

COMMENTARY

Self-study, Living Educational Theories, and the Generation of Educational Knowledge

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I have read with pleasure all the articles in this special issue. My comments are based on earlier writings (Whitehead, 1995) in which I focused on the self-studies of teacher educators and the evidence of learning in explanations of educational influence. I call such explanations *living educational theories*. These living theories are constituted by the explanations of teachers, teacher educators, student and pupil researchers, for their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of their students and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work.

Over the 14 years since the 1995 commentaries, I have come to see, in the longitudinal studies, the evidence that shows the learning of teacher educators as they work at improving their practice and their educational influences in student's learning. I can also see an extension in the cognitive range and concerns of the teacher educators as they engage critically with the ideas of others. For example, I think that all students and teacher educators would benefit from engaging with ideas on the social and cultural influences in learning from the work of Bourdieu and Vygotsky as we explore our repurposing of our professional practices.

In this commentary I focus on both the learning I am seeing in the longitudinal studies and the evidence of *educational influences in students' learning* that I believe could be enhanced in producing co-created living theories with teacher educators, students and pupils as researchers. I find that the most inspiring quality of this issue resides in the evidence of the teacher educators' own learning that they show in their reflections on their own values and understandings and the responses of their students.

In my own writings I have stressed the importance of explaining our educational influences in our learning as teacher educators, in the learning of our students and in the learning of the socio-cultural formations in which we live and work. I see a difference between learning and educational learning. Much learning is not educational. Many of my students tell me how family and schooling experiences have subdued their natural curiosity and knowledge-creating capacities. They say that they have to un-learn some of the learning from these early experiences in regaining their natural exuberance and love for life and learning. In distinguishing learning from educational learning I use the idea that educational learning is informed by values that carry hope for the future of humanity.

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My comments are also informed by my experience of seeing at least one of the writers, in each of the contributions to this issue, present their ideas in a public forum, such as the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. In commenting on the evidence of educational influences in learning in this book I shall bear in mind the life-affirming energy and the values of recognition I felt expressed by each of the presenters in what I take to be explanatory principles in their embodied knowledge as teacher educators. In other words I have seen at least one of the writers in each contribution express their embodied knowledge of teacher education in ways that for me carry hope for the future of humanity and my own.

In 'How did we do? Beginning teachers teaching mathematics in primary schools', Sandy Schuck reflects on her learning and recognizes that the process of reframing is a dynamic and never-ending one. I would add that the process of reframing could contribute to the epistemological transformation in educational knowledge that Schön (1995) called for. I am thinking here of the need to develop a relationally dynamic awareness of the space and boundaries that support creativity in teacher education (Whitehead, 2008).

Sandy poses the important question: Is it better to inspire students to want to go out into the teaching workforce as agents of change, or to help them through the initial period of survival by emphasizing compliance and conformity rather than innovation and change? She shows her own openness through considering whether she should be helping her students through that initial period by being honest about the challenges that lie ahead and suggesting that they take small steps towards change rather than act as revolutionaries. Sandy is refreshingly honest that this has led her to be far less certain in her beliefs about how best to serve students and clearly wishes to extend her own understandings of the context in which teachers find themselves.

In thinking about ways in which the creativity of teacher educators could be engaged more fully in improving their practice I'd like to focus on what Sandy means by 'researching their experiences', where she says:

I realized that I could assist our students after their graduation, in a number of ways. These included researching their experiences on leaving the university and disseminating the results to teacher educators and employing authorities.

I want to suggest that student teachers and beginning teachers are capable of researching their own experiences and generating explanations of their educational influences in their own learning, in their pupils' learning and in the socio-cultural formations in which we live and work. In commenting on all the studies in this issue, this is the one insight that might have the most influence in enhancing future research into the educational learning of teacher educators, students and pupils. Teacher educators, students and pupils as co-researchers could help to generate the forms of educational knowledge that are needed to enhance contributions to both improving practice and generating knowledge.

The communication of the meanings of embodied knowledge needs visual narrative in addition to words on pages of printed text. I am thinking that explanations of the educational influences in the learning of teacher educators could be deepened and extended through visual narratives. I am thinking of visual narratives that include Renée's insight that open discourse concerning our teaching and work-style is not an easy conversation to have. As Renée says our norms of politeness and self-protection and our experiences with the impact of opening one's teaching (or any other behavior) to public comment are potentially as dangerous or uncomfortable to those making the comments as

they are to the one who is being commented upon. Repurposing our practice means ‘creating space within the related fields of teacher education and graduate education to renegotiate the often unacknowledged and unspoken rules that may inhibit the very goals we would like to achieve’.

At this point I invite you to view the visual narrative of Branko Bognar and Marica Zovko (2008), two Croatian educators, in the *Educational Journal of Living Theories*. This visual narrative shows pupils and teachers and researchers co-creating their living educational theories and is available at the URL <http://ejolts.net/node/82>. I believe this visual narrative shows how video-clips of our practices as teacher educators can be integrated with words on pages of text. This is particularly important in communicating the meanings of the expression of the energy-flowing and values-laden standards of judgment that we use in evaluating our educational influences in learning.

In the learning of teacher educators studying ‘The role of vision in trajectories of literacy practice among new teachers’, Dot, Heather, Renée and Connie were surprised to find a lack of relationship between ideas and practice with some students. Some teachers were unable to work through the details of practice using their lenses of big ideas. In retrospect, the authors say that they believe that they could have helped their students to achieve stronger practice by encouraging them to consider and articulate the specific, concrete aspects of their visions more clearly. Their learning includes the development of the idea of addressing *vision-in-context* during the pre-service year. I do agree with the conclusion that ‘if we are serious about helping our candidates make their visions for teaching real, then we must offer support for the development of vision in the most real contexts possible: alongside them in the classrooms where they engage with real children every day’.

I also agree that if we hope to understand how and why some teachers improve their practice from the pre-service year to the first year of teaching, it is worth investigating the visions for teaching of teachers with rising practice scores more closely. What I am wondering is whether the research approach should include the co-creation, by teacher educators, teachers and pupils, of narratives of educational influences in learning? I believe that including such an approach would help to produce a valid understanding of how and why some teachers improve their practice from the pre-service year to the first year of teaching.

In my earlier writings I stressed the importance on asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ and of using insights from traditional disciplines of education, in the generation of our own living educational theories. I am suggesting that any educational investigation of teachers improving their practice should include the teacher’s narrative with a validated explanation of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of their pupils and in the learning of the socio-cultural formations in which we live and work. My stress on validation comes from my experiences of video-taping my classroom practices as a science teacher in 1971. I thought that I was supporting enquiry learning in my classroom where the video-tapes showed that I was actually giving my pupils the questions to answer!

To enhance the validity of accounts I advocate the use of Habermas’ (1976, pp. 2–3) criteria of: comprehensibility – does it make sense; truth – does it contain sufficient evidence to justify assertions; rightness – is there an awareness of the assumptions in the social and cultural background within which the account is written; authenticity – does the writer show, over time and interaction, that they are committed to living the values they espouse. Each contribution to this book seems to me to fulfil these criteria of validity in

making contributions to educational knowledge. Because of my own research interests in such contributions I looked at them to see how ‘theory’ was being used.

Clare, Clive, Yiola and Tim gave the most explicit acknowledgement of their understanding of theory when they follow the principles of grounded theory to analyze their data. They are committed to continuing to study their graduates to gauge the actual impact of the courses on their early years of teaching.

In their learning they say that they have begun to understand more fully the challenges faced by beginning teachers and hence some of the crucial elements of pre-service preparation: ‘As instructors we see that we need to consider simultaneously many different issues, such as modeling teaching strategies, explaining theory clearly, devising learning activities, selecting resources and readings, prioritizing topics, and working with a diverse group of learners’.

Having been present at many presentations by Clare and Clive, I can bear witness to their expression of a sustained commitment to improving teacher education through research. I feel that they love what they do. I agree that explaining traditional theories clearly is essential in teacher education and, I would add, *as well as* recognizing the knowledge-creating capacities of individuals in enquiries of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ as they generate their own living educational theories.

A living theory is similar to a grounded theory in that the intent of a living theory is to move beyond description and to generate a valid explanation for an individual’s educational influence in his or her own learning and in the learning of others. Living theory differs from grounded theory in that the theory is not an abstract analytic scheme of a process. A living theory is an explanation for an individual’s educational influence in learning where the explanatory principles are not abstract generalizations. The explanatory principles are the energy flowing values and understandings the individual uses to give meaning and purpose to their life and to explain their educational influences in learning.

It might be that the co-creation of living educational theories with students and pupils could be a helpful addition to the present approaches to investigating with graduates? In generating their own living theories student teachers could help to monitor their own learning and close the gap between what the student teachers learn and what the teacher educators think they are teaching them. In supporting the generation of their own living theories the new teachers’ pre-service-programme could support the growing understanding of learning theory in the building of their vision.

In learning that clarity of expression is not sufficient, the teacher educators have also learnt that it is important to help student teachers become self-conscious about their learning. The contributors to this text are to be congratulated in showing the advances in the self-studies of teacher education practice by focusing on their own learning.

In their contribution on ‘Insights into self-guided professional development: teachers and teacher educators working together’, Helen, Carole, Susan, Jessica, Laurie, Brianne, Charissa and Marilyn draw attention to Anna Richert’s (2002) important point that the affective side of teaching is rarely identified or addressed by researchers. In recognizing the importance of affect in my work as a tutor in the continuing professional development of teachers on masters and doctoral programmes I tend to focus on the life-affirming energy in teachers’ values and recognize the vital importance of the point made by Marilyn:

You begin to compromise your own values, because you feel as if you cannot succeed in the ways you believe you should. The monthly meetings provide an opportunity for me to listen to everyone else's experiences and remind myself of the ideals we share. This enables me to work in my school in a proactive way. (Marilyn, Interview 2/2008)

In my 1996 commentaries I stressed the importance of documenting the learning outcomes of the students with whom the teachers are working. I see that this point continues to be emphasized for future research by these authors:

The data do not, however, document the learning outcomes of the students with whom these teachers are working. It appears that this must be a next step if we are going to make a case not only for the value of self-directed models of professional development but also for the role of teacher as professionals who are willing and able to work in the best interests of all students.

In this concluding point of my commentary I am suggesting that support in helping the student teachers and pupils to see themselves as knowledge-creators in the generation of their own living educational theories could now inform research into the processes of enhancing educational learning and generating educational knowledge as we enhance the knowledge-base of education.

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