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Evolving Educational Influences in Learning: collaborative communities of practice, relationally-dynamic constellations of values and praxis

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Abstract

This paper contains three main themes: an examination of the claim of Living Educational Theory research to be a well-founded and credible research methodology within the field of educational research; an account of the author's cumulative development over time as a living-educational-theory researcher; and how the author is now moving his living-educational-theory research into the future.

The author's understanding of his own praxis – as a fusion of knowing, doing and being – is explored, leading to an extension of the role of values as explanatory principles for living-educational-theory research accounts. Rather than a fixed structure, an individual's values are envisaged as a *dynamic constellation* that is in a state of flux; values within the constellation adjust their relationships with each other over time to fit changing contexts.

The concept of groups of researchers within collaborative communities of practice is shown to have relevance in fostering a novel web-based Living Manual that offers contextualised solutions to practical problems within the fields of disaster relief and the design of regenerative human settlements. Within the collaborative community that has gathered around the Living Manual, co-researchers are seen to have *relationally-dynamic constellations of values* that align their value-sets with each other's.

Keywords: Community; Praxis; Relational; Dynamic; Values; Constellation.

Index of main sections

- Introduction and road map with signposts
- Living Educational Theory research as a new form of scholarship
- Values as ethical principles and standards of judgment
- My research perspective within Living Educational Theory research
 - Developing my praxis
- All that has gone before: understanding the past and projecting into the future
- My values as guiding principles
 - A dynamic constellation of values
- Collaborative Communities of Practice
- The Living Manual and relationally-dynamic constellations of values
- Conclusion

Introduction and road map with signposts

In this introduction, I will signpost the journey of my cumulative development as a living-educational-theory researcher and my understanding of evolving educational influences in learning, as set out in this paper.

At the time of writing my MA dissertation (Mellett, 1994), I chanced upon a discussion by Evalt Ilyenkov (1977) about an extract from a letter sent by Karl Marx to Maksim Kovalevsky, which runs as follows:

"... It is necessary to distinguish between that which the author in fact offers and that which he gives only in his own representation. thus what Spinoza considers the keystone of his system, and what in fact constitutes this keystone, are two quite different things. Our job cannot be once more to paraphrase the theoretical foundations ... Our job is to help the reader to understand the 'real inner structure' of his system, which far from coincides with its formal exposition. ..."

Thus, the job of the process of review that occupies about half of this paper and the process of review that will take place (has taken place) within the EJOLTs open review space are to, "help the reader [me] to understand the 'real inner structure' of his system, which far from coincides with its formal exposition". In the context of a living-educational-theory account, I regard "his system" and my reading of it as being my understanding of myself as an agent for change in the world.

However, I remain aware that Living Educational Theory research, as a values-driven educational research genre, remains a fringe interest alongside the mainstream forms of education research. In an attempt to formally locate Living Educational Theory research as a new form of scholarship incorporating a new epistemology, in Section 2 I compare and contrast the requirements discussed by Ernest Boyer (1990, 2016) and Donald Schön (1995) with the basic tenets of Living Educational Theory research.

I hold 'educational research' to imply research from within educational practice, whereas 'education research' implies research on education through an objectivising praxis. Through the summary of a conversation with Jack Whitehead (Whitehead, 2020), in Section 3 I review the role of values within Living Educational Theory research (as an *educational* research paradigm) and contrast this approach with the Kantian deductive basis (of *education* research).

A central requirement of a living-educational-theory research account is that it offers an explanation of the author's educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the social formations in which they live and work. However, many contributors to Living Educational Theory research focus on self-study, having read the requirement as '... the author's educational influences on their own learning...' In Section 4, I make a distinction between '*in* learning' and '*on* learning' to understand better the research perspective I am choosing to take within Living Educational Theory research.

Having established my view of Living Educational Theory research and my research location within it, Section 5 reviews my past areas of interest, as they have evolved over time – through reiterative cycles of action and reflection, forming a repeating process whose output at each stage is applied as input to the succeeding stage. Writing and publishing accounts of significant stages in this process have built up to create my current personal living-educational-theory. As with all living-educational-theories, mine is described by explanatory principles that are informed by my values as ethical principles and standards of judgment. Insights into the nature of my values emerge over time through my practice and interaction with others within it.

Moving from the summary of my past writing, I identify and explore the nature of the values that I consider to be significant in my life as an educational researcher (Section 6). I suggest that my values exist in a constellation with an internal relational structure that is dynamic and adaptive over time.

As an example of a new form of scholarship, one of the distinctive aspects of Living Educational Theory research is its focus on collaboration and community, as researchers describe and explain their educational influences in the learning of themselves, each other and the social formations of which they are a part. In Section 7, I move the discussion closer to my current enquiry as I revisit the MSc Construction Management programme with which I was involved at the University of Bath – see *A living-theory pedagogy for postgraduate distance learning education* (Mellett, 2016) – and find parallels with the form and function of the Living Educational Theory research community.

This article finally comes fully up-to-date with Section 8, as I look to the future and the design and implementation of a 'Living Manual' that aims to support designers working in the field of regeneration, especially those concerned with developing settlements for people displaced by natural disaster or warfare. The intention is for those designers to form a community of practice *within* the Living Manual, which acts both as a meeting place and as a portal for the growth and sharing of best practice. By definition, manuals contain knowledge: however, the Living Manual is designed to be *autopoietic*, as in a self-regulating and self-producing living organism; its users act as knowledge-carriers and creators who add to its body of knowledge.

Through an explanation of my educational influences in learning, I lay out the data to support the claim to have made an original contribution to Living Educational Theory research by describing and explaining the nature of *relationally-dynamic constellations of values*: I explore the genesis of the Living Manual and identify as evidence for this claim the relationally-dynamic nature of each individual's values within a collaborative community, as they align their individual sets of values to form a coherent and overarching constellation that holds the focus of the group's joint enquiry.

Living Educational Theory research as a new form of scholarship

Boyer (1990, 2016 – *passim*) expanded the classical 'academic' view of scholarship to include the four domains of Discovery, Integration, Application and Teaching. He stated that:

“Basic research has come to be viewed as the first and most essential form of scholarly activity, with other functions flowing from it. Scholars are academics who conduct research, publish and then perhaps convey their knowledge to students or apply what they have learned. The latter functions grow out of scholarship, they are not considered to be a part of it. But knowledge is not necessarily developed in such a linear manner. The arrow of causality frequently can, and does, point in *both* directions. Theory surely leads to practice. But practice also leads to theory. And teaching, at its best, shapes both research and practice. Viewed from this perspective, a more comprehensive, a more dynamic understanding of scholarship can be considered.” (pp. 15-16).

Living Educational Theory research sits squarely within this description of a new form of scholarship. Elements of theory and of practice inform each other as an educational enquiry proceeds. They exist in a dynamic equilibrium of question and answer with each other, in which,

“... the work of the scholar ... means stepping back from one’s own investigation, looking for connections, building bridges between theory and practice (p. xxii) [and where] ... there is a readiness ... to rethink what it means to be a scholar (p. 16) ... [involving] ... the scholarship of *discovery* (p. 17) ... the scholarship of *integration* (p. 18) ... the scholarship of *application* (p. 21) ... [and] the scholarship of *teaching* (p. 23).”

Listing the main features of each of Boyer's four scholarships show Living Educational Theory research to meet each in turn.

“The scholarship of Discovery contributes not only to the stock of human knowledge, but also to the intellectual climate ... Not just the outcomes, but the process, and especially the passion, give meaning to the effort. (p. 17)

“The scholarship of Integration ... we underscore the need for scholars who give meaning to isolated facts, putting them in perspective ... making connections across the disciplines ... (p. 18)

“The scholarship of Application ... moves towards engagement as the scholar asks "How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems?" ... And further, "Can social problems themselves define an agenda for scholarly investigation?". (p. 21)

“The scholarship of Teaching ... teaching, at its best, means not only transmitting knowledge, but transforming and extending it as well ... pushed in creative new directions.” (p.24)

As a conclusion, Boyer asked simply for:

"a more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar – a recognition that knowledge is acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice and through teaching." (p.24)

Living Educational Theory research can claim to meet these requirements, as an inspection of the *résumé* of Living Educational Theory research on the current EJOLTS website (EJOLTS, 2020/04) confirms:

“An individual’s living-educational-theories ... are evolving ... as they are embodied and expressed by the researcher through their practice. ... [They are] generated by individuals to explain their educational influences in learning in enquiries of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ ...

Living [Educational] Theory research is a form of self-study research in which practitioners research questions that are important to them ... [using] various research methods such as Action Research, Narrative Enquiry and Auto-ethnography. Living [Educational] Theory research is distinguishable by the form of logic, epistemology, explanations, standards of judgement and units of appraisal.”

If Living Educational Theory claims to be a new form of scholarship, then the question arises as to the form of epistemology through which it pursues its practice and expresses its outcomes and conclusions. Donald Schön (1995) proposed that:

“If we wish to pursue the "new forms of scholarship" that Ernest Boyer presents ... we cannot avoid questions of epistemology, since the new forms of scholarship he describes challenge the epistemology built into the modern research university.

... the new scholars must produce knowledge that is testably valid, according to criteria of appropriate rigour, and their claims to knowledge must lend themselves to intellectual debate within academic (among other) communities of enquiry.” (p. 27)

Significantly, Schön implied that a paradigm shift away from the Kantian categories would be required:

“... if the new scholarship is to mean anything, it must imply a kind of action research with norms of its own, which will conflict with the norms of technical rationality ... “ (p. 27)

Schön suggested that practice should be seen as a setting, not only for the application of knowledge, but for its generation, acknowledging and utilising the kinds of knowing that are already embedded in competent practice.

“Perhaps there is an epistemology of practice that takes fuller account of the competence practitioners sometimes display in situations of uncertainty, complexity, uniqueness and conflict. (p. 29)

... what Polanyi calls "tacit knowing" and what I would like to describe as "knowing-in-action". I submit that such knowing-in-action makes up the great bulk of what we know how to do in everyday and in professional life." (p. 30)

Thus, Schön's "knowing-in-action" involves our capability of reflecting on what we know as revealed by what we do – and our ability to reflect-in-action enables us to generate new knowing. (p. 30). Furthermore, this "practice knowledge" may be made explicit and put into a form that allows it to be generalised, in such a way that both the problem and the action strategies can be carried over to new situations perceived as being similar to the first. Schön concluded:

"In the new situations, one must still test the validity, actionability and 'interest' (the term so beloved of academicians) of the practice knowledge derived from the initial situation. ... what I call 'reflective transfer'. (p. 31)

"In order to legitimise the new scholarship, higher education institutions will have to learn organisationally to open up the prevailing epistemology so as to foster new forms of action research. This, in turn, requires building up communities of enquiry capable of criticising such research and fostering its development." (p. 34)

The new epistemology implicit within Living Educational Theory research includes the unit of appraisal of an explanation produced by an individual educator for his or her educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the social formations in which they live and work. The standards of judgment applied to those units of appraisal are values-based and lie at the core of the individual living-educational-theory researcher's claim to knowledge.

Values as ethical principles and standards of judgment

I was recently (March 2020) in conversation with Jack Whitehead (JW) concerning values as ethical principles and standards of judgment. He summarised his thoughts in a later private correspondence, in which he gave the following justification for situating these values that carry hope for the future of humanity as standards of judgment for validating the accounts of living-educational-theory researchers.

JW commenced by contrasting two separate forms of rationality that both make a claim to have knowledge – the transcendental deduction of Immanuel Kant (1781, 1787) and Living Educational Theory research. Beginning with Kantian deduction:

"My first experience of justifying ... values [as standards of judgment] was on the philosophy course for the Academic Diploma Course led by Richard Peters at the London Institute of Education 1968–70. The course focused on the contents of his book *Ethics and Education* (Peters, 1966).

The justification offered by Peters was based on a form of Kantian Transcendental Deduction. This form of deduction states that if we are given a proposition *p*, as true, and can demonstrate that proposition *x* is implied in proposition *p*, then there are good reasons for accepting proposition *x*.

The given proposition is a rational person seriously asking 'What ought I to do?'. In *Ethics and Education*, Peters argued that implied in this proposition were the values of freedom, justice, consideration of interests, worth-while activities, respect for persons, equality and

democratic procedures. This philosophical justification of values relating to the flourishing of humanity in education is based on a philosopher's concept of what is rational."

Peter's influence extended to the course leading to a Diploma in Education that I studied at the University of Bath in 1970–71, involving the Sociology of Education, the Philosophy of Education *etc.* I undertook MA studies in education at the same university in 1989–93 and, following two modules in Educational Technology, I encountered Living Educational Theory research through two modules in Action Research (tutored by JW). My previous objectivising stance gave way to my slowly learning to say 'I' and to give that 'I' an ontological significance in terms of my self as a reflective practitioner and educational agent for change in the world.

Continuing our conversation, JW moved on from the Kantian perspective to discuss the perspective of Living Educational Theory research:

"A Living Educational Theory [research] justification of values of the flourishing of humanity is grounded in the practitioner's question, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' and exploring the implications of asking, researching and answering this question. The exploration includes the clarification of the meanings of the values used by the individual to give meaning and purpose to their lives in what they are doing. These meanings are also used by the individual as explanatory principles in their explanations of their educational influences in learning.

"Living Educational Theory research includes the following decision and validating procedures for validating the meanings of the values of the flourishing of humanity that are used as explanatory principles in an explanation of educational influences in learning in the enquiry, 'How do I improve what I am doing?'.

"The decision is identical to that made by Polanyi (1958):

"I must understand the world from my point of view, as a person claiming originality and exercising his personal judgement responsibly with universal intent". (p. 327)

The process of validating an account that makes a contribution to Living Educational Theory research rests on the procedure laid out by Habermas (1976), stated as follows (JW quoting directly from the Habermas text):

"... I shall develop the thesis that anyone acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated (or redeemed). Insofar as he wants to participate in a process of reaching understanding, he cannot avoid raising the following – and indeed precisely the following – validity claims. He claims to be:

- a) Uttering something understandably;
- b) Giving (the hearer) something to understand;
- c) Making himself thereby understandable; and
- d) Coming to an understanding with another person.

The speaker must choose a comprehensible expression so that speaker and hearer can understand one another. The speaker must have the intention of communicating a true proposition (or a propositional content, the existential presuppositions of which are satisfied) so that the hearer can share the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must want

to express his intentions truthfully so that the hearer can believe (p.2) the utterance of the speaker (can trust him). Finally, the speaker must choose an utterance that is right so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background. Moreover, communicative action can continue undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified.” (pp. 2–3).

With a claim to knowledge expressed in terms of a speaker and a hearer agreeing that they understand each other (as far as they are able within Habermas' terms), JW then described how the validation of living-educational-theory accounts is contingent on Habermas' (*ibid.*) four criteria of social validity, which I understand as generating knowledge through conjecture and consensus within a critically-aware community.

“Living Educational Theory researchers are encouraged to submit their explanations of educational influences in learning to the responses of a validation group of some 3–8 peers who are asked to respond to the following questions that are derived from Habermas’ four criteria of social validity in reaching a shared understanding:

- i. How could I improve the comprehensibility of my explanation?
- ii. How could I strengthen the evidence I offer to justify the claims/assertions I make?
- iii. How could I deepen and extend my understandings of the sociocultural and sociohistorical influences in my practice and explanation?
- iv. How could I enhance the authenticity of my explanation in the sense of showing that I am living my values as fully as possible?”

Thus, Living Educational Theory research is distinguishable by its epistemology, explanations, standards of judgment and units of appraisal; its logic is a form of question-and-answer within dialogue between the interested parties; a living-educational-theory account can gain insights into practice from propositional forms, but that practice cannot be reduced to a purely propositional analysis of its form.

The foregoing offers a re-examination and re-statement of the general principles of Living Educational Theory research. I shall now situate my own living-educational-theory’s research perspective within this broader genre.

My research perspective within Living Educational Theory research

The aim of a living-educational-theory account is for the writer to make a valid claim that they understand their own educational development¹, as explained by Jack Whitehead (1989) in his seminal paper on Living Educational Theory research. The opening summary states:

“I'm assuming that all readers of this Journal will at some time have asked themselves questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?', and will have endeavoured to improve some aspect of their practice. I believe that a systematic reflection on such a process provides insights into the nature of the descriptions and explanations which we would accept as valid accounts of our educational development. I claim that a living

¹ See also Whitehead, J. (1985) which refers to an analysis of an individual's educational development as the basis for personally-orientated action research.

educational theory will be produced from such accounts.” (p. 41)

Thus, our educational development is moved forward by our values, which are revealed by ostensive definitions that "... show and to point to the meanings of the standards which are embodied in our practice and whose meanings can be clarified in the course of their emergence in practice" (Whitehead 1989, *ibid.*) – as distinct from 'lexical' definitions of standards described by words defined in terms of other words.

This article brings a particular focus to the evolving nature of my educational influences in learning through my living-educational-theory research and, as a parallel thread, the development of my relational and ontological values over time.

Citing the current introduction to Living Educational Theory research on the EJOLTS website (EJOLTS, April 2020):

“An individual’s living-educational-theories (living-theories) are living, that is they are evolving and they are lived as they are embodied and expressed by the researcher through their practice. Researchers’ living-theory accounts provide explanations and standards of judgment of ‘improving practice’ in terms of their relational and ontological values that are clarified as they emerge and evolve through their research. A 'living-educational-theory' is the particular/unique living-educational-theory generated by individuals to explain their educational influences in learning in enquiries of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’. An individual’s living-educational-theory account includes evaluations of past learning and an intention to improve practice in the future in ways that are not yet realized in practice. Improvement in practice is understood as practice that contributes to a world in which humanity can flourish and is expressed in the values-based living standards of judgment (Laidlaw, 1996) of the Living [Educational] Theory researcher.”

I would claim that the development of my relational and ontological values over time includes "... evaluations of past learning and an intention to improve practice in the future in ways that are not yet realized in practice", and discusses the evolution of my "... standards of judgment in terms of their relational and ontological values that are clarified as they emerge and evolve through [my] research". It is worth re-examining one sentence from the middle of this paragraph:

“A 'living-educational-theory' is the particular/unique living-educational-theory generated by individuals to explain their educational influences in learning in enquiries of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’”

The significant point here concerns "... educational influences in learning": the sentence does not read 'educational influences *on* learning', which I read as signifying a researcher's account of their educational influences *on* the learning of themselves, of others and of social formations.

In making a distinction between 'influence on learning' and 'influence in learning', I take the former to refer to an individual's account of their educational influence as an *effect* on the learning of self/others/social formations; I take the latter to refer to an individual's account of their educational influence as a *factor* in the learning of self / others / social formations.

Taking the educational influence of Einstein and his Theory of Relativity as an

example, we have:

1. Einstein's educational influence (as an effect) on the learning of physicists.
2. Einstein's educational influence (as a factor) in the learning of physicists.

I see "an effect on" (1.) as modifying the existing state of physicists' learning; I see "a factor in" (2.) as a component part of the schooling of physicists in the learning of their discipline.

“‘Living Educational Theory’ (with upper case) research refers to a lexical definition of meaning which distinguishes Living Theory research in terms of its practice and processes; ‘living-educational-theory’ (with lower case) refers to the unique embodied and ostensive expressions of meaning in explanations of an individual’s educational influence in learning.” (EJOLTS, April 2020)

The lexical definition of Living Educational Theory research distinguishes it from other educational research methodologies and is expressed in terms of its practice and principles. A living-educational-theory researcher's account should aim to offer explanations of their educational influence in learning by making a contribution to Living Educational Theory research that enlarges its practice and principles as a research methodology. This target is one step further on than a living-educational-theory researcher's account that offers a values-based enquiry into their own learning.

As a matter of history, the two seminal papers (Whitehead, 1985; Whitehead, 1989) published by Jack Whitehead gave a stipulative definition of Living Educational Theory research. A community formed around this definition and a paradigm was created. Contributions since that time have clarified and enhanced these definitions – hence the distinction that I make between ‘influences on learning’ and ‘influences in learning’. ‘On learning’ refers to self study, rather than influences in learning as a contribution to the practice and principles of Living Educational Theory research viewed as a discipline. The question ‘How do I improve my practice?’ within a living-educational-theory research enquiry has frequently come to be interpreted as requiring self study alone. I maintain that a living-educational-theory account should make a clear contribution to the development of Living Educational Theory research.

Developing my praxis

<i>PRAXIS</i>	=	KNOWING	+	DOING	+	BEING
living theory		<i>episteme</i>		practice		values
↑		↑				
The New Scholarship (Boyer)		The New Epistemology (Schön)				

Figure 1. The relationship between the elements of living-educational-theory and my praxis
Living Educational Theory research does not simply offer me – as a living-educational-

theory researcher making claims about my educational influences – a new form of scholarship informed by a new epistemology. It offers me the opportunity to develop my praxis, constituted as a unique integration of my *knowing* with my *doing* with my *being*. In this context, I equate *knowing* with theory (including epistemology), *doing* with my practice, and *being* with my values in action. These relationships are summarised in Figure 1 (above).

One aim of this paper is to review the progression of my living-educational-theory over time in terms of the evolution of my personal praxis, as I attempt to make claims to have an educational influence in the learning of self and others. The progress of this evolution is marked by successive cycles of *poiesis* – the activity by which a person brings something into being that did not exist before – in which I create new knowledge and understanding through the agency of my living-educational-theory research. The course of my educational development has been marked by a transition of my educational influence progressing outwards from myself (e.g. MA dissertation – Mellett, 1994), to others (e.g. two previous published EJOLTS papers – Mellett, 2016; Gumede and Mellett, 2019) to social formations (the latter part of this paper – Mellett, 2020). The current part of this movement has depended on identifying and grasping the opportunities offered by working within collaborative communities of practice.

All that has gone before: understanding the past and projecting into the future

This paper is the latest iteration of my personal educational enquiry that has taken place over the past 30 years. It centres on the core questions that I have raised and formally attempted to answer through the course of my published accounts. A central purpose of each of these accounts has been my attempt to offer a valid claim that I understand my own educational development.

The latest stage of my understanding of my own educational development evolves into existence during the reflective processes involved in generating the descriptions and explanations that constitute the account of my latest educational enquiry. A form of ontological consolidation then takes place in the quieter spaces between my educational enquiries and the accounts that result from them. There is a relational dynamic between each successive enquiry / account that evolves over time and which constitutes my current understanding of my own educational development: it is not so much the accounts themselves as the total cumulative processes of producing them. In this manner, I carry out a form of hermeneutic reflection on the written record of aspects of what I have been and what I have done in order to understand in greater clarity who I am now and what possibilities this state holds for my action in the future. (As an aspect of the 'hermeneutic horizon', I anticipate that readers will already have identified at this point their own understanding of the term (Gadamer's *prejudice* – 1975, 1989) and will have that ready to hand to compare with my offering as part of their internal dialogue of reading.) It is significant to note that much of this reflection takes place within conversation with others, whether I am 'acting' as a reader, a researcher or an author – or a blend of all three.

Taken as a whole, my past publications reveal the component parts of the current focus of interest – relationally-dynamic constellations of values and collaborative

communities of practice – that I have developed over an extended period of time. They include:

MA dissertation

Making the Break: How can I undertake and understand my search for an enhanced comprehension of my life through moving beyond forms of existence that are grounded in 'mere formal rationality and instrumental reason'? (Mellett, 1994):

... in which, starting with an enquiry into improving the quality of my thinking, I came to identify the negative implications of understanding and expressing my being through the cognitive categories of a positivist personal paradigm. I mean my 'being' ontologically speaking as in 'being a human' rather than objectively speaking as in 'being a brick. I abandoned the search for a universal validity for knowledge and substituted the notion of conjecture shared by a critically-thinking but pragmatic community.

Key learning

Responding to the two fundamental questions (i) What is my claim to knowledge? (ii) Can I make a valid claim that I understand my own educational development?

The BERA Review

Educational Action Research within Teaching as a Research-based Profession (Mellett, 2000)

... in which I held that it is not sufficient to stand *outside* the subject, to analyse it, and then to look for the construction of a definition, by asking the question: "What is Research-based Professionalism?" Instead, I posed the question as, "What is it to ask, what this thing – 'Research-based Professionalism' – is?" With my review/research question posed in this form, I was obliged as the questioner to remain an integral part of the questioning, treading a path with others *inside* the subject of enquiry and giving an account of how it is for us as we undertake that journey.

Key learning

The nature of texts as 'readerly' (the text has closed meaning) and 'writerly' (the reader is able to collaborate with the text to construct knowledge – Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1993) building on Bruner's (1991) concept of constructed realities).

EJOLTS paper

A living-theory pedagogy for postgraduate distance learning education (Mellett 2016)

... in which I showed how the development of the new MSc distance learning module *Consolidating Theory and Practice* helped to move the focus from the *delivery* of teaching materials to students as recipients of knowledge to the *engagement* of them as active agents generating their own practice-based understanding.

Key learning

The role and function of collaborative communities of practice.

EJOLTS Editorial Foreword (Mellett, 2017)

... in which I ask the question "What use has all this effort been?" in the context of 10 years' publication of living-theory research accounts in EJOLTS. I ask "... what am I actually going to *do* as the result of my reading?" It is one thing to hold certain values and to have those values confirmed or challenged by the writings of others – but it is a further step for those living-educational-theory writings to make me behave in my life in a better way. It is not enough to exchange affirming thoughts amongst ourselves within the Living Educational Theory research community – each of us has to 'get out there' and *do* something.

Key learning

The influence of living-educational-theory accounts on practice.

The Wiki of Living Educational Theory research (Mellett, 2018)

... in which I set up and offered a wiki site for the purpose of providing an alternative channel into the understanding of Living Theory research, taking advantage of the hyperlinked relationship between ideas. 21 contributors have used the site to give autobiographies of their own learning and to explore the underpinning ideas within their living-theory research.

Key learning

A wiki as a medium for facilitating and fostering generative engagement within a collaborative community.

EJOLTS paper

Forming a 'We' through a good-quality conversation (Gumeda and Mellett, 2019)

... in which Jerome and I – two authors from two radically different cultural traditions – start from the production of intersecting autobiographical accounts to form a 'We' by progressively helping each other to 'get on the inside' of each other's culture. In Living Educational Theory research terms, this is the process of each author's educational influence on the other. Engaging with de Sousa Santos' (2014) ideas of intercultural translation and with Jousse (1997) we seek, "...discoveries [that] consist in the bringing together of ideas susceptible to being connected, which have hitherto been isolated" (p.49) to create a shared form of knowledge.

Key learning

An understanding of the generation, meaning and use of the word 'We' within a collaborative research enquiry; holding a good-quality conversation.

EJOLTS paper

Evolving Educational Influences in Learning: Collaborative Communities of Practice, Relationally-dynamic Constellations of Values and Praxis (Mellett, 2020)

... in which I review the past as a springboard for my present and future praxis, enquire into the nature of Living Educational Theory research as a research methodology, and identify the dynamic nature of values both within an individual and as shared by collaborative groups of researchers.

Key learning

Living Educational Theory research is at the core of my praxis; values form patterns that are in flux; regenerative human settlements.

My living-posters

Living-posters were devised to provide an opportunity for researchers to bring attention to their sites of practice and research interests and to help connect people with similar research interests. My three contributions are as follows:

- May 2015: Realising the educational potential of a death through the question: *How can I work with others within our Living Theory research to sustain and develop Paulo's creative values as we try to make the world a better place?* (Mellett, 2015)
- April 2017: The creation of living theory through the generation of a Living Manual for the construction of regenerative human settlements. (Mellett, 2017b)
- June 2019: Some of the things that are motivating me – Bath Co-operative Alliance; the Colerne Parish Neighbourhood Plan; EJOLTS; Colerne Liberal Club; the Blueprint Alliance; Community Land Trusts (Mellett, 2019b)

Key learning:

There is a common thread that runs through all my disparate endeavours that is linked to my values. This point is picked up again later at Video 1.

Through the processes of researching and writing these accounts, I have come to identify the personal values that I hold as explanatory principles that give meaning and purpose to my life. However, having made this statement, I feel the need to revisit the basic underlying arguments that justify such an approach to my making a claim to knowledge. I shall now enumerate those values that are significant to me in my activity as an educational researcher and as an agent for change at large in the world.

My values as guiding principles

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2004) defines values as, 'principles or standards of behaviour'. To this definition, I add Feyerabend's (1990) observation that "... values can only be clarified and understood in the course of their emergence in practice." (p. 17). My values have emerged in the course of my past practice and have been identified and employed as explanatory principles within my past writings. As my practice moves into the future with the development of the web-based Living Manual, which offers contextualised solutions for the design of regenerative human settlements and disaster relief, I am also evolving my living-educational-theory and the values that inform it as explanatory principles.

In personal terms, I understand my values to be the internal standards that guide my thinking, feeling and acting – that is, my attitudes and behaviour. When living true to values that are life-affirming and offer hope for the future of humanity, I can claim that I am acting in a moral and ethical manner, where morals define my personal character and ethics are standards defined by groups and cultures as enduring, long-held beliefs intended to guide not just individuals, but a society as a whole.

My conclusion is that values cannot be described in purely lexical terms but that their existence as guiding principles can be discerned by their expression in my practice, in terms of my attitudes and behaviour. Working from my understanding of how I live my life, I can identify just two overarching values – **freedom** and **justice**. These values chime with the claim of Living Educational Theory research to 'offer hope for the flourishing of humanity', in that they emphasise values of freedom over bondage and justice over tyranny. When these values are denied in the course of my practice, they become drivers to action as I strive to resolve their denial – as a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989) – within that specific set of circumstances. In this manner, I clarify the meanings of my values in action when they are negated.

I wish to add **democracy** as a third personal value but agree with Richard Peters (1968) who holds that democracy is not a value but a procedural principle. I shall, therefore, express this value as 'adherence to democratic forms of social organisation' (i.e. that are intrinsically antithetical to totalitarianism).

I would also add **care** as one of my values, principles or standards of behaviour – possibly as a sub-set of justice. I feel this value to be denied by much that I see in the current design of human habitation, both for settled populations and in the sphere of disaster relief. As a result, if care in this field is being denied then my sense of compassion is acting as the driver for me to envisage the implementation of a Living Manual for the design of regenerative human settlements and disaster relief.

A dynamic constellation of values

Moving from my own specific values, I understand that each living-educational-theory researcher holds their own unique set of values which give meaning to their explanatory principles. I regard this 'unique set' as a *constellation* of linked values that has a central value at its core with ancillary values surrounding it, as in a three-dimensional 'spider diagram'. However, when an individual moves their research to address a new enquiry in a new context, it is likely that their constellation alters: either to move a different value to the centre, with the result that all values in the constellation reorganise their relational structure; or to re-arrange the relationships between subsidiary values around the original centre. It is likely that all humans – whether living-educational-theory researchers or not – hold a *dynamic* constellation of values in this manner that periodically realigns its constituent parts to guide thought and action within each new set of circumstances.

Looking at such individual constellations within the social dynamic of a group, David Wright (2020) raised an interesting point in his review of this paper:

“Are there particularities to these values? Is there an orientation, for example, towards reflection upon self in context or relationship which (necessarily) places emphasis upon the sort of respect that enables productive and satisfying relationships to unfold? An orientation, for example, towards sustaining self within a network (or constellation, or system) which requires certain forms of behaviour (i.e. those which do not destroy the fine threads of the web)?”

My immediate thought is to turn to the German motto of the Romantic era: *Frei aber einsam* – free but alone. An individual is free to think and act, constrained only by their

moral sensibilities: when two or more gather together, they affect each other. I like to think that the forms of interaction, especially the quality of conversation, between living-educational-theory researchers shows them to be highly sensitive to each 'other'. In this way, one dynamic constellation of values does not swamp another or barge it out of the way but rather dances with it in the expectation of each creating new insights into their joint and individual beings.

Collaborative communities of practice

As stated earlier, one of the distinctive aspects of Living Educational Theory research is its focus on collaboration and community, as researchers describe and explain their educational influences. These elements of *collaboration* and *community* form the link between Living Educational Theory research and the practice and processes that underlie the function of the proposed Living Manual (see the following section). This novel web-based Living Manual offers contextualised solutions to practical problems within the fields of disaster relief and the design of regenerative human settlements. Within the collaborative community that has gathered around the Living Manual, co-researchers are seen to have *relationally-dynamic constellations of values* that align their value-sets with each other's.

The first step will be to enquire into the nature of collaborative communities and how they became a factor in my enquiries.

The paper *A living-theory pedagogy for postgraduate distance learning education* (Mellett, 2016) describes and explains my educational influence in the transformation of a distance learning MSc programme in International Construction Management offered by the University of Bath. From 2006 to 2012, I was involved in adapting the programme from a classical paper-based correspondence style of course, to a cutting-edge blended learning programme of study. The focus moved from the *delivery* of teaching materials to students as recipients of knowledge to the *engagement* of students as active agents generating their own practice-based understanding. This shift of emphasis sat well with the thinking of Michael Farthing (2011) who, as the incoming Chair of the 1994 group of UK universities, had noted that:

"...Universities are communities where people come together to create and share knowledge ... Universities are so much more than warehouses that sell off-the-shelf qualifications, and students are more than consumers purchasing degree certificates ..."

The paper (Mellett, 2016 – *passim*) describes the development of a new MSc distance learning module *Consolidating Theory and Practice* (CTP), which ran alongside the six core units of the Construction Management programme and provided the vehicle for students to develop skills as reflective practitioners and to generate explanations of their educational influences in their own learning: that is, to produce their own living-educational-theories.

The aim of these changes was to engage students in a 'culture of inquiry' (DeLong, 2002) approach to learning that enabled them to:

- critically review their engagement with the programme, to set targets and seek to realise them

- understand the quality and value of their professional practice through their studies
- make a valid claim that they understand their own educational development and, as a member of a collaborative community, establish an autobiography of their own learning.

Students bring a wealth of personal professional experience to the programme which they are encouraged to use to contextualise their studies and to share with fellow students in order to broaden the horizons of the cohort. Group activities set within the (Moodle) online virtual learning environment encouraged the sorts of conversation that help to form a 'collaborative community of practice' in which the integration of academic resources and working practice can take place. Thus, the educational process consists of sharing insights to build new knowledge and understanding as students work their way through the formal content of the programme.

In this manner, students were classed as reflective practitioners and were encouraged / required to incorporate academic ideas into their professional practice in order to improve its quality; they were required to make a valid claim that they understood how these changes came about; they used their participation in a collaborative community to meet these requirements.

The collaborative community that grew within each annual cohort of students evolved almost of its own accord, with its quality and idiosyncrasies dependant on the personnel concerned and their personal experience and personalities. However, all contained the main elements required of a collaborative community, as first formally identified about 30 years ago by Lave and Wenger (1991), Pahnesar *et al.* (1998) and Stamps (1997). They identified four major elements, which they defined in the following terms:

“Goal

To engage in systematic, collaborative discourse, reflection and enquiry for the purpose of improving professional development and practice and contributing to the field at large.

Participants

Members with diverse expertise and experience who transcend organisational, disciplinary and geographic boundaries including families and consumers.

Methods

Group reflects on professional practice, identifies a set of core issues or concerns and employs a variety of methods to explore those concerns, including empirical research and ongoing reflection.

Outcome

Co-construction of the professional knowledge base by researchers, practitioners and consumers. Improved services Public dissemination of findings, products and processes.”

While these definitions are given in terms of 'consumers and products' and may seem rather 'industry / commerce-bound', I would claim that they are immediately recognisable as the elements of a community of Living Educational Theory researchers. Each researcher carries out their own living-educational-theory enquiry within the context of the

broader Living Educational Theory research collaborative community, which provides the basic epistemology (as practice and principles) for their contributions and the arena for its validation.

The Living Manual and relationally-dynamic constellations of values

In late 2014, following the death of my son in June at the age of 34, my interest in collaborative communities began to engage with the field of regenerative human settlements. My son had been a development worker and contracted malaria in Ghana, dying five months later in Brazil from the overwhelming effects of the *P. falciparum* parasite. For several years, he had been developing the idea of integrating together the provision of the six basic human needs for food, shelter, water, waste management, energy and meaningful work. At a UK memorial gathering in July 2014, several of his colleagues who were expert practitioners in these fields resolved to continue his work and instigated the formation of the 'Blueprint Alliance' that brought together like-minded people and pursued integrated and regenerative projects around the world, especially in the field of disaster management and refugee camps². The statement of intent was as follows:

The Blueprint Network is an alliance of multidisciplinary practitioners from the humanitarian and sustainability sectors. We collaborate in research, development, promotion and capacity building of integrated and regenerative design solutions that can foster resilience in vulnerable communities around the world.

I was (and remain) a regular attender at the six-monthly Blueprint meetings hosted by the Tamera community in southern Portugal, where the group has formed its base. My involvement was to ensure that the activities of Blueprint members were documented and edited for educational use. During the first meeting in September 2014, I circulated some of the photographs taken during the memorial gathering. The five people under the sunshade in **Figure 2** were present and they all said: "That's where Blueprint was born!" In that instant, the photograph flipped its focus for me and took on a whole new significance.



Figure 2. The genesis of the Blueprint Alliance

Underneath the sunshade in the background are a UN disaster relief worker, a biogas expert, a permaculturist, a water management specialist and a lime-stabilised adobe / straw

² see <https://www.tamera.org/regenerative-refugee-settlement/>

bale builder. Knowing well the people concerned I would deconstruct this photograph within the context of this paper as follows:

- Each of the five people present holds their own constellation of values as motivators for their action in the world.
- Each of the five knows each other's working practices and reputations well and together they constitute a collaborative community of practice.
- Each was motivated to come to the Gathering out of their love for my son and respect for his work in their field.
- With their individual understanding of the value 'justice' denied through the recent death of my son, each had reorganised their dynamic constellation of values to place 'love' at its centre and to align their efforts to a joint enterprise that emerged as the Blueprint Alliance.

Thus, an individual each holds his or her own constellation of values; within a joint enterprise, these constellations are seen to be relationally-dynamic and to align with a common central value. Without invoking Living Educational Theory research practice and principles, I would claim that this tableau represents an evolution of praxis within a collaborative community; shared knowledge, various examples of practice and a relationally-aligned set of values engender *poiesis*, which brings something into being that did not exist before, in order to achieve an improvement in the existential meaning in their lives.

Two years later, with the Blueprint Alliance well-established, one of the major projects was to build a replica refugee camp embodying integrated systems for 200 people to use as an experiential educational environment for visiting delegates from the disaster relief community.³ It was at this point that the notion of a 'Living Manual' arose and possible options were explored in detail over the following two years, with myself as the main driver.

However, with the planning and initial earthworks funded and completed in late 2018, the project stalled due to a revision of Portuguese zoning regulations. Largely as a result of this reversal of fortune, the Blueprint Alliance has now, in part, metamorphosed to form 'Re-Alliance'⁴, which is a registered and funded organisation that pursues the same aims and ideals but has a clearly defined structure and a paid secretariat. The statement of intent is as follows:

“A coalition bringing together field practitioners, policy makers, educators, community leaders and humanitarian and development workers. Sharing skills and experiences to grow the influence and impact of regenerative development in the humanitarian field.”

The circumstances surrounding the inception of the Living Manual are contained in the three Living Posters listed above and are summarised in the following video clip (Video 1).

³ see https://www.tamera.org/wp-content/uploads/earthworks_booklet_FINAL_marcus-jan_4-2.pdf

⁴ see <https://www.re-alliance.org/>



Video 1. An extempore outline of the inception of the Living Manual
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSxSf9DZoaY>

The aim of the Living Manual supports a collaborative community of practice whose members are engaged in the planning, construction, improvement and maintenance of human settlements that regenerate the lives of the people who live in them and the land on which they stand. The Living Manual:

- is a guide for the humanitarian sector that builds bridges between (deep) ecology and regenerative settlement design / relief work.
- acts as a resource for promoting peace and social cohesion within camps/settlements and with host communities, by providing information about tools for community organization.
- enables individuals to come to the practical solutions they need without initially fully knowing what they are looking for.
- enables self-navigation so that individuals can search through content themselves: language, internet connection and type of hardware (smart phone / tablet / PC) are not barriers to access.
- is organized to reveal multi-layered content that users can drill down through, giving access to increasing layers of detail.
- is driven by artificial intelligence algorithms that interrogate the user's search patterns to profile their enquiry and suggest contextualised solutions.

Most significantly, the Living Manual is *autopoietic*, as in a self-regulating and self-producing living organism; users act as knowledge-carriers and creators who add to its body of knowledge. A significant aspect of the processes that take place within the Living Manual is that they are guided by the 'Pattern Language' – which may be looked on as a new form of logic (see Leitner, 2014) – developed by the architect Christopher Alexander (Alexander, 1979). Patterns describe a problem and then offer a solution.

The Living Manual – deeper structure

The current proposal for the development of the Living Manual is to initially construct best-practice case studies from the past five years of Blueprint projects and the work being undertaken by Re-Alliance members and associates and from trawling through external sources for likely content. These case studies are now being published on the Re-Alliance website, which is starting to establish a Living Manual web presence as a resource for researchers and practitioners in the field of building regenerative human settlements –

see <https://www.re-alliance.org/casestudies>. As the case study archive grows, it will be linked to toolkits (see <https://www.re-alliance.org/toolkits>) and publish 'pattern cards' produced through Alexander's 'Pattern Language'. When the case studies and the associated resources reach a critical mass, the aim is to then to develop suitable artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms to run in the background of the website to offer unique solutions to each user's contextualised circumstances. It is envisaged that the inner Living Manual AI process will function in the following sequential manner.

1. A visitor comes to the Living Manual website with a practical question in mind.
2. The visitor seeks answers to their initial question by choosing to visit specific pages and choosing to click specific links.
3. Possible answers to the initial question generate further questions for which further answers are sought.
4. If the database of case studies / clickable links is sufficiently large, then each visitor's question-and-answer search pattern is unique,

It can be seen that 1–3 above constitute a form of the action-reflection cycle that researchers engage in as they ask questions of the sort: "How do I improve what I am doing?" – which lies at the heart of the enquiries of all living-educational-theory researchers.

The Artificial intelligence (AI) that runs in the background of the website functions in a similar manner to that behind the websites of social media companies – e.g. Google, Amazon, Facebook – whose owners, whatever the service they offer, have the overarching aim of collecting data about their users. They run background AI algorithms within their websites that profile each user for their likely tastes as consumers. Each user is then targeted with specific personal advertising. In a similar manner (but with entirely different aims) the intention is for AI within the Living Manual website to note the search pattern of each user to suggest solutions that are unique to the specific context of each user's enquiry. The profile of the user's enquiry and the generation of appropriate solutions will be assisted if:

- a. users are aware that they collectively form a collaborative community of shared practice;
- b. users are aware of the background AI and its purpose; and
- c. the Living Manual includes drop-down options for climate, terrain, populations etc..

Each user thereby adds further solution patterns to the underlying data sets within the Living Manual, thus increasing the total knowledge store available for consultation.

Two separate ICT programmers have confirmed that this design for a Living Manual is feasible and would represent a step forward from the myriad static database models currently available. Writing the necessary coding and web hosting for the first year has been costed at a modest €34,000.

As the latest of my educational interests, my contribution to the Living Manual can be seen to depend on much of what has gone before. It centres on a joint practice that is constituted as a collaborative community; it has brought about an alignment of my constellation of values and those of my friends and colleagues working on this project; it is

informed by a novel form of epistemology – pattern language – provided by Christopher Alexander (1979, *passim*).

Blended together, epistemology, practice and values form the latest manifestation of my praxis that informs this current cycle of my living-educational-theory research into the question: *How can I improve the quality of my practice?*

Conclusion

T. S. Eliot Four Quartets (1935, 1969): the opening lines of 'Burnt Norton'.

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future,
 And time future contained in time past.
 If all time is eternally present
 All time is unredeemable.
 What might have been is an abstraction
 Remaining a perpetual possibility
 Only in a world of speculation.
 What might have been and what has been
 Point to one end, which is always present.

Footfalls echo in the memory
 Down the passage which we did not take
 Towards the door we never opened
 Into the rose-garden.

This paper contains much that is a review of the past. It is an attempt to revisit those parts that might point to "what might have been", in order to open the door "into the rose garden" – I do not agree that "all time is unredeemable".

Time past

For the purposes of this paper, I do not wish to take the principles and practice of Living Educational Theory research 'on trust'. I give my reasoning for accepting them as a valid expression of Ernest Boyer's (1990, 2016) 'new form of scholarship' and Donald Schön's (1995) "new epistemology" and conclude that Living Educational Theory research can legitimately claim to be a well-founded and credible praxis within the field of educational research. I lay stress on the need for living-educational-theory researchers to explain their educational influences in learning in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' Living Educational Theory research does not rest on accounts of self-study alone; living-educational-theory accounts must describe and explain the researcher's influences in the learning of self and others, thus advancing Living Educational Theory research as a research paradigm.

The past 30 years of my published writings are briefly surveyed, in order to give the reader an indication of my development as a living-educational-theory researcher, as a person holding certain values relating to freedom and justice. In common with all people, I am a historical, cumulative being. I make choices which determine my path as I move through time; the present 'me' is largely an accumulation of the effects of the choices I have

made in the past; who I 'am' in the present affects the choices I make that respond to current circumstances and take me into the future.

My values are the explanatory principles that I use within my living-educational-theory research accounts. I look on my values as a dynamic, rather than a static, constellation that consists of a central value surrounded by supplementary / subsidiary ones.

Time present

Within the realm of Living Educational Theory research, my present thinking and actions are guided by my values as "principles or standards of behaviour" (Concise OED, *passim*), which are expressed through the form of my actions as I strive to make the world a better place.

The present time finds me with a particular interest in 'collaborative communities of practice'. I trace the origins of this interest to my work in the development of the MSc unit 'Consolidating Theory and Practice' within a distance learning MSc programme of study, making links with collaborative communities of practice as the arena within which Living Educational Theory research takes place.

Time future

I suggest that each individual has a unique constellation of values that is dynamic over time and context and also with respect to that of another individual. Various people hold various values at various times in various situations. It is likely that each member of a culture or community holds a similar range of values that are linked together in a dynamic hierarchy. In a given context at a given time, a given living-educational-theory researcher may put a particular value at the centre of their enquiry and all other values reorganise around it – as in a spider diagram. When two or more living-educational-theory researchers are pursuing a joint enquiry, I propose that their personal constellations of values align more closely with each other as they seek to identify specific values as their common explanatory principles.

Living Educational Theory research does not simply offer me – as a living-educational-theory researcher making claims about my educational influences – a new form of scholarship informed by a new epistemology. It offers me the opportunity to develop my praxis, constituted as a unique integration of my *knowing* with my *doing* with my *being*. In this context, I equate *knowing* with theory (including epistemology), *doing* with my practice, and *being* with my values in action. As an expression of educational endeavour, my praxis links to *poiesis*, through which I bring into being something that did not exist before. These relationships are summarised in **Figure 3** (which is an extension of **Figure 1** above).

Development of my understanding and implementation of 'collaborative communities of practice' first identified over a decade ago are now emerging as a driver for the Living Manual. The value at the core of this work is love – love for my son whose death evoked a common response that called on the same value within a group of his associates, with whom I now share this work. For each of us involved in this work, *compassion* and *justice* emerge as the values being denied in our separate work within regenerative human settlements and acting as our drivers for action.

<i>POIESIS</i> bringing into being something that did not exist before ↑			
PRAXIS	=	KNOWING	+ DOING + BEING
<i>living theory</i>		<i>episteme</i>	practice values
↑		↑	↑
The New Scholarship (Boyer)		The New Epistemology (Schön)	Relationally dynamic constellation of values

Figure 3. A summary of the factors now at work within my living-educational-theory research praxis

Throughout the course of the past 30 years, into the present and on into the future, there is a transformation occurring in my values that has been more *implied* within my writings than has been made explicit. Perhaps that is the very nature of values. Within my own living-educational-theory, the question is whether I actually understand the nature of my values that I use as explanatory principles and actually comprehend how they transform in the course of my practice, my life and my praxis. Whether overtly identified or covertly implied, my experience is that when my values are denied, they become drivers to action and their meanings become clarified as I search within knowledge for insights to guide the descriptions and explanations that make up my claim to know my own educational development. In this manner, the quality of my personal praxis advances and lends to my 'core self' a renewed sense of ontological affirmation.

Future work

As noted earlier, a significant aspect of the processes taking place within the Living Manual is that they are guided by a 'Pattern Language' – which may be looked on as a new form of logic (Leitner, 2014) – developed by the architect Christopher Alexander (Alexander, *passim*). Patterns describe a problem and then offer a solution. It is interesting to note that Alexander's conception of patterns, and pattern languages, were major factors in the creation of the first wiki. The idea of a pattern language also applies to many complex engineering tasks and has also been especially influential in the work of software engineers from the beginnings of the Digital Age.

I am suggesting that a form of pattern language may have some interesting implications for the epistemology and form of logic that support individuals' living-educational-theory research enquiries. I may return to this idea at some time in the future.

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