

Can I explain the influence of spiritual values in my education, in the education of others and in the education of social formations?

Notes for a contribution to a workshop on Perspectives on Spirituality,
University of Bristol, 19th March 2003.

Jack Whitehead, Department of Education, University of Bath.

Given last night's vote in the House of Commons committing British Troops to an attack on Iraq I'd like to begin with an e-mail I received from a colleague that feels connected to the theme of the workshop on perspectives on spiritualities:

Dear All

I have organised another peace vigil at the chaplaincy centre, sorry it's short notice, but then so is Bush's latest ultimatum.

Silent Vigil for Peace, Thursday 20th March 2003, 1.30 to 2.00 at the Chaplaincy Centre

Join the Peace Group to meditate on peace, pray for peace, and visualise peace encircling the world. This vigil is to express our desire for peace as an alternative to war. Peace is not an absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice.

People of all faiths or none are welcome. If you would like to read or say a prayer for Peace from any tradition you are most welcome to bring one along.

The vigil will consist of:

Welcome, statement of intent
Meditation on peace (silent vigil)
Light candles (optional)
Pause
Prayers for peace (optional)

The enquiring spirit of the invitation to contribute a short presentation of a narrative account of spirituality was in relation to research and development within the social sciences. I'd like to bring my spirituality into the conversation through a discipline of educational enquiry. I am thinking of the enquiry 'How am I improving what I am doing?' in the context of my relationships as a professional educator and educational researcher. This educational enquiry is disciplined through being accountable to spiritual and other values.

I see myself doing several things as an educator and educational researcher. I am educating myself. I am influencing the education of others. I am influencing the education of social formations through the knowledge-creating activities of myself and others. For the sake of clear communication perhaps I should say that my experience and understanding of spirituality is not grounded in an allegiance to any religion. My spiritual values do have temporal and dynamic dimensions in that they influence the choices I make. They contribute to both the personal power I need to act and the sense of responsibility for myself and others that I bring into my actions. My spiritual values help to give meaning and purpose to my life and can explain some of my motivations for why I do what I do. In the creation of my own living educational theories of my learning, my spiritual values move me to act in particular directions in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' and provide evaluative criteria for me to judgement the outcomes of my actions as improvements.

My narrative begins with video-clips showing my educational relationships with practitioner-researcher in their educational enquiries for their doctoral and masters degrees. In the first clip I am working on 14th Feb. 2003 with Simon Radcliffe, a teacher at Westwood St. Thomas School in Wiltshire. In the course of the conversation I talk about a spiritual quality of life-affirming energy I experience in Simon's presence. I am exploring with him my intuition that this energy is significant in his educational influence with his pupils. He responds to my point about his life-affirming energy with a point about 'Poltergeist' and the 'Undead'. This isn't what I was trying to communicate to Simon about his life affirming energy! His response catches me by surprise and evokes the explosion of laughter that seems to me to provide evidence for my point that I experience a life-affirming spiritual energy in his presence. I also want to pause at the 1/100 second 'look' that Simon directs at the camera woman. This also appears to me to communicate a quality of relationship that is significant in Simon's educational influence. The meanings I experience in relation to the 'look' connect with and bring to life the energy I associate with my spiritual values.

The second clip shows Cheryl Black, one of Jackie Delong's colleagues, responding to a pupil who is brushing some chalk dust from the back of Cheryl's coat. I want to pause the clip at the point where Cheryl communicates to me a spiritual quality in her life-affirming energy.

If I have time I will show you a third clip showing Jackie Delong, a Superintendent of Schools in Ontario, addressing an international conference of teacher-researchers. The idea of research being systematic enquiry made public is one that I hold and I encourage doctoral researchers to present their enquiries in a range of local, national and international forums. The point of the clip I

want to focus on is where Jackie has been asked a question about how she supports networks of practitioner-researchers and she suddenly recalls receiving an e-mail from a teacher about the high level of support she has received from colleagues when she expressed the desire to undertake some action research. She refers to this support as 'The Swat Team' We have talked about this moment and have agreed that Jackie is expressing her life-affirming energy as she connects with the fundamental values of why she is doing what she is doing.

This brief presentation doesn't permit me to go into much detail of the explanations of my educational development and influence in the education of others over the past 30 years as a Lecturer in Education at the University of Bath. But I can point you to the narratives which contain the evidence of this influence in the living theory section of the website <http://www.actionresearch.net>

I would also urge you to access <http://www.actionresearch.net/evol.shtml> where I have a letter with live urls that make connections between different educational enquiries.

My main reason for drawing your attention to these narratives is that they communicate explanations for the education of individuals in a way that would be seriously distorted, perhaps beyond recognition, by any theory or method of enquiry drawn from the social sciences. As Pring (2000, p.7) says, the distinctive features of any enquiry are determined by the nature of the subject matter to be enquired into. What I am suggesting is that a research programme into spirituality may need to keep the social sciences at bay while showing how and when they can be appropriately drawn upon in studying the influence of spirituality from the educational perspective of making meaning and giving purpose to one's life.

I am thinking of meanings such as those expressed by Jacqui Scholes-Rhodes in her doctoral thesis, *From the Inside Out: Learning to presence my aesthetic and spiritual 'being' through the emergent form of a creative art of inquiry*, Scholes-Rhodes (2002) provides the evidence to establish her meanings of exquisite connectivity in relation to presencing both her aesthetic and spiritual 'being'. The evidence requires the engaged and appreciative response of a reader who is able to make informed judgements on how writing, images, music, poetry and the arts can communicate such meanings. These involve the recognition of the contexts and sometimes difficult relationships out of which the meanings of spiritual standards of judgement emerge. The recognition also involves the aesthetically engaged and appreciative responses to writings with the following qualities:

I wanted to understand, to sustain and nurture these emotional and aesthetic glimpses as an experience of spirituality in my life. Each

image engenders a sense of connectivity, sometimes emerging from the aesthetic curve of a natural landscape or from perfumed scents on the wind, and other times overwhelming in the simplicity of human relationship. It can flow simply from a memory of beauty, precious in its cocoon of silence, the silence itself so precious in a cacophonous world. I wanted to feel this 'exquisite connectivity' daily - to wake sure in its power, to absorb its energy and nourishment..... (Scholes-Rhodes, 2002)

My emphasis on the importance of educating social formations in relation to spirituality is focused on a distinction. It is the distinction between the analysis of a social formation and the education of a social formation. It is the distinction between the analyses of social formations produced by social scientists in their social theories and the educational theories produced by educational researchers for explaining the education of social formations. I am suggesting that an interdisciplinary exploration of spirituality would benefit from the inclusion of a perspective from a discipline of educational enquiry. This inclusion would be difficult if the educational perspective were constrained within the social sciences.

Inclusive ways of being in social formations, that are constituted by the dynamic boundaries and power relations, are being explored by Alan Rayner, an ecological researcher at the University of Bath. You can access his ecological writings at: <http://www.bath.ac.uk/~bssadmr/essaysandtalks.htm> .

"By differentiating and integrating, reconfiguring and recycling, a distributed power structure in which boundaries are opened or sealed off according to circumstances allows a versatile indeterminate system to develop. This system gathers and stores, explores and redistributes within its dynamic boundaries as its components assert their autonomy and admit their interdependency in a continuing creative interplay." (Rayner, 1997, p. 292)

This brief multi-media narrative has enabled me to focus attention on some of the key issues and questions I am addressing in my educational, interdisciplinary study of spirituality. I am wondering if understanding spirituality as an embodied value and living standard of judgement (Laidlaw, 1996) in a discipline of educational enquiry might appeal to you.

I am thinking of a discipline of educational enquiry through which you and I can account for the influence of our lives in educating ourselves, in influencing the education of others and in influencing the education of social formations.

Laidlaw, M. (1996) How can I create my own living educational theory as I offer you an account of my educational development? Ph.D. University of Bath. Retrieved March 2003 from <http://www.actionresearch.net/moira2.shtml>

Pring, R. (2000) *The Philosophy of Educational Research*, London & New York Continuum

Rayner, A. (1997) *Degrees of Freedom: Living in Dynamic Boundaries*. Singapore: Imperial College Press.

Scholes-Rhodes, J. (2002) *From the Inside Out: Learning to presence my aesthetic and spiritual 'being' through the emergent form of a creative art of inquiry*, Ph.D. University of Bath. Retrieved March 2003 from <http://www.actionresearch.net/rhodes.shtml>

Whitehead, J. (1993) *The Growth of Educational Knowledge*. Bournemouth: Hyde.

Whitehead, J. (1999) *How do I improve my practice? Creating a discipline of education through educational enquiry*. Ph.D. University of Bath. Retrieved March 2003, from <http://www.actionresearch.net/~edsajw/jack.shtml>