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ARTICLE

# Generating living theory and understanding in action research studies

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explains how individuals can generate their living theories from action research as explanations for their educational influences in learning. The epistemological significance of these explanations is explored in terms of the energy and values that are expressed in explanatory principles of learning in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'. Limitations in the expression of the meanings of these explanatory principles through words on pages of printed text are overcome from a perspective of inclusionality and in multi-media explanations that focus on the embodied knowledges of action researchers. These explanations can be accessed through the live URLs provided in the article. Evidence that the explanations of educational influences in learning from Whitehead's educational research programme have been used by others is provided from the masters and doctoral degrees of other living theory action researchers.

## KEY WORDS

- inclusionality
- living standards of judgment
- living theory

My purpose in presenting this article is to establish a different understanding of theory that can emerge from action research with the use of multi-media explanations. I shall be claiming that these explanations enable the communication of explanatory principles of flows of energy with values in the embodied knowledges of practitioners. I shall be claiming further that text, on printed pages like these, is too limited as a medium for communicating such meanings.

My commitment to action research emerged in 1971 as I asked, researched and answered my question, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' in the educational contexts of my work as a teacher of science in a comprehensive school in London. At that time, action research was the only research approach that allowed the researcher to place their own 'I' and their practice in the research question. I agreed with Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) that there is 'no clear agreement about the character of action research: what it is, what and who it is for, and how it should be done are all matters which are contested in the literature' (p. 21). I agreed with Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart and Zuber-Skerrett (1990, p. 13) about the difficulty of formulating a valid, generally accepted definition of action research and their idea that:

... if yours is a situation in which: people reflect and improve (or develop) their *own* work and their *own* situations; by tightly interlinking their reflection and action; and also making their experience public not only to other participants but also to other persons interested in and concerned about the work and the situation, i.e. their (public) theories and practices of the work and the situation, then yours is a situation in which action research is occurring. (p. 19)

Theories in action research are important because of their explanatory power. Insights from theories can help us to understand better how to improve our practice. Theories can also be dangerous when people act with false beliefs. For example, the racist theorists that helped to fuel the Second World War have yet to be eliminated from cultural influences in different parts of the world. The theories we hold can matter in terms of life and death. For example, theories about gender relations can lead to individuals in some cultures being condemned to death for sharing ideas about women's rights from the Internet. Theories certainly matter in terms of what is viewed as a legitimate education in different cultures and on how well-being is understood and can be enhanced in different countries.

Most theories are presented to us in journals such as *Action Research* as a set of propositions which are stated with sufficient generality yet precision that they explain the 'behaviour' of a range of phenomena and predict what would happen in the future (Pring, 2000).

I use the idea of living theories (Whitehead, 1989) to distinguish the explanations of action researchers from the general explanations in propositional theories that dominate the refereed international journals. I am thinking particularly of living theories that are constituted by the unique explanations of action

researchers of their educational influences in learning. In propositional theories, explanations for the actions and learnings of individuals *are derived from conceptual abstractions* of relations between propositions. In living theories *individuals generate their own explanations* of their educational influences in their own learning. The explanatory principles in living theory explanations are energy-flowing values embodied and expressed in practice. I shall be directing your attention to where you can access the visual narratives on the Web that communicate the meanings of such energy-flowing values in living theories.

I distinguish two forms of living theories generated by action researchers. The first is dialectical and grounded in living contradictions (Eames, 1995; Whitehead, 1999). There has been a 2500-year-old tension between propositional and dialectical theorists that continues to this day. The tension focuses on contradiction. Starting with Aristotle's work on interpretation it was argued that contradictions, in the sense of mutually exclusive opposite statements being held together, were not permissible in theory. This became known as the Law of Contradiction.

Karl Popper (1963) used Aristotelean laws of logic to show that if any propositional theory contained a contradiction then it was entirely useless as a theory. The Soviet logician, Evard Ilyenkov (1977) recognized that he was still faced with this problem of contradiction in his decision to 'write' logic when he asked, 'If an object is a living contradiction what must the thought be (statement about the object) that expresses it?'

I shall be pointing below to the evidence that shows how living theories contain a logic of living (Whitehead, 1999). This living logic can answer Ilyenkov's question about the form of thought that can express living contradictions. I am thinking here of 'I' existing as a contradiction in the sense of holding together a commitment to live certain values with the recognition of the denial of these values in practice. I shall also show below how dialectical living theories have been generated from action research enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' in which 'I' exists as a living contradiction.

The second kind of living theory is grounded in a relationally dynamic awareness that I will refer to, following Lumley (2008) and Rayner (2004, 2005), as inclusionality.

At the heart of inclusionality . . . is a simple shift in the way we frame reality, from absolutely fixed to relationally dynamic. This shift arises from perceiving space and boundaries as connective, reflective and co-creative, rather than severing, in their vital role of producing heterogeneous form and local identity. (Rayner, 2004)

I understand inclusionality as a relationally dynamic awareness of space and boundaries as connective, reflexive and co-creative. In the generation of living theories from action research informed by inclusionality (Adler-Collins, 2007; Charles, 2007; Spiro, 2008), insights are used from both propositional and dialectical theories.

I like the way Lumley expresses such a relational dynamic in his fluid-dynamical worldview as:

. . . an inspiring pooling-of-consciousness that seems to include and connect all within all in unifying dynamical communion . . . The concreteness of 'local object being' . . . allows us to understand the dynamics of the common living-space in which we are all ineluctably included participants. (Lumley, 2008, p. 3)

One problem, in all forms of research related to human development, is that representations of expressions of energy with values in relationally dynamic explanations are not well understood or documented. Vasilyuk (1991) has highlighted this problem when he says that we have very little idea of how to link up into one whole the physiological theory of activation, the psychology of motivation, and the ideas of energy which have been elaborated mainly in the field of physics.

The explanatory principles, in inclusional living theories, are expressed in terms of flows of life-affirming energy with the embodied values that give meaning and purpose to the life of the individual. The technological advances of digital multi-media forms of representation in e-media are enhancing the possibilities for communicating such explanatory principles. Multi-media can help us to represent and communicate the relational and dynamic nature of the values we are using to judge our practice (Whitehead, 2008a). This has been shown by Charles (2007), with an African Cosmology of Ubuntu. It has been shown by Adler-Collins (2007) with insights from Buddhism in bringing a curriculum of the healing nurse into a Japanese university. It has been shown by Spiro (2008) with her original idea of knowledge-transformation in a doctoral research programme in the UK. Adler-Collins (2008) and Laidlaw (2008) have also emphasized the use of multi-media representations in the generation of living theories from within universities in China and Japan.

My interest in understanding the nature of the theories that can be generated by action researchers began with my first report as an action researcher into improving learning (Whitehead, 1976). The explanation was in the form of action reflection cycles in which individuals:

Expressed their concerns that they were not living their values as fully as they believed that they could do. They imagined ways forward and choose one possibility to act on in an action plan. They acted and gathered data with which to make a judgement on the influence of their actions in helping their pupils to improve their learning. They evaluated their actions in relation to their values and understandings. They evaluated the validity of the explanations I produced of our learning.

From some earlier experiences in 1971, when I first used video to analyse my own classroom practice, I understood the importance of recognizing oneself as a living contradiction in stimulating the imagination to generate ideas for improving practice. The inclusion of 'I' as a living contradiction in enquiries of

the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' was accepted by all the participants in the above project.

The idea of including 'I' as a living contradiction in explanations of learning served to reinforce my belief that a new form of theory was needed to distinguish the explanations offered by action researchers from the explanations derived from the conceptual abstractions in propositional theories which eliminated contradictions.

My educational action research programme over the last 35 years at the University of Bath has focused on asking, researching and answering the question, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'. I found myself asking this question in the first lesson I taught at Langdon Park School in London's Tower Hamlets when I began teaching in 1967. I came into teaching with a passion to help pupils develop their scientific understandings.

Because I don't know you, the reader, I am hoping that I am not making a mistake in my assumptions about the way you make sense of the world in terms of 'Theory'. As a reader of *Action Research* you will have met the theories generated or used by action researchers in which meanings are communicated through words on printed pages of text. My present difficulty is in communicating the nature of explanatory principles with their energy-flowing values while writing in a medium of words on paper. I am thinking of the difficulty of communicating the meanings of the life-affirming energy with values in living relationships. I am thinking of the difficulty of including such expressions of energy with values as explanatory principles for an individual's influence in what they do, in pages of printed text. In my research programme this influence has focused on the educational influences of individuals in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of social formations (Whitehead, 2006).

The difficulty is that, in my experience, the explanatory principles in such explanations are not communicable from within a set of propositions. I understand a proposition to be a statement which asserts that something is true or false. The explanations given by individuals for the educational influences of what they do, always carry energy-flowing values. In life's journey an individual cannot do anything without the expression of energy. Actions need energy and values distinguish actions and learning as educational.

My interest in multi-media forms of representation is that they can show expressions of life-affirming energy with values and communicate their meanings in visual narratives (Whitehead, 2006) that can explain educational influences in learning. With the advances in communication technologies it might not be too far in the future when you will be able to access *Action Research* as an e-journal with live URL links to visual narratives such as those already provided by the journal *Action Research Expeditions* (Whitehead, 2004). The communication and development of a living theory approach to action research will need access to the opportunities for the new forms of visual and audio communication being

opened up by new technologies. Before I direct your gaze, through the limitations of printed text, to the forms of representation of energy-flowing values that have been opened up by multi-media technologies, I shall describe some of my learning from my research programme into the nature of educational theory that supports these new forms of representation.

## **Introducing myself and my action research programme**

I am a lecturer in education and educational researcher at the University of Bath in the UK. I began my research programme at the university in 1973 with a commitment to contribute to the reconstruction of educational theory. I began this programme because I wanted to contribute to enhancing professionalism in education and it seemed to me that the view of educational theory that had dominated my studies of education at the University of London, Institute of Education between 1968 and 1972 was mistaken. In this view, known as the disciplines approach to educational theory, the theory was believed to be constituted by the disciplines of the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education. Having studied these disciplines and attempted to explain my educational influences in my own learning and in the learning of my pupils (I was a full-time science teacher in comprehensive schools between 1968 and 1972) I could see that a fundamental mistake was being made in the disciplines approach to educational theory. I believed that this mistake was so fundamental that a new approach to theory was required. Paul Hirst (1983), one of the early proponents of the original disciplines approach to educational theory, put this mistake very clearly when he stated that many of the operational principles of educational theory are generalizations from practical experience and have as their justification the results of individual actions and practices. The mistake was in thinking that *principles justified in this way are at best pragmatic maxims having a first crude and superficial justification in practice that in any rationally developed theory would be replaced by principles with more fundamental, theoretical justification.*

I studied this mistaken view of educational theory at the Institute of Education of the University of London between 1968 and 1972. I felt the power of the adherents to this approach to replace the practical principles I used to explain my educational influences with abstract principles from the disciplines of education. The seriousness of the mistake prompted my move to the University of Bath in 1973 to see if I could contribute to the generation of valid forms of educational theory.

## Explaining my educational influences in my own learning and in the learning of others

The transformation in my thinking that distinguished my research as action research, came in March 1976 when I received responses to a report (Whitehead, 1976) I had written to describe the local curriculum development outlined above. Influenced by Macdonald's (1976) idea of democratic evaluation I had convened a validation group of the teachers I was working with, together with other stakeholders to critique my report in terms of its validity. Drawing on the most advanced theories of the day I had explained what the teachers were doing in terms of models of curriculum innovation, in terms of models of change in the teaching and learning process and in terms of models of evaluation. The response of the teachers was unanimous. They agreed that the report might be satisfactory to my academic colleagues but they could not see themselves in the report. They could not recognize the explanation in terms of the explanations they gave for their practice in working to improve their pupils' learning. As they made their criticism I could see that it was justified. They asked me to return to the original data of video-clips of their lessons, transcripts of our conversations, copies of pupils' work and transcripts of conversations with the pupils, and to construct an explanation in which they could recognize themselves.

Working with Paul Hunt, one of the teachers, I returned to the data and reconstructed the explanation into a form and content that the validation group accepted as a valid account of our enquiry into improving learning for pupils. The form and content of the explanation was very different to my first explanation. The first explanation was given solely in the form of conceptual abstractions. The redrafted explanation accepted by the validation group had the form of the action reflection cycle presented above.

In 1989 *The Cambridge Journal of Education* published what I think is the most influential of my articles to date on 'Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind "How do I improve my practice?"'. In this article, I introduced the idea of a living educational theory as an explanation that individuals generate for their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of social formations. Also in 1989, Jean McNiff graduated with her doctorate from the University of Bath for her thesis on 'An explanation for an individual's educational development through the dialectic of action research' (1989).

McNiff (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) has been the most influential action researcher in communicating the idea and significance of living theory. The idea of generating living theories evolved from a rejection of the idea that educational theory could be constituted from the disciplines of education of philosophy, psychology, sociology and history. This rejection of the disciplines approach to

educational theory did not mean a rejection of the value of insights from the disciplines of education in the construction of educational theory.

The idea of living theory evolved from this rejection into a dialectical view of generating educational theories from the ground of 'I' as a living contradiction. It then evolved from a dialectical perspective into an inclusional perspective with Rayner's (2005) insight of inclusionality. An inclusional perspective can be distinguished as a relationally dynamic awareness of space and boundaries as connective, reflexive and co-creative. I want to stress that this evolution of living theories from a dialectical base with its nucleus of living contradiction, into inclusionality (Whitehead, 2006) does not mean a rejection of insights from either propositional or dialectical theories.

This evolution of living theories is shown in the theories being generated by researchers at Nelson Mandela University (Wood, Morar, & Mostert, 2007). These researchers are exploring the implications of asking, researching and answering their questions concerning the movement from rhetoric to reality as they enquire into the role of living theory action research in transforming education. Wood et al. demonstrate an understanding of the importance for the action researcher of exploring the implications of seeking to live their ontological values as fully as possible in their professional practice. These insights, about the importance of expressing and researching embodied values that give meaning and purpose to life, have also been integrated into the living theories of educators associated with the University of Limerick (2008), such as those above, and those associated with the University of Bath.

The significance of these living theories that have been generated by action researchers from an inclusional perspective is that they have established a new epistemology in the Academy in terms of living units of appraisal, standards of judgment and logics. The importance of understanding a unit of appraisal is that this is whatever is being judged in terms of its validity. The standards of judgment are what we use to do the judging. The importance of logic is that it is a mode of thought that is appropriate for comprehending the real as rational.

I am doubtful that the new epistemology could have been established without a change in university regulations for the submission of research degrees, to permit the inclusion of e-media.

Until 2004 the regulations of the University of Bath for the submission of research degrees did not permit the submission of e-media. A Senate working party on the regulations made a recommendation that e-media should be permitted and the regulations were changed to allow this in 2004. The epistemology significance of permitting e-media is that visual narratives can now be included in the explanations given by action researchers for their educational influences in learning. Two of the most recent action research accounts to receive doctoral accreditation are those of Charles (2007) on 'How can I bring Ubuntu as a living standard of judgment into the academy? Moving beyond decolonisation through

societal reidentification and guiltless recognition’, and Adler-Collins (2007) on ‘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?’.

You could test the validity of my point that visual narratives are needed to communicate the meanings of the ontological values individuals express through their relationships by accessing Charles’s thesis in your browser at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/edenphd.shtml> and Adler-Collins’s thesis at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/jekan.shtml>.

For example, at the beginning of Chapter 6 of Charles’s thesis you can access a video-clip of Charles talking about his experiences of working in Sierra Leone with women whose husbands have been killed by soldiers who raped the women. As Charles describes his learning about values of humanity from the women who were bringing up children from the rapes, and communicates through the video his embodied expression of these values of humanity. I am claiming that the visual medium carries more of his meaning than his words alone, or his words appearing on a page of text. I am further claiming that visual narratives permit the communication of relationally dynamic meanings that are expressed in relationships. They enable the meanings of embodied values to be clarified, developed and communicated in the course of their emergence in practice.

Some of the most impressive pieces of writing that include multi-media living theories of educational influences in learning are in the master’s accounts of Joy Mounter (from 2007) and Claire Formby (from 2007, 2008):

How am I integrating my educational theorizing firstly with the educational responsibility I express in my educational relationships with the children in my class, but also with the educational responsibility I feel towards those in the wider school community?

(Formby, 2008, <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/cfee3draft.htm>)

How do I sustain a loving, receptively responsive educational relationship with my pupils which will motivate them in their learning and encourage me in my teaching?

(Formby, 2008, <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/formbyEE300907.htm>)

Can children carry out action research about learning, creating their own learning theory?

(Mounter, 2007, <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/tuesdayma/joymounterull.htm>)

I want to emphasize my reason for included these points about visual narratives. I want to justify the inclusion of URLs for a web-browser to take you directly to multi-media accounts. My reason is to draw your attention to the boundaries of what can be communicated through text alone as I use words on a page of text in *Action Research* to see if I can persuade you of their limitations!

If you go into the multi-media living theories of Claire Formby and Joy Mounter you will see video-clips of their practice, through which they communi-

cate their meanings of the values that give meaning and purpose to their lives and that are expressed in their professional practice. I think of such values as ontological in that they are at the heart of the individual's sense of themselves and their ways of being. Their values are expressed with a life-affirming energy in what they are doing.

The ontological significance of the explanatory principles of living theories is that these are the values used by individuals to give meaning and purpose to their lives. These values can be clarified and developed in the course of the action research. The expression of the meanings of the embodied values can be formed, in the process of clarification, into the communicable standards of judgement that can be used to evaluate the validity of the contributions to knowledge in the production of the living theories.

Energy-flowing values, such as love, are not usually brought into academic standards of judgement. In 2006, during a lecture on action research I was giving to research students in the University of Bath, I asked the students to talk to each other in pairs to see if they could understand the values at the heart of each of their research programmes. I then asked them to share these values. Nobody mentioned love. I said that I was fascinated that with a group of research students in a university, an institution of higher education, nobody had mentioned love as a value at the heart of their research programme. I said that I found this strange because I love what I do in education and this love motivates and sustains my commitment. I asked why it was that nobody had mentioned love as being significant in the values-base of their research. After a period of silence one researcher said, 'Love isn't Academic'. There was another silence and then laughter as the group appreciated that if love was being eliminated from what counted as Academic, there was something wrong with the way we were thinking about what counted as Academic! Eleanor Lohr (2006) brought 'love' as a living standard of judgement into the living theories legitimated at the University of Bath. She included a visual narrative of her relationship with her husband Paul to communicate what she was meaning by love at work and analysed her responses to issues of power and privilege.

There has been some criticism of a living theory approach to action research on the grounds that it doesn't engage with issues of power and privilege in society (Noffke, 1997, p. 329). In a picture taken in January 2008 (University of Limerick, 2008), Jean McNiff is in her doctoral robes from the University of Bath celebrating the success of Margaret Cahill and Mary Roche on their graduations with their living theories doctorates from the University of Limerick; Margaret Cahill's 2007 thesis is on 'My living educational theory of inclusional practice'; Mary Roche's 2007 thesis is on 'Towards a living theory of caring pedagogy: Interrogating my practice to nurture a critical, emancipatory and just community of enquiry'.

The symbolism of the robes is that ideas generated by Jean in her doctoral

research programme at the University of Bath have been integrated in the living theory doctorates of Cahill and Roche at the University of Limerick.

Jean McNiff has supervised three other living theory doctorates to successful completion at the University of Limerick with graduations in 2006 and 2007. The explicit embrace of enhancing the expression of the values of social justice and holistic educational practice, in the theses, provide evidence of an educational engagement with issues of power and privilege in society and an appropriate response to Noffke's criticism:

- Bernie Sullivan's, 2006, 'A living theory of a practice of social justice: Realising the right of traveller children to educational equality';
- Máirín Glenn's PhD, 2006, 'Working with collaborative projects: My living theory of a holistic educational practice';
- Caitriona McDonagh's, 2007, 'My living theory of learning to teach for social justice: How do I enable primary school children with specific learning disability (dyslexia) and myself as their teacher to realise our learning potentials?'

In engaging with issues of power and privilege in society, Yaqub Murray has expressed well an experience of inclusional action researchers as they recognize the continuously changing nature of their living enquiries and their living theories:

The flow of my liquid imagination requires a solution, or moment of stability, perhaps a stabilising process, in which the runaway liquidity of my meanings are staunched just long enough for me to translocate them in communicable ways into my text. This tension of exposing and opening up new ideas set against the practical need to hold them steady and stabilise them so that I can communicate their meanings has remained with me throughout my research inquiry as a journey of liquid discovery, and ever-present in my writing-up process. I have not resolved this issue. The tension remains: I imagine it will require a very conscious effort of self-discipline on my part whenever I write. (Murray, 2007, p. 208)

## **Concluding perspective**

The living theory approach to generating theory and understanding in action research is distinguished by individuals producing explanations for their educational influences in learning as they ask, research and answer questions of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'. In developing this approach, I have emphasized the importance of the action researcher as a knowledge-creator in the process of seeking to improving practice.

The contribution to action research generally is in the presentation of an epistemology of practice for action researchers. This epistemology shows how a living logic can overcome the battle for dominance over what counts as rational-

ity in action research between proponents of theories that are structured through propositional or dialectical logics. The contribution includes an explanation of how the energy-flowing values used by action researchers, to give meaning and purpose to their lives of enquiry, can be formed into living standards (Laidlaw, 1996) of judgement for action research. This involves a process of clarifying the meanings of the values as explanatory principles in the course of their emergence in practice using action reflection cycles.

The new perspective on theory in action research is in the idea of three kinds of theory in action research; propositional, dialectical and living theories. Living theories are emerging from the knowledge-creating practices of action researchers. The explanatory principles are distinguished by the life-affirming energy and embodied values expressed in the practices of the action researcher. Living theories integrate insights from propositional and dialectical theories without being reduced to their abstract conceptual understandings. In other words, living theories retain the distinguishing uniqueness of the particular constellation of values, understandings and contextual influences in the life and research of the individual action researcher.

The presentation has drawn attention to the need to extend printed text based analyses and narratives of action research studies, with visual narratives that show the action researcher engaged in the social context of their enquiry into improving practice. The importance of visual narratives, that draw evidence from e-media and that are already flowing through Web-space, have been used to urge readers to access the communications on the Web. These communications focus on the meanings of the flow of life-affirming energy with values in the explanations of educational influences in learning of the living theories of individual action researchers. The explanations include studies conducted by action researchers in the social contexts of the police, education and health services as well as the commercial sector.

In conclusion, I want to draw attention to a vital distinction between social and educational actions. Schutz (1972) has pointed out that 'Not every type of contact between human beings has a social character; this is rather confined to cases where the actor's behavior is meaningfully orientated to that of others' (p. 30). The distinction I am drawing between a social action that is distinguished by an actor's behaviour being meaningfully orientated to that of others, and an educational action, is focused on the expression and representation of flows of life affirming energy in the life of an individual. Many educational actions include social actions. But not all educational actions are social. Not all explanations of educational influences in learning are derived from social theories. I make this point in the knowledge that I value insights from social and other theorists and integrate these within my own living theory (Whitehead, 2006). I am claiming that the life-affirming energy in explanations of educational actions and influences is beyond the social.

I am suggesting that the educational actions of action researchers are distinguished by flows of life-affirming energy with values that characterize their own unique living theories (Whitehead, 2008b, 2008c). As I conclude, I am wondering if I have persuaded you that the expression and representation of such flows of energy, with values, require action researchers to move beyond limitations of printed text based narratives into multi-media accounts of their values-based influences in the world?

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