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Improving Learning And Practice In The Workplace Through Living Theory Research

Jack Whitehead, University of Cumbria.

36:12 minute video of the presentation



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY5FTWouzTU>

Powerpoint slides to support the presentation produced by Michael Choy



<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwsingaporeppt.pptx>

Notes for Jack Whitehead's keynote presentation at the conference at the Institute for Adult Learning Singapore (IAL) with the theme of Transforming Continuing Education and Training (CET): innovations in Workplace Practice and Learning on the 11th July 2014.

Abstract

Keeping the goals of IAL at the forefront of this keynote I shall focus on the use of Living Theory research and Action Research in raising capabilities, catalysing innovation, and leading research in workforce learning. I shall provide access to the evidence that demonstrates that a Living Theory approach to Action Research can facilitate the development of an effective, innovative and responsive CET sector that is able to meet the needs of industries and the workforce (see <http://www.ial.edu.sg/>).

The evidence includes the use of multimodal narratives with digital technologies in workplace learning that have been accredited for higher degrees in continuing education and training and which are freely available from the Internet. The evidence will be drawn from the living-theories produced by individuals as they explore the implications of asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing in my workplace practice?' The international significance of this evidence will include living theories from workplaces in Singapore, South Africa, Canada, Europe, China, South Africa and Japan.

Keywords: living-theory, workforce learning, innovation, raising capabilities, improving practice.

Introduction

My last visit to Singapore in 1990 was marked by the 25th anniversary celebrations of Singapore becoming an independent republic. At this time I was a lecturer in education at the University of Bath and supervising Peggy (Kok) Leong's master's dissertation, which she successfully completed in 1991, titled *The Art Of An Educational Inquirer*. Peggy lectured at the Vocational and Industrial Training Board in Singapore, which became the Institute of Technical Education in 1992. My keynote draws on the work of Peggy Leong that inspired me. Peggy employed a Living Theory approach to Action Research to generate her living-educational-theory. A living-educational-theory (or living-theory) is a researchers explanation of their educational influence in their own learning, the learning of others and the learning of the social formations within which they live and work (Whitehead, 1989). I will clarify later what distinguishes a Living Theory approach to Action Research. Peggy Leong introduced me to important cultural differences between our values. Peggy's values were shaped by her experiences as an East Asian woman living, working and researching in Singapore. Mine were shaped by my experiences as a white, British male working in a British university. In particular Peggy held firmly to a cultural value of Singapore that stresses the importance of excellence in the workplace, whilst I held firmly to my values of freedom, justice and democracy:

I found harmony at last in coming to a compromise between the values of freedom, democracy and justice and the values I held regarding excellence in doing a job. The action research that I take back with me to my place of work will be based on the values of excellence which I will promote in using action research in teacher training just as Whitehead promotes the values of freedom, democracy and justice in his action research activities in the United Kingdom. I have to make very clear that it is the value of excellence that powers the action research that I would be prepared to do back in my place of work (Leong, 1991, p. 61)

The keynote is organized into four sections:

- i) The use of a Living Theory approach to Action Research to raise capabilities, catalyse innovation and to lead research into workforce learning.
- ii) Evidence that a Living Theory approach to Action Research can facilitate the development of an effective, innovative and responsive CET sector that is able to meet the needs of industries and the workforce (see <http://www.ial.edu.sg/>).

iii) The innovative use of multimodal narratives with digital technologies in workplace learning Evidence will be drawn from the living-theories produced by individuals as they explore the implications of asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing in my workplace practice?’ The evidence is available from <http://www.actionresearch.net> .

iv) The international significance of this evidence includes living-theories generated by researchers in workplaces around the world for instance, South Africa, China, Canada, India, Europe, Israel Japan and Australia. These living-theories can be accessed from <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml> and <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/moira.shtml> .

I shall begin my keynote by asking for any issues or questions that you would like me to address. This enables me to emphasise the importance of moving from a transmission mode of delivery to an educational approach to co-creating knowledge, which enables an educator to be more responsive to a learner’s questions and interests.

I also video my keynotes and then post the video at the top of the text I prepare for the keynote. This is to show that the meanings of the embodied expressions of life-affirming, energy-flowing values, I express whilst presenting the ideas in the keynote, can be clarified with the help of visual data. I stress the importance of life-affirming, energy-flowing values because anything that anyone does requires the expression of energy, yet the relationship between energy and meaning and energy and values is only weakly understood (Vasilyuk, 1991, p. 63-64).

i) The use of a Living Theory approach to Action Research to raise capabilities, catalyse innovation and to lead research into workforce learning.

I first introduced the idea of a living-educational-theory in a 1989 paper published in the Cambridge Journal of Education (Whitehead, 1989, see <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/livtheory.html>). I usually shorten Living Educational Theory to Living Theory, as in this paper. The idea of Living Theory emerged from Ilyenkov’s (1977) question, ‘If an object exists as a living contradiction what must the thought (statement about the object) by that expresses it?’ (p. 313). Having seen myself teaching science on video, denying some of the values I held about the importance of enquiry learning, I had already experienced my ‘I’ as a living contradiction in my question, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ in the context of my workplace, professional practice.

I coined the phrase living-educational-theory to mean 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 influence the learning, to distinguish the **explanations generated by practitioners** from the explanations **deduced from general theories and applied to individual cases**.

For many years my living-theories emerged from an action research approach to my enquiry, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' By this I mean that I used action reflection cycles in which I:

- a) expressed a concern about my practice because my values were not being lived fully in my practice.
- b) clarified the meanings of the values that could explain why I was doing what I was doing.
- c) imagined ways to improve my practice and chose one of these possibilities in an action plan.
- d) acted on the action plan and gathered data that would enable me to make a judgement on the effectiveness of my actions in living my values more fully and in contributing to enhancements in another's learning.
- e) evaluated my effectiveness in terms of my values and another's learning.
- f) produced an explanation of my educational influence in the learning of others which I submitted to a validation group of some 3-8 peers with questions derived from Habermas' (1976, pp, 2-3) four criteria of social validity:
 - How could I improve the comprehensibility of my explanations?
 - How could I strengthen the evidence I used to justify my assertions (claims to know)?
 - How could I deepen and extend my understandings of the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences in my practice and explanations?
 - How could I enhance the authenticity of my explanations in showing that I was truly committed to the values I claimed to hold, through time and interaction?

I use the capitals in Living Theory to distinguish the conceptual principles of this research approach from individual and hyphenated living-theories. These are the explanations that individuals generate to explain 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 writings and which distinguish a Living Theory approach to Action Research from other forms of Action Research. Action Research is not the only research approach that can be used to generate a living-theory. It is also possible to use Narrative Enquiry, Autoethnography, Self-study, Ethnography, Case Study, Grounded Theory and Phenomenological approaches.

ii) Evidence that a Living Theory approach to Action Research can facilitate the development of an effective, innovative and responsive CET sector that is able to meet the needs of industries and the workforce (see <http://www.ial.edu.sg/>).

You can access this evidence from my web-site [actionresearch.net](http://www.actionresearch.net), <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml>. I want to familiarise you with the evidence that demonstrates how a Living Theory approach to Action Research can facilitate the development of an effective, innovative and responsive CET sector that is able to meet the needs of industries and the workforce.

As the emphasis in Singapore is on excellence and meeting the needs of industries and the workforce I want to focus your attention on the following living-theories:

Yvonne Crotty's Ph.D. (2012) Thesis, How am I bringing an educationally entrepreneurial spirit into higher education? Dublin City University, 2012.
<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/yvonnecrotty.shtml>

Bonnie Kaplan's Master of Technology Dissertation, How do I use my living and lived experience to influence creative economic independence in others? 2013 Durban University of Technology. <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/kaplan/KaplanMTech032014.pdf>

Graham Van Tuyl's Ph.D. (2009) Thesis, From Engineer To Co-Creative Catalyst: An Inclusional And Transformational Journey. University of Bath.
<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/gvt.shtml>

By clicking on the live urls you can access both the abstracts and the complete contents of the explanations. Crotty's thesis leads nicely into the next section on the innovative use of multimodal narratives with digital technologies in workplace learning.

iii) The innovative use of multimodal narratives with digital technologies in workplace learning. Evidence will be drawn from the living-theories produced by individuals as they explore the implications of asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing in my workplace practice?' The evidence is available from <http://www.actionresearch.net> .

From the 'Other Homepages Of Interest' section of the left hand side menu of <http://www.actionresearch.net> you can access the work at Dublin City University of two of the most innovative researchers in the world on the use of visual narratives with digital technologies in workplace learning. You can access the work of Dr. Margaret Farren and Dr. Yvonne Crotty as Co-Directors of the International Research Centre for e-innovation and Workplace Learning: Action Research, Creativity and Educational Innovation at:

<http://www4.dcu.ie/cwlel/index.shtml>

Both Crotty and Farren (2013) have been awarded their doctorates for their living-theory explanations of their influences in workplace learning. You can access these doctorates from:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml>

Farren, as a main editor of the Educational Journal of Living Theories has, together with Branko Bogar of J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, in Croatia and other members of the EJOLTS community, established a rigorous process of open review for the publication of living-theories, which include multimodal narratives. You can access all the journal issues from <http://ejolts.net> as I shall show you now.

In addition to the two above examples of the innovative use of visual narratives with digital technologies in workplace learning that have been accredited for higher degrees in continuing education and training I want to draw your attention to the two following examples because of the way that visual data with digital video is integrated within the explanation and not just included as an appendix to a main argument.

Marie Huxtable's Ph.D. (2012) Thesis, How do I Evolve Living-Educational-Theory Praxis in Living-boundaries? University of Bath.

Chris Jones' MA (2009) Dissertation, How do I improve my practice as an inclusion officer working in a children's service. Bath Spa University.

In addition to the above living-theory theses you will find many others on my website where researchers have integrated video and images within the explanation.

In 2004, as a member of a Senate Working Party on the regulations governing the submission of research degrees, I was able to support a recommendation to the Senate of the University of Bath that the submission of e-media within research degrees was accepted. Mary Hartog's doctorate was the first to be accepted under the new regulations:

Mary Hartog's Ph.D. (2004) A Self Study Of A Higher Education Tutor: How Can I Improve My Practice? University of Bath.

<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/mariehuxtable.shtml>

I continue to research how explanations of workplace learning can be enhanced by integrating video into written text. The evidence for the spreading influence of living-theories in international contexts can be seen in the following section.

iv) The international significance of this evidence includes living-theories generated by researchers in workplaces around the world for instance, South Africa, China, Canada, India, Europe, Israel Japan and Australia. These living-theories can be accessed from <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml> and <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/moira.shtml> .

They include:

In South Africa:

Elizabeth Wolvaardt's Ph.D. (2013) Over the conceptual horizon of public health: A living theory of teaching undergraduate medical students. University of Pretoria.

<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/wolvaardtphd/Wolvaardtphd2013.pdf>

In Canada

Jacqueline Delong's Ph.D. (2002) How Can I Improve My Practice As A Superintendent of Schools and Create My Own Living Educational Theory? University of Bath.

<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/delong.shtml>

In China

Moira Laidlaw's work on Action Research in China's Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching at Ningxia Teachers University. Retrieved 27 June 2014 from <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/moira.shtml> . This includes her inaugural professorial address on 'How might we enhance the educational value of our research-base at the new university in Guyuan?'

In India,

Barnabe D' Souza's Ph.D. (2008) Thesis, Evolution of a rehabilitation programme for chemically dependent male street adolescents in a major Indian city. Supervised by Stephen Bigger. Coventry University in collaboration with the University of Worcester. https://eprints.worc.ac.uk/512/1/Barnabe_DSouza_PhD.pdf

Swaroop Rawal's Ph.D. (2006) Thesis, The role of drama in enhancing life skills in children with specific learning difficulties in a Mumbai school: My reflective account. Coventry University in Collaboration with the University of Worcester. <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/rawal.shtml>

In UK

Marian Naidoo's Ph.D. (2005) I am because we are (A never ending story). The emergence of a living theory of inclusional and responsive practice. University of Bath. <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/naidoo.shtml>

Robyn Pound's Ph.D. (2003) How can I improve my health visiting support of parenting? The creation of an alongside epistemology through action enquiry. University of the West of England. <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/pound.shtml>

In the Republic of Ireland

Bernie Sullivan's Ph.D. (2006) A living theory of a practice of social justice: Realizing the right of Traveler Children to educational equality. Limerick University. <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/items.asp?id=47>

In Israel

Anat Geller's Ed.D. (2010) Within Dialogue and Without: How has 'Being in the Unknown' become a value in my developing as a better dialogical educator? University of Bath. (live connections to video clips from the text need adding). <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/geller/anatgelleredd.pdf>

In Japan

JeKan Adler Collins' Ph.D. (2007) Thesis, Developing an inclusional pedagogy of the unique: How do I clarify, live and explain my educational influences in my learning

as I pedagogise my healing nurse curriculum in a Japanese University? University of Bath. <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/jekan.shtml>

In Australia

Phil Tattersall's Ph.D. (2011) Thesis, How am I generating a living theory of environmental activism with inclusionality? University of Western Sydney.
<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/tattersallphd/philtphd.pdf>

In International Settings

Eden Charles' Ph.D. (2007) Thesis, How Can I bring Ubuntu As A Living Standard Of Judgment Into The Academy? Moving Beyond Decolonisation Through Societal Reidentification And Guiltless Recognition. University of Bath.
<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/edenphd.shtml>

Ram Punia's Ed.D. (2004) My CV is My Curriculum: The Making of an International Educator with Spiritual Values. University of Bath.
<http://www.actionresearch.net/living/punia.shtml>

Jacqui Scholes-Rhodes' Ph.D. (2002) From the Inside Out: Learning to presence my aesthetic and spiritual being through the emergent form of a creative art of inquiry. University of Bath. <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/jacqui.shtml>

This is not an exhaustive list of evidence from international settings. More evidence can be accessed from <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml> .

Conclusion

I am hoping that the focus on evidence in my presentation on improving learning and practice in the workplace through a Living Theory approach to Action Research will stimulate you to generate and share your own living-theories in workplace enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' By retaining a focus on excellence from Singaporean culture, in researching such questions, I believe that the Institute for Adult Learning Singapore (IAL) will continue to enhance its reputation as being at the forefront of research into Adult Learning and Continuing Education and Training and I want to end by thanking the organisers of the conference for this opportunity for sharing the ideas in the keynote with you.

References

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Retrieved 27 June 2014 from <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/livtheory.html>