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Living-Educational-Theory research as transformational CPD

Jack Whitehead and Marie Huxtable

Abstract

CPD Living-Educational-Theory offers an approach to continual professional development that enables the educator to enhance their own professional practice and also enables them to offer as gifts the knowledge, expertise and talents they develop to extend the knowledge base of the profession. In this paper we briefly introduce Living-Theory research and the international CPD project, 'Living Values Improving Practice Cooperatively' that began in the process of supporting educators through a Masters programme.

Background

In 2005 we began working together to provide support for educators wanting to engage in CPD by researching their practice to improve it and creating explanations of their educational influences in learning. These have been legitimated by the Academy at masters level and can be accessed from <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/mastermod.shtml> .

The pedagogy of the Masters programme was not the traditional one with a series of lectures and workshops followed by an assignment to be submitted that showed that knowledge had been acquired and applied. The pedagogy was that of Living-Theory research.

Living-Theory (Whitehead, 1989, 2011) is a form of self-study that is focused by the researcher researching questions of the form, 'how can I improve what I am doing?' This form of self-study is not navel gazing or egotistical. It is an ethically driven form of research where the educator recognises and takes responsibility for the contribution they make to the quality of the educational relationship, space and opportunities experienced by learners. Making as explicit as possible the educational influences in learning of expressions of our embodied knowledge and values, as well as describing and explaining what we intentionally do, can help us understand and improve the contribution we each make. As Ginott (1972, p.15) said, 'I have come to the frightening conclusion: I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather.'

The educators who have worked with us have taken responsibility for researching the lived reality of their educational values to improve the climate learners experience and the educational influence they have in learning and life, their own, that of others and of the social formations within which they work and live. Many practitioners we have worked with have offered as gifts accounts of the talents, expertise and knowledge they have developed through their research, which have been accredited through many universities. These accounts can be found on <http://www.actionresearch.net> and of some of the Masters level work can be found in this edition of Gifted Education International.

The Masters group we established has evolved into the international CPD project, 'Living Values Improving Practice Cooperatively'. This is a research project for

leaders, teachers and other professionals, from a variety of fields, who are committed to improving the life-chances and well-being of individuals and communities, by enquiring individually, collaboratively and co-operatively into the processes of improving their practice and knowledge-creation. The project has a physical and virtual 'home' and meeting place. You can join us by looking on <http://www.actionresearch.net> where you will also find a wealth of resources and information about other educational communities you may wish to join or learn about.

As we research to improve our individual daily practice we are also researching together to learn how to improve how we learn, work and research co-operatively and collaboratively. Through the project we have been researching to create and make public our knowledge, talents and expertise of how we are each, and together, improving education in our daily practice using a living theory approach.

What is a Living-Theory research approach to improving practice?

In 1972 Whitehead was working in an inner-city secondary school teaching science. A lesson went so badly he came out determined to find ways to help his reluctant learners to do better. One of his responses was to develop enquiry-based learning. He thought he was doing that well but when he looked at videotapes of his practice he was shocked to see that in fact he was giving his students the questions and answers. He experienced himself as a living contradiction in the sense that he could see himself denying in his practice values that he claimed to hold. At this time he was also working on his Masters Degree. He began to think of the explanations he produced for his educational influences in his own learning and in the learning of others. He distinguished such explanations from those generated by philosophy, psychology, sociology and history, which constituted the disciplines approach to educational theory. In this approach the practical principles Whitehead used to explain his educational influences in learning were held to be, at best, pragmatic maxims that had a crude and superficial justification in practice and that would be replaced in any rationally developed theory by principles with more theoretical justification from the disciplines of education (Hirst 1983, p. 18). Because of this mistake in the dominant view of educational theory, Whitehead decided to move to a University, as an educational researcher, to see if he could contribute to the creation of valid forms of educational theory.

Over the next 40 years Whitehead evolved Living-Theory research. It is educational and a self-study of a person's presence in the world that is generative and transformational in the process of researching to improve it. Through the cooperative engagement with others, in the process of creating their living-theories, each researcher develops and offers, talents, expertise and knowledge that are recognised and valued. The researcher as learner is empowered to accept and express their responsibility for the educational influence they have in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations they are part of.

What does this look like in practice? Where to start? The simple answer is to begin with where you are and focus on what excites, puzzles or challenges you in the here-and-now. There is not a set procedure as is common with many of the social sciences. Living-Theory research is instead a multidimensional and relationally dynamic process. Rather than trying to impose a structure, each Living-Theory researcher evolves methods of enquiry that help them to recognise, as they emerge in the process

of enquiry, the values that give meaning and purpose to their lives and which form their explanatory principles and living standards of judgment (Laidlow, 1996) of their practice. Dadds and Hart (2001, p. 166) refer to this as methodological inventiveness. They point out that how practitioners choose to research, and their sense of control over this, can be as important to their sense of identity within the research as their research outcomes:

‘No methodology is, or should be, cast in stone, if we accept that professional intention should be informing research processes, not pre-set ideas about methods or techniques.’ (p. 169)

As the researcher develops their enquiry they often produces some reflective writing on formative experiences in their life, which may or may not be included in subsequent published work. These narratives often reveal to the practitioner the ontological values, the values that give meaning and purpose to their lives, which are at the heart of their practice and why they are seeking to improve. At the same time there may be a problem they are struggling to resolve, such as ‘How can I teach this child better?’ or ‘How can I implement the latest national strategy without compromising the quality of education in my school?’ However, the question to which the research offers an answer is rarely clear at the beginning but emerges in the course of enquiry. It is a question that is not an idealised one but is rooted in the reality of the evolving response within the constraints and tensions of the real world, of which we are each a part of and wish to improve.

Sometimes a researcher finds it easier in the first place to use the questions that Whitehead has developed to guide their enquiries:

- What is my concern?
- Why am I concerned?
- What am I going to do about it?
- What data will I gather to help me to judge my effectiveness?
- How does the data help me to clarify the meanings of my embodied values as these emerge in practice?
- What values-based explanatory principles do I use to explain my educational influence?
- How do I use my values-based standards of judgment in evaluating the validity of my claims to be improving my practice?
- How will I strengthen the validity of my values-based explanations of my educational influences in learning?

Those familiar with action research and TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context; Wallace & Adams, 1993, Wallace et al., 2004) will recognise commonalities. Huxtable (2012), for instance, found a way of understanding her living-theory research by integrating TASC and the action reflection cycle that Whitehead has described above into what she has called Living-Theory TASC. Living-theory researchers gradually gain confidence in their own creativity and ability to research but initially may find it helpful to use frameworks they are already comfortable with.

Creating multi-media narratives of explanations of educational influence

Whitehead distinguishes research as valid knowledge made public. To make our learning public we need to create communicable, valid accounts of our living-educational-theories. In the process of creating such accounts we not only enhance our own learning and lives but also hope to enhance the learning and lives of others and contribute to the pooling of knowledge that carries hope of creating a more humane world. Text alone cannot communicate fully the meaning of ontological values such as a loving recognition, respectful connectedness or educational responsibility. While taking Lather's (1994) point about the irony inherent in trying to represent something that can never reach the being of the thing itself, we believe that multi-media narratives can get closer to communicating the meanings of energy-flowing values that can be done using text alone. We are heartened by the recognition, by the editors of journals such as 'Teaching and Teacher Education', that scholarly enquiries beyond written text can use alternative forms of representation to communicate meanings that cannot be carried by written text alone (Hunter, et. al., 2012).

To strengthen the validity of multi-media narratives we use questions derived from Habermas's (1976, pp. 2-3) four criteria of social validity. By this we mean that we respond to the accounts in validation groups, of between three to eight peers, through the questions:

- How could the comprehensibility be improved?
- How could the evidenced used to justify assertions be strengthened?
- How could the awareness of the socio-historical and socio-cultural influences in the writing be extended and deepened?
- How could the authenticity of the writing to show the writers commitment to the values they claim to hold be developed over time and interactions?

These values and processes are being lived and developed in the Living-Theory CPD project that has evolved from the Masters programme.

Living Values Improving Practice Cooperatively: An international CPD project

The project is grounded in the assumption that each individual has talents that could be developed in learning that enhances the individual's well-being and the well-being of others in living loving and productive lives in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' The project participants are committed to living as fully as possible, in the creation of their living educational theories, the personal and co-operative values and understandings that carry hope for the future of humanity.

The project is continuously evolving and you can participate in both the project and its evolution as you express and develop your talents and offer them as gifts to other by accessing details of the project at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/huxtable/LLCCPD/Home.html>

and making your own contributions to:

<http://www.spanglefish.com/livingvaluesimprovingpracticecooperatively/>

As you create your own living-education-theories as explanations of your educational influences in learning you may wish to contribute to the community of practitioner-researchers from all over the world who have already published their accounts in the

Educational Journal of Living Theories (EJOLTS). For the archive and present issue together with details of submission see: <http://ejolts.net>

We intend this issue of Gifted Education International to be a contribution to this global initiative on developing the talents that carry hope for the future of humanity and in offering these educational gifts to enhance our international contexts.

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