growth of Educational Knowledge: Creating your own living-educational-theories (Whitehead, 1993).

The risks are documented and analyzed in terms of the living contradictions:

i)   I am a University Academic. I am not an academic.

ii)   I am a creative academic. I am not a creative academic.

iii)   I can question the judgments of examiners. I cannot question.

iv)   My writings are consistent with my duties as a University Academic.
          They are not consistent.

The analyses point to the importance of prudence in assessing risks, especially when there is a threat to one's employment in engaging with the power relations within the workplace, which may have a vested interest in suppressing publications that are critical of the organization.

Principle No. 5: Plural Structure

My master's degree dissertation on a 'Preliminary Investigation of the Process through which Adolescents acquire Scientific Understanding' (Whitehead, 1972) was presented as a conventional research report of the time as a linear, chronology of events, in the single voice of myself as the author, with a focus on causal relationships between dependent and independent variables in a controlled experimental design. I offered and organized the evidence to justify my assertions.

I agree with Winter (1989) that the process of Action Research seeks

differences, contradictions, possibilities and questions, as ways of opening up new avenues for action. I agree that an action research report should be presented in terms of the multiplicity of viewpoints that make up the situation. Because of the multiplicity of viewpoint Winter considers the appropriate format for an Action report to be a 'plural structure'. This consists of various accounts and various critiques of those accounts. Because of Winter's concern with rigor, rather than validity he says that such accounts should end not with conclusions that are intended to be convincing but with questions and possibilities that are intended to be 'relevant' in various ways for different readers.

You can see my first action research report that is presented with such a plural structure (Whitehead, 1976).

Principle No. 6: Theory, practice and transformation

I agree with Winter that theory and practice are not two distinct entities but two different and yet interdependent and complementary phases of the change process. Each living-educational-theory is grounded in practice with enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' Such theories are transformed by transformations of practice. Theory and practice are not in mutual opposition but each is necessary to the other in the continuous evolution of both practice and theory.

Peggy Kok (1991) has given a very clear analysis of the use of Winter's 6 principles for enhancing the rigor of an action research account.

Many Action Researchers have faced, as I have, questions about the objectivity, validity, rigour and generalizability of their explanations of influence.

Generalizability

Instead of thinking of a living-educational-theory in terms of a set of

propositional relationships between linguistic concepts I have proposed a view of educational theory as a dynamic and living form whose content changes with the developing public conversations of those involved in its creation:

> The theory is constituted by the practitioners' public descriptions and explanations of their own practice. The theory is located not solely within these accounts but in the relationship between the accounts and the practice. It is this relationship that constitutes the descriptions and explanations as a living form of theory. In being generated from the practices of individuals it has the capacity to relate directly to those practices. To the extent that the values underpinning the practices, the dialogues of question and answer and the systematic form of action/reflection cycle, are shared assumptions within this research community, then we are constructing an educational theory with some potential for generalizability. The 'general' in a living theory still refers to 'all' but instead of being represented in a linguistic concept, 'all' refers to the shared form of life between the individuals constituting the theory. Now history shows us that new ideas have often met with skepticism, rejection or hostility from those who are working within the dominant paradigm. Researchers who are trying to make original and acknowledged contributions to their subject, education, might expect powerful opposition to their ideas. (Whitehead, 1989, pp. 47-48)

In resisting such opposition it is necessary to engage in the politics of educational knowledge (Whitehead & Lomax, 1987; Whitehead, 2009).

Part 3: Spreading the influence of Living Theory research

The growth of my educational knowledge since my initial teacher education program in 1966-7 has included the influences of my first degree in physical sciences with their positivist and propositional epistemologies in which contradictions are excluded from theory. Since 1980 the growth has included the influence of a dialectical epistemology within which contradiction is taken to be the nucleus. The growth has included the influence of a living epistemology with its living and inclusion logic which can hold insights from theories that are structured by propositional and dialectical understandings (Whitehead & Rayner, 2009).

In 1995 I produced a guide to help my students understand action research (Whitehead, 1995) which is organized into 5 action reflection cycles with each cycle focused on **improving practice** but with deepening and extending insights, from current social theories, into the generation of living-educational-theories for cultural renewal.

Living-educational-theories and Living Theory research

Working with the above sense of generalizability I conclude by focusing on the spreading influence of living-educational-theories and Living Theory research. This includes evidence from the living-theory section from Action Research (www.actionresearch.net) and the Educational Journal of Living Theories (ejolts.net). These websites make publically available masters and doctoral living-theories and publications from Europe (Croatia, UK, Ireland and Norway), USA, Canada, South Africa, Australia, China and Japan. Each living-theory is presented as an explanation of the individual's educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of

others and in the learning of the social formations that influence the practice and writings.

I am now exploring how such educational influences can be extended in a global social movement that includes the commitment of individuals to live their ontological and relational values as fully as possible. These values are both explanatory principles and living standards of judgment (Laidlaw, 1996). We can use values as explanatory principle to which we can hold ourselves and each other to account. We can also use values as living standards of judgment for evaluating the validity of our contributions to educational knowledge. The interactive component to building the community is a listserv called practitioner research, which provides the connections among the community (http://tinyurl.com/6z4e8wk). The kind of discussion that takes place in the discussion forum is described below.

I am experiencing the spreading global influence of living-educational-theories and Living Theory research through educational conversations that appear to me to have the characteristics of Ubuntu ways of being. In this way of being there is the recognition of 'I am because we are' (Whitehead, 2011). If you access this Inaugural Mandela Day lecture you will be able to play a video-clip of Nelson Mandela talking about the influence of an Ubuntu way of being in his own life. Charles (2007) gained academic legitimacy for Ubuntu as a living standard of judgment in his doctoral thesis on 'How can I bring Ubuntu as a living standard of judgment into the Academy? Moving beyond decolonization through societal reidentification and guiltless recognition.' Phillips (2011) followed this with his doctoral thesis on 'My Emergent African Great Story.' Both Charles and Phillips acknowledge their Afro-Caribbean heritage in their understanding of Ubuntu.

In spreading the global influence of Living Theory research I have also advocated the integration of Inoue's (2012, 2015) insights into the integration of East Asian Epistemology into Western ways of knowing (Whitehead, 2015a). This global influence can be seen in Dent's (2015) Thesis from Malaysia on 'A reflexive study of the continuous practice improvement of a global professional.' The importance of engaging with a sense of oneself as a global professional, in spreading the influence of Living Theory research, can also be seen in the writings of Coombs, Potts & Whitehead (2014), who have explored living-global-citizenship as both an explanatory principle and living standard of judgment in terms of international educational development and learning through sustainable partnerships.

At the heart of the ideas of being a global professional, with the value of living-global-citizenship, are particular qualities of relationship that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. Such relationships can be experienced with reflections on data on the 'living-posters' from the Town Hall Meeting at the 2015 Conference of the Action Research Network of the Americas (Whitehead, 2015b). It is difficult, if not impossible, to communicate the embodied expressions of these values through printed text alone. Hence my emphasis on the importance of visual narratives, using digital video technology for communicating these meanings. The use of multi-screen SKYPE conversations as shown in the above reflections on data, from the ARNA 2015 Town Hall Meeting, with participants from Canada, the USA, the Republic of Ireland, the UK, South Africa and India, is a recent innovation in spreading the global influence of Living Theory research and the unique contributions of individuals in their living-educational-theories.

Social media can also be useful for spreading the influence of Action Research and Living Theory research. For example, Margaret Riel (2015), made use

of social media to make available a free on-line action research program which includes learning activities with a video and resources to support them. The sharing of these resources on the practitioner-researcher discussion forum generated a good discussion around the issue of one's identity as an action researcher including the sharing of video (Kaplan, 2015).

Through these journal and community spaces action researchers can share their thoughts, ideas and writings with others who are committed to living as fully as possible the values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. Each living-educational-theory, shows how insights can be used from traditional, propositional and dialectical theories without denying the rationality of each others' world view. In the ways described above I believe that we are contributing, as Action and Living Theory researchers and global citizens, to improving international educational development and learning through our sustainable partnerships as we support each other in our enquiries of 'How do I improve what I am doing?'

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