

In pursuit of counterpoint: an educational journey*

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Abstract

In this paper I describe and explain my educational development from 1978, to the present day as the main editor for our living educational theories journal EJOLTS. I develop the idea of counterpoint as a way of describing and explaining the management of educational values in my practice and theorising. I show how my early insights were not sufficiently rationalised to help me improve what I was doing, and how the development of my own living educational theory has enabled me to do that. I write about how the search for wholeness, and the avoidance of what I describe as fragmentation, exist in a dialectical relationship between learning and practice. I reveal how these insights are helping me to explain my educational development and improve learning. I show how evolving my counterpoint of values has helped me to illuminate problems and how, over time, I try to solve those problems through a greater acceptance of challenges from students, as well as collaboration with the people I am working with. I show how my work in China (in which my colleagues and I develop action research approaches with Chinese characteristics) leads me to understand more about, and enhance, my own educational development as well as helping to improve learning for teachers and students, both in Higher education and in schools. It is my growing facility for interweaving my values, philosophy and my actions that I designate as counterpoint.

Keywords: Counterpoint; Educational Values; Living Educational Theory; Living standards of Judgement; Fragmentation and Wholeness.

Rationale

In the story of my educational journey I will try to present the living standards of judgment and logic as I ask myself the question, ‘How can I live the most worthwhile form of life?’ In contributing to this first issue of EJOLTS I want to offer readers an original contribution to the conversation started by Donald Schön (1985) about the need for a new epistemology.

In my doctoral thesis (Laidlaw, 1996) I originated the idea of living and developmental standards of judgment in the generation of living theories. As my research evolved in China (2001–2006) I came to understand that action research with Chinese characteristics involved the kind of receptive and responsive standards of judgment used by Rayner to distinguish his work on inclusionality (Rayner 2003 – see later). In explaining my educational influences as my living educational theory I am also aware of needing a *living* logic – i.e. one that can develop as my insights develop – to distinguish the sense I am making of my existence. I am thinking of living logic in the way I developed in a [paper](#) I wrote (Laidlaw, 2004a) for the Bath Action Research Group at Bath University. In short I describe and explain my logic as stemming from a belief that:

My life has a purpose. It's for something. I chose education as the principle articulation of my life's focus a long time ago... I see myself as acting in the name of education and being in the loving service of humanity...The distillation of the above in language is fairness and in the form of my sense-making in mind and thought is logic and in motivation and actions is love. (p. 3)

I go on to say that this living logic develops through experience with others over time in my practice. It is not static and isn't used as a theory from which I extrapolate my practice. It is living in the sense that my practice develops my theory, which develops my practice and so on. My logic is developing through my melding of theory and practice into praxis.

In this paper for EJOLTS I wish to account for my own educational development which is a description and explanation of how I have tried to live my values more fully in my educational practice. If, in our [rubric](#) at EJOLTS we say: ‘We are particularly interested in publishing explanations that connect a flow of life-affirming energy with living values such as love, freedom, justice, compassion, courage, care and democratic evaluation’, then it is important that we show how we are accounting for these values in our actions.

When I agreed to work in EJOLTS, I did so because I felt this could be a journal in which people could share their desire to learn, one in which we could enable better processes for learning as well as facilitate democratic processes, values of freedom, love and equality together. I wanted to help build a learning community.

a) Counterpoint and Related Terms Used in this Paper

I need to start by explaining the term 'counterpoint' and related expressions used in this paper. 'Counterpoint' is a musical term denoting the fusion of different voices into a harmonious whole. 'Voice' is the 'technical' term given to single strands of melody in a composition, in which no voice is subsumed within the whole, but each one is necessary to the whole and the whole is necessary to the individual voice. Counterpoint is the [musical equivalent](#) of holding the [one and the many](#) together as [Socrates](#) said in his exposition about what constitutes the art of a dialectician. In order to help explain what I mean, if you are reading this on the internet I would invite you to click on the url after the following few paragraphs. If you don't have the internet, please have a look at the footnote below, which I hope offers some explanation of what I want to say¹.

In the extract, the counterpoint begins at 2 minutes 50 seconds. On the screen you will see the voices represented as coloured bars and you can see how they interweave. There is a symmetry and sense of challenge and resolution. Although the whole integrates, no one voice is lost in the developing of the arguments, yet the resolutions are beautiful. Watch and listen particularly at just after three minutes, when the first voice is heard again and then a new development is forged. You can see on the screen as well as hear how there is argument or exposition, counter-argument, resolution, voices listening to voices, or persistence when a voice needs to influence other voices. Look at the dialogue at four minutes 26. It is a true dialogue in the way in which neither suppresses the other, but in which both have their say and add to the overall impetus, yet retaining at the same time their individuality.

I believe all of this has been framed by Bach with a sense of purpose, and that purpose manifests itself in his determination to evolve the highest forms that those voices can evolve separately and together, and for those voices to speak with authority and confidence and for those voices to do it beautifully! In educational terms this music represents to me a principled expression of beneficial purposes in the world, of collaboration, of the expectation that voices can work together towards goals which matter, and harmonise eventually into something even better than there was before. It is something that relies on the creativity of individuals and groups. I perceive a link between counterpoint and educational processes.

In the way I am using it in this paper, an educational counterpoint is a space in which people are learning something worthwhile and to their greatest potential. Learning how to create, facilitate and hold this space becomes the counterpoint of my practice.

So, after all this preamble, have a look and listen to [Bach's Toccata and Fugue](#).

¹ The youtube presentation plays Bach's Toccata and Fugue, which is a piece of music for organ. The notes are visually represented in colour-coding for the individual voices, and intervals between notes are depicted bars of colour on the screen going up or down. As the music develops you watch its development and interplay of voices in a visual form, and see the weavings of the various voices. It is a visual as well as aural counterpoint.

b) The relationship between counterpoint and my educational values

In my thesis (Laidlaw, 1996) I maintained that all the values in my practice were not separable in meaningful ways: that the whole and the parts were one and they were continuously developing dialectically. This sense of the living and evolving values became my original contribution to knowledge. I now believe the notion of counterpoint offers me a way of expressing these ideas more completely. The degree of counterpoint in my practice also indicates my own learning.

i) Democratic practices

I am aware that I cannot write about values as if they are static. Values become apparent through our actions. From the beginning of my professional practice I have consciously sought to embed democratic principles within educational processes and have rated the success of a particular series of lessons or teacher-observations to the degree to which democratic principles are being encouraged (Laidlaw, 1996). I accept this notion of democracy: 'Democracy [is] not majority rule: democracy [is] diffusion of power, representation of interests, recognition of minorities' (Calhoun, as cited in Roper 1989, p. 63).

Working out to what degree I was enabling this space and how I could improve it has usually been the stuff of my educational theorising from the beginning of my career – as far as I could say I did any theorising at the beginning of my career. And in this paper I think you will see the degree to which my [understanding of democratic practices](#) has developed and become a significant voice in the counterpoint of my professional development. I am claiming that within any counterpoint of my educational life, the enquiry into how I can improve the value of democracy is always a recurring theme. I place the idea of it here in the paper so that you can bear it in mind in subsequent parts. Within my particular developing value of democracy comes an increasing understanding and integration of what I and others perceive as fairness as well.

ii) Freedom

I also want to draw your attention to my value of freedom. It is my belief that I try to act in ways that will enhance individuals' and groups' freedom. By freedom I don't mean licence. With freedom come responsibilities, because what we do impinges on others. I believe that individuals and groups have the right to self-determination if this does not infringe the freedoms of others. I also believe responsible freedom encourages creativity and through creativity we fulfil and challenge ourselves.

iii) Equality

Linked to the above values is my notion of the equality of all human life. All people, regardless of religion, faith, ethnicity, race, history, geography, language, gender, age,

physical or mental abilities, are equal. That this notion is not universally recognised has meant that I have sometimes had to strive for it overtly in my practice. This is not only to enable worthwhile learning about something like English or Psychology, but more importantly to draw attention to the necessity of raising equality as an issue. If I do not treat all my students, colleagues and pupils, as equal then I am violating one of my core values, and the counterpoint is distorted. Experiencing a sense of being respected as an individual, is, I believe, a human right. The degree to which I succeed or fail as I embed this value within my practice is a degree to which I am maintaining a counterpoint of practice.

iv) A desire for wholeness

In addition I see a desire for wholeness as an important value in my work. I perceive wholeness (which had an original connotation of holiness) to be likened to integrity. I am referring to the healthy unfolding of something/someone towards a goal, which is not necessarily fully understood or planned for, but gains creative momentum as aspects begin to fit together in harmony. In my own educational development and in influencing the educational development of others, I have sought wholeness rather than pieces or fragments. I have sought a degree of symmetry. Integrity also suggests honesty or adhering to certain ethical principles. I believe that developing my values of democracy, love, freedom and equality has integrity because I can show how such integrity has led to improvements in learning something of value. My desire for wholeness is about wanting to cohere particular values within my educational processes. I detail more about my understanding of wholeness and fragmentation later on in the paper.

v) Love

In his doctoral thesis Finnegan (2000, as cited in Civile 1981, p. 300) states that 'love enables justice to see rightly'. This is a telling phrase for me. Love is what essentially motivates me to do what I do and guides me towards actions which are conducive to living out the above values more fully. In a review of a previous draft of this paper, Lewis Husain (2008) asked me why I care. I care because I see no other way of creating for myself a worthwhile life. I chose a long time ago to see life as meaningful as opposed to meaningless. As Peck (1978) wrote, love is not so much a feeling as an orientation. It is hard work. It requires dedication and a belief and hope in oneself and the other. Love is what motivates me and keeps me going when it's tough. Love, for example, has helped me in the creation of this paper, which has been one of the most difficult in my life to write. I do it because I hope it will speak to you and that you may find some inspiration in it. If I choose not to see what I do as meaningful, then I will never create anything worthwhile. In the end I believe that we create ourselves in our own images and I don't want to be ugly on the inside. If, on the other hand, I believe my life is meaningful, then it requires dedication to see it through. It is love which provides sustenance as well as motivation for the journey.

The pursuit of counterpoint in my educational life requires a balance of the degree of emphasis given to any particular value at any particular time. In educational terms

counterpoint is about balancing all the values and beliefs and experiences and insights at any given moment for the benefit of the learners.

c) Creating standards of judgement from values

The values I am highlighting of love, democracy, freedom, equality and wholeness for the purposes of any evaluation become my standards of judgement. These standards of judgement help me to frame my educational practice and theorising. I hope that these values can be seen to be emerging clearly in this paper. I believe you will see them manifesting themselves as the standards of judgement you can apply when I:

- 1) facilitate individual and collective voices into becoming a meaningful whole, in which individuals voices are neither subordinated to the whole, nor important only in relation to it;
- 2) (help to) improve practice and theorising; and
- 3) help teachers to develop greater understanding of their social and epistemological contexts in order to fulfil both personal and social values.

I will try to show my students and colleagues speaking for themselves as part of the explanation of my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social contexts in which the actions take place. (Again, the notion of students speaking for themselves is a democratic one in which I have been aided by reading the work of Dewey (1997²), Neill (1960), Rogers (1983) and Foucault (1980).) Now I want to show you where it all began.

d) Some personal history

I have been engaged in education all my life. I grew up in a middle-class family, went to several 'good' schools (i.e with an emphasis on the academic) and then to university to study English and German. I gained a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), and in 1978 I went into my first job at a comprehensive (state) school in Shropshire, which, in 1976 had been extolled by the HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectorate) as one of 'Ten Good Schools' (HMI, 1977) in England and Wales. Its reputation was founded on the head-teacher's and senior staff's open style of leadership, in which they facilitated democratic forms of policy and curricular processes with staff. The head-teacher, Mr. Richards, always seemed to bear in mind the axioms that teaching is for learning and that we were there for the children and not just for the sake of earning money. At my interview I made the distinction that it was my belief I would be teaching children not English. I believe it is indicative of my educational development that I would now say I learn with others, rather than teach anyone anything. It was the former sentiment that got me the job, however.

² Of course Dewey originally wrote his epic book *Democracy and Education* in 1916.

In this school of over 800 children, Mr. Richards seemed to know every child: I saw him over ten years address countless children by name. He appeared to be acquainted with many of their parents and their circumstances. His management style was easy-going but astute. He took great pains to find out what was happening in his school: a kind of leadership by walking around, I suppose. In my experience over ten years he used his knowledge to enable and not to control. I believe it was stemming from his leadership that teachers would eagerly collaborate to find ways of improving innovations and continuity without systemic distortion or pressure. We loved the children and we loved Mr. Richards. To me he was a genius. If he had been a composer, he'd have written counterpoint, I'm sure of that! I was lucky to have him as a role model for the first ten years of my career.

I also want to pay tribute to Brenda Pogson, the senior mistress, for the first few years of my stay in Wenlock. Her professionalism and many personal kindnesses to me were inspiring. From both of these role models I began to learn about keeping my eye on the whole picture as well as the moment. I look back now and see Mr. Richards holding the one and the many together, weaving counterpoint in his school between himself, students, teachers, governors, the community, and the local educational authority. From him I had my instincts confirmed about the importance of respecting individuals as a way of harmonising educational relationships on a wider scale.

After ten years I came to Bath on secondment to do a Master's degree in Education. Afterwards I stayed in Bath as a part-time tutor in the University's education department. I started a Ph.D. with Jack Whitehead, graduating in 1996. During this former period at the university, I worked with 28 PGCE students on action research cycles on teaching practice who wrote finally up [their findings](#). Many case-studies showed a concern with how they might enable their own students to improve their practice, which tended to encompass ideas around freedom of speech, and learning how to take responsibility for their own learning. This mirroring of tutor's and students' and *their* students' own enquiries focused me on the importance of mutuality in an enquiry. I came to understand that my students' and *their* students' liberation and my own were linked at profound levels, and that any account of my educational development would necessarily focus on those aspects of mutuality (Laidlaw, 1996).

e) Fragmentation and Wholeness

In this section I am focusing on strands of my educational development that emerged in later years as significant catalysts of change. The categorisations of 'wholeness', or 'fragmentation', (values I referred to earlier) are tools I'm using to help you access important aspects of my educational development. Here I need to devise linguistic tools to approximate to what I mean although I don't find always find language very helpful when it comes to explaining my experiences.

Its limitations are helping me to understand more about the value of multimedia presentations in living theorising. Have a look at a [video](#) Jack Whitehead made of a lecture he gave recently. This shows, more powerfully than any description I could render in words, the flow of energy, the enthusiasm, the effort, that Jack makes to live his values more fully in

his practice. Farren's (2008) current work shows this energy-flow as she improves her practice in facilitating learning through the creation of a dialectical relationship between the use of multimedia technology and Celtic Spirituality. You can read her paper as well as part of our first issue of EJOLTS.

In 1994 I administered the 'Third World Congress on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management' in Bath (see ed. Laidlaw et al, 1994b). The theme of the congress was 'Accounting for Ourselves'. In 1995 I became an English teacher in a local girls' comprehensive school where I was able to work on my doctoral and postdoctoral research, increasingly beginning to focus on equalising opportunities. This came more and more to mean nurturing people to speak in their own voices about issues which concerned them (Foucault, 1980).

I believe responsibility for learning and accounting for oneself are cornerstones of good learning (Laidlaw, 1994a). I believe if responsible self-expression is an aim of my teaching its processes are necessarily democratic and should highlight the significance of individual voices and group-harmony. By group-harmony I am alluding to counterpoint again, which enables dissonances in opinion rather than conformity, and in educational terms this can be related to McIntyre's (1991) idea of 'constrained disagreement'. A tautness can exist between different voices (as in the youtube presentation at the beginning), but this should be characterised by critical thinking and tolerance, as well as a sense of responsibility for knowing where one stands and why. Those realisations in practice are some of what I aspire to.

These ideas are related to Rayner's idea of inclusionality (Rayner, 2003) in which all things are organically related, yet have their own individual characteristics; a free flow between them in an osmotic way suggests health in a process, just as mental health may depend on having secure, yet reactive boundaries (Redfield-Jamieson, 1997). In reading Bohm's work as part of my revision-work for the resubmission of this paper I find myself saying immediately: *Yes, this is what I believe!* And this tacit belief in the unity of being, and a fear of fragmentation, is, I am claiming, a central force in my work. Bohm writes:

The notion that all these fragments is separately existent is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion. Indeed, the attempt to live according to the notion that the fragments are really separate is, in essence, what has led to the growing series of extremely urgent crises that is confronting us today. (pp. 1-2)

With a far-reaching voice of warning, Bowers (2008), in a response to an [earlier draft](#) of my paper, writes:

...the individual is separated from traditions (that is, culture), community is separated from the other participants in the local ecologies, the environment is reduced to what can be exploited, and organic processes are interpreted as having component parts which can be re-engineered to improve profits and external sources of control.

I wish I'd written both of those above extracts, because they perfectly express a concern I share about the importance of trying to heal what can sometimes be over-systematised, and de-humanised educational processes. The notion of counterpoint sets me free from such restraints and puts me in touch with something more powerfully

human. It gives me a way of expressing my ontological truths, whilst at the same time developing structures that can be made porous enough to support creative, dialectical and democratic processes of education.

Perceiving fragmentation disturbs me on profound levels and it always has: from broken relationships in childhood, to social deprivations in the world that appal me in adulthood. It disturbs me in educational relationships when communication has broken down. It disturbs me in Art if I perceive form and meanings at odds, even warring with each other, or bellowing hatred, destruction and dissolution in classical forms that seem to promise cohesion. It disturbs me in moods and atmospheres, which suddenly become splintered and fractured and unable to achieve wholeness again. It disturbs me in aims and objectives, brokenly conceived and imposed on others, and then the processes vaporising into disappointment and resentment on both sides. It disturbs me when I perceive the larger societies with their factions and groups so angry at each other, building up resentments and justifications and polarisations in their fury. Processes *leading* to that frame of mind, as well as that frame of mind itself, strike me as insidious, divisive, and essentially self-defeating. I believe them to be dangerous to the well-being of individuals within their social contexts.

When voices cannot harmonise with their societies and are prevented from doing so, or indeed, prevented from helping those societies to become more redolent of the values already discussed in this paper (and claimed for later on), then those societies are unhealthy in my opinion. When voices and societies are harmonised in a creative dialectic that enables individual potential to be realised for the common good, and generatively acknowledges and nurtures those individuals for themselves and the groups they are harmonising with – then these, in my opinion, are healthy societies. I believe there is a sense of integrity, or wholeness within such potentials that leads to creativity and desires it.

Bognar and Zovko (2008) in another of the papers being published in this first issue of EJOLTS, express it well in my opinion when they say:

Therefore, the final meaning and purpose of creative actions are not merely revealed in a deed or in a theoretical explanation of a process, but in the essential strengths that gave rise to the deed. By creating something a human being produces their own world, themselves, and also their own creative power. It means that the end-purpose of creativity is the human being who has produced their own human nature – their culture. (p. 4)

Fromm (2003) also writes about the significance of creativity: ‘In the act of creation man transcends himself as creature, raises himself beyond the passivity and accidentalness of his existence into the realm of purposefulness and freedom’ (p. 35).

In my doctoral thesis I put forward the idea through the leit-motif³ of the *Ancient Mariner* in which his act of shooting the albatross – a creature sent by God and a part of the wholeness of being – fragmented the harmony of the mariners’ lives. The Mariner was punished because he destroyed the inherent harmony and wholeness of the cosmos and thus fragmented reality. I cite this example because it’s a significant stop-over on my educational journey that has me led here (and from where I am still travelling).

³ A leit-motif refers to a repeated theme in a piece of music.

f) An Experience of Wholeness

I want to include now something that has tremendous resonance and numinosity for me. I know that not everything can be expressed in words, because some experiences and insights reach beyond language and into spirit and what I would call soul. I want you to know I hesitated about including this description because it isn't simply an anecdote that describes a precious experience I once had. In fact, I believe the experience expresses me, and I believe it is wholly germane to this paper because it shows in stark relief what it is I seek in my educational life.

My sense as a child of the oneness of the universe was begun in my seventh year when I experienced something I can only describe as a living hallucination. I heard Bach consciously for the first time. Standing in the school-hall after Assembly⁴ the children filed out to a record playing Bach's Brandenburg's first concerto, [the slow movement](#) I stood impaled with light and felt and saw and sensed all around me a living oneness. The desk I stood beside became living wood again, rather than a shaped block, inert and unfeeling. The voices I heard in the playground outside were woven into the music's counterpoint. I looked at my hands, turning them over and over and seeing that they were not simply parts of my body, for there were no parts; they were joined to me, but they were joined to everything around me as well. All of me was. There was a daffodil in a cracked vase on the teacher's desk across the room and I felt my heart expand with love for the flower and it too, I realised, was part of me and I of it. I understood its petals and why it was yellow and what being yellow felt like. There was absolutely nothing frightening about this experience; on the contrary I felt awash with harmony, peace and love. It was the most beautiful experience of my life because, in the language of this paper, it felt as if I were in a state of counterpoint with the universe.

Then a larger sense entered my understanding. Not only was it this classroom and these children outside on the playground that were connected to me and me to them, but beyond that to the way home, to London (the city nearby) to other countries, then outwards to the stars, which had always fascinated me. As C. S. Lewis says: 'Something must drive us out of the nursery to the world of others' (Lewis, 1964, p. 41).

Lewis' solution is suffering. Mine, however, is joy. I experienced the reality of others as well as the connections and responsibilities we all have to each other, the world we live in and the cosmos. The music infused me with understanding of a type I have never forgotten. It is this kind of understanding I seek in my work, not as an aim, but as a value, as a living personal truth and one which, I believe, connects me to all creation. Everything became a voice in the counterpoint. The whole, more than the sum of its parts was, I now believe, God. The living logic of this recognises my limitations in ever articulating what I perceive as true. However, I believe that the multimedia descriptions and explanations for practice, such as the ones we are developing at EJOLTS, may help us to get closer to a sense of fusion, coherence, and wholeness. It is one of the reasons I am excited about this journal: it may narrow the gaps between what we do, what we say and what we are.

⁴ Assembly refers to the compulsory period of religious worship during a school day (usually first thing in the morning) that all schools performed daily by law at that time (early 1960s).

Descriptions of such mystical experiences are hardly unique! Maslow called them peak experiences in a process of actualisation (Maslow, 1970, p. 161). This seems to me a European way of seeing people and their relationships to their contexts – i.e. as divisible in clear-cut ways, the power of analysis over synthesis. I realise I have opened a huge box here, which this paper is not designed to answer. In China where I spent nearly six years I found that some cultural ways of seeing are unlike European ones, and the highly influential *Dao de Jing (The Way)* (道德经) of Lao-zi (老子) does not isolate the individual from experiences of oneness. Instead of writing about individual enlightenment, this series of poems concentrates on what underlies every process of human experience:

(道可道、非常道。名可名、非常名無名天地之始有名萬物之母。故常無欲以觀其妙、常有欲以觀其徵。此兩者同出而異名。同謂之玄。玄之又玄、衆妙之門)



I - The Flow of Life -

*The Flow of the universe is not one you can explain,
And its true name is not one you can speak.*

*For the universe began without words,
And then we gave names to all things.
In the world of non-being, we embrace its mysteries,
And in the world of being, we interact with it.*

*These two flow into one another
And are separated only by name.*

*Together they form a mystery.
Enigma in enigma —
Gateway to all wonders.*

(老子; Lao-zi)

I think there are links here between these Daoist ideas and Rayner's (2003) ideas about inclusionality. In addition have a look at Whitehead's (2008a) and Farren's papers already alluded to, as they also write about the energy-flow in human experiences that can be enhanced for the good of us all.

I realise my experience as a child is not unique but it was formative for me and I believe it has influenced my life ever since. The legacy of this experience has been to give me clues whereby I can recognise the 'Yes, that's it!' moments. In other words, my mystical experience has helped me to gauge situations in my educational life. This does not mean I am goal-oriented, so much as having a facility sometimes to work with groups of children –

and sometimes adults – in such a way to help us cohere as a community of learners, as well as helping individuals find their own voices and their own particular creative abilities.

That early experience has also infused me with huge energy and drive to do what I can in trying to make the world a better place. In those precious minutes as a child I experienced awe for the cosmos, for myself, the beauty of my own body, and of the world around me and the biggest insight of all, that when seen in this way, everything made sense. Simply that. It made sense and I was at peace with all of it and it was at peace with me because we were all one. There was no fragmentation because there is no fragmentation.

I will always reject processes leading to fragmentation – well, such is my self-belief. For me such splintering leads towards the dark and I want to experience the light and help others to do so. This is my tacit knowledge, which I do not believe can be gainsaid by you as you read this paper. What you *can* gainsay, and what I hope you will contradict if you find my logic flawed, is what I have chosen *to do* with this knowledge, and it is about this that my paper revolves. In actual fact it is around this that [all my papers](#) revolve, whether overtly or not. My understanding and my actions in the world aspire to achieve this creative dialectic, this counterpoint – voices merging, fusing, diverging, learning and celebrating. My knowledge, values and theorising understandings of my professional practice have developed, in the sense I can both articulate them, and evoke their power in helping me improve what I am doing. My educational life is a living process of becoming. I was never quite able to articulate or explain all this in my thesis to my satisfaction, because I still didn't understand it all as a process of pursuing counterpoint. Once this metaphor took root in me, as once the legend of *The Ancient Mariner* (Coleridge, 1798) did in my thesis, I began to understand more about how my living educational theorising works.

I also want to say that I slip in and out of this understanding of the interrelation between my knowledge and values. I am a part of the chaos and beauty around me and inside me, and so there are times when I am not as wise at all as I experienced in those profound moments of insight at the age of seven. If I were all the time so close to the meanings I glimpsed then, my educational development would always have held the one and the many together, always woven the voices into the living fabric of our canvases more educationally; it would always have cohered into counterpoint. Such hasn't always been the case.

Let's now look at the beginnings of this weaving of voices and values, and the evidence for my educational development and significant learning emerging out of the processes.

g) What have I done?

i) My first ten years of professional practice

My first ten years of professional practice are scant on evidence of any educational influence on my students. Coincidentally, in the writing up of this paper in preparation for our first issue at EJOLTS, I received this letter through the web-based friendship network, 'Friends Reunited' from a student I taught in the sixth-form back in the 80s. She wrote:

I don't know whether you'll remember me! (I do!) School was so long ago now and some of the most vivid and best memories I have are times spent in English with you at the helm! I still have the copy of *Jude the Obscure* you gave me and funny but every time I see it I think of you!!

And then nearly at the same time, this from another former student:

I was in your tutor group in my 1st year (1980); you also took me for some lessons. I have spoken about you so many times over the years as you are always the teacher that I remember the most, I always felt that you believed in me. Hope you are O.K.

And this one from a former student (an 11 year old then) I taught in my first year (1978): 'I remember English, sitting in the library classroom with Charlie & Jinks, taking it in turn to read passages from books (*Animal Farm*?). [You were] one teacher who made school pleasurable...'

This latter student participated in an Assembly (a coming together of a whole school under one roof once a day for some religious purpose (this was the law back in 1978)) in which his whole class and I created a short series of sketches about the poem by William Blake, [Tyger Tyger](#). One of his classmates coincidentally wrote to me recently out of the blue, offering me an [mp3 rendition](#) of the cassette recording made of the Assembly.

I think these unsolicited comments and the motivation to send me this recording show that I connected meaningfully with these particular students, but it shows little about how, or whether we were able to learn from our experiences, or whether I influenced their learning or they influenced mine; or indeed whether we evolved any kind of useful theories from our work. There were, however, times I would claim when we truly approached counterpoint – in the sense of collaborating on that assembly, each student busily working on their own ideas towards a common goal, yet one that didn't in any way subsume individuals within the whole. There was enjoyment, creativity, worthwhile learning and so on. I claim this, but I have no compelling evidence.

One anecdote can give you the flavour of those early teaching days, however, when I was consciously learning how to democratise the learning processes with my students. I had early-on recognised the need for such goals in my teaching and it has been a leit-motif in all my educational development (see Laidlaw, 1994a; 1994b; 2008) because I understood that democratic processes value each voice in harmony and balance with the community: the two are held in a creative dialectic as issues of power and knowledge are debated and resolved. I wanted that space for my students, so here is a short story about its beginnings.

For the assembly already mentioned, all the children assigned themselves tasks after we'd discussed what we might choose as our material. As the class' English teacher, I wanted us to discuss what we might do to contribute to the Assembly in our lessons rather than telling each child what to do. Over three weeks the work evolved, some choosing to paint scenery, others to be in charge of props, some writing short stories or poems of their own or organising short plays and so on. All of them had a choice about what to do, but at the end of each week each child had to account to us all for what s/he had achieved.

One day Joanne (one of the writers above) looked at me wandering around the classroom from desk to desk, to see what was happening, and said to me: 'Why aren't you

doing anything?’ I have to admit, it hadn’t occurred to me before that I should. I asked for suggestions. ‘Set the poem to music,’ Joanne said authoritatively:

‘It needs some music.

‘Right!’ I said.

And so, at the instigation of a pupil and with the assent of the class, I wrote the music and that’s what I accounted for at the end of that week! To me that says something about the values I was working with thirty years ago. I was trying to respect individuals and developing with them a space in which each voice counted. I was also showing myself willing to change what I was doing at pupils’ instigation when I felt it was educational.

However, it was to take me until my time at Bath to begin to realise the importance of becoming more accountable for my work in terms of any serious claims to have influenced the learning of anyone. During my time in Shropshire, given the personal and professional freedom to develop through that whole school system with Mr. Richards, I put my heart and soul into the school. I left it in 1988 with a great sense of hope that I would be able to continue with something of value in Bath.

ii) Tutoring at a university

From 1990-1993, I tutored part-time at Bath University’s School of Education. In 1991 I decided to do a Ph.D. engaging in action research processes with Jack Whitehead. I had a passion for teaching and felt completely alive in the classroom. I wrote a Guide to Action Research for Student-Teachers in 1992, which was the first time I wrote anything substantial in my educational writing, because I had recognised the importance of building on the learning I had done with my students. Have a look at [The Pre-Service Guide to Action Research](#) in which some of my students were able to account for themselves as they worked on action research enquiries into the question: *How can I improve my practice?*

I wanted my students to have a chance to be the best they could be. I helped my tutorial students to formulate their own standards of judgement by which they would want their own voices to be heard and judged. Those standards still had to work inside the social and systemic standards expected of students in the schooling and university-systems, of course.

As I mentioned before, in 1994 I administered the third World Congress in Action Research, Action Learning and Process Management at Bath University. It was a watershed for me. I began to learn more about the importance of treating others as individuals, regardless of whether I could see them face to face or not. Before that all my work had been concentrated on children in my classrooms. I had always found working at a distance with people less rewarding, less real somehow. I found it more difficult to recognise the simple truth that someone writing to me from New Zealand, say, or South America, or from South Africa was as fully real to them in their life as I was to me in mine. Just because I hadn’t met them didn’t lessen their reality! It is an embarrassing truth, but I didn’t begin to grasp it consciously until that year. I struggle with it still when I hear news of the joys and calamities of people living in countries I may never visit. This narrowness of vision is something I consciously try to fight against as it is in direct contradiction to that sense of oneness I had

as a child and still have sometimes in listening to music or reading poetry, and often with children, students or colleagues in classrooms.

My paper for the World Congress dealt with issues of responsibility, empathy and respect for others (Laidlaw, 1994b). The idea of accounting for myself (see Laidlaw, Lomax & Whitehead, 1994) became important to me then. It is something to do with taking responsibility for my actions and that's worthwhile because it shows respect to others implicated in the work, and also because it enables democratic challenges, such as the ones I hope we're developing here at EJOLTS.

iii) Two living contradictions

In 1995, just before finishing my doctorate I got a job in a Bath comprehensive (state school) for girls. I wanted to work in an all-girls' environment for several reasons, one of which I believe is pertinent to this paper: I felt that girls might gain more from their learning by themselves than if they were in a mixed environment, where it was my experience that girls could be marginalised in classrooms. For me it was an equal opportunities issue (see also Spender, 2001). I had perceived during my time at Wenlock that not only were the boys the most vocal in class, but that they also received more of a teacher's time and more of my time as well. I once recorded myself on cassette-tape (now lost) – at the instigation of Sarah, one of my 14-year-old students – to register how much of my time was being given to boys and how much to girls in a series of our German lessons. I was shocked at the time – it was about 60/40 in favour of boys and this was when I was trying! Sarah had challenged me, saying that we teachers regularly gave boys more time than girls. When I look back on it now I'm pleased to think that Sarah felt she could challenge me. I have always attempted to accept challenges to my authority (the institution endows me with power) as opportunities for learning. It could be quite painful at times, but I grew to accept that these challenges were indications of the freedom to learn in self-chosen ways I had influenced. In other words, the fairer the processes of education, the more challenges I was likely to experience. Such opportunities for learning have struck me always as constituting fairness.

Since my China days, however – see later – I have come to see single-gendered schooling less enthusiastically. I can now see that because we are a mixed-gendered society, inequities in teaching boys and girls together because of their different needs may need to be dealt with from within a mixed-gendered system. I now believe that it becomes incumbent on teachers, administrators and leaders to find ways to create equal opportunities for learning despite the apparently different learning styles of girls and boys (Matthews, 2005).

I began to realise that my value of democracy was growing into something that also required explicit structures to support fairness and equal opportunities. Such values were assuming greater significance in my development of democratic practices than it had before.

I now believe that fairness is what equalising opportunities is about, and since about 1997 that has been my conscious aim in all my [professional practice](#) (scroll down below the Guyuan work). Some of my deepest learning occurred when my students told me I was contradicting my espoused values and I then researched the situation (see papers in above website).

In 1997 and 1998 I worked with a mixed-attainment class of fifteen year olds on some poetry. The following conversation marks the beginning of a huge learning curve for me because I wasn't balanced in the way in which I was trying to live out my values in practice. One student, Sally, remained behind after class one day. This is the conversation we had (from field-notes directly after the lesson):

Sally: I'm fed up with this school! I hate this ...school!

Moira: Why is that, Sally? Come on, sit down over here and let's talk about it.

Sally: (crying, sitting down) I've had it up to here with white Geography, white History, white bloody everything. (Looking at me accusingly) And even white bloody English! When I was in London we learnt about Black culture. The teachers, a lot of them were Black too. I hate this bloody school! I hate it. I hate all the teachers. I just hate everything.

Moira: I remember what you wrote in your autobiography. Do you remember when you read it out to the class? 'And then they cast me out in a white desert.' Is that what it's like for you?

Sally: Too bloody right. Oh Miss, I want to go home.

Moira: Where? To London?

Sally: Yeah.

Moira: Well for the moment that isn't possible, is it? What can I do to help you in English here, Sally? What would make you feel you were learning something worthwhile for you? You know that Black Anthology I gave you, how are you getting on with it? We'll be studying it next term.

Sally: It's great, Miss. I love Maya Angelou. I've started reading 'I know why the Caged Bird Sings'.

Moira: Oh, I love that. Could you lend me it after you've finished with it? I haven't read it for ages and my copy's gone walkabout.

Sally: (laughs) O.K., Miss. (May, 1997)

This was a turning point in my career. Sarah at the school in Wenlock had alerted me to perceived injustices in my practice – and now Sally was doing the same in Bath. Both challenges represent, I believe, an insight that I was acting unfairly and these constituted watersheds for me. I was suppressing Sally's voice rather than encouraging her. In counterpoint there is no one voice sapping another. All voices are wholesomely working towards resolution, or at least, as I said before, a balance. The first dissonance with Sarah had revealed to me something about implicit gender dynamics in schooling, and now Sally was raising my consciousness as regards race. Because of Sally's intervention I found a way to install the poetry of [Maya Angelou](#) as part of our examination coursework. Sally helped me to continue learning how important it was critically to examine my own values and actions. Before Sarah's and Sally's challenges I had been sure that I was acting fairly.

The rhetoric of my educational development has always been that I want each child to feel herself being valued for being herself. Sally didn't as Sarah hadn't. I simply hadn't realised what it might feel like to be in their positions. This necessary quality of empathy is

something that Rawal (2008)⁵ writes about dramatically in her doctoral thesis. Such insights and practices (because empathy has to be acted upon to be worth anything) are so vital to evolving educational relationships. Sally and Sarah helped me to see that without that quality, the educational and ontological value of what I was doing was simply not good enough! From these two examples of my own living contradictions I believe did some of the most profound learning in my career because those examples are always in my mind. I can't dispose of them because, I suppose, they still have work to do.

On the day she left the school (July, 1997) Sally came to see me, thrilled to bits about gaining a place at a Drama school in London.

Sally: I feel I have come alive... Reading this poetry⁶ is like coming home. Do you remember you asked me that question? About coming home.

Moira: Oh yes, it isn't one I'm likely to forget. Why is it like coming home?

Sally: I am doing what I want. I decide. I say. (Tears in eyes) It helps that you've helped me, but I make the decisions. (She clasps my hands in hers.)

Moira: (tears in eyes too) Oh yes, absolutely. That's what it's all about, isn't it? Oh, Sally, I'm so happy for you.

Sally: (big grin) So am I. See you, Miss (relinquishes my hands).

Moira: See you, Sally.

There isn't room here to go into more details about the educative relationships I evolved within that class, but you can read the [paper](#) in which I documented the processes of learning. Suffice it to say that I was learning about my own practice from my students as well as influencing them educationally. I was evolving the skills that Branko Bogner (2007), in reviewing this paper in an earlier draft highlighted: that it wasn't for me to become a good teacher so much as to become a good learner if I wanted to glean the most educational value from my professional life and influence others educationally. Sally, and to a lesser extent Sarah (because I wasn't ready to learn so much) taught me the value of questioning my own practice from the students' point of view; in addition they helped me to realise that I could not hope to encourage fair practices in others if I were myself acting unfairly. There are [several other papers](#) I wrote during the years at the Bath school, all of which deal with my continuing desire to improve learning.

⁵ See Chapter Eight. Retrieved from <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/rawalpdf/Chapter8.pdf>

⁶ I put together an anthology of poetry written by Black authors. It included Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and Jackie Kay.

iv) Using a camcorder in the classroom

Towards the end of my time at the Bath school I taught a class of twelve-year olds English (Laidlaw, 2001). In one of our units of work on the poet William Blake⁷ I asked the children to do a project about his poetry, covering ground we'd studied, but presenting it entirely in their own ways. I acted as a facilitator. The students chose to be with the girls they felt most comfortable to work with – usually in groups of about five. They also had to include self-developed standards of judgement whereby they and the other students and I could evaluate the work. I sought consciously not to interfere with the direction of their studies but I was always available for discussion.

In the following video clip, you will see me working with Hayley. (If you are not reading this on the internet the footnote⁸ explains what is happening.) The [video](#) represents Hayley talking about her two chosen poems from those we studied. I hope you can see her drawing her own conclusions from what she is learning with a sense of what that learning means for her own development. Hayley said later:

Working in this way was new. You didn't tell us what to do. You helped us see what the whole thing was like, but then we had to work out for ourselves how to present our learning to the class. It was really difficult. There were times when I just wanted you to tell me what to do, but you wouldn't. But now, when I look back, I feel so proud. (Pause) This is MY work, you see. I did it. It's mine.

Moira: Yeah, that's right. And how does that feel?

Hayley: ...I feel fantastic! I never felt about my work like this! It was exciting and as the weeks went on I wanted to do it more and more. It was so good. So good. My dad used to tell me off in the evenings because I was spending time working all the time instead of going to bed and getting some sleep, but I wanted it to be perfect. For me. My work. My ideas. I don't want this time to end.

Visitors often came into our classroom because we welcomed them having a look at what we were doing. Many remarked they could not tell this was a mixed-attainment class (Laidlaw, data archives) and that the students were enjoying a lot of freedom and saying what they thought. I believe that freedom and speaking for oneself are not mixed-attainment issues at all, but the natural potentials of all human-beings in any environment conducive for learning. I realised in Shropshire that a school can stand for responsible dissension, critical thinking and aspiration towards individuality and wholeness. Dissension is not a negative response; indeed it can be wholly positive if it represents critical thinking and the struggle for freedom from oppression. I think this is one of the reasons at EJOLTS we chose to have an open reviewing system. It suits this kind of enquiry and development of values. It encourages personal responses and hopefully over time will stimulate vigorous debate, challenges and healthy growth.

⁷ See [pictures](#) by Blake on the [two poems](#) Hayley was studying.

⁸ In the video Hayley is talking about her reasons for presenting her work in the way she does. She is articulate and apparently keen to show me what she knows. She is capable of contradicting me and is clearly pleased with what she has accomplished. Her comments also reveal a clear sense of understanding about the poems she has studied. All the girls and their parents gave their permission for this and related clips to be uploaded onto the web.

Striving for freedom of expression constitutes the dynamics that would be expected in counterpoint in which voices sometimes pull apart as well as pulling together in order to realise wholeness. There is clearly a struggle for each voice to be heard, and yet each voice is heard, and how wonderfully! The music only reaches its full potential both as individual voices and counterpoint, when each voice delights in its own strengths and potentials and relishes the whole. Anyway, as I illustrated with the youtube visual presentation of a Bach fugue, I think you can hear and see this happening: how at the end, one of the voices is played at half the speed, having found another way to be significant. Some say Bach was a great mathematician because of the symmetry of his designs. I say he was an amazing human being!

At this Bath school I tried to exercise my tacit belief in the potential of children to rise above what they are, into what they can become. I claim that Hayley's comments show a certain trust, a sense of well-being, and a decided opinion about the worthwhileness of the processes she has been through. I will return to this video again later, as I changed my view later on about the video as a whole.

v) Going to China: in search of integrity

In 2001 I went to rural China as a volunteer with VSO. Originally the contract was to last for two years, but I stretched it to five in [Ningxia Teachers University](#) (originally a teachers college) because I loved it so much. My reasons for choosing to leave my comfortable job in Bath for a volunteer's life in rural China are detailed elsewhere (Laidlaw, 2001b). Suffice it here to say that I wanted a broader challenge and felt that I had more to offer than I was offering in England. I needed to extend my own creative life. It was, in a way, a search for wholeness. I felt I could do more. I felt by not doing more I was not being true to myself or living up to my potential. I did it because I could. For me there is a compelling logic in that statement, like a teacher who said to me once when I asked her why she was a teacher: 'I teach because I was taught.' I didn't understand the portent of that until I went to China, but her words had a [sympathetic resonance](#) to my own aspirations and so I've never forgotten them. They really make sense now.

Apart from a language barrier (admirably overcome by my colleagues and students by speaking English, rather than by any of my paltry attempts to speak Mandarin) there were cultural, historical, ethnic, systemic, philosophical and material differences to surmount in my new environment. Descriptions and explanations of my claims for educational development during these five years can be found under the heading [Maira Laidlaw's Papers and Writings](#). These writings deal with the ways in which I attempted to facilitate students and colleagues' own voices within their contexts as they underwent varying processes to improve practice.

vi) Bringing in the Social Contexts of my work

I want to write something now about how important it was for me to learn about the significance of the social contexts in my work, because before I went to China there was a gap in my understanding about the links between my social context and the work I did. Mr. Richards brought it to my attention once in 1987. He exhorted me to look at the bigger picture and not simply concentrate on the classroom. I thought he was wrong (talk about youthful arrogance!) because I didn't understand the dialectic that exists between learning and the social context. I didn't realise that my classroom was not the world, although it often felt like that. I suppose at the time I was more involved with teaching than learning.

In December 2006, an educational colleague⁹ wrote the following to me in response to a paper I was working on:

...Your living theory could carry an enhanced analytical quality by extending through the unquestionable authenticity of the first-person consciousness of your writing into a third-person discussion of the material and structural context in which the first-person consciousness is being mediated (and both will be, of course, in flux and transformation I suspect...

I didn't disagree but felt that I was doing more to bring my work into the public arena of accountability, and that I had taken on board the epistemological significance of so doing. I replied: 'Much of the validity of what I believe and do, rests on the results of collaborating with others over time on issues that concern us'.

But to be fair, I haven't rigorously contextualised my accounts through the economic and political factors that hegemonise the conditions directly affecting my work in China. There are several reasons for this:

- a) I was in a privileged but precarious position of trust. As a volunteer, I was a guest. Going public on specific human rights issues would be metaphorical suicide. I would simply be thrown out of the country and nothing would improve. It's not an excuse, it's pragmatism.
- b) My understanding of China remains fairly limited. Five years in no way makes me an expert. I was a foreigner looking in and do not believe I would ever be able to become a full insider (Laidlaw, 2004b, 2005). My understanding of contexts is limited.
- c) I am slow to recognise historical, political and social influences. I naively regard the people I work with - child or adult, Chinese or English, Black or white - as having common characteristics beyond mere social, cultural, ethnic, geographical, religious, gender, and historical boundaries. These are to do with the desire to speak in their own voices about their own issues. I tend to concentrate on those. I accept that criticism of my writing. I am not sure how much this specific focus diminishes my practice. This is something I am hoping readers can help me with.

There is a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989), however, as long as I am not addressing these aspects above in my practice, which includes what I am doing with my

⁹ This is from an email by a colleague, wishing to remain anonymous, who was involved in their own living educational theory research programme.

educational research-writing. I hope the rest of this paper meets some of the challenge of those limitations and resolves the discord.

In China my work with colleagues thrived more than working with my student-teachers on their teaching methodology. By 'thrived' I am meaning that the work became self-sustaining to a degree and generated worthwhile learning and lots of energy from those involved. Colleagues were eager to say my students were gaining more jobs after graduation because there were classes in 'Western' teaching methodology now. With my colleagues, working on our action research enquiries¹⁰ breathed new life into stale processes, and enabled us to take more responsibility for our own learning and teaching, as well as empowering individuals and groups to speak in their own voices about the issues that concerned them. It is difficult to distinguish at times whose influences effected what outcomes. Educational processes aren't linear or directly causal. I have learnt that for something to be educational, processes cannot follow an entirely pre-determined route at all.

Educational action research is a dialectical process whereby individuals and groups can come to know their practice better in order to improve it and to transform the contexts in which they find themselves for the good of all involved. I see living educational theory approaches in action research enquiries as placing more emphasis on the ontological and epistemological development of processes and people, individually and together, as they devise ways uniquely suited to their needs. These must be in dialectical and developmental relationship to the contexts in which the practices are undergone. Living educational theories are ever-increasing cycles of understanding, action, reflection, development, evaluation and aspiration¹¹. Thus, if I am to extrapolate my social influence in this deeper dimension of counterpoint in my educational practice in any meaningful way, I have first to say something of the contexts and the people with whom I was working.

Until I went to China my work was preoccupied with my own educational development, and I wrote about it as if it were possible to abstract the 'I' from the setting in which the 'I' locates its identity. In China, this was harder to do in relation to my professional life (see case-studies at <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira.shtml>).

During my placement the head of my department Dean Tian and I, together with experienced colleagues Li Peidong and Liu Xia, built up an action research group in the department. We started with five members in February 2002, and by July 2006, we had nearly forty. We also worked with a local Moslem school (see Ma, 2006). We built up a network of teachers improving their practice, and held several workshops about action research in the New Curriculum for the teaching of English in China. This curriculum has carried the weight of law since September 2005. The New Curriculum advocates critical thinking, peer and self-evaluation, teaching as learning, and building partnerships in the learning process. This is nothing like the traditional Confucian way, in which classrooms are

¹⁰ My five-year enquiry was entitled: 'How can I promote sustainable educational development at Guyuan?'

¹¹ See <http://www.jeanmcniff.com> for further explanations of the spiralling nature of action research enquiries and by extension, living theorising.

run on lines of military-discipline. The New Curriculum and action research approaches share the view that knowledge can be dialectical and that there is a relationship between the growth of a human being and the growth of knowledge (VSO, 2004). It also extols the learning partnership between teacher and student, and opens spaces for self-evaluation as part of the assessment system. This curriculum is, in other words, democratic in design, and because of this our action research work developed into individual enquiries that would meet its demands (see papers from colleagues at the previous website).

In December 2003, Dean Tian with officials from Ningxia Province's Education Bureau, the College President, and Professor Jean McNiff from Great Britain, opened China's Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching (CECEARFLT)¹². In 2005, the Centre was given official status from the Education Bureau in Beijing, a necessary step in the legitimation process in China. Our Centre is the first of its kind in the world. In China this is seen as a great coup (Perrement, 2005).

Our work became increasingly focused on how we might help schools and our own colleagues and students to embrace the values of the New Curriculum in practical ways. Tian Fengjun and I edited a book of case-studies (Tian & Laidlaw, 2006), which detailed how our work was enabling new and experienced teachers to teach in ways that encouraged critical thinking and interactive dynamics in classrooms in order to improve learning. This was commented on favourably at local and national levels in the media (Guyuan Daily – 固原报, 2004, October 1st; Ningxia Daily – 宁夏报, 2004, October 3rd; Perrement, 2005) In 2004 I was awarded the State Friendship Award. Given annually to a few dozen people, the award is a state acknowledgement of individual foreigners' work in education, business and social administration, finance, import-export, and medicine. For six months, Dean Tian gathered information about me from colleagues, the local constabulary, VSO, and students. He submitted his application on my behalf to Beijing, where there is a full-time committee working on this annual event. I wrote in an email to Jack Whitehead:

I had always accounted the social context as being the classroom before, if I'm honest, rather than looking at the contexts - political, social and cultural - that help to sculpt the art of practice and the significance of outcomes and even values to an extent. (M. Laidlaw, personal communication, June 5, 2007)

The State Friendship Award was conferred as a social validation of the work that had been done collaboratively with me simply as a symbol of something new and hopeful in a poor and remote rural town in northwestern China¹³. I am not diminishing my creative and original contribution, but I know without the inspirational leadership of Dean Tian¹⁴ and warm collaboration with colleagues, as well as the co-operation of the Ningxia Education Board and our own president of the University, such an award could not have been orchestrated. The organisation for this event is an example of counterpoint, in which so

¹² See [pictures and the Centre's mission statement](#).

¹³ [Friendship Award Picture](#). I am sitting in the front row with a blue dress on. Premier Wen Jiabao is four people to my left.

¹⁴ See [Dean Tian's details](#). He is one of EJOLTS' peer reviewers.

many agencies worked together in order to find a way of celebrating collaboration and international harmony.

The college was immensely proud, not just of me, but of having orchestrated this particular event. Dean Tian, a politician as well as a close personal friend, saw the potential of our collaborative work. It was a mark of his professional respect for my work that inspired him but this award raised Guyuan's visibility to Beijing. It was a huge event. There was also a letter from the Vice Principal of Ningxia's government to the college extolling our work, as well as a documentary on television about my life and work there. Such visibility as Guyuan gained from our work was a spin-off I had not foreseen, but I believe Dean Tian was astute enough to maximise all possible opportunities. These events energised the hope in the college (Wang, 2004; Tian, 2005; Liu Hui, 2006; Sun, 2006).

An individual was highlighted but it was as much a conferment on the society and the groups within that society, as it was on me. An illustration of this was when I came back home to Guyuan from the ceremony in Beijing. People stopped me on the street and shook my hands, eyes gleaming with enthusiasm, because they had seen the televising of the ceremony and Wen Jiabao shaking my hand and his assistant saying I came from Guyuan in Ningxia. What was most significant was not me, but the mention of Guyuan. A school in Haiyuan, a town near Guyuan, also felt touched by this award¹⁵ The school was purpose-built as an Islamic school in the town, the result of positive discrimination on the part of the Beijing government to further the freedoms of Islamic people in China. The Guyuan group went to Haiyuan on a regular basis to assist in the development of action research enquiries. See how [Ma Yanguai](#) helped his senior English students to improve their writing. A member of the action research group, on a tip-off from Dean Tian, recorded the Awards ceremony and showed it to staff and pupils because it implicated them. It was their business. My experience in China was that when three people got together, even strangers on the street, they became an instant community. I saw this happen time and time again. The individual people, their voices, all the processes, insights, values, conversations, events, the educational developments, all were woven together into this Award. When the process was going on, I wasn't able to pick out the individuals' voices and what it all meant. I felt the honour but I now understand more about the Award's marvellous community and political implications.

This process of counterpointing isn't a fully conscious or individual process, because in the account you have read so far it is not simply I who has engaged in the processes, or conducted them. Many others created their own parts, and their influences wove the themes that stand out. Collaboration is a vital theme and was developed by us¹⁶ as a way of improving what we were doing (Li & Laidlaw, 2006). We were engaging in worthwhile pursuits in the name of education (Tian & Laidlaw, 2007). Dean Tian and I discussed this idea (Laidlaw, 2005) during one of our marvellous 'putting the world to rights' sessions in his

¹⁵ See [Haiyuan's location](#) within Ningxia Province.

¹⁶ 'Us' here refers to myself, my colleagues in Guyuan and Haiyuan, the citizens of Guyuan and Haiyuan and anyone else who was moved by the broadcast of the Award, the politicians who made the choices for the ceremony, Wen Jiabao and his contribution to the process of making visible the work done in his country in the name of education.

office, drinking lovely green tea and smoking endless cigarettes. We were specifically discussing our logical differences:

Dean Tian: What I do is about helping the whole to become balanced.

Moira Laidlaw: What I do is often about enabling individuals to find their voices.

Dean Tian: I don't see this as a living contradiction!

Laughter

Dean Tian: You are focused on individuals. I am focused on the whole. We can complement each other.

Dean Tian had the wisdom not to seek to elevate himself above what we were doing, but instead conducted his own action research enquiry into how he might help his colleagues to become more collaborative in order to promote sustainable development (Tian, 2005). This was a profound development in the work of the Centre, because politically, culturally and historically, deans are hierarchically above most of their colleagues and do not open their work to the criticism of staff. However, as one of our chief aims at the Centre was for sustainable educational development,¹⁷ Dean Tian knew he had to take the unprecedented step – at least it's unprecedented as far as I know in China. For a dean to become a learner and be seen to be a learner seemed to signify huge steps towards a democratisation of our work, which, as I have already explained, I perceive as being in itself educational and a necessary dimension. This changed the nature of what we were able to do together. In contrapuntal terms, his voice became more sonorous as it took upon itself the underlying hues of freedom, democracy and an openness to learning; his decision influenced all the processes we were engaging in. For a man in his powerful position to say that he was a learner and not a teacher, if you like, turned melody into harmony, like the flowering of a beautiful plant.

Dean Tian's ability to include himself within the body of the work as well as being in a facilitating role for the whole initiative, encapsulates much of the same logic by which I was also working. Adding his voice so strongly to mine on this issue changed the epistemology of our work. Democratising the processes of learning in China is not a widely-pursued aim. Doing this work in Guyuan, a small, rural 'backwater', presented us with a chance to change the way in which learning happens. There was an augmentation at this point of the significance of our work. The particular values we were living out, like the democratisation of learning processes, were becoming stronger.

Alongside these changes in epistemology I was undergoing a seismic shift in perspective – from one of a deep individualism to a greater openness to the importance of the collective. It used to be uncomfortable (Laidlaw, 2005) but it has become a spur to learning because it helped me to understand and use the significance of what happened to me when I was seven.

¹⁷ I heard from Dean Tian (November, 2007) that the Centre had won an award from the University in terms of its research. I left in July 2006.

My work shows increasing understanding over this period about the importance of collaboration within a social context (Laidlaw, 2004a, 2005, 2006). It isn't that I now diminish the significance of the individual; the individual is still central to me. However, in China I learnt more about the counterpoint of human realities. I learnt more about balancing the one and the many. Existentially and educationally now, I stand within the paradoxes of being myself and being one of a crowd, of being responsible and being a recipient, of even the reality that I don't exist either at one point or another but both at the same time and all exigencies in between. I exist in a quantum reality (Zohar, 1998).

vii) Some specifics of our work together in Guyuan

I now turn to an examination of some of the thinking and actions surrounding our work at the Centre. Li Peidong and I wrote a joint article (Li & Laidlaw, 2006 – alluded to above) and had a conversation in October 2005 that highlighted some stark differences in assumptions made between Chinese and some Western educational philosophies:

Li Peidong: You seem to be assuming [in individually-oriented action research] that if someone learns something better that is enough to make the research valid. We don't see it that way at all. To be valid the research has to show that it connected usefully to the society in which we live. What impact does the research have at a social level?

Moira: I'm not sure it's a western philosophy, I think it is descriptive of my interpretation of some of western thinking. What accords to my own assumptions perhaps.

Li Peidong: Perhaps yes, but my reading of western philosophy does place the insights of individuals at the Centre, rather than the observances of a whole society. You value the single voice. We value the group voice.

Moira: Then what we need, perhaps, in our AR work here at the Centre is some kind of dialectic between those two stances. Maybe that's AR with Chinese characteristics.

My conscious goal during those years was to promote sustainable educational development, which my colleagues and I understood to mean engaging in action research with Chinese characteristics¹⁸. At an action research meeting (June, 2006) in a discussion of what action research with Chinese characteristics might look like, we highlighted values to do with love of family (Liu, 2004) patriotism (Ma, X., 2006) and a selfless working towards goals of educational improvement for all people, (Tian, 2005), and close collaboration between colleagues and institutions and with local and national government (Li and Laidlaw, 2006). It should be mentioned, however, that not all colleagues in the department chose to be action researchers, and therefore I have little evidence of their thinking about what we were doing, or how it squared with their own educational philosophies and epistemologies. One of the senior members of staff said to me before I left, however: 'I think this AR work is good for the department. It makes other people know we are doing something special. Our reputation is better because of AR.'

¹⁸ See [papers](#) for corroboration.

Visibility was a key element in the motivations of many colleagues as you can see in their papers. To be successful in the work that enhanced our teachers' ability to handle the New Curriculum added kudos to the department in the eyes of the local education authority (which sent a letter of congratulation to the department for their work in December 2004); the provincial authority gave its financial support for Jack's visit and, I believe, Beijing was showing its recognition of our hard work in offering me the State Friendship Award.

In another instance of our work's social impact, Matt Perrement, a writer for *China Development Brief*, one of China's foremost independent journals (which has unfortunately now ceased operations), came to Guyuan for a few days to find out what the Centre was doing (Perrement, 2005). [*China Development Brief*](#) was a bi-monthly journal with articles about issues of interest in China in terms of culture, education, society, politics and economics. Its headquarters were in Beijing. The article detailed the educational and social value of the project to the college and the area, and what the author saw as the potential for the project to be extended into other areas of China in the future. Perrement revealed the group-nature of the success of the project and the way in which action research had become a way of helping teachers to implement the New Curriculum through the advocacy of critical thinking and pro-active learning techniques. In conclusion he wrote:

The appeal of action research in Guyuan is undeniable and will doubtless outlast the presence of any individual. As teacher Li said: 'Action research is beyond education. It is about human beings and social development.' I always felt that, when analysing the differences in educational approaches, but have never seen it in action so clearly. (p. 6)

In Guyuan we wanted to enable greater consistency between espoused and lived values in the classroom with students, who would become teachers. I spent time working with individual colleagues in the deepening of their action research enquiries (see website for details of classroom observations and follow-up ideas), which often meant examining our living contradictions (Whitehead, 1989). Dean Tian, Li Peidong and I encouraged colleagues to write up their findings as we wrote up ours and we held validation meetings to enhance the educational value of the texts. Ma Xiaoxia (2006) wrote this about her conclusions about the purposes and value of the work she was achieving in her own educational development:

The New Curriculum in China, in making performance more important than competence, shows a respect for [a] dialectical form of knowledge, because it accords students as well as teachers the right to find different ways of understanding the world.... The most important dilemma... in matters of educational values, is whether people are enlightened with, or entitled to, certain freedoms to think and behave. As for static knowledge and dynamic knowledge, they are actually not completely in contradiction to each other, and thus can collaborate with each other. That is, students should be enlightened with manifold freedoms to develop their own thinking patterns, and given the right and the responsibility to speak and create opportunities for mutual collaboration. (pp. 15-16)

In 2005 Jack Whitehead from Bath University came to Guyuan. When I worked there in the early nineties, the political, social and economic factors impinging on the future lives of my students didn't concern me much because their relative affluence gave them a high degree of choice and self-determination. I assumed they came from similar backgrounds and expectations to myself, so I never questioned the contexts. In Guyuan the contrasts of poverty in my surroundings and the harsher circumstances of my students' lives from those I

had learned about in the West, were amply demonstrated by their lifestyles, their continuing worries about money, their responsibilities to their families' futures, their dedication to studying in order to justify their families' faith in them, and the low level of medical care available to them and their families. Extended families often pooled their collective resources in order to send one child to college, eventually to provide support for the family financially and as security in old age. There is no welfare state in China. This borderline poverty and lack of choice in individual lives were vividly visible to me in ways I had not encountered before. I could no longer separate the work I was doing in the classroom with the lives my students were leading outside it.

During his visit, Jack (Whitehead, 2008b) took some [footage](#) of the ending of a lesson with a hundred Teaching Methodology students, in which I was saying goodbye to them and trying to draw out one of the students from the crowd to thank her for her outstanding contribution in the lesson. Jack saw a value in what was transpiring. The significance of these moments was discussed at length between us and then Jack wrote this: 'We are agreed that what we are seeing in the video-clip can be described as a loving flow-form of life-affirming energy in educational relationships' (email correspondence).

There seem to me to be two intimately-related and significant aspects here. First is the way in which the capturing of this moment enables insights to be derived that might not be possible without such technology; attendant on this are the possibilities for educational development because of this refinement of visibility. The second aspect is that Jack and I were able to discuss such a moment and agree on something together about its educational and ontological value, which can carry through to our subsequent practice and theorising. It's not a template or a model for anything, but rather moments that enable us to focus more clearly on the values we wish to bring more fully into the world through our educational work. When we say that we are working in the service of education, what we are really saying is that the values we both recognise in the video of my work with Miss Tian embody those we identify with and seek to distil through practice over time. That's what it means to be in the service of education as we are improving our practice, (see Whitehead, 2006).

h) Counterpoint between individuals and groups

With Sarah, Sally and Hayley I had worked through issues to do with empowerment and democratic forms of educational processes. With Hayley it was through the inauguration of developmental educational standards of judgement *in the classroom* as the video and her own words in my journal bear witness. With Sally and Sarah it was through enabling them to have opportunities that could help them to find their own creative levels.

Whilst studying the video of my actions with Miss Tian in the classroom in China, I decided (18 months ago) to look at the video of Hayley but I was shocked at what I saw. I ask myself now what was educational for Sam (her companion) about a process that excluded her, simply because Hayley had something to say that added to my sense of the evolution of an educational process. Hindsight is a wonderful thing! I cannot claim on the one hand that

my work with Hayley was wholly educational or that my espoused value of fairness had been a part of the process either, when my work with Sam was so distinctly lacking in that quality.

I show no empathy for Sam at all in that clip, and that appals me now. What is even more worrying is that Hayley was allowed to see me treating another student with less respect than I showed to her. I believe that my educational development is characterised by being able to hear disharmony, picking out the strands of counterpoint that are discordant and then to attempt to avoid such consequences in the future. It has taken six years for me to hear this discord, so neither Hayley nor Sam can benefit. It is to be hoped though, that I and other people can benefit. When I watch the video now, I cringe, despite owning that there are some aspects which have stood the test of time. My error was in not including Sam in the discussion or showing any concern for her obvious discomfort. I was too task-orientated. I was teaching English and not children! Moreover, I wasn't open to what Sam might have been able to help me to learn.

In the video clip with Miss Tian I show in microcosm, I believe, what I am meaning in this paper by counterpoint. We exist all together within a particular space and at a particular moment within which no one person is more significant than another. We are existing in harmony with the institution in whose name the educational development is being carried out through relational ties of experience, a common purpose, memories and significance. Counterpoint in educational terms juxtaposes respect for individuals and the whole group with a particular focus in this instance on one student, whose own learning needs were such that I needed to single her out. I did not want to sever the relationship with each student; I could have simply called Miss Tian out, stayed at my desk and allowed the other students to drift away. It would have been quicker to do it that way. However, I wanted to praise Miss Tian and single her out to herself for her unusual courage at volunteering information in a class at the same time as showing respect and affection for all my students. I felt her actions that day in class were a turning point in her learning journey but I had a responsibility to the whole as well as the individuals that go to make up that whole.

Standing at the door welcoming and waving off students was part and parcel of founding good relationships with them, for me the foundation of worthwhile learning. As the students flowed round me, I established contact with Miss Tian without losing contact with the other students, and in this way could help her recognise her specialness without rejecting the other individuals in the class.

As the crowd of students diminished Miss Tian and I were gradually brought into dialogue. Her voice had so rarely been heard in class, so I felt if I could only capitalise on it by affirming her courage and initiative, she might be able to sustain that necessary step in her own educational development. It seems she subsequently did this by becoming more communicative in class (Laidlaw, data archives). On the last day she came up to me, a most unusual act for her, took my hand and said how much she loved my lessons and was looking forward to becoming a teacher. I felt if she could not believe in herself sufficiently to make her voice heard, she would not survive in the competitive world that China is becoming. She would not be able to act as a role model for students growing up into a more complex world than their parents and grandparents perhaps could have known about in their own youth (Consulate General for P.R. China in Houston, 2004).

It is a weakness of this account that I have only verbal evidence and my own journal entries with Miss Tian. She was one of 102 students in the class, but that is still an excuse! Working on valid evidence about individuals' educational development would be an educational process in itself should I ever find myself in that situation again. I acknowledge weaknesses in my systems of data-collection at this level. Anyway, Miss Tian said she was exhilarated (and a little wary) at being singled out, but she felt pride and achievement: her friend remarked that Miss Tian often alluded to the meaningfulness of this lesson to her. It is significant that the young woman applied for, and was awarded, her first teaching post shortly before the end of the college-course. She returned to her home-town as many graduates do, in order to offer support for rural development. In 2004 at the State Banquet on October 1st (Labour Day) to commemorate the 55th Anniversary of the founding of The People's Republic of China, Premier Wen called to the people to unite in China's development programme, and particularly singled out the role of rural China in the country's economic revival (Wen, 2004).

To weave a pattern through my educational development is to see me, at my best, doing what I have written about above in terms of the educative relationships with Dean Tian, for example; or working with students and colleagues on their teaching and learning; evolving patterns with colleagues, students, friends, associates and citizens; or even with politicians in what became the Friendship Award in China. Weaving these patterns means evolving a sensitivity to disharmony when it arises, keeping a wider vision, working say, with an individual within a group but not severing the links. I suppose it is a little like being a conductor, but I think my job as a teacher has been less didactic than that.

i) Conclusion

It is my belief that over five years in China I helped to develop standards of judgement such as the enabling of individual and collective voices, improving practice and theorising, and helping teachers develop greater understanding of their social and epistemological contexts in order to fulfil both personal and social values. I believe I did this by paying close attention to the values of freedom, democracy, equality, a search for wholeness and love within my practice. Engaging in action research with Chinese characteristics opened up channels of enquiry which challenged the hitherto accepted norms of a Confucian hegemony, by facilitating individuals to speak in their own voices about what they were trying to do with their own classrooms.

Similarly, *action research with Chinese characteristics* was conceived of as more than a sop to pacify detractors; we aimed to promote it as a genuine desire to see how to find new ways that suited the particular social, economic, political, interpersonal and professional needs of the people we were working with.

Chinese characteristics in our action research enquiries would, we hoped, diminish the chance of western imperialist imposition on indigenous cultural norms and might enable the people themselves to develop something they wanted to satisfy their own perceived needs (see Li & Laidlaw, 2006).

In broad terms I am claiming my educational development is increasingly characterised by respect for groups, individuals and the contexts in which we are working as we seek to improve learning. In personal terms I feel more adept and comfortable in the free-flow of life-affirming energy which can generate between groups and individuals as we are engaged in worthwhile tasks together.

By understanding my educational development as the pursuit of counterpoint – a musical form in which all voices are equal in value and in interest, and in which the whole is gradually developed into something which satisfies each individual voice – I am able to perceive my educational journey more clearly and thus relay it to you. Through the insight that my early mystical experience can be compared to counterpoint, I gained a way of understanding them both better. In my opinion, *counterpoint represents the highest achievement of my educational development*.

[T.S. Eliot](#) wrote about the beginning and end being fused. I started this paper with the assertion that at EJOLTS we are interested in ‘publishing explanations that connect a flow of life-affirming energy with living values such as love, freedom, justice, compassion, courage, care and democratic evaluation’ ([EJOLTS](#), 2007). I hope we are able to fulfil this promise. My action research enquiry has now become: *How can I work within EJOLTS in such a way to promote love, freedom, justice, compassion, courage, care and democratic evaluation?*

My educational journey is not over by any means, but for the time being I am ending my account here. I am eager to find out what you think/feel about this paper. By sharing our ideas and collaborating, we can improve the quality of our educational discourse, practices and theorising. We can help to make the world a better place for all of us to live in.

I am looking forward to hearing from you. Please write to: ejolts@hotmail.com

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