The dragons of conflict in 54 years of a global, Living Educational Theory Research approach to professional development.

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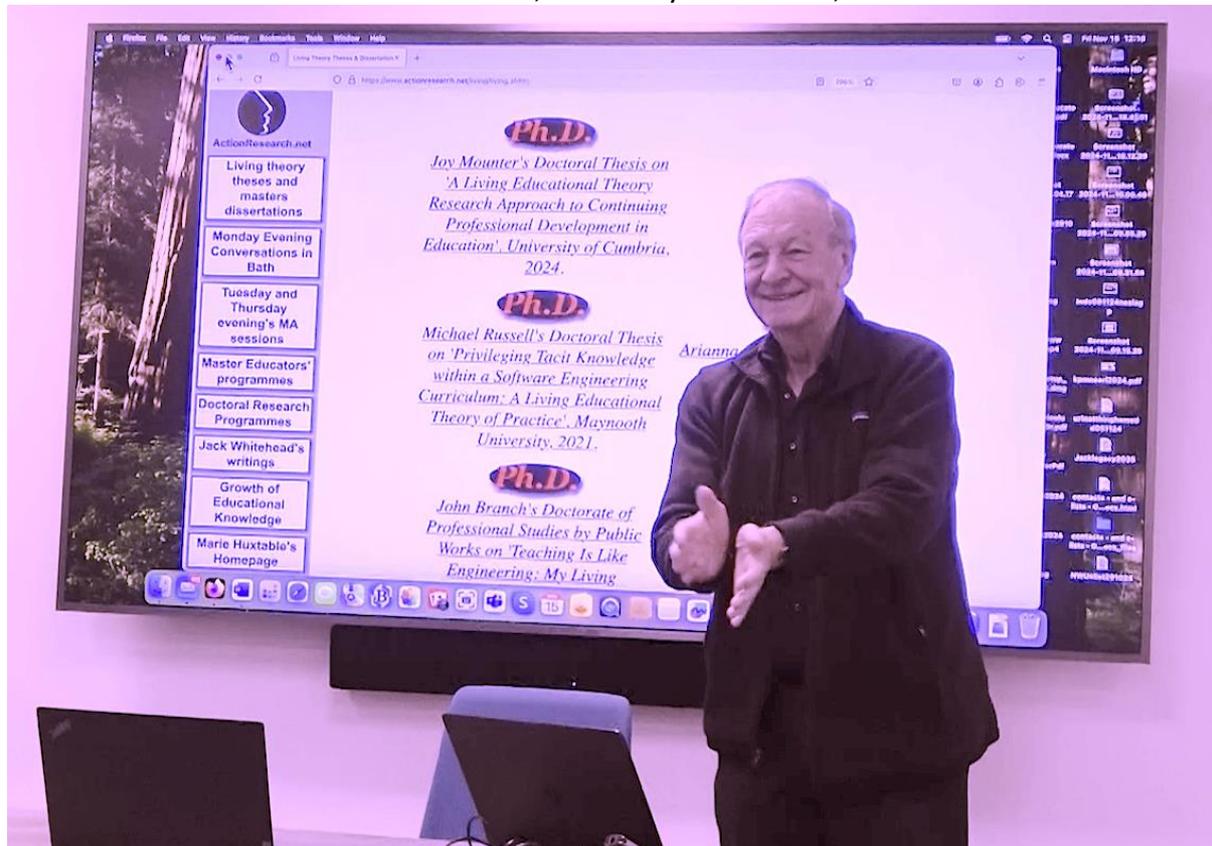
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Abstract

'Here Be Dragons', refers to dangerous and unchartered contexts. In this paper the metaphor is used to reflect on both the dangers and the exciting opportunities of a 52 year educational research programme into an individual's professional development as an educator and educational researcher. It moves from local classroom contexts into UK higher education and then into global, higher education contexts, including the Republic of Ireland,

Canada, China, Nepal, India, USA and South Africa with learning from research presentations and workshops in many countries. It includes the clarification of the meanings of embodied values that distinguish a practice as 'educational' and constitute the values of human flourishing. It includes the transformation of these embodied values into explanatory principles of practical judgements on educational influences in learning, in the creation of an epistemology for international professional development in education.

Introduction

As I write this on the 6th November 2024 I had just woken to the news of Donald Trump's victory in the USA Presidential Elections. I shall relate this victory to 'Here Be Dragons', in terms of dangerous and unchartered contexts. In the words of Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists, UK (an organisation I am a member of):

> Across the globe this morning, people are waking up to news from the United States that may shock, sadden, and scare us.
>
> Donald Trump's victory represents more than just a change in American leadership – it signals a real shift backwards for human rights and secular values that will reverberate far beyond US borders.
>
> Already, evangelical groups across America are celebrating what they see as a mandate to roll back decades of progress on crucial human rights issues. We've seen this playbook before, and we know what it means: renewed attacks on women's reproductive rights, LGBT equality, access to assisted dying, and the very foundations of secular democracy. But unlike 2016, Trump has all of the powers of the judiciary, Senate, and House of Representatives on his side. His word is law.
>
> Democracy and humanist values are under constant threat everywhere. But we at home can protect, promote, and preserve these values. (Copson, 2024)

In responding to such threats to secular values I shall be drawing insights from my keynote on 'Transformative Living Educational Theory Research in the Landscapes of Cultural and Religious Diversity'. This was presented to the 4th International Conference on Transformative Educational Research and Sustainable Development (TERSD) with the theme of 'Transformative Education Empowerment in the Landscape of Cultural and Religious Diversity', on the 19th October, 2024. You can access this keynote from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jackkeynotetersd191024.pdf.

I shall also be drawing insights from the symposium presented at BERA 2024 at the University of Manchester 8-12 September, 2024, by Margaret Wadsley, Joy Mounter, Marie Huxtable and Jack Whitehead on 'Generating an epistemology for educational research from the responsibility of educators and educational researchers to research their own professional development'. You can access the symposium from https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/bera2024/bera2024symposiumprop.pdf

The insights will focus on the responsibilities of professional educators to research their own professional learning as they seek to live as fully as possible, values of human flourishing. In doing this a Living Educational Theory Research approach to professional learning and development will be offered as an approach that recognises both the constraints and creative opportunities that can be offered by spiritual, ideological and cultural similarities and differences.

This paper is organised in terms of the IPDA suggestions: framing in contemporary current issues and debates; overview of the research approach; research questions and research findings; original contributions to the wider community: Context; Theory; Methods.

Framing

The framing is located within current debates on close-to-practice research (Hordern, 2021; Morris et al. 2023), with a Living Educational Theory Research approach, to professional learning. The framing includes an engagement with the values of the Magna Charta Universitatum (MCU, 2020) and the European Declaration on Global Education to 2050 (Dublin Declaration, 2020), where 'dragons' are experienced in terms of living contradictions where values are experienced as negated in practice:

> Values are the **principles or standards** that we each carry through our lives and that **guide and inform** our thoughts, attitudes and actions. They influence, and are influenced by, our experience of the society in which we each live. Our values help determine what is important to us and shape how we interact with other people and the more-than-human world. (Crompton, 2024)

A clear distinction is made between an education research approach to professional learning and development that is close-to-practice and a Living Educational Theory Research approach to professional development in which the educational research is a necessary part of the professional practice. I have previously located my understanding of my professional practice within the following:

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

influence and contribute to the educational influences of these Global, European and Higher Education contexts. (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2024 p. 5)

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> Transformative Educational Research and Sustainable Development (TERSD) is a scholarly forum that aims to conceive, enact, and flourish the depth and scope of transformative capabilities, collaboration, embodied practice and praxis in education and research. This forum was initiated in 2016 by a number of professionals who are animated by transformative soul and striving for better education practices through transformative education approach. The first three conferences of this forum were hosted by Kathmandu University School of Education (KUSOED), Nepal. The initial conference, which took place in 2016, encouraged theoretically grounded conversations about the necessity of multi-paradigmatic epistemologies and relational ontologies in research and teaching. The second conference, in 2018, was centered on transforming society as a whole by means of knowledge legacy and context-responsive wisdom. The third conference, in 2022, aimed to broaden the scope of transformative educational research and practice by taking into account the ways in which locals, communities, and practitioners might survive in the face of challenging time and difficult circumstances brought on by covid-19. In order to critically understand who we are and who we might become as individuals and communities, the previous conferences provided us with an opportunity to broaden our conscious awareness of our situatedness in the world. This opened us up to the idea of promoting equity, empowerment, and enhanced meaningfulness in educational research and practice. (TERSD 2024 – see https://tersd.unesa.ac.id/)

Research approach

A Living Educational Theory Research approach is used when individual professionals and living contradictions and other concerns are experienced. They generate valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanations for their educational influences in their own learning in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which the practice is located. A living contradiction involves holding together two mutually opposed opposites. This approach does not deny the importance of an education research approach in which researchers generate contributions to the conceptual frameworks and methods of validation of forms and fields of education knowledge. The importance of education research to educational research is that insights from education researchers can be integrated within the valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanations that individual educational researchers generate for their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which their practice is located. Living Educational Theory Research is an approach used by practitioners to continually research their practice to realise their responsibilities as professionals i.e. holding themselves to

account for what they do and the consequences of their practice as well as accounting to others. They contributute valid accounts of the knowledge they create in the process to a globally accessible knowledgebase all can draw on.

As in any form of research, the validity of the claims to knowledge are fundamental to the academic legitimacy of the contributions to knowledge. A Living Educational Theory Research approach to Professional Learning uses insights from the work of Popper (1975, p. 44) and Habermas (1976, pp. 2-3). Draft explanations for educational influence in learning are subjected to the mutual rational controls of critical discussion, as Popper suggest. These controls are focused on questions that are designed to strengthen the validity of the explanations for educational influences in learning. These questions are:

- How can I improve the comprehensibility of my explanation?
- How can I strengthen the evidence I use to justify my claims to knowledge?
- How can I enhance the sociocultural and sociohistorical understandings I use to explain their influences in the explanations for educational influences in learning?
- How could I enhance the authenticity of my explanation for educational influences in learning in the sense of showing that my explanation is demonstrating that I am living my values as fully as possible?

Whilst the research approach is focused on the generation of a valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanation for educational influence in learning, insights from other research approaches can be used in generating the explanation. For example, each living-educational-theory includes a self-study by the researchers in the sense that that the 'I' of the researchers is engaged in inquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve the educational influences of my professional practice?'. Whilst each living-educational-theory is a narrative it is important to ensure that each narrative includes an explanation for the educational influences of the researcher and that the validity of the explanation has been subjected to the mutual rational controls of critical discussion. As each living-educational-theory engages with sociocultural and sociohistorical influences it is autoethnographic in nature. Care must be taken not to subsume the explanations within cultural influences, but to rather use insights about cultural influences in the generation of the valid explanation for educational influences. Some research approaches require that the methodological approach is defined before the research begins. In a Living Educational Theory Research approach the methodology is clarified and evolves in the course of its emergence in practice.

Questions, Dragons and Research Findings

The questions of Living Educational Theory Research include the researcher's 'I' and are focused on, 'How do I improve the educational influences of my professional practice with values of human flourishing?'. The dragon includes academic pressures to remove the 'I' from valid explanations for educational influences in learning. I felt these pressures when starting my research in my part-time students for a Masters in the psychology of education, while teaching science in an inner London secondary school. My tutors emphasised the priority of a controlled experimental design, following the methodology of positivist science. This design eliminating the 'I' of the researcher in explanations. The explanations prioritised

causal, rather than intentional relationships. Michael Polanyi (1958) helped me to overcome this dragon and include the intentional influences of 'I':

> I must understand the world from my point of view, as a person claiming originality and exercising his personal judgement responsibly with universal intent. I must now develop a conceptual framework which both recognises the existence of the other such persons and envisages that fact that they have come into existence by evolution from primordial inanimate beginnings. (p. 327)

My second dragon to overcome was the Aristotelean Law of contradiction which stated that two mutually exclusive statements cannot be true simultaneously. Ilyenkov (1977) states the problem clearly:

> Contradiction as the concrete unity of mutually exclusive opposites is the real nucleus of dialectics, its central category… but no small difficulty immediately arises as soon as matters touch on 'subjective dialectics', on dialectics as the logic of thinking. If any object is a living contradiction, what must the thought (statement about the object) be that expresses it? Can and should an objective contradiction find reflection in thought? And if so, in what form? (p.313)

Watching video recording of my classroom practice in 1972 I experienced myself as a living contradiction in holding together certain values together with their negation. Values are a necessary component of educational practice as education is a values-laden practical activity and we use values as explanatory principles in explanations for educational influences in learning. I valued enquiry learning and believed that I had established it with my students. The video showed that I was giving my pupils their questions and negating my value. In this experience I found my imagination working autonomously to produce solutions to this problem. I imagined ways forward, chose one of the possibilities and created an action plan. I acted and gathered data to enable me to make a judgement on my effectiveness in living my values more fully. I evaluated my actions and modified my concerns, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations (Whitehead, 1977) . I moved this action-reflection cycles into Living Educational Theory Research through generating a valid, evidence-based and values-laden explanation for my educational influences in my own learning and in the learning of my students.

The third dragon to overcome was in the criticism that such explanations were merely anecdotal and subjective and lacked rigour, validity and objectivity. I have explained above in the research design how I used insights from Popper and Habermas to overcome such criticism.

The fourth dragon to be overcome was in the politics of educational knowledge that refused to allow the submission of digital data in the submission of research degrees. This visual data was necessary to clarify and communicate the embodied expressions of the values that could be used as explanatory principles and standards of judgment, in explanations for educational influences in learning. This dragon was overcome by changing the rules governing the submission of research degrees to permit the inclusion of digital visual data.

The answers include insights from theories of sociocultural and sociohistorical influences in the understandings and practices of individual practitioners in their unique contexts with the 'dragons' of living contradictions. The findings draw on over 50 Living Educational Theory Doctorates that have been awarded, by universities around the world, for their original contributions to educational knowledge (Whitehead, 2024). A new collective imaginary (Drewell & Larsson, 2019, Skolimowski, 1994) is offered below as an original contribution to knowledge for international professional development to contribute to a more peaceful and just world.

Original contributions: Context; Theory; Methods.

In making the original contributions I accept Foucault's distinction between a 'specific intellectual and a 'universal intellectual'. I see myself as a specific intellectual who is engaged in the generation and sharing of a living-educational-theory at the precise points where my own conditions of life and work situate me. I am encouraging other readers to generate and share their own living-educational-theories as specific intellectuals and to encourage others to do so too.

> I accept Foucault's (1977) distinction between the 'specific intellectual' as opposed to the 'universal intellectual'. He says that for a long period the 'left' intellectual was acknowledged as a champion of truth and justice. The intellectual was a spokesperson of the universal in the sense of moral, theoretical and political choices. In opposition to the universal intellectual, he describes the specific intellectual in terms of an engagement in a struggle at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them. Foucault takes care to emphasise that by 'truth' he does not mean 'the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted'. By 'truth', he means the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true. The struggles 'around truth' are not 'on behalf' of the truth, but about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays. (Whitehead, 1993, p. 69)

Such original contributions have emerged from the unique explanations for professional learning, of each individual, from their professional development programmes. They include an epistemology for professional learning with a distinctive unit of appraisal, standards of judgement and living-logics of the explanations for educational influence in learning. They include methods of educational inquiry for clarifying and communicating meanings of the embodied values that distinguish practice and learning as educational. The methods include the use of empathetic resonance with digital visual data for clarifying and communicating the meanings of the energy-flowing values that can explain educational influences in learning (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2024a & b).

In facing and overcoming the dragons of conflict in 54 years of a global, Living Educational Theory Research approach to professional development, there are still dragons to be faced. For example, in contributing to the creation of a more peaceful and productive world, professional practitioners are faced with global issues of war, pestilence and poverty. Such dragons will need to be faced by a new collective imaginary which promotes our collective actions in moving towards a more peaceful and productive world.

This new collective imaginary (Drewell & Larsson, 2019; Bateson, 1975; Skolimowski, 1994) will need to overcome the final dragon of a personal identity that is grounded in the belief in an autonomous, individual 'I', that is solely concerned with self-interest. Such a collective imaginary needs an inclusional 'I' that recognises an individual's responsibility for their own professional learning and development, whilst at the same time recognising that this individual is exercising this responsibility within and for a social formation and ecological environment. I have found the following insights on steps towards an ecology of mind, a participatory research programme, recognition and a collective imaginary helpful in overcoming this final dragon.

Steps towards an ecology of mind

… it is also an ecological question. The means by which one man influences another are a part of the ecology of ideas in their relationship, and part of the larger ecological system within which that relationship exists. (Bateson, 1975, p. 353)

In fact, the problem of how to transmit our ecological reasoning to those whom we wish to influence in what seems to us to be an ecologically "good" direction is itself an ecological problem. We are not outside the ecology for which we plan—we are always and inevitably a part of it. (p. 354)

A Participatory Research Programme

Let us address some of the detail. How do we do that participatory research? What are some of its main characteristics?

The participatory research is the art of *empathy* –
Is the art of *communion* with the object of enquiry –
Is the art of learning to use i*ts* language –
Is the art of *using* its language –
Is the art of *talking* to the object of our enquiry (although this may at first sound strange, let us remember that stranger things are now happening in this life) –
Is the art of penetrating from *within* –
Is the art of *in-dwelling* in the other –
Is the art of *imaginative hypothesis* which leads to the art of identification –
Is the art of *transformation of one's consciousness* so that it becomes part of the consciousness of the other.

Some of these requirements seem to be almost too much for our minds trained in the rigours of objectivity. Yet surprisingly, most of these attributes of the participatory research are not alien to us. We know them from our own personal experience. (Skolimowski, 1994, pp. 160-161).

Generating a Collective Imaginary in the International Professional Development Association.

Yet, our collective ability to create social reality is perhaps our most defining human capacity. This social reality is sometimes termed our *Collective Imaginary*.

This is the emergent property of the complex self-organisation of many minds with the capacity for symbolic language, and it is unique to human beings.

Examples of our Collective Imaginary include money, nations, marriage, presidents, the market and democracy. They are all collective agreements and only exist because we collectively believe in them and use our collective resources to reinforce their existence.

Our Collective Imaginary makes it possible for us to live together as a society in any given moment within our context of nature and technology. It would be impossible to live with today's technology using the Collective Imaginary of a Stone Age society. Our Collective Imaginary also allocates power and can be very oppressive for some groups in society.

One important aspect of our Collective Imaginary is our current worldview and our present paradigm. When we are talking about developing our worldviews, we are ultimately talking about making a conscious shift in our Collective Imaginary.

Currently, most of us understand our social reality as a thing, something that is outside and separate from us. We experience it as something given that comes at us. We do not see it as something socially constructed and continuously reinforced by our own thinking and acting today.

This means that we usually do not perceive the process of ourselves forming social reality and then replicating it from generation to generation (perhaps with just slight adjustments). We do not see how, in this way, we are actively complicit in perpetuating the established power structures of society. Nor do we generally have an understanding of how our individual and collective consciousness and intentions impact the social reality around us.

Previously through history, social reality appears to have evolved in an unconscious way – through trials, (p. 65) random actions or intuition. During historical time, thousands of different cultures have been in competition with each other and only a few Collective Imaginaries have survived and thrived.

Nowadays, in our connected world, we can see certain aspects of our Collective Imaginary that dominate globally, thus dictating the behavior of most groups in most societies. The global market system is perhaps the most obvious example. (Drewell & Larsson, 2019, pp. 64-65)

Recognition

Generating such a collective imaginary requires a collective response. I am suggesting that we begin by sharing each others' recognition of each others' worth and exploring the implications of this recognition for each other's professional learning and development:

> Human beings seek recognition of their own worth, or of the people, things, or principles that they invest with worth. The desire for recognition, and the accompanying emotions of anger, shame and pride, are parts of the human personality critical to political life. According to Hegel, they are what drives the whole historical process. (Fukuyama, 1992, p. xvii)

> The existence of a moral dimension in the human personality that constantly evaluates both the self and others does not, however, mean that there will be any agreement on the substantive content of morality. In a world of thymotic moral selves, they will be constantly disagreeing and arguing and growing angry with one another over a host of questions, large and small. Hence thymos is, even in its most humble manifestations, the starting point for human conflict. (pp. 181-182).

I believe that a start has been made in creating and sharing such a collective imaginary in the homepage of living-posters at:

https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/homepage2023.pdf

I am suggesting, as a member of the International Professional Development Association, that you contribute your own living-poster as a contribution to our collective actions in overcoming the dragons of conflict in moving into the future from a grounding in 54 years of a global, Living Educational Theory Research approach to professional development.

Interim conclusion, November 2024

My engagement with practitioner researchers around the world has extended and deepened my understanding of the importance of recognising each individual's unique constellation of values and the influence of the historical and cultural contexts within which their professional practice is located. The dragons of conflict and responses to them are influenced by these unique values and contexts, in creating a global, Living Educational Theory Research approach to professional development.

For example, do please access the most recent additions to the homepage of living-posters at https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/homepage2023.pdf. The most recent additions are Education for Development and Sustainability at https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/eds24.pdf and the Indonesian TERG (Transformative Educational Research Group) preparing to present at the 2024, International Conference of Transformative Education and Sustainable Development at https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/indonesiangp23.pdf .

All practitioners, including those in both groups are influenced by the patriarchal, historical and cultural influences of their societies. There is a lack of equality and empowerment between males and females. This lack is experienced by many in the groups as a living

contradiction as they seek to live more fully their values of equality and social justice. Each one of us embodies a unique constellation of values that we are seeking to live as fully as we can. Hence, we can each generate and share our unique living-educational-theories as we explain our educational influences in our own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations within which our practices are located. As we generate our living-educational-theories and extend and deepen our global perspectives we may benefit from insights that incorporate Eastern Wisdom Traditions with Western Academic Traditions (Panta et al., 2022).

You may find that the influences of Western Academic Traditions might be restricting the modes of data representation you wish to include, for reasons of validity, into your explanations for educational influence (Eisner, 1997). Confronting such restrictions may mean engaging with the politics of educational knowledge and the power relations that are sustaining the restrictions. Such power relations may also be experienced as pressures within Higher Education to work as 'universal intellectuals' in the sense of being a spokesperson for universal explanations. In creating and sharing your living-educational-theories I am suggesting that you work as a specific intellectual by engaging in a struggle at the precise points where your own conditions of life or work situate you (Foucault, 1977). For example, Kaplan (2013) working and researching in a place of high unemployment in South Africa, asked, researched and answered, 'How do I influence emerging entrepreneurs to become sufficiently self-confident to be able to design, establish and sustain their own employment and employment for others?'

As members of the International Professional Development Community we are stronger together in facing the dragons of conflict in developing a global, Living Educational Theory Research approach to professional development. We can support each other through our dialogues and our responses to each other's writings as we work and research to live our values of human flourishing as fully as possible and to help others to do so too.

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