

How can I live my values in each of the areas of activity defined by my sector? An Educational Enquiry Unit.

Introduction: What am I concerned about? Why am I concerned?

My career is currently in transition on many levels. First, after seven years of teaching in further and higher education, I am beginning to put more emphasis on research activity and focus more on postgraduate than undergraduate teaching; second, my research interests are changing, from the teaching of academic writing, to studying higher education more generally, including learning, teaching and policy; and third, as I finish my Master's degree and consider beginning studying toward my doctorate, my position in the academic hierarchy is shifting, bringing new roles and responsibilities, along with a focus on professional development to meet new challenges.

Recently there have been instances when I have felt that my professional obligations have been in conflict with my values and I want to ensure that I am living my professed values in my teaching practice for my own moral peace of mind, as well as meeting the agreed standards in my profession, so that I can provide evidence of this to current and potential employers.

My current roles include coordinating the Study Skills Centre (SSSC) at a teaching-led university and teaching at a music college offering degree-level courses in musicianship; I teach study skills to first-year undergraduate students, research methods to second-year undergraduate students, and an action research module on the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Music Higher Education.

Methods and Methodology: What can I do about it? What will I do? Why have I chosen this method to address my concerns?

I decided to take an action research approach to this project for several reasons. First, as I am teaching a postgraduate module in action research, I wanted to engage with this method to inform my own teaching and have experiences and expertise to share with my students, including participating fully in validation meetings by having writing to share. This alignment of my scholarship and practice allows me to live my professed values. Finally, I judged that action research was the most appropriate way for me to find the answers to my questions because I wanted to explore how I live my values in my practice, provide evidence for tacit knowledge (McNiff and Whitehead 2002:28) and conduct research on myself (ibid, 15), as opposed to on other people.

For all these reasons, I adapted the process outlined in McNiff *et al* (1996) to the following and asked myself:

What am I concerned about?

Why am I concerned?

What can I do about it?

What will I do about it? Why have I chosen this method to address my concerns?

What happened?

What have I learned by doing this project?

How can I modify my practice in future?

What questions am I left with?

Answering the question 'why is the describing and analysis of one's educational values is so important in action research living theory?', Whitehead (2009) explains the importance of defining our values thus:

It is because of the value-laden nature of what is educational. Action research is a form of research that is concerned with improving practice. To distinguish something as an improvement means making a value-judgment. So values are necessary in explaining our educational influences in learning and in judging what counts as an improvement.

Therefore, I began this investigation by defining my professional ontological and professional values. During a validation meeting for this paper, Marie Huxtable helped me clarify my thinking about how I define my values, by questioning which of my professed values were actual 'ontological values that give meaning to my life' and which were simply tools allowing me to live those values (2010).

I currently define my ontological values as the following:

1. Justice
2. Freedom
3. Love
4. Nurturing and supportive relationships
5. Equality
6. Respect for self and others
7. Honesty
8. Trust
9. Humour
10. Creativity

These relate to the ideas, principles, and tools I value in my professional life:

1. Academic freedom (My right to express my views and research findings with impunity)
2. Alignment of scholarship and practice, for both myself and my students
3. An ethical approach to teaching and research
4. Creativity, innovation, and improvisation
5. Transparency of rationale
6. Opportunities to inspire and be inspired
7. Opportunities I have to simply *think* about my subject and the world around me
8. Opportunities to contributing to my field of knowledge
9. Opportunities to travel and share knowledge with other educators and researchers
10. A high quality of work/life balance
11. Opportunities for continuing professional development
12. Access to higher education based on academic performance, as opposed to financial or social status
13. Respect for the needs of individual learners and teachers
14. Student-centred approaches to learning and teaching activities
15. Discipline-centred approaches to learning and teaching activities
16. The pedagogically responsible use of technological tools to enhance learning
17. Relational dialogue

Similarly, as I want to evaluate my practice, I must define the criteria against which I will judge it; in order to make improvements, I will first need to test my practice against these criteria and see where changes need to be made.

I will evaluate my practice against my own professed values (defined below) and the Higher Education Academy's *UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education*¹ (HEA, undated). The PSF provides an external, sector-wide set of criteria against which to evaluate my teaching, while my values are self-imposed criteria. While I could have chosen to use institutional indicators, I felt that they would have represented the institution's values, rather than my own, and given my desire to broaden my knowledge and experience at this point in my career, I felt that sector-wide and personal indicators were more a more appropriate way of evaluating my practice.

This paper evaluates my teaching practice against the six areas of activity outlined in the Higher Education Academy and examines my strategies used to live my values in each of those activities.

Evaluation of My Practice: What happened?

In order to determine how I can live my values and meet the professional standards in my sector, I critically mapped my practice and values against the professional areas of activity defined by the Higher Education Academy. The full analysis of how I do or do not live my values in my practice with examples is below, while my reflections and action plans can be found in the Project Evaluation and Conclusions sections of this paper.

Area of activity 1 - Design and planning of learning activities and/or programmes of study

When designing and planning learning activities or schemes of work, I start with the principle of constructive alignment: making sure that learning activities and assessment match the stated intended outcomes for the course and/or module. Biggs and Tang explain that 'constructive alignment is a marriage between a constructivist understanding of the nature of learning and an aligned design for teaching that is designed to lock students into deep learning', as opposed to encouraging 'surface' learning only for assessment (2007:54).

For example the areas of learning I support in the Study Skills Centre (SSSC) - academic writing, scholarship, oral presentations, time management, research, reading and note-taking, and exam preparation and writing- closely relate to the assessments students must submit at this institution; for example, academic writing remains a primary mode of both formative and summative assessment and was identified by both staff and students surveyed as the most problematic 'study skill' area. Aligning the support available with expectations of students in higher education demonstrates my professional value of scholarship and practice by using my knowledge of the importance of constructive alignment to ensure the relevance of the advice available. Also, this alignment shows the respect that I have for others, but ensuring that the materials and advice I offer provides the knowledge and skills that will help them meet expectations in their studies.

In order to facilitate learning about the process and importance of social validation in action research,² I shared my own work-in-progress of this action research report in a validation meeting with the postgraduate students I teach. By sharing this work with my students, I was living my value for the alignment of scholarship and practice, as I am not only teaching

¹ henceforth PSF

² See McNiff and Whitehead 2010:195 for a discussion about the importance of social validation in the action research process.

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action research methods, but using my scholarly knowledge and drawing on the tacit and to improve my own practice. Through this validation process, I was made aware of some my values through the relational dialogue between myself and one of the students. In the section of the video displayed below, I am aware of the energy that I display when talking to James about my concerns around hierarchy and the physical positions of participants in a teaching session:



(Validation Meeting, 2010)

http://www.youtube.com/watch_private?v=DzxPatKIEzM&sharing_token=P_tbAx44zDGyTDYD3qoFtw

This process of relational dialogue was useful to my understanding of my own work and values. I often use the dialogic methods and examples when teaching my students about the purposes, expectations and objectives of academic writing, but this conversation in the classroom provided a great example of how our thinking is shaped by the questions, enquiries, and insights that we respond to.

In addition, the public blog used to supplement the classroom sessions for this module provides a platform for communication between participants, provide a space for public validation of the students' ideas, another important aspect of action research, one that can be difficult to achieve in 'conventional' teaching contexts. Other scholars have access to our blog and can comment on the group's posts or share their own work with us, thereby creating a forum for academic debate. The use of the blog demonstrates my value for pedagogically responsible use of technology and open access for learning materials and scholarly output.

Area of activity 2 - Teaching and/or supporting student learning

Whilst I am able to live my values in designing learning and teaching activities, I do not always feel that I am able to do so when delivering my teaching to students.

For example, as discussed and illustrated by the video clip above, I struggle with the hierarchal, teacher-centred approach I sometimes take. This teacher-centred approach contradicts my defined value of student-centred learning and teaching activities. I have identified three issues which may contribute to this teacher-centred approach, including the physical layout of classrooms and my use of PowerPoint slides, along with my conditioning to the traditional lecture-style model of teaching delivery.

I often use PowerPoint slides to supplement oral information in my teaching sessions; while this takes into account my value of respect for the needs of individual learners by providing

information using a variety of media to address different learning styles, and trying to use technology in a pedagogically responsible manner it means that I am bound to the 'front' of the classroom to change slides at the appropriate times. This creates an old-fashioned, hierarchal situation in which I become the focus of the lesson by standing while the students are sitting and positioning myself at the focal point for the students. I continue to research and experiment with solutions to this issue.

The layout of the furniture is another barrier to my professed value of student-centred teaching. For one of my undergraduate lessons I have asked the facilities manager to place the chairs in the classroom in double horseshoe shape instead of in rows; students have reported that they like the arrangement better and I feel like the students are more engaged and well-behaved when the chairs are arranged this way, possibly because it creates less of a traditional classroom atmosphere and makes the learners feel like they are on an equal footing with me, the teacher; however, when I used this seating arrangement in my other undergraduate lesson in an attempt to improve learner engagement, the students reported that they were uncomfortable with the change and didn't like sitting so close to other students. I have asked other lecturers in the institution for other ideas about how to improve the physical layout of the classroom and will continue to experiment with options and record the effect on learner engagement and behaviour.

I've also been thinking about some of the issues raised by Huntington in her chapter 'Interactive teaching and learning: exploring and reflecting on practice' (in Hartley et al, 2005), that my politics, personal experiences, and professional socialisation forms the basis of my educational practices. For example, I suspect that my conditioning to the traditional lecture-style delivery of higher education may also be influencing my teacher-centred practice. My own learning experiences as an undergraduate student relied heavily on large-group lectures; this style of teaching is also prevalent in depictions of university study in film, television programmes, literature, and other popular culture media (such as comic strips or social media applications). As such, I find it difficult to find creative ways of delivering teaching to large groups of students. I have tried to address this issue with my undergraduate students by encouraging all students to attend at least one individual tutorial per term. With my second-year Research Methods students, the tutorials have been the place where students have their breakthroughs about their research projects. In the group sessions I introduce concepts and tasks for undertaking a successful research project and try to contextualise this process with students' ideas about their careers; however, not until they apply these concepts to their personal research idea does the true understanding seem to develop. I plan to continue to investigate the correlation between tutorial attendance and student performance and satisfaction in order to evaluate the effectiveness of 1:1 tuition as a teaching tool in this context. Using 1:1 tutorials allows me to respect and meet the needs of individual learners and help students understand the rationale and learning outcomes for the module.

Similarly, Huntington refers to other blocks to interactive approaches, such as 'local institutional blocks' and 'fear' (in Hartley et al, 2005:27) that influence my own practice. Problems such as classroom layout (as outlined above), institutional expectations and regulations, constraints on space, and rigid adherence to set schemes of work are challenges to my attempts to live my values of creative, innovative teaching; discipline- and student-centred approaches to teaching, and the use of technology to enhance and/or deliver taught sessions.

Area of activity 3 - Assessment and giving feedback to learners

As outlined above, my practice as a teacher of academic writing has been greatly influenced by academic literacies theory (Lea and Street, 1998); Ivanić's work (1998) on the relationship between student identity and their academic writing; and Lillis' (2001) argument for 'talkback' rather than 'feedback' on student work. Using academic literacies theory,

Ivanic, and Lillis's work to inform my practice is an example of how I live my value of practice informed by scholarship.

Lillis (2001) argues that tutor-student dialogue is an important part of the academic writing experience. I attempt to implement these ideas by creating space for students to talk through their formative proposals for the UG Research Methods module I teach. Using a research proposal form as a structure for the conversation, students explain to me their ideas for their project, which creates an opportunity for me to help them identify potential problems with their design, focus their research, and align their methods to their purposes. This type of dialogue is particularly important in formative assessments, where students are meant to learn from feedback to improve their performance on summative assessments. Using 1:1 tutorials to help students design and complete their research projects allows me to live my values of constructive alignment for assessments and an ethical approach to teaching because it offers students a genuine opportunity to learn from formative assessments and ask questions about feedback, rather than simply giving one-way written communication that they may or may not understand. I hope that using the formative research proposal, along with tutor-student dialogue, I am creating genuine opportunities for my students to learn about the process and practice of conducting research, as well as enabling them to meet the expectations for a specific assignment.

In *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, Ramsden lists the properties of good teaching, listing among them 'giving the highest-quality feedback on student work' (2003: 86-7); to me, feedback forms an integral part of the learning and teaching process and while I agree with Ramsden, I would add that timeliness also forms an important part of responding to student work. By ensuring that I deliver feedback in a timely manner, giving students an opportunity to learn from previous experiences and implement suggested changes into their next pieces of assessment, I am sending a clear message about the importance of this learning opportunity. In my opinion, teachers who give feedback late, or after the deadline for the next assessment, send out a clear message to students that feedback is not important or useful in the learning process; I value the opportunity feeding back gives me to take into consideration the needs of individual students, possibly inspire students, and help students understand the relevance of particular assignments to other contexts or assessments.

Area of activity 4 - Developing effective environments and student support and guidance

I try to live my values of the creative and relevant use of technology and taking into consideration the needs of individual students when developing effective environments and giving support and guidance.

The university at which I teach offers degree programmes in several Further Education colleges in the region. As my role as coordinator of the Study Skills Centre I have responsibility to provide learning support to all students of the university. As the students studying in partner colleges often find it difficult to travel to the main campus for 1:1 tutorials or workshops, I have found innovative ways to support their learning, including offering bespoke sessions to groups of students and providing learning materials and e-tutorials via the virtual learning environment system (VLE). In addition, I have developed a series of downloadable handouts on a range of topics including essay structure, thesis statements, referencing, and giving presentations. These handouts closely align with expectations of undergraduate work (e.g. Harvard and Numeric referencing systems) and are also developed in response to student and/or staff demand (e.g. writing business plans). In addition to the handouts, I also offer e-tutorials via the real-time chat function. This method of interaction more closely simulates the face-to-face tutorial context: it requires the student to put time aside to engage with me, which puts value on the tutorial; it allows for more immediately reciprocal communication than, for example, email; it gives students a chance to respond to my questions and prompts and, even more so perhaps than face-to-face

tuition, allows for silence and time for students to find the answers to their questions, with me keeping a facilitation rather than teaching role. By offering these students virtual support, I can help them understand the expectations of their writing (and other assignments) by introducing them to the socio-institutional contexts in which they learn, adapting my teaching style to their unique needs, and teaching them about specific techniques to improve their academic writing.

When the opportunity arises to teach 1:1 sessions in person, I try to follow the guidelines I learned as an undergraduate peer tutor for creating an effective environment. Ryan's advice on professional behaviour in a tutorial includes 'never write any part of a student's paper', 'never comment negatively to students about a teacher's teaching methods...', 'never suggest a grade for the paper', 'never criticize the grade a teacher has given a paper', and 'honor the confidentiality of the tutoring relationship' (2002: 1-3). Although this guidance is aimed at peer tutors, I find that maintaining these standards in any tutorial I give creates a professional and ethical environment. I still also follow Ryan's suggestions for running a successful tutoring session, including 'sit side by side' and 'give the student control of the paper', (2002:15) along with keeping in mind the 'three powerful tools' of active listening, facilitating, and silence (2002:17-22) to create an independent yet supportive learning context. Of course, there are times when I break these 'rules' – sometimes because I forget myself and get lazy, or because the situation calls for it. But upon honest reflection, I do not think there are any times when veering from these guidelines actually *improved* a tutorial; I argue that following these basic tenants makes me a better 1:1 tutor and improves student learning and independence, as well as helps me live my values of respect for individual learners, student-centred learning environments, and an ethical approach to teaching by removing opportunities for me to fall back on prescriptive advice.

Area of activity 5 - Integration of scholarship, research and professional activities with teaching and supporting learning

As much of my work in the SSSC involves teaching and supporting academic writing, I try to implement theories and ideas from scholarship related to the teaching of academic writing, also known as 'composition' in North America. The current conversation about teaching academic writing in UK higher education is framed by 'academic literacies' theory. Academic literacies theory appeals to me because it goes beyond the 'study skills' or 'socialisation' approach to teaching academic writing and suggests that teachers of academic writing should take account of the influence of power, identity, and epistemology (Lea and Street, 1998) to better aid students' understanding and practice of writing in their discipline.

I try to use this theory in my practice in several ways. For example, I try to socialise learners to the socio-institutional contexts in which they write by explaining the current context of higher education, its purposes and changing priorities. This helps students understand why they may have to submit assessments such as essays, which do not seem to have direct relevance to their employment goals, but do facilitate learning, transferable skills, and critical thinking. Again, by socialising students to the academy, I am attempting to live my value of aligning scholarship with practice and making rationale apparent, which I believe helps students meet the expectations they face. 'Socialisation' is also an important of academic literacies theory; students need to be aware of the conventions and expectations of specific disciplines and fields of study, as well as those of the social-institutional context.

I also draw on Ivanič's (1998) work by taking into account students' various identities which may influence their ability to meet expectations. For example, I will acknowledge the unique circumstances facing mature students, who may be juggling family responsibilities and jobs alongside their studies. In my experience, some mature students see their age and/or lack of recent educational experience as a barrier to learning and/or academic performance; I try to help them see the value of their life experience and to apply previous learning to new

contexts. I designed a one-hour cross-discipline workshop for mature students using principles of academic literacies theory and aspects of Ivanič's work; I begin by introducing Ivanič's four aspects of self and asking students to reflect on how their own identity as a writer is shaped by these aspects. This is an example of how I respect the needs of individual learners, act on an opportunity to inspire, and be inspired by, these students, and align my teaching practice with scholarship.

Area of activity 6 - Evaluation of practice and continuing professional development

If I profess to value continuing professional development, then I need to evaluate my practice to find places where improvement, investigation, or a massive overhaul is necessary.

For example, after the first year of practice, I reviewed the Study Skills Centre's performance and value by soliciting feedback from both staff and students at Bath Spa University. Using an electronic survey, I asked members of the university community about their experience of using the service. From the data gathered some elements of the programme were changed; for example, the timing of certain workshops, the addition of bespoke sessions, and more 1:1 tutorial times. As a key objective of the SSSC is to meet the learning needs of the students, I felt that their opinions were just as important to the design of the service as pedagogical theories or evidence. After the second year of service, several focus groups were conducted to solicit feedback from students who had participated in a 1:1 tutorial or generic workshop. The feedback received resulted in a difficult moment for me: some students responded that they felt that the 1:1 tutorials were 'rushed' and that more time could be taken to address their individual learning needs. Upon self-reflection, I realised that I had not been meeting the requirements of effective 1:1 writing tutorials; after several years of teaching students about the same issues over and over again had caused me to become complacent and to see the tutorials as a diversion from my research and management duties. In reaction to this epiphany, I decided to develop the peer tutoring programme, to teach students how to tutor each other in academic writing, with the hope that they would have the enthusiasm and patience that I had once given to each of my tutorials. As part of the development of the peer tutoring training programme, I reviewed the fundamental theories and practice of 1:1 tutoring which re-energised and re-focussed my own teaching as well.

I also consider this paper as an evaluation of my practice; in the evaluation and conclusions I will reflect on the findings of this process, consider areas of my practice which need to be developed, and devise an action plan to address these issues.

Project Self-Evaluation: what have I learned by doing this project?

Upon reflection, I think that this was an unusual action research project, as the 'action' was primarily my analysis of my practice, rather than more tangible 'actions' such as trying new approaches in the classroom to attempt to improve learning and/or teaching. My focus, methods, and ideas shaped and shifted dramatically over the course of writing this paper – my first drafts look nothing like the finished piece. While I argue, understand, and believe that academic writing is about the *process* just as much as, if not more so than, the *product*, I still feel that at times I over-complicate issues in my mind. This has become apparent to me in various aspects of my practice. I need time for my ideas to develop, be challenged (by myself, colleagues, external sources, students, etc), change, and grow before I present them to my audiences. I think this self-awareness is important as I move into a phase of my career where I will be expected more and more to contribute strategic, operational, and theoretic ideas at the institutional level and possibly beyond; it will also be important to keep my processes in mind as my research career develops and I look for opportunities to publish my work. In the future, I will aim to communicate my ideas, even complex ones, in a clear and

concise manner with the audience's needs in mind. Sometimes I think that academic writing for assessment is especially difficult as there are several differing actual and implied audiences to consider (e.g. marking tutor, peers and colleagues, community of practice, and possibly oneself, depending on the type of assignment).

In the future I will consider my methods more carefully and try to choose the simplest option that meets the aims and objectives for the project; I will also give myself plenty of time to develop my ideas fully before communicating them to others.

Conclusions: How can I modify my practice in future? What questions am I left with?

This section aims to provide an answer to the research question: How can I improve my practice by evaluating how I live my values within the professional expectations of my sector?

Mapping my actions in six areas of activity outlined in the PSF (HEA, undated) against my values has illuminated the following about the what I will do differently in the future in my practice when

1. Designing and planning learning activities and/or programmes of study

Although I will always strive for improvement, I am generally happy with my ability to live my values whilst meeting the professional standards of course design by ensuring a student-centred approach to learning, using technology to enhance learning, and aligning teaching and learning activities with active and current scholarship. I think I could improve my practice by reviewing some of the literature in this area, including Ramsden's *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, Hartley et al's *Enhancing Teaching in Higher Education*, and Biggs and Tang's *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. As my career focus changes, it will be important for me to not only familiarise myself with new resources, but also to revisit others with a new questions and foci.

2. Teaching and/or supporting student learning

I hope to continue to find ways in which I can live my values more fully when facilitating learning in classroom contexts, thereby encouraging independent learning and more fully support and respect the needs of individual learners. Living my values will require research, energy and an innovative approach to my teaching, as well as confidence and desire to encourage institutional change. As well as the resources outlined above, I will review *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (Fry et al, 2003) for practical tips on managing and improving classroom sessions. I think that my forthcoming project on using Web 2.0 technology will also contribute to a more creative teaching practice. I would also like to investigate training on negotiation and change management to enhance my ability to effect and lead institutional change.

3. Assessing and giving feedback

I will continue to strive to offer useful and timely feedback to my students; I would like to investigate ways in which I can use technology to make this process more effective, manageable, and of interest to students. Again, I think an ability to influence institutional practices would be of benefit to my practice as I am often working within boundaries and restrictions imposed elsewhere. Alternatively, I need to exercise my creative capabilities to find innovative ways to work around institutional practices that clash with my values and knowledge.

4. Developing effective environments and student support and guidance

How can I live my values in each of the areas of activity defined by my sector?

By offering a variety of communication methods, I am living my values by using technology to react to learners' individual needs and hopefully also being creative and innovative; however, I do not feel that I am able to live my values fully, because sometimes these methods become too teacher-centred and generic, as with many of the handouts. In time, I hope to develop more interactive resources that will allow for more independent, subject-specific learning by students.

5. Integrating scholarship, research and professional activities with teaching and supporting of learning

Although I attempt to integrate theories of learning and teaching into my practice, I think I could do this more thoroughly and/or with more awareness. Again, as my career begins to move in new directions, I will need to review the scholarship with which I am familiar and seek out new theories, ideas, and advice that will shape my practice. I am excited about the prospect of trying some of the suggestions for effective use in technology that I have been reading about in preparation for my next paper, particularly Web 2.0 tools for collaborative learning. I would like to more fully live my value for time to read and think about my subject, as this is a part of my practice which has recently been neglected.

6. Evaluating my practice and planning continuing professional development

I believe that my practice would benefit greatly from peer feedback – because I have been working individually for the past 3 years, I have had only sporadic and informal feedback on my teaching practice from colleagues and supervisors. While it has been affirming to hear this (primarily) positive feedback, I am now seeking more critical, structured feedback that will help me identify areas for improvement in my teaching practice. As such, I have arranged for two colleagues to observe my teaching at the university this term and ensured that my teaching at the college will be assessed under the institutional observation scheme. I will continue to seek feedback from students and do what I can to act on their suggestions for improving the learning environment and activities. I hope that by continuing to evaluate my practice I will continue to develop my skills, knowledge, and abilities as a professional teacher and researcher.

At the completion of this project I am left with the following questions which may be helpful to investigate in future:

- a. How can I help my first-year foundation degree students engage more fully in the Study Skills module?
- b. How can I use new/emerging technology to teach more creatively and foster independent learning?
- c. How can I make my teaching sessions more student-centred?
- d. How can I challenge institutional practices of assessment and feedback?
- e. How will my practice be affected by new policies on learning and teaching practices in UK HEIS?

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