

## Cultures of inquiry: a transformative method of creating living-theories

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### Abstract

As we approach the question, “How do I improve my practice?” we are simultaneously working towards, “How do I make the world a better place and invite others to do the same?” This article documents the nature of our influence on ourselves, and those around us, using the methodology of Living Theory research and creating cultures of inquiry in a myriad of contexts that can serve as intentional spaces for personal exploration of values as living standards of judgment and explanatory principles. A culture of inquiry is a safe, supportive space wherein practitioner-researchers are enabled to share their vulnerabilities, to make explicit their values, and to hold themselves accountable for living according to those values. We argue that creating cultures of inquiry through our personal and professional interactions, and embodying key values that are embedded within them, can contribute meaningfully to the growth of the field of Living Theory research. By inviting others into the world of Living Theory research, we are actively working towards creating and sustaining Living Theory research as a social movement with our current community and intentionally inviting others to join.

**Keywords:** **Loved into learning; Culture of inquiry; Living Theory research; Collaborative writing; Vulnerability; Authentic connection.**

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## Structure of Article

This article is the third in a series of articles that we have written for EJOLTs. The first two were published in the June, 2019 issue, as individual articles sharing our joint research experiences (DeLong, 2019c; Vaughan, 2019c) and during which Jackie guided Michelle to create her own living-educational-theory. This one, the third, follows our intentions from that point, i.e. to share our learning in a workshop at the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA) 2019 Conference in Montreal, Canada and to review and reflect on how effective we were in meeting our goals and living our values in the session. By reviewing and reflecting on our video-recording of the workshop and sharing our observations in Zoom meetings afterwards, we wrote this article to hold ourselves accountable for living our values as explanatory principles. We wish to engage our readers, including those who were at ARNA, to hold us to account and help us improve our practice.

The article is structured under the following headings:

- A. Introduction
- B. Background and context of authors
- C. Culture of inquiry: a transformative method of creating living-theories
- D. Values as explanatory principles in a culture of inquiry
- E. The essential role of visual data in our learning
- F. What we have learned and validation
- G. Conclusions and next steps

### A. Introduction

In this article, we share the process of writing together in our dialogic ways of knowing, retaining our individual voices at times to highlight our individual contribution and thinking. We share our individual journeys as living-educational-theorists, using our values as explanatory principles and explore how we each embrace the values nested within a culture of inquiry in our own context. Then, by reviewing and reflecting on video-recordings of our collaborative workshop at ARNA 2019 conference and the subsequent reflective dialogue that occurred through Zoom meetings, we use visual data to illustrate how vulnerability, authentic connection, and mindful questioning contribute to building cultures of inquiry. Creating our own living-educational-theories and being part of the Living Theory research community has had a profound effect on our lives and the ways in which we navigate the world. Our hope is to add to the discussion about how we can work together as a community to spread and sustain the field of Living Theory research.

In this article, we ask, ‘How do we use Living Theory research and living, loving, and working in a way which embodies our values and influences ourselves, others and the world?’ As we approach the question, ‘How do I improve my practice? we are simultaneously working towards, “How do I make the world a better place and invite others to do the same?” We focus on these questions and unpack how as individuals, and together, we invite others into the world of Living Theory research, and actively work towards creating and sustaining Living Theory research as a social movement with our current community and inviting others to join.

The methodology and community of Living Theory research have had a profound effect on our own lives and the way in which we navigate the world. Michelle describes the impact of this work in an excerpt from her June, 2019 article in EJOLTS:

“I embarked on this journey to have a better understanding of what lies at my core, yet what I have come to realize is that this journey was indeed about bringing my core to the surface and creating the space to let it flow outward with confidence and purpose. When we talk about cores, they are often hidden, as in the middle of the earth or even the center of an apple, but this work is about exposing them and bringing them to the light for examination and discussion. Once my inside was revealed, I felt the sense of wholeness described by Moira Laidlaw (2008), the fragmented pieces of things that were important to me suddenly aligning themselves to create a scene that made sense for this first time. I found I could not do this work alone, and through the mentorship I received from those within this field, I was encouraged to talk about my work, share my thinking and expose my core. While initially uncomfortable, once I started, I found that I could not stop. Like a good book, I would share my story with anyone who would listen, making new pathways for this energy to travel.” (Vaughan, 2019c, p. 76)

Jackie (Jacqueline): The process of creating my own living-educational-theory doctoral thesis (DeLong, 2002) was transformative; experiencing what Tillich called a ‘transcending experience’:

“Faith is not a theoretical affirmation of something uncertain, it is the existential acceptance of something transcending ordinary experience. Faith is not an opinion but a state. It is the state of being grasped by the power of being which transcends everything that is and in which everything that is participates. He who is grasped by this power is able to affirm himself because he knows that he is affirmed by the power of being-itself. In this point mystical experience and personal encounter are identical. In both of them faith is the basis of the courage to be.” (Tillich, 1962, p. 168)

Having had that ‘transcending experience’ I want to share it and encourage and support others to experience the transformation that comes from conducting research using a Living Theory research methodology of examining my values and assessing to what degree I live them. In the process of improving my practice, I use my values as explanatory principles to explain the nature of my influence on myself, on others and on the social formations where I live as I volunteer my time and expertise. Because of my dialogic way of being, I have found that ‘loving educational conversations’ with colleagues, critical friends, and students have become a research method for me and that visual data are essential to deepening and conveying my thinking. In mentoring others to create their own living-educational-theories, the dialogic processes inherent in email and, especially, Zoom and Skype video recordings of ‘loving educational conversations’, enable me to clarify my thinking and enable others to do the same (Vaughan, 2019c; DeLong, 2019). I think that you will see evidence of this within this paper.

With each of us having been so significantly impacted by the work being done in the Living Theory research field, it is a natural evolution to want to invite others to be a part of this process. If our lives have been forever changed, then we can contribute to the flourishing of humanity by supporting those throughout the world in their efforts to engage

in some part of the Living Theory research experience. By ‘flourishing of humanity,’ we are working from a hypothesis that humanity ultimately flourishes as individuals transform their own lives and begin to impact their own social contexts, thus spreading the reach of influence. We intend to use our work to support others to engage in the transformative experience described by Tillich (1962) and experienced by each of us through this process. As we do this work, together and individually, and reflect on how each of our values are infused in that process, we can begin to see patterns and trends in the ways that we engage in the facilitation of others in their Living Theory research work.

The dialogue in this article documents how we are working to learn from our experiences, as learners in the field, as well as facilitators. We hope to begin a discussion about how we can continue to improve our practice as mentors and facilitators in our individual contexts and how we can work together to build cultures of inquiry that support the continued flow of life-affirming energy to support the transcending experience of others.

Let’s start with giving you some understanding of our contexts.

## **B. Background and context of authors**

### **Jackie’s Context**

I live in Paris, Ontario, Canada (an hour west of Toronto, Canada) most of the year and part of the year in Torre de la Horadada, Alicante, Spain. In my 38 work years, I was a professional educator, teaching at elementary, secondary and university levels of education, and an administrator of schools and school systems in Ontario. While I was a Superintendent of Education, I researched my practice and created my own living-educational-theory doctoral thesis asking the question, ‘How do I improve my practice as a superintendent of schools and create my own living-educational-theory?’ (DeLong, 2002). During that time and since, I have committed to encouraging and supporting others to create their own living-educational-theories.

These days my practice is volunteering my time, expertise and energy as a mentor to others around the world who want to research their practice and create their living-educational-theories by ‘loving them into learning’ (Campbell, 2011) in a ‘culture of inquiry’ (DeLong, 2013). In order to share my knowledge and commitment, I present, as often as I can afford, at international conferences committed to practitioner research. In order to continuously improve my practice, I examine, study and write about those ‘loving educational relationships’ and presentations.

I see myself as a social activist, part of Living Theory research as a social movement (Whitehead, 2009) for social transformation for the flourishing of humanity and as a living global citizen (Potts, 2019). I am making a contribution to a global social movement of practitioner-researchers who are creating a future with loving educational relationships, as part of the Living Theory research community.

### **Michelle’s background and connection to Jackie**

I am currently an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida, teaching courses in action research and the analysis of instructional practice to graduate students pursuing their Master’s degree or Doctorate in

Curriculum and Instruction. I began my career as an elementary school teacher and worked as a classroom teacher while I completed my doctoral studies over a decade ago. I have identified authentically connecting to my students through dialogue and building trusting relationships as core values of my practice (Vaughan, 2019c). As a classroom teacher, I worked in an inclusion setting, focusing on weaving together the various abilities and disabilities in my classroom to create a community of trust where each member felt comfortable and experienced academic and social growth. Those early experiences taught me the value of human connection and the profound impact a relationship with a caring teacher can have on a student's life. While my current students are adults, often teaching in their own classrooms full-time and taking their graduate courses online at night, the value of connection and the importance of building those authentic relationships are just as important. Through my work, I use action research to "provide teachers with opportunities to build and sharpen the dispositions that create reflective and collaborative teacher leaders" (Vaughan & Burnaford, 2015, p. 286). Recently, my work has grown to include a significant number of doctoral advisees and, as I began to navigate how this role impacted my practice, I found myself introduced to the world of Living Theory research.

In the Summer of 2018, I travelled to Vermont, USA, to attend the Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA) World Congress where I presented on the role of action research within doctoral programs. It was there that I met Jackie Delong after attending a workshop she conducted with Jack Whitehead and Marie Huxtable on Living Theory research. At the end of the session, I briefly expressed in writing how touched I was by the discussions we had during the workshop. The nature of the workshop had allowed me to connect with others who had similar beliefs about the importance of allowing your core values as a human permeate your pedagogy in an effort to support student learning. A few weeks later, I received an email from Jackie. I was shocked and thrilled that she had read my words and was reaching out for further dialogue. The email below marked the beginning of our mentoring relationship (June, 24, 2018, 10:34 AM, Jackie Delong):

"Hi, Michelle. How are you? I wanted to make contact with you now that we are back in our real worlds. First, I wanted to thank you for your very affirming comment on the feedback form and second, I wanted to follow up on your meaning of "how we can touch each other exactly where they are". I remember your comment about helping others experiencing burnout and wondered if we might continue to explore that concern. I really enjoyed meeting you.

Love, Jackie."

In my response to her email, the excitement in my words is palpable and there is relief from having found a like-minded individual with whom to explore some of my questions. This is evident in comments like "my heart is full" and "I was inspired" in my response to her email (June 24, 2018, 8:01 PM, Michelle Vaughan):

"Jackie, thank you so much for reaching out, your session with Jack was the highlight of my conference and worth all the travel to get to Vermont! I have spent some time reading through [actionresearch.net](http://actionresearch.net) and, while I still have just scratched the surface, my heart is full

from reading the stories of those who have undergone the process of examining and understanding their own living-educational-theory.

My comment about touching each other where they are really reflects my own journey to find a place in academia where it is safe to be an individual who is still learning. As I approach tenure, I begin to reflect on the toll it has taken on my own personal values and growth. Yes, we check the boxes, do the research and be sure to publish in the 'right' places, but how does this bring value to our students and our communities? Obviously, I empathize deeply with my doctoral student who is studying his own burnout because I can see my journey through his eyes, he is struggling to find his own place to be an individual within the confines of the dissertation process. I was inspired and, in all honesty, relieved to see the work being done.

I left the conference a bit lighter than I arrived and I thank you for that. I look forward to beginning to unpack my own living-educational-theory and am open to any guidance you may have as I move into this next phase.”

In the months that followed, Jackie and I worked together often as she guided me through the exploration of my own core values as an educator and the construction of my living-educational-theory. That work is documented in my article, as well as in Jackie’s article in the same June, 2019 issue of EJOLTS and walks through my own journey of self-discovery using a Living Theory research methodology (and Jackie) as a guide (DeLong, 2019c; Vaughan, 2019c). I ended my previous publication in EJOLTS with a call to action for myself to begin the process of working with those around me to identify their own core values and support the journey of others:

“Change is not always easy and, while I believe most of my change has occurred internally, it will no doubt continue to impact those around me. I am eternally grateful for my serendipitous introduction to this field and hope that sharing my developmental work will encourage others to peel back the layers of their own practice to reconnect or connect for the first time with the values that influence their work and the relationships around them”.  
(p. 78)

We both acknowledge the profound impact Living Theory research has had on our own growth as individuals and educators. In an effort to ‘pay it forward’, we believe that working with others and scaffolding the exploration of their own values can not only spread the impact of Living Theory research, but support a more conscious awareness of how we choose to engage with others and if we are embodying our values. We discuss this growing awareness and reflection as small ripples of change in our individual (and shared) contexts. It is our hope that small ripples of change will continue to grow outward, which is how we see our contribution to Living Theory research as a social movement. We will use the sections below to outline intentional (and unintentional) ways in which we are supporting Living Theory research as a social movement in the world around us.

### **C. Cultures of inquiry: a transformative method of creating living theories**

In this section, we explore how Jackie has used the idea of "cultures of inquiry" (DeLong, 2002) in her work and discuss how this idea has evolved into a transformative

method that can occur in a myriad of contexts and has the ability to shift in its form and use depending on the participants. Jackie's use of the word 'culture' builds from Said's (1993) definition. For Said, culture means two things in particular:

"First of all it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure. ...Second, and almost imperceptible, culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought." (Said, pp. xii-xiv, 1993)

We argue that cultures of inquiry can be both micro and macro as well as sustained and spontaneous. They exist in the autonomous way Said describes, bringing pleasure to the participants because they are built from a loving place. We will use the sections below with supporting stories and video clips to highlight the differences in intention and outcomes of the various forms of culture of inquiry experiences.

### Jackie on Culture of Inquiry

A culture of inquiry is a safe, supportive space wherein practitioner-researchers are enabled to share their vulnerabilities, to make explicit their values, and to hold themselves accountable for living according to those values. They learn to recognize when they are not living according to their espoused values and are what Jack Whitehead (1989) calls "living contradictions."

In an email (150619), Cathy Griffin, a former student, current school principal and long-term friend, described a living culture of inquiry in her response to our Skype conversation (it is not necessary to view this clip – but I include the video link because it is referred to in the email):



**Video 1.** Cathy Griffin and Jackie DeLong in a culture of inquiry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEoc-rNG4xE>

"A Skype session with you is a reflective, research space for me. I automatically prepare for a conversation by returning to my values and examining what I am doing in my work and my life. I enter the conversation knowing that you will be a loving listener with concern for my health and well-being above all. I also enter the conversation knowing that, as an astute LET (Living Educational Theory) researcher, you will help me identify and clarify important points

in my journey to improving what I am doing and will validate or question the claims I make about my practice. That sounds so technical and 'researchy'. But the reality is much different than that because of the love that underpins the relationship and because of the loving actions you make in line with your values. For example, in the clip above, you honour my time more than once by checking if my household is getting up and needs my attention and by suggesting a next meeting time that suits my schedule which may be more complicated. You voice concern that I don't spend my weekend looking for a video clip for you but take time to relax. You voice your love at the end of each email and voice call. It may seem trite to an onlooker, but it is foundational to the work we do together. The unconditional love is an example of your values in action (ontology) and your intentional creation of a space in which it is safe to do Living Educational Theory action research."

Experiencing values such as loving kindness and being loved into learning within this democratic, non-hierarchical environment, and the recognition of their embodied knowledge, enables individuals to improve their lives and practice by creating their own living-educational-theories "... which includes 'I' as a living contradiction, the use of action reflection cycles, the use of procedures of personal and social validation and the inclusion of a life-affirming energy with values as explanatory principles of educational influence" (Whitehead, 2009, p. 182). It is a democratic space where individuals are "loved into learning" (Campbell, 2011), where they feel supported and encouraged to share their embodied knowledge and their vulnerabilities, where 'loving educational conversations' contribute to each one creating their own living-educational-theory using their own methods and methodologies with what Dadds and Hart (2001) call 'methodological inventiveness'.

Removing hierarchies is challenging and simply saying there are none is not acceptable. I have found that creating a non-hierarchical space develops when the individuals come to recognize their own embodied knowledge, a knowledge that only they have and others do not. They may know less than the teacher/mentor about a discipline or a process but much more about their knowing and ways of knowing.

It is the experience of both of us that, to make learners feel safe and trusted, the facilitators need to be vulnerable themselves and establish that they love the individuals in the group. Essential to the building of a culture of inquiry is 'loving them into learning'.

## **Loved into Learning**

### *Jackie on Loved into Learning*

While I have been a teacher-mentor for many individuals, including Cathy Griffin, Liz Campbell, Michelle Vaughan and Judy McBride, I hold an educational responsibility to express the special humanity of the educator "for whom the life and particular being of all his [her] students is the decisive factor to which his [her] 'hierarchical recognition' is subordinated" (Buber, 1947, p. 122). Liz Campbell coined the language of "loved into learning" as she described my way of being with the Master's group:

"One of the key findings in my Master's Research Project (MRP) was my ability to reveal, clarify, and explicate my embodied expression of being "loved into learning" (Campbell, 2012, p. 69). Jacqueline Delong, one of my course instructors in the Master's program and who eventually became my supervisor, stood in front of the entire class and told us she loved us. Delong's actions aligned with her values and this

inspired me to believe in myself, to realize that I had something significant to contribute and that I could live more fully according to my values. In addition, I felt trusted and respected which enabled me to continue my research with more confidence and authenticity. Recognizing that I had something of value to contribute enabled me to read the theories of others with a more critical lens which enhanced my learning journey. I refer to this process as loved into learning.” (Campbell, 2019, p. 14)

Michelle described my way of loving into learning as ‘leaving ego at the door’:



**Video 2.** Loved into learning and leaving ego at the door

<https://youtu.be/wjm13drYVQc>

When I shared with Michelle the ‘loved into learning’ language, Michelle responded by describing my way of being that encouraged her research as “leaving my ego at the door”:

“It’s something about you not bringing your ego into it which I think allows the love to flow through. I think to be able to show genuine love and also having your ego: they don’t play well together in the sandbox. So, if you really want to have somebody feel that emotion, I think you approach a lot of these relationships without ego and that is, in my experience, rare in higher education... It feels like everybody needs two chairs; one for your body and one for your ego.”

Through our research, we have found that cultures of inquiry can be created in micro and macro situations and in spontaneous and sustained forms.

### **Micro and macro cultures of inquiry**

Before we begin discussing the difference between sustained and spontaneous cultures of inquiry, it is important to note that cultures of inquiry can be both on the micro and macro level. When we hear the term cultures of inquiry, it may conjure up images of groups sitting together with the purpose of using dialogue to explore various inquiry questions. And while this may be an accurate representation of some of the ways in which cultures of inquiry are formed, they can also be as small as two people involved in a mentoring relationship, where, as Yamamoto (1998) discusses, both parties benefit from the paradox of mentorship through the fulfilment of their roles. When both members of the mentoring relationship are valued and ‘seen’ for their equal contribution to the relationship, symbiosis occurs and both members reap the reward of the relationship.

In the following discussion, macro cultures of inquiry may be defined as a group of students in Michelle's courses, Jackie's work with the Bluewater Master's cohort students, or a group of attendees at a conference session. When discussing micro cultures of inquiry, we will be writing about Michelle's individual work with her doctoral advisees, Jackie's mentoring relationships as she supports others to create their own living-educational-theories, and our work with each other.

### **Sustained cultures of inquiry**

A sustained culture of inquiry is an intentional culture of inquiry that exists over extended periods of time at both micro and macro levels. Mentoring relationships are an excellent example of a sustained culture of inquiry at a micro level. These can exist within a created structure, as Michelle sees with her advising relationships with doctoral students, or they can be sought after and nurtured as Jackie has experienced with Michelle and other researchers she meets at conferences. At a macro level, sustained cultures of inquiry might be courses or professional development experiences that are taught with the intention of exploring values in the participants' practice.

### **Spontaneous cultures of inquiry**

Spontaneous cultures of inquiry occur in meaningful moments that take place when individuals involved in a dialogue or experience have created an open flow of life-affirming energy where participants can feel safe to explore their own values. The clips in the sections below highlight a spontaneous culture of inquiry that we witnessed while facilitating a conference session at ARNA in 2019.

### **Jackie on spontaneous culture of inquiry**

I find conferences places of learning, both from reflecting on my own presentations and from listening to others. In the workshop that Michelle and I conducted, we had several examples of digital recordings that clearly showed the Living Theory research process as it emerges and the nature of our relationship. When we got into the room, the technology wouldn't work, no matter how much Michelle and several other people tried, including a technician who you see in the video-recording going in and out three times and finally leaving in disgust! And the look on Michelle's face was just tragic. I finally recognized that this was useless and started the group on the values exercise where they have 4–5 minutes to share what really matters to them with a partner. The rather flat session magically turned around! When Liz Campbell, participant in the workshop, colleague and friend who created the language of 'loved into learning' (Campbell, 2011), shared the values that she heard Rachel, workshop member, share, a spontaneous culture of inquiry pulled us into that space where we could have loving educational conversations and be loved into learning. See below:



**Video 3.** ARNA 2019: Liz Campbell loving into learning while creating a culture of inquiry [https://youtu.be/Kcy\\_aRE7\\_mU](https://youtu.be/Kcy_aRE7_mU)

"Liz: And Rachel is humble: it took me a while to get this – I had to ask a couple of questions to get there. She is very humble but she is very passionate about everyone having a sense of belonging. She's very passionate and excited about the inter-connectedness of everything: we started talking about the question in the context of the conference; I said 'like education' and she said, 'well, it's all connected, you know'.

She's very passionate about having authentic and meaningful learning for her students and embraces body-mind and holistic learning. Very passionate about environmental sustainability to the point that it is part of her family and family life. Experiential learning is also a priority for her and then I asked why she had come to this particular workshop and she said, 'Well, it was the word love' – so that tells me she is courageous. She is in the science area of her school but she is also director of Action Learning, too, so that is a nice blend. She is very creative and her mother calls her 'a grower of souls' so you can see where she gets her creativity from and after just speaking to her for a few minutes, I thought that was a pretty good description. I've only told you a few things about a very special woman!"

Liz creates a culture of inquiry spontaneously in which Rachel feels listened to, loved, and respected. The space is then open for Rachel to share her concerns, asking "How am I processing your question of the alignment of value and practice". She explains that the misalignment between her position at the administrative table in her school and her values is fraught with tension. Discussion follows that involves many of the group around power and values and the issue of alignment.



**Video 4.** Liz Campbell on living with dissonance <https://youtu.be/zl-4AncxM0s>

"Liz: This has been a big part of my struggle, too. The contradictions where I didn't think I had any power and I didn't want power but wanted to be able to affect change. Right? And so, I struggled but, in the end, realized that it is in the dissonance that the most growth can take place. And not that you have to start with a problem; you can start with something you are doing really well. Why is this working and how can I do it better? Or How can I share it? What should I do next?

What I came to realize was that it's OK for some 'ying and yang' and dissonance and it's not necessarily all what we would call false dichotomy-it's possible for things to co-exist in an effective way.

Jackie: And still live your values

Liz: And still live according to your values. That's what Living Theory research did for me. It allowed me to navigate a way to co-exist within that dissonance and still have a purposeful life.

Michelle: I think that last piece is really important and why this research is important. Your research about trying to figure out how to navigate this and how to still be at your best and fulfill your values is very important for someone who is just like you to read. Right? Because we get this disillusioned thought, especially if you are in a PhD program: am I generalizable; am I this; am I that?

If we are looking to make change to affect other humans and to live our values more fully then this is the most important work. This what I want to read and what changes the way I think. So for those who are in that fight, this is the work that is closest to your heart."

The educational conversation turns several directions with Jack Whitehead (who is the videographer) interjecting about Barry McDonald's (1987, p. 6) concept of "creative compliance" which helps them arrive at the conclusion that your values need not align in all parts of your life.

We believe that this culture of inquiry space that Liz opened up spontaneously fulfilled the need for "a collaborative, participative and inclusive paradigm built on love and working through local and global action to connect us with each other as human beings and with nature" and filled us with the "positive energy of faith, love, hope and creativity... to move us toward Loving Learning Conferences" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2017, p. 224).

In the next section, we share the values of vulnerability, authentic connection, mindful questioning and loving educational conversations that are explanatory principles in the nature of our influence in cultures of inquiry.

#### **D. Values as explanatory principles in a culture of inquiry**

As we discussed and analyzed the different ways in which we each work with others to support their own growth and development as living-educational-theorists, we discovered key aspects of facilitating cultures of inquiry that serve as core values of the process. This section will discuss how vulnerability, authentic connection, mindful questioning and loving educational conversations contribute to building cultures of inquiry, both sustained and spontaneous and how we each approach these core facilitating values in our own way. Let's start with vulnerability.



**Video 5.** Democratic Evaluation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SShZFmETpkk>

I asked the students in the Bluewater Master's cohort to help me improve my practice by giving me specific feedback on areas for improvement. Suffice it to say that submitting myself to public evaluation was not easy but I felt that it was important as an expression of my love for my students and the work that I do. It also served as a process that they might use with their own students. When the individuals in the group see me being vulnerable, they are more willing to share their vulnerabilities, insecurities and values. After this 'democratic evaluation', Cathy Griffin shared her narrative of her negative childhood experience to the Master's group and later asked her students (age 11-12) how she might teach them better (Griffin, 2011; 2013). As Brené Brown (2010b) says, "Vulnerability is the willingness to say 'I love you' first, the willingness to do something where there are no guarantees. It is the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging and love."

### Michelle on vulnerability

Within my own practice, I have identified vulnerability as a conscious (and unconscious) choice that I make in order to allow my core value of connection to flow freely and build relationships with my students. This shows up in multiple ways in my own practice; sharing stories of failure with my students, negotiating and realigning the power structure in the doctoral advising relationship, and seeking help from my students. Like Jackie, I build from Brown's (2012) research on vulnerability and believe the following to be true in my own practice:

"Vulnerability is based on mutuality and requires boundaries and trust. It's not oversharing, it's not purging, it's not indiscriminate disclosure, and it's not celebrity-style social media information dumps. Vulnerability is about sharing our feelings and experiences with people who have earned the right to them. Being vulnerable and open is mutual and an integral part of the trust-building process." (Brown, 2012, p. 45)

In order to build trust in my own cultures of inquiry, I rely on a foundation of vulnerability. Creating spaces where my students and peers can fail and share their struggles is a necessary component of how I facilitate my courses and relationships with students. The clip below highlights how vulnerability can be used to foster connection (the next value to be discussed) as I share some of my own insecurities when I started working on my living-educational-theory a year prior.



**Video 5.** Michelle and Jackie at ARNA <https://youtu.be/rD11P3C6yfo>

In this clip, I share my own story and experience of attending a session with Jackie a year earlier, reflecting on how I felt when she asked the participants in this session to identify their own core values:

“I remember being in a similar session last summer and being interested in Living Theory research and knowing that my values were important to me, similar to Rachel, but not being able to answer that question right away because it is difficult to make that transition to ‘What does that mean for research?’”

As the facilitator in this session, I can hear myself struggle and become nervous as I share moments where I was unsure of my own footing in this field, using ‘um’ frequently to find my place. Throughout the clip, I gain confidence as I begin to share how I worked through my place of ‘unknowing’ and grew in knowledge and experience in the field of Living Theory research. This clip provides evidence of the importance of vulnerability as a facilitator. Being open with the participants in the room allowed me to build from the positive energy I received from the participants when sharing in the session, creating a culture of inquiry that became safe for sharing by others in the room.

### **Authentic Connection**

#### *Michelle on authentic connection*

Connection with others is a core value of my living-educational-theory. I work to achieve this connection in my practice and life by “showing vulnerability, generating excitement through interest, respecting knowledge, time, and limitations, and focusing on caring relationships” (Vaughan, 2019, p. 73). While there are a number of definitions of connection that exist, Brown’s description (2010a) of connection as “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship” (p. 19) fits well when we are discussing how connection can support the goal of building cultures of inquiry as a way to further expand Living Theory research as a social movement and the impact of the field.

In the clip below, one of the participants in our Living Theory research session, Stephanie, discusses this idea of authentic connections with her students and her goal of creating spaces for more “intimate interactions” to take place in her classroom. This clip occurs almost an hour into our session and is the first time Stephanie has spoken to the entire group. I believe our efforts to connect with the participants and provide a space where everyone can feel welcome and encouraged to explore ideas that are still forming in their minds is evident in this clip. Stephanie talks through some of her most meaningful moments as an educator, discussing how the authentic interactions with her students give her “more faith in humanity” but leave her faced with a contradiction in her classroom as her curriculum limits the opportunities for freedom of expression for her students. The conversation is concluding as Jackie points out that Stephanie does, indeed, already have a research question.



**Video 6.** Connections in classroom interactions <https://youtu.be/WS5cCfj99Jg>

As I watch this clip from a facilitator's perspective, it becomes clear to me that Stephanie feels connected to those in the room, mentioning both Emily and Liz in her discussion and how she relates to each one of them. In the culture of inquiry that we set out to create in this session, our participants have connected with each other in a short amount of time, underscoring the idea that connection does not have to be strongest between the facilitator and the participant. Creating a space where connections can grow is the primary goal and stepping back to allow them to flourish can lead to powerful moments of life-affirming energy.

### **Mindful questioning and loving educational conversations**

#### *Jackie on mindful questioning and loving educational conversations*

I believe that we can create a kinder, safer, more loving future by developing our loving educational conversations. Gadamer (1989) discusses the form of human interaction through dialogue:

"...To conduct a dialogue requires first of all that the partners do not talk at cross purposes. Hence it necessarily has the structure of question and answer. The first condition of the art of conversation is ensuring that the other person is with us. ... To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented." (p. 367)

He tells us that conversation as an art form means that we do not talk at cross purposes and thus use a question-and-answer format. We need to ensure that we are on the same wavelength as our colleague and that the matter at hand is paramount. Gadamer (1975) advises that a thinking person will search for everything in favour of an opinion, not for the weaknesses. (p. 367)

When I am coaching/mentoring others in creating their living-educational-theories, I make use of questions that I think will help them move on in their thinking, that will facilitate, not control, the conversation. I take care that the questions be small steps that encourage deeper thinking and yet not too long a stride so that they lose what they have accomplished or become afraid to take the next step. Questioning can be a means of controlling a conversation so I try to be fully cognizant that the questions or comments that I make in guiding the researcher are loving, educational and without prior judgement. Michelle Vaughn describes this "nice scaffolding" assistance (27/01/2019):



**Video 7.** Michelle shares the supportive Living Theory research process.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzawRc48YgQ&feature=youtu.be>.

“I said [to Jean] I don’t know if Jackie knew that she was going to tell me to do all these things along the way but it felt like she had the next step for me planned and was just waiting for me to get somewhere so that I could take the next step. Because had she told me everything up front, I might have been overwhelmed about the process but it was a very nice scaffolding. And I said it really felt like the writing was a journey of self-discovery...”

While ‘loving and educational conversations’ can be seen as part and parcel of being ‘loved into learning’, I have chosen to deal with them separately in this article as I live this value in conversations when the focus is not so much on learning as on building relationships, on what Jerome Gumedé and Peter Mellett (2019) call a “good-quality conversation.” They see a ‘good-quality conversation’ as one that is undertaken with respect, and careful listening. It is my experience that the art of listening is the key. I need to listen and consider the other person’s opinion without preparing my response or arguing my position in advance. Stephen Covey’s (1989) advice to seek first to understand before being understood still resonates with me. In order to be responsive to the other, whether in a classroom or with a friend or colleague, the time committed is priceless for the formation of lasting ‘loving educational relationships’ built on shared stories, shared experiences and shared values.

When our post-doctoral community meets on SKYPE on Sundays, we share an update of what is happening in our research worlds and in our personal lives, what is working and what is presenting us with problems. Just listening and consoling is valued but so are strategies for moving on. Very frequently, we find solutions to the problems presented or, at the least, provide directions to be considered. I look forward to those conversations every Sunday morning even though, for me, it is at 8:00 in the morning. Because of my dialogic way of being, these meetings allow me to share my thinking, provide me with constructive criticism to improve my research and writing and give me new ideas to ponder. You hear everyone saying, “how can I help?” Here is the session on September 3, 2018:



**Video 8.** Postdoc Group <https://youtu.be/DhenTow0-9c>

My writing over the last 25 years (DeLong, 2019a) demonstrates my sustained commitment to building ‘loving educational relationships’ as I encourage and support practitioner-researchers to create their own living-educational-theories within a culture of inquiry (DeLong, 2013). I am dialogic by nature and I am intentional about living my value of loving others into learning; and, I have both created and researched living cultures of inquiry where practitioner-researchers know (Griffin, 2011; Campbell, 2011, 2019; Vaughan, 2019c) that they are in a safe place for sharing their vulnerabilities. Brown (2012) states that “Not only can we not deeply love, we cannot know the truth of who we are without experiencing vulnerability” (p. 32). My culture of inquiry shares commonalities with Huxtable’s (2012) ‘living boundaries’. She describes a living-boundary as a trustworthy, co-creative, multidimensional, relationally dynamic space (Huxtable, 2012). I also feel a connection to Robyn Pound’s (2003) concept of ‘alongsideness’:

“Values of alongsideness act as explanatory principles and standards of practice and evaluation. As an epistemology, alongsideness employs Living Theory research (Whitehead, 1989). Accessibility for participants unfamiliar with this research is increased by calling the developmental process ‘enquiring collaboratively.’” (Abstract)

Because we both are so visual and dialogic, the video recordings give us the data to provide evidence for our claims to know and help us be accountable for them. We have thoroughly enjoyed our journey through loving educational conversations that emerged “in our spontaneously responsive, dialogically-structured relations with another person” (Shotter, 2008, p. 168).

In the next section, we discuss visual and dialogic data.

## E. The essential role of visual data in our learning

### Jackie on visual data

The visual digital recordings have been seminal to the development of my thinking and reflexivity because I have been able to review the loving educational conversations recordings stored on YouTube. When I am viewing and listening to the conversations, I can see and hear the nature of the relationship, whether I am living my espoused values and/or what might be involved in improving myself or the relationship. In this ARNA 2019 clip you hear me sharing the significance of video data:



**Video 9:** ARNA 2019 Workshop: the significance of video data:

<https://youtu.be/dUZiYWtSGXU>

I find that visual data not only brings life to the writing but also deepens the understanding of educational relationships and learning. The visual narrative is, at the same time, raw data and an explanation of empathetic resonance (DeLong, 2010b) and life-affirming energy. This means that, in the moment of conversation and while reviewing the video, I am mindful of the dynamics of our interactions, including the times when my ideas are resonating and there is a building of excitement in the educational conversation as new knowledge is created and I recognize our shared values. But, I am also aware of the tensions – the times when my meaning is not resonating with others or when I feel I am not clear or not understanding or being understood. In these cases, more dialogue and/or reflection is needed to uncover the source of the tension.

While recording, selecting clips and transcribing video data is time-consuming, I find such love, hope and joy (Liz's values that I share) in experiencing again the empathetic resonance in the conversations. I found that there was a plethora of raw data that requires editing and, in that process, I experience the art of finding themes in a personal inquiry as Marshall (1999) describes:

"Images, phrases, concepts and questions around which I organize my sense of inquiring can arise from a variety of sources, but when they 'appear' they can have an intensity which makes me recognize them as powerful, or invest them with such power. They have an evocative quality for me, repeatedly catch my attention, and/or are rich phrases (often with ambiguous or multiple meanings) which echo in different areas of my life. They serve as organizing frames for my self-reflection and for taking issues further conceptually and in practice. Typically they have been repeated in more than one setting. Sometimes I will be encouraged because they have resonance for other people as well as me, but sometimes this is unimportant." (Marshall, 1999, p.4)

In her Master's project, Liz Campbell wrote about the initial resistance researchers experience:

"Also, I want to thank Jackie DeLong for video recording our presentations and conversations during the two courses she facilitated in the Master's program (in spite of the reluctance and resistance of many of us) and encouraging us to view the footage to look for evidence of our claims. The trusting relationship that developed with my peers and my instructors is what enabled me to become a reflective practitioner. We (myself and the other students in my class) have many reasons to justify our lack of ready willingness to use video, but fortunately for me, I was able to overcome my initial reluctance." (Campbell, 2011, p. 95)

It is still amazing to me that the video-recordings are not used more commonly. I understand that there is 'push-back' by some Universities and school districts but, in my experience, there has been support and encouragement for the tool to improve our teaching and learning.

Through the visual data, I am highlighting the methodological importance of my dialogic way of being and through my educational conversations and dialogues I am clarifying the ontological values which are the standards of judgment that I use as explanatory principles in my educational relationships with my colleagues, Cathy Griffin, Liz Campbell, Judy McBride, Michelle Vaughan and my newest community member, Parbati Dhungana from Nepal. These five live in totally different contexts, are very different

individuals, and yet each is generating or generated her own living-educational-theory accounts with deep insights.

### **Michelle on visual data**

Visual data can also play a role in capturing nonverbal communication and an exchange of life-affirming energy that is unable to be recorded when looking at a transcript of a conversation. It is these nonverbal cues that are often so important in building trust and encouraging the members of a culture of inquiry, whether micro or macro, to grow in their thinking and independence. The clip below has already been shared to illustrate the use of vulnerability and connection as core values of facilitating cultures of inquiry. However, view the clip again with a different lens (I suggest turning the sound off), watch closely as I frequently look to Jackie for ‘validation checks.’ In the span of this three-minute clip, I visually check-in with Jackie twenty different times.

As a new researcher in the field and one of Jackie’s mentees in our own micro culture of inquiry, I have relied on her guidance through my own growth. Here, for the first time, I am presenting to a group of others about Living Theory research and Jackie allows me to share at length, giving me positive energy and nods and smiles of encouragement to help me find my footing. Without the use of video, this data would not have been captured and I believe it adds an important element to the story of mentorship and facilitation.



**Video 11:** Michelle and Jackie at ARNA <https://youtu.be/rD11P3C6yfo>

We will try to bring the two threads of our Life Writing (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo, 2009) and relationship together into a braid in a review of our learning with some conclusions, and then share our next steps.

## **F. What we have learned and validation**

We have learned that:

- It is important to speak with our own voices even as we collaborate.
- Our research and writing improved because we had loving educational conversations and wrote collaboratively.
- Visual data is seminal to our understanding of our learning and influence.
- The Zoom technology enabled us to create our culture of inquiry in order to write the paper.
- We have further clarified the nature and forms of cultures of inquiry.

Through the process in the EJOLTS Open Reviewing space at: <https://ejolts.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=236>, we have been fortunate to have had our three reviewers, Máirín Glenn, Lesley Wood and Neil Boland provide us with specific ways of strengthening our article and we have incorporated their suggestions. To quote Máirín Glenn, “I think it is a stronger and more robust piece of work now.” In addition, Jack Whitehead, Liz Campbell and Moira Laidlaw have given us encouragement and invaluable advice for improvement. We have asked colleagues to use Habermas’ (1976) questions as means to respond to our article:

- i. How could I improve the comprehensibility of my explanation?
- ii. How could I strengthen the evidence I use to justify the assertions I make?
- iii. How could I extend and deepen my socio-historical and sociocultural awareness of the ecological complexities that influence my practice and my explanation?
- iv. How could I enhance the authenticity of my explanation in showing over time and interaction that I am living my espoused values as fully as I can?

To end, we share our conclusions and next steps.

## **G. Conclusions and next steps**

As part of our culture of inquiry in our Living Theory research community, we hope that we can convey that we are all influencing each other in what we understand to be a ‘global social movement.’ The nature of the relationships between us is based on love, respect, encouragement, support and also, critique. While we stress the importance of the individual ‘I,’ as an autonomous researcher in creating our own living-theories, we engage with the ‘i~we~I~us~’ relationships that Joy Mounter (2019) has developed. In such a relational dynamic awareness, we manage to retain the individual integrity of each of us, but at the same time recognize the life-affirming energy and love that we feel when we are working together.

We have articulated in advance that we want our voices to be individual and separate while also being stronger as a community of living theorists. We hope that we have accomplished that.

Furthermore, we are hoping that you can see and indeed feel our passion, commitment and life-affirming energy for encouraging and supporting others through the transformative experience of creating their own living-theories in cultures of inquiry with loving educational conversations. Our intention is that this and further reflection will enable us to see to what extent our reflexivity can further clarify the values we use as explanatory principles in explanations of our educational influences in learning.

This paper can be strengthened with your help. We invite you to contribute to strengthening the validity and rigour of this paper by drawing on Habermas’ (1976) four questions above.

Going forward, our next steps include the following three points:

- Continuing our commitment to the Living Theory research community and EJOLTs.
- Encouraging and supporting new living theorists to create their living-theories.

- Taking our learning forward to future conferences such as CARN 2020 in Dundee, Scotland and AERA 2021 in Orlando, Florida and critically engaging with the ideas of others.

We wish, like the Irish-philosopher O'Donohue (2007), "to become an active force of renewal and encouragement in the world" and "a powerful agent of transformation":

"The world is not decided by action alone. It is decided more by consciousness and spirit; they are the secret sources of all action and behavior. The spirit of a time is an incredibly subtle, yet hugely powerful force. And it is comprised of the mentality and spirit of all individuals together. Therefore, the way you look at things is not simply a private matter. Your outlook actually and concretely affects what goes on. When you give in to helplessness, you collude with despair and add to it. When you take back your power and choose to see the possibilities for healing and transformation, your creativity awakens and flows to become an active force of renewal and encouragement in the world. In this way, even in your own hidden life, you can become a powerful agent of transformation."

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