

Volume 8(1): 49-66

[www.ejolts.net](http://www.ejolts.net)

ISSN 2009-1788

## Who am I who teaches?

Pip Bruce Ferguson

### Pip Bruce Ferguson

*Dublin City University,  
Ireland.*

Copyright: © 2015

**Bruce Ferguson.**

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

### Abstract

This paper investigates what role my identity and self-awareness play in my teaching. My questions are, who am I who teaches? And does this 'I' impact in positive ways for myself and others? In seeking to answer these questions, and to explain why, in my opinion, they are vital questions for *any* teacher to answer, I describe a historical degree of naïvety about the impact of my background and culture on how I teach. Such naïvety renders practice unsafe for all concerned. I explore how the work of specific theorists, encountered during Masters and Doctoral study, have enabled me to gain insights into the 'I who teaches'. These include Freire, Foucault, McNiff, Whitehead and latterly Palmer. Furthermore, these writers, along with certain instances from my educational practice, have brought home to me the importance of ongoing self-exploration and clarity about my values and accountability. I present examples of how I now currently practice, how I strive to make my biases clear both to myself and my students and hold myself accountable for my values in a public way. I show how I now seek to ensure that, as far as possible, my practice demonstrates the flow of life-affirming energy for both my students and myself. Departing from tradition, perhaps, I incorporate reflections from the open reviewing process so that my reviewers' voices are also explicit in the development of this paper.

**Keywords:** Living Theory Research; Self-exploration; Cultural Safety; Accountability; Tertiary Teaching; Open Reviewing.

## Introduction

This paper investigates the questions, 'If we 'teach who we are', how do we know who that is?'<sup>1</sup> Does that 'I' impact in positive ways for myself and others?' These are subsets of a wider question, namely, 'What is the role of one's identity and self-awareness in teaching?' In the paper, I first describe my values and how these might be worked out in my practice before explaining my early approaches to teaching, in both primary and tertiary education, and why I feel these approaches were naïve. Secondly, I explain instances from my practice and from professional reading that alerted me to the naïvety. Thirdly, I describe how I have striven to improve my practice over time by widening my awareness of the 'I who teaches'. I show how I have striven, with more and less success, to live out my values of openness, accountability, equity, caring and respectfulness to all, in my practice. These values are spelled out next. I conclude with specific examples of evidence that I would contend support my belief that I am seeking to teach now in ways that demonstrate a flow of life-affirming energy (Whitehead, 1989) for my students, my peers and myself. I am hoping that this self-exploration, warts and all, and the stimuli that have prompted my investigation, may encourage others to build their own critical knowledge of their practice.

What are my values, and how do I understand them and work them out in practice? I'm indebted to my reviewers who challenged me to be more overt about these. Moira wrote:

Near the beginning you list the values, such as caring and respectfulness to others, without offering specific insights into the meanings for you of these words. The danger of writing about values as if they can be explained through mere words is a big one. It's tempting because there is an implicit assumption that others will share what you are meaning, but surely it is the precise meanings you give to your values through your practice and reflection on practice that makes them more than simply words on a page...I ask myself the question always when I am writing a paper: 'How can I maximize the chances for my readers to grasp what it is that truly matters to me in the work I do?' I love this paper because of the values that are emerging out of it. I would like to see them come out of the shadows a little more, though. (Laidlaw, 2015)

Swaroop requested '...more persuasive incidents...the internal dialogue which I think should be more unambiguous, more specific... I believe what is missing is your explanation, your reflections in-action and on-action' (Rawal, 2015).

Later, she wrote:

In the beginning when you talk about: 'to live out my values of openness [etc] in my practice' I cannot see all these values here...your readers may not know the Pip I know, making it difficult for them to understand why you used those terms in particular. Can you give evidence? (op. cit.).

Sigrid contributed these thoughts.

What is important to me is how your examples, which are concrete and trustworthy, show HOW you have been, and thus how I/we can be in the process of becoming teachers that are

---

<sup>1</sup> I am using 'we' in places in this paper, as Palmer does. The questions derive from Palmer's work, but are not direct quotations

more qualified...I don't want to read the article to see the proof of you living your values. Rather, I will read the article to see how you practice when living your values. (Gjølterud, 2015)

I have chosen to paste in and respond to my reviewers' comments because I value their perspectives and how these will help me to construct a stronger paper, and because I fervently believe in the openness and transparency of open reviewing as a more educative and iterative process than the more traditional 'blind reviewing' of many other journals. What is clear from these reviewers' comments is that, (a) I have been insufficiently clear in the first iteration of the paper about what my values are, so that I might be appropriately held to account for these in the later examples; and (b) I need to be more overt about the links between these values and the incidents from my practice. So, an explanation of what these values mean to *me* follows. I have striven, in the ongoing iteration of the paper, to make it clearer to readers than I obviously have in the first draft, how I seek to work these values out in my practice. However, as Whitehead describes in his use of the term 'a living contradiction' (1989, p. 43) at times it will be clear that I demonstrate 'the experience of holding educational values and the experience of their negation' simultaneously. I am, indeed, a living contradiction. Thanks to Moira for her encouragement of my making the living contradiction aspect clearer.

The first values I cited were those of openness and accountability. These link together for me. I have always had scant tolerance of game-playing and covert undermining of others and their practice. Openness, to me means declaring the beliefs that I hold, while simultaneously wishing to remain open to disconfirming evidence. An example of how I have demonstrated such openness would be my movement from one denomination in the Christian church to another. In my family of origin, church played an important part. I am second in a family of eight. Both sides of my immediate family were Christian of one type or another. In the church of my parents, there were strong claims made to be the 'true church'. However, later investigation led me to believe that there were other forms of Christianity that held equal value. (I am *not* in any way disparaging other faiths or beliefs in this statement). At the time, it was a profound shift, but I believe that it well illustrates my claim to openness.

I can provide a more education-related example for the linkage between the two values. At various stages of my lengthy employment in education (more than 40 years) I have worked in institutions that were undergoing periods of turbulence. Invitations have been extended by management to consult on proposed changes. Colleagues have argued that such consultation was hollow and should be spurned. However, I have always taken up the opportunities to consult. I have laid before the managers my concerns or support with regard to the proposed changes, believing that if an opportunity is offered and not taken up, staff cannot then claim that their point of view was overlooked. It may well not have been taken seriously in the long term, but both openness and accountability required me to 'put my money where my mouth is'. For several years, as a union representative, I participated in a 'Contract Management Committee' where management and union representatives met to discuss issues relating to staff employment and conditions. Through this committee-work we were able to reach resolution on some situations that might otherwise have become problems. Finally, towards the end of this paper I provide an example of discussion with a student whose work I was marking. In this example, you can clearly see how I seek to ensure openness with regard to *any* evidenced work that the students may choose to put forward,

whether or not it conforms to material covered in class, or my own preferred attitudes and beliefs.

I argued that I value equity. By equity I mean a little more than the Oxford dictionary definition, 'the quality of being fair and impartial'. I subscribe to the sometimes-critiqued notion of positive discrimination in the interests of rectifying past undervaluing and oppression. I have noticed this particularly with regard to the situation of Māori learners in New Zealand's educational institutions. As I have discussed in both my theses (Ferguson, 1991; Bruce Ferguson, 1999), historically government-policy focused on what might loosely be described as 'helping Māori to achieve in the same way as Pakeha (non-Māori)'. This has resulted in policies and approaches that devalued Māori knowledge and ways of learning. I have investigated and reported on this in a project for our Ministry of Education (Elliott-Hohepa, Bruce Ferguson & Piggot-Irvine, 2009) amongst other publications. This work has extended my initial understanding of equity as 'fairness and impartiality' and caused me to see that sometimes I need to operate in more targeted ways to help students to achieve to their best potential. Fortunately, so has the New Zealand government more recently. Its rhetoric has shifted from 'closing the gaps' (Bedford, Callister & Newell, 2010) to 'helping Māori to achieve success as Māori' (Ministry of Education, 2011).

As a result of this striving for the type of equity that recognises the strengths of diversity and values them, I encouraged the Māori university for which I was then the research-manager to enter a new research assessment exercise. They achieved most creditably in that (see Tawhai, Pihera and Bruce Ferguson, 2004, for more details of this). Closer to home both geographically and recently, as I'm now in Ireland, I strive to better understand my new context in order to practice as equitably as possible. I have, so far, undertaken a ten-week course in spoken Irish, believing that 'language carries culture' (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, 1986). With apologies for my less than perfect pronunciation, I greet my first classes of students in Irish. I have sought mentors from within my university who are immersed in the Irish language and culture and am receiving help and advice from several. I am discussing the availability of submission of assignments in Irish – a somewhat fraught discussion as the situation is not as clear as it was in New Zealand. I am determined that my students should not be disadvantaged by my ignorance of their culture and values, but as a living contradiction, I am sure that occasionally I will get this wrong. Examples of doing so in New Zealand occur later in the paper. No specific examples of doing so are yet available from Irish colleagues or students but I am probably still covered by 'generosity to newbies' in this regard! I am also working actively with four Irish educators across sectors to promote a network of educational action researchers in Ireland. This work seeks to link up people who may be 'isolated' geographically or institutionally, and support them in their endeavours into action research and living-educational-theory. I claim that this is a pertinent example of seeking equity in my current work.

How do I interpret caring, and work it out in my practice? To me, caring means to treat the other as one would want to be treated oneself. It involves, where possible, empathy – seeking to understand and support the other's feelings and situation. It involves extending flexibility where I can, even when institutional practice may suggest that this is not advisable. At its best, caring involves loving others in a non-sentimental way. One of the EJOLTS submitters for whom Moira and I were reviewers said in her response to our feedback, that 'I am still deeply moved and inspired by the fact that love can be present and visible in an

academic journal and between academics who know one another only as online colleagues' (Bruce Ferguson, 2015, in press). Very recently I claim to have demonstrated caring with regard to one of my students. She had needed to miss the last class to attend a relative's funeral. She asked for an extension for an assignment that was due, which I gave to her and all the other students. She still missed the deadline and was unable to submit her assignment via our Learning Management System. While I had warned all students that late submissions would attract no comments and no marks, I considered that a little flexibility was merited in this case. I was able to offer her half marks, and some general feedback that will help her with her subsequent assignments. I am not sure what view my institution might take of this approach, but I believe it was justified in the circumstances and demonstrated caring to the student.

Finally, I claim to value 'respectfulness to all'. I think some of the examples I have cited above, and that appear later in the paper, provide evidence of where I have demonstrated this value. They also present examples of myself as a living contradiction, where despite my best intentions, I have failed to achieve this value in the eyes of some of my students. To me, respectfulness involves recognition of the other and his/her perspectives. It also involves humbly challenging these if it seems that the perspectives are harming or otherwise isolating the other. A written example of my doing this in a cross-cultural context occurred in my interchanges with Paulus Murray, a Khoikhoi/English educator working in the U.K. whose wife is Arabic. At the time of the Iraq war, Paulus was so incensed by political events that he expressed himself very angrily on a public research-related group's discussion-site. I felt that I understood his perspective but that he was coming out with some rather totalizing statements that precluded his concerns being best understood by readers. So I engaged in conversation with him about this via email. On 9 April 2003 I wrote:

Paulus, I appreciate the anger you express over the Iraqi invasion. I suspect it is shared by most, if not all, of us.... I applaud your struggle, and would encourage you to continue it but also to investigate ways of presenting yourself that do not offer totalising narratives that exclude the Other as evil and bent on destruction of the Arab world. (P. Bruce Ferguson personal communication)

Paulus accepted my comments and chose to jointly prepare a paper on our work together for a conference in 2003. He was eventually unable to attend, and I took an amended copy myself, but he commented in a paper he compiled (Murray, 2003) that, 'I'd very much like to explore these questions with you...I don't consider right or wrong as helpful in this kind of enquiry. I like your take.' Paulus also challenged me to consider the effect of my 'whiteness'. His paper deserves a wider reading in my opinion, as it is quite provocative. The URL appears in the references.

Having provided a more in-depth analysis of my values and how I perceive these and seek to work them out in my practice, I will now take readers through influences on my educational development before presenting some examples of myself as a living contradiction. I didn't set out to be a teacher, to be honest. I was fortunate to gain an American Field Service scholarship in my final years of high school (1965-66). I studied in Kansas, U.S.A., for a year, living with an American family with whom I am still in touch. This was my first experience of living in a different culture from that of my native New Zealand, and as part of a family of three, not eight, children, from a different religious background. I

recount this information as it possibly provides evidence that, despite this different exposure, the naïvety I describe later had not been rectified. It showed that I had been exposed to experiences that, without adequate reflection and appropriate challenge, didn't change my biases much, if at all.

Returning to New Zealand in the middle of the calendar year, I found it difficult to decide what career I wished to pursue. My parents, who still had six children living at home to support, encouraged me to try teaching. So I headed out from their back-country home for Teachers' College in New Zealand's capital city, Wellington. I gained a Diploma of Teaching via two years of in-college training with the usual 'placements' in schools, then a year as a probationary assistant. I completed three additional years of teaching primary school students before graduating with a B.A. in what you can do after three o'clock (mainly Education and Political Science!) and commencing my family. I have three daughters and now have four grandchildren. As a primary-school teacher, I taught in the best way that I knew how. I did my best to support my students to achieve to their full ability – I thought. I didn't know then how my privileged position might be colouring the way that I related to my students and to whether I understood their realities.

When I look back, I recognise that although my family background and my Christian beliefs inclined me to want to promote social justice and equity, I had little insight into how my own actions and beliefs might serve to maintain systemic inequity and injustice. I *was* a member of our trade union (although I didn't become active in the union movement until many years later whilst in tertiary education), and don't recall taking part in any protest movements at that point. For instance, around the time that I started teaching in the tertiary system thirteen years after first starting my teacher education, there were two strong protests going on in our area. New Zealand's first meeting of feminists was held in Hamilton in 1979; in a subsequent year, substantial protests against apartheid-influenced selection of the Springboks rugby team that toured New Zealand in 1981 were held there. I joined neither, despite feeling sympathy for both perspectives. I didn't see myself having the time, the energy (with three young children) or the ability to take any active role in these movements.

## Stimuli for Change

So, what challenged this naïvety? What provoked me to see that to remain silent is to side with oppression? In 1986, employed at the Hamilton polytechnic, I did a course entitled 'Becoming Bicultural'. This challenged me to consider how well I understood the educational situation in New Zealand as it impacted on New Zealand's indigenous people, the Māori. My own ethnic ancestry is Scottish, Irish, English, Danish and French/Italian. I had been brought up by parents who encouraged us to relate positively to Māori people – my grandfather had wanted us to learn the language, but it was not taught in my high school. However the course encouraged students to study their *own* culture, to extend their knowledge of *te ao Māori* (the Māori world) and to look at how our teaching might better enable Māori students to achieve to their true potential *as Māori*.

This was new to me, although I subsequently explored Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in my Master of Social Science (M.Soc.Sci.) thesis (Ferguson, 1991). By then light was beginning to dawn for me on the inherent blindness of my previous practice. There is not room

in this paper to go into the literature that explores how such cultural imperialism can disadvantage indigenous peoples. (In New Zealand, for instance, see the work of Metge, 1986; Codd, Middleton & Jones, 1990; and Bishop & Glynn, 1999). However, the course started me on a lifelong journey of exploration around the 'who am I who teaches?' question posed by Palmer in his book, *The Courage to Teach* (1998). Furthermore, it challenged me to think about whether the 'I who teaches' was being inadvertently oppressive of any of my students. The course was seminal in its impact, but what else challenged my biased teaching lenses?

In the next part of the paper, I explore these issues with reference to several authors – Palmer amongst others - whose writing has been instrumental in my development, and a couple of 'critical incidents' that have caused me to open my eyes. Meanwhile, in response to a request from Moira for 'an example that can help the reader see in greater focus' what I mean by my claim that the course was seminal in its impact, I subsequently began consciously to consider the case-studies I include in my teaching (to include ones that help my students, like myself, to expand our understanding of the impact of colonialist attitudes as a depressant of indigenous abilities) and to ensure that Māori authors are also well represented in my reading-lists.

Essentially, I discovered that if I do not investigate my own ontology, epistemology and fundamental values in life, i.e. the lenses through which I see the world, I risk teaching with these beliefs taken uncritically as the norm against which I measure others. This is what I believe I did in my early teaching. I suspect I am not alone in this bias. As I have written in other papers (e.g. Ferguson & Bruce Ferguson, 2010) we are like goldfish that do not see the water in which we swim. Palmer explores the necessity of investigating our beliefs in two of his works (1998; 2000) from a personal and reflective viewpoint, engaging the reader in his own narratives and perspectives.

It is this kind of investigation and clarity that will continue to challenge me throughout my life, and I see presented in many of the papers from those subscribing to the Living Educational Theories approach that underpins this journal (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). In this approach, researchers are challenged to investigate their own values and beliefs, to openly articulate them and to describe how they can be measured and, finally, to demonstrate how they might be held to account for these values and beliefs. It is in striving to articulate my living theory and to hold myself accountable for its practice that I seek to free my students from my own blinkers. I seek to encourage them to investigate what values *they* wish to see worked out in their lives, and to decide how they will use them for their own and society's good. It is particularly important, as I work in a new country, that I encourage this kind of self-exploration and valuing by my students, as their realities are not mine.

This striving encourages me to state, as I occasionally do in class, that 'all statements are suspect, including this one' which generally gets a laugh, but intends to render *any* knowledge as potentially challengeable. I want my students to find their own truths, to be true to their own values as I strive to be true to mine, and to make these values transparent. I regularly tell new students that mine is a left-wing perspective; that there are alternative right-wing perspectives that they may hold and wish to promote. I tell them that while I do try to provide balance in my teaching, and give them articles critical of my own fond theories, they need to be aware of the lenses through which I see life. I tell them, and try to demonstrate, that in seeking to develop qualities that each one of us may see as life-affirming,

it is important to gather alternative perspectives that may challenge ours. For me these have often come from specific writers, as well as from colleagues and my students. Evidence follows of these, and how they have been obtained.

## The Writers

My discovery of many of the writers has been through university study. In the 1980s, when I studied for my M.Soc.Sci. degree, I was introduced to the work of Freire (e.g., Freire, 1970; Horton & Freire, 1990). Freire's 'embodiment' of his own values was so strong that exile from his native Brazil resulted when he worked to overcome the 'banking education' that prevented the Brazilian peasants from gaining insight into their oppression, substituting 'liberatory education' that worked from the reality of the peasants. Freire, as a teacher, was not of the peasant class but he did not inflict his language and concepts onto the peasants. Rather, building from *their* language and daily lives, Freire's methods enabled them to learn to read. From there, they passed the literacy test that had denied them the vote. The balance of power in Brazil was disturbed, and this contributed to Freire's exile. His theories motivated my examination of my practice, expressed in *Liberation Theology and its Relevance to the Kiwi Christian* (1991), the thesis I wrote for my M.Soc.Sci. degree. It has a rather theological title, but as liberation theology advocates working for social justice in one's own context, recounts my investigation of the disadvantaging of Māori in New Zealand's educational and social environments. Freire's challenge of educators to practice *praxis* continues to challenge me.

The other theorist whose work I found through university study, at the suggestion of my Ph.D. thesis supervisors, is Foucault. As a gay academic in France, he had experienced personal pressure and discrimination, including arrest for his public protesting about prison conditions. Foucault developed tools of analysis that investigated how power functions; how people are monitored and rendered compliant; and how individuals can exercise power in their own contexts. He claimed that power operates in a net-like way, capturing everyone, but that individuals 'are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising ... power' (Foucault, 1980, p. 98, in Bruce Ferguson, 1999). This perspective is quite enlightening if one has previously considered oneself mainly as 'subject' to the power of others, rather than an exerciser of power. It has helped me to search for ways to improve my own practice, life and the practices and lives of those around me. I have been encouraged in recent years by Living Educational Theory research work and the accounts of others using the approach.

The seeking of ways to improve the disadvantage that individuals may see in their own lives and those of others can be very motivating, and it is to the work of Palmer that I wish to turn next. I came across his work only in the last five years. I feel his book *The Courage to Teach* (1998) is the most powerful account of values in teaching that I have read in 20 years. As he recounts in a later book, in his own life Palmer's striving to contest injustice in the educational institutions in which he worked led to his feeling such anger-turned-inwards that he developed severe depression. He dropped out of formal education and entered a retreat-type environment for a number of years. In that environment, he gradually came to realise that his gifts as an educator were still being practised. He realised that his most effective place was to work *outside* of formal educational institutions (Palmer, 2000).

Reflecting on his own values and how he had acted in pursuit of these, he identified others who had done likewise. He spoke of the case of Rosa Parks, the black woman whose action in refusing to shift from her bus-seat to allow space between white and black passengers led to the mass boycotting of the bus system, and sparked off a continuing 'non-violence' approach to challenging racial discrimination in the States. As Palmer (1998) expresses it:

...the people who plant the seeds of movements make a critical decision: they decide to live "divided no more". They decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside. They decide to claim authentic selfhood and act it out – and their decisions ripple out to transform the society in which they live, serving the self-hood of millions of others. (p. 32)

So, there are authors such as Freire, Foucault, Palmer and activists such as Parks and more recently, Nelson Mandela, seeking to act in ways that are true to their own identities, in order to contribute to a positive future for humanity. Mandela's work has been so globally powerful that a special issue of EJOLTS (see <http://ejolts.net/node/209>) paid tribute to it – thanks to reviewer Moira for reminding me of this. Two books I have recently reviewed also draw inspiration from his work. To me, seeking to practice in ways that are true to my identity and that might contribute to a positive future for humanity is essential work for teachers, in their own spaces, to undertake. I have reflected on the stimuli that authors such as these have provided to me. However, 'external' written sources have not been my only motivation. I have had challenges from students too, that have helped to alert me to problems with my practice over the years. I recount a couple of these below.

## **The 'Critical Incidents'**

New Zealand claims to be a country founded on the Treaty of Waitangi (signed in 1840) that accords to both Māori and non-Māori appropriate rights. Specifically, it sought to guarantee Māori rights over 'taonga' (treasures such as lands, forests and fisheries) as well as 'governorship'. Latterly, 'taonga' have also been considered to be language and cultural practices (Stephens, 2010), although this broadening is contested by many in New Zealand, as Stephens explains. I previously alluded to my grandfather's wish that we learn Māori. This didn't happen owing to the language not being widely taught in those days; certainly it wasn't at any schools we attended. As I described in my M.Soc.Sci. thesis (Ferguson, 1991) the approach to Māori culture during my primary schooling would best be described as a 'basket weaving and stick games' approach. It inserted into a predominantly Pakeha (European) education system some of the more obvious cultural practices, but did little or nothing to acknowledge differences at a fundamental level. Accordingly, Māori children have historically been under-represented in the numbers of those who succeed academically, although this is changing. Moira suggested that readers might want to know a little more about this situation. I hope that the information I have now included in my explanation of my understanding of equity at the start of the paper has provided that – the movement from 'closing the gaps' to Māori achieving success as Māori. In my thesis, I strove to investigate how this devaluing and disadvantaging happened, drawing on Freire and Bourdieu as well as New Zealand authors to

rage against the inequity. But I still get caught on aspects of insensitive practice in my own classroom.

There is a protocol in Māoridom that precludes the positioning of bottoms on surfaces on which food can be served. It was not widely known at the time of the following incident in my class (late 1980s), and probably is not still. I was teaching a mixed cultural group, and sat on a desk as I taught. I was approached at the end of the lesson by a Pakeha man who told me that I had probably offended the Māori students in the group by this action. I asked him why, and he directed me to ask *them*. So I did. The woman I approached told me, to my horror, that she had, 'not heard a word you said after you sat on that desk'. She explained the protocol to me. I had not thought of the desk as a food serving surface, had I even known of the protocol, but we often pulled desks together to use for shared lunches and the like. I asked her why, if my actions were so offensive, she had not alerted me to this. Her reply is that it would have been disrespectful; I was the teacher, and therefore in a 'superior' position. She could not tell me my behaviour was inappropriate. While I was shocked at the time, I appreciated the action of the Pakeha man and the Māori woman in contributing to expanding my knowledge. The fish began to see a little more of the water in which it swims. When I teach now, I strive to find out the cultural backgrounds of my students. I explain that I know they may not find it possible to tell me when I offend against their norms, but ask that (a) they forgive me for this inadvertent breach and (b) if they can do so, to let me know, so that I do not offend against others in the future.

A later example, in the mid-1990s, was even more serious. I unwittingly laid a double assessment burden on a fellow staff member in my action research course. She was Māori, and her project involved an investigation into how she and her colleagues could make their course more accessible to students. One of the assessment-outcomes of my course required students to provide a report on their work. As all students were also staff, I omitted to reinforce that they could submit assessment work in te reo Māori, the Māori language. I assumed they would know that. However, this student felt she had to submit in English despite the fact that her coursework, and feedback to fellow Māori staff, happened in te reo Māori. I should have reinforced the availability of submitting in te reo, but didn't. So I treated this student unfairly vis-à-vis the other students, who all taught in English. I did not find this out until I interviewed her a year later for my Ph.D. thesis (Bruce Ferguson, 1999).

Again, as with the woman I had inadvertently offended, I asked why she had not told me. Again, I got the answer that she didn't feel it appropriate – but this time, out of consideration for *my* workload (as a peer lecturer). She would have known that I had to locate and pay a Māori speaker with experience both in te reo, and in action research, to translate appropriately. Additionally, she felt that some of her concepts did not lend themselves to translation, so even her own English report suffered from this impoverishment. I found out about the problem only because I had interviewed her for my research. Hidden in the margins of this particular story, of course, are all the possibilities of unfair practice where I have *not* specifically sought data, and students have been reluctant to provide it for whatever reason. In these kinds of ways it is possible to disadvantage students, even against a claimed rhetoric of equity and self-critique. However, given the difficulties in them telling us, it is hard to know how best to address these problems, apart from extending our knowledge through reading and professional development, or through making it clear that we are open to approach.

I found my reviewers' comments on this section absolutely fascinating. Sigrid has worked in a very different culture to that of her native Norway. She wrote:

The last years I have been working a lot in Tanzania. When I started, I was scared, knowing very well that I did not know the culture, and therefore was bound to make unjust errors. So, I too had to ask my students to please tell me when I was doing or saying things that could be offensive or hurtful, and at the same time I know them to be so polite they would never want to hurt my feelings. It is a dilemma (Gjøtterud, 2015).

Swaroop, whose country has been colonized (as has New Zealand) by the English in the past, mentioned that Indians 'still carry the burden' of colonization. However, Swaroop went on to expand on her country's experience of diversity.

India is a country of diversities – cultural, linguistic, racial, caste, and religious. As an Indian, you can go anywhere and you will be different!...[in some parts of the country] I am treated like a westernized teacher from Mumbai. In Gujarat [a state in India] I am treated like an outsider even though I am a Gujarati....because I live in Mumbai (Rawal, 2015).

Swaroop was alerting me to nuances of difference that perhaps my Māori/Pakeha examples were not well representing. However, she went on to suggest that 'the Māori students should have understood your point of view. What is missing on their part is empathic listening'. She may be correct, but as this paper is about *my* awareness of my deficiencies, not theirs, I have not sought to describe any possible deficiencies on their side. It is an interesting point, though – her emphasis is on the importance of dialogue – which I totally support. In both situations, however, there was a power-differential, which, I believe militated against free dialogue even though I pride myself on trying to work in an equitable way. I believe it is important to recognise Swaroop's point here, even though I cannot respond from the perspectives of my students.

Maira, who taught English in China for many years, described being moved to tears by some of the examples above. In the margin of the track-changed article she posted as well as her 'front page' reviewer comments, she described examples from her own practice of inadvertently getting things wrong because of Chinese understandings of which she was unaware. She wrote: 'I look back on my China years now, and wonder how many other huge holes I dug for myself and others believing I was helping people to liberate themselves. It's a very sobering thought.'

However, alongside the feeling that I have been describing here about deficiencies in practice despite best intentions, Maira (Laidlaw, 2015) said, 'Sometimes the tears are the joy of recognition' while Swaroop (Rawal, 2015) wrote, 'Your words and thoughts are like an arrow that does not merely touch but pierces the heart!' I hope the subsequent iteration of this paper answers her request that 'I would like to see more of you' (op. cit.), and also Sigrid's desire to 'read the article to see *how* you practice when living your values' (Gjøtterud, 2015).

## Living Educational Theory research and self-accountability

An important source of reading that has encouraged me in this work, and ongoing professional development through my reviewer role on EJOLTS, is the Living Educational Theory research approach. Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff have written a variety of papers and books, both separately and together (see, for instance, Whitehead, 1989, 2008; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006; McNiff, 2008) in which they challenge practitioners, as they challenge themselves, to follow a process of continuous improvement. This includes questions such as, 'How do I improve this process of education here?' The question is likely to arise when we experience a clash between our educational values and the requirements in our practice (the situation of being a living contradiction). We then imagine ways of overcoming these problems, act on a selected solution, evaluate the outcomes of our actions, modify our practice accordingly, and so forth (Whitehead, 1989). McNiff is adamant that the action research approach she recommends and about which she has written extensively, should not be perceived as prescriptive. For instance her diagram, presented in McNiff (1988), shows multiple possibilities proceeding from an initial question. She is, however, determined, as is Whitehead, that teachers should clearly describe their values, articulate how they hold themselves to account for these, and proceed to gather evidence that supports (or indeed, challenges!) their contentions. McNiff states that:

One of the values I hold is the right of each one of us to experience freedom with justice. Therefore I do encourage you to read other work and other opinions, so that you can make up your own mind about what is most appealing to you and most appropriate for your own situation. Finding out what is available before deciding on any one option is responsible practice (McNiff, 2002, un-paginated).

It is in the spirit of this type of inquiry that I have consistently worked since first beginning to recognise that my practice and my work environment might be oppressive of those with whom I seek to investigate knowledge and ways of being. I did not set out to be oppressive, of course; I was simply unaware of how complicit I was being in the processes of power in my institutions and how these were militating against equitable achievement of many students.

I have a spiritual and philosophical commitment to social justice and equity as I explained at the start of the paper. It was a shock to recognise that there were ways I could be practising that denied to others these rights. The work of Bourdieu on habitus and cultural capital, explained in the New Zealand context via writers such as Codd, Middleton and Jones (1990) and Bishop and Glynn (1999) gave me insight into how this complicity operated. My wide reading has guided me to strive constantly to improve my practice, to investigate who is *disadvantaged* by the ways that I practise as well as who is advantaged.

So, through my reflection (shared with others, including with my students) and my writing I seek to show evidence that I am living in accordance with my claimed values, and that I am trying to recognise who I am becoming as a teacher. I use the continuous verb 'becoming' quite deliberately. I believe that if we think we have 'arrived' at a position of perfection, we risk the Biblical warning: 'Let he (sic) who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall' (1 Cor. 10:12). Foucault refused to be held to past positions, writing, 'Do not ask who I am

and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. (Foucault, 1972, p. 17)

I believe that teachers need to maintain consistency in their values, and to hold themselves accountable to these. But they also need to ensure that when 'sought data' disconfirms that self-belief, or demonstrates that they are in an untenable position, they are able to change. Palmer did exactly the latter when he chose to depart from work within institutions, finding the conflict in values too great for his health.

## Evidence for the claims above

I have reflected on historical reading and challenges to my practice, and suggested that I now commit to trying to ensure that values and practice are congruent. In this next section, I will present a couple of examples of how I know whether my values are being worked out in my practice – how I seek to understand better the 'I who teaches'.

In my current context in Ireland I am very aware of being 'an outsider' as a newly-arrived New Zealander, and constantly seek to check my teaching-methods and language against Irish notions of 'proper practice'. To assist my understanding, I took an Irish Language class immediately on arrival as a way of learning to pronounce names and simple greetings appropriately, and to absorb some aspects of the culture. One of my sources of 'reality-checking' has always been my colleagues, from whom I invite feedback on my practice. The most common feedback from them to date is that New Zealand valuing of directness in communication can be disconcerting to Irish people. This has been evident not only in the feedback I give my students when teaching, but I have also observed it in my colleagues' response to a New Zealand manager who now works in our area. His transparency has been quite shocking to some, although also appreciated. So as I continue to grow as a teacher I am having to adapt the way in which I value directness and honesty, respecting that my colleagues and students here are also honest, but prefer to express this in more circumspect ways.

An example, quite humorous, might illustrate this. In a team meeting recently, I was describing a particularly tricky situation where I'd had to send an email that I composed with some care. Knowing my manager was a little anxious about this particular situation, I said, 'Don't worry, I was diplomatic!' My manager, with whom I have a very good working relationship, turned to the rest of the team, rolled his eyes and said, 'Does she even know how to be diplomatic?' I am striving to adapt my rather direct style of communication for Irish audiences nonetheless. In the 'Network for Educational Action Research in Ireland' (NEARI) work that I am currently undertaking with Irish teachers (see below), we are organizing a short mini-conference at my university in April this year. I have been encouraging them to take centre stage in the advertising and up-front aspects of this. They know the context, and what it is wise to say (and to leave unsaid!) My work is mainly to organise registrations, catering and the venue. That feels safer, and is less likely to cause inadvertent offence.

Earlier, I claimed to encourage students to develop according to their own values, rather than to feel they have to adopt (or temporarily regurgitate) mine in order to get good grades. An example from a student I have recently taught follows – I have used this quotation from his work with his permission. He was generally quiet in class, but obviously has his own

views about how education should work. It is a long quotation, and my comments are in italics – but I believe it provides evidence of my claim to be encouraging students to develop in ways that might not be those that I would choose, and to be able to express those views without constraint or penalty. My comments are in italics.

But perhaps my definition of “intellectual development” is dissimilar to that of [the university]. I may acquaint myself further with the university’s strategic plan to find out what exactly is expected in this regard. But my approach to trying to establish a career in academia is one that will involve a certain oppositionality, anyway. *X, one of the features of universities is to be ‘a critic and conscience of society’. That CERTAINLY doesn’t involve uncritically swallowing any party line. You may recall me saying in class, “all statements are suspect, including this one” which is an attempt to get people thinking about what THEY believe about things. I am glad to see you doing this.* I don’t want to become a vessel for the pervasive ideology sanctioned by the [university] authorities, or by anyone else. In fact, this is one of the things that interest me most about work in academia: the possibility (even if it’s a slight one) of maintaining intellectual independence in one’s work. This I consider to be further linked with the study of literature, because literature is among the least utilitarian of all disciplines. To wish to study literature is already to make a statement regarding oneself, the world, and how one wishes to relate to the world. Or so I would argue, or *may* argue when the time to write my philosophy of teaching comes. *Please do! I will look forward to it. ‘The pen is mightier than the sword’ and has changed many a regime. The book review I have just completed is dedicated to Nelson Mandela, uses quotes from him at the top of each chapter, and endorses his writings and their importance in helping to transform South African society.* (P. Bruce Ferguson, personal communication, 2015)

Further evidence was provided by a New Zealand colleague whom I used as a referee to gain my position here in Ireland. This Pakeha woman has been a friend, fellow staff-developer and supervisor for me in evaluative and action research projects carried out for diverse bodies in New Zealand. She has seen me in many situations and, I believe, can speak accurately about if and how my practice matches my values. She wrote:

Pip works with everyone (race, age, inclination) in the most authentically collaborative and genuinely respectful way that I have experienced regardless of whether the role is teacher or researcher or developer. (P. Bruce Ferguson, personal communication)

It is also valuable to consider comments placed on my LinkedIn page by a young Māori woman for whom I was manager for a number of years, and with whom I carried out research. This shows that, despite some of the glitches I reported earlier in the paper, I can work in supportive and culturally appropriate ways with others. She wrote in support of me, but I also appreciated the advice that she provided to me, in turn, when I needed direction on appropriate cultural protocols.

Awesome Manager of 3 years, who was supportive and confident in my abilities. Allowed me to spread my wings at such a young age, which I am so very grateful for. The belief and mentorship I received from Pip until her resignation will stay with me forever. (P. Bruce Ferguson, personal communication)

I submit these attestations with some trepidation, as they don’t seem ‘humble’ to me, and we New Zealanders value humility rather than the blowing of one’s own trumpet. Nonetheless, I believe they describe the extent to which I do seek to practise what I preach,

and to work in diverse cultural settings in ways that *can* be supportive despite the potential for damage. Living Educational Theory requires us to provide evidence – these examples are the best evidence I can provide – for how I am claiming to be developing as a teacher, manager, researcher and colleague.

I have come across great examples of action research and/or reflective practice since my arrival in Ireland. However, it seems to me that the Irish are even more reticent than New Zealanders to ‘blow their own trumpets’ and it can be hard to find out what others are doing. It can be hard for indigenous Irish people to promote their own practice, hence, my interest in seeking to support the development of networks (NEARI is the latest example) that allow practice to be shared in collegial ways. I have to be careful in this work, however. I have already described the ‘transparency’ and ‘up-frontness’ of New Zealanders and how it can be disconcerting (at best) to Irish people. Accordingly, in this new endeavour I am working with four Irish women, to whom I have been introduced by Jack Whitehead. He, (alongside Marie Huxtable, who also lives in England) has been a supportive observer and contributor to our ongoing work. I post below a photograph of a ‘meeting’ of Jack, Marie, Bernie Sullivan (one of the group of four) and myself. We, along with the remaining three women, ‘met’ via Skype on 2 February 2015. I believe our photograph (Figure 1) shows our delight in connecting, and supporting each other in the work.



**Figure 1:** Photo snip from YouTube of initial ‘meeting’ of Network for Educational Action Research in Ireland group. Left to right: Marie Huxtable, Bernie Sullivan, Pip Bruce Ferguson. Insert: Jack Whitehead

So, these ‘critical friends’ are helping me to practise in ways that are culturally safer in a new country. They are guiding and supporting joint work for the greater good of teachers across Ireland – in first and second level (primary and secondary school) action research work as well as in my area, tertiary or higher education. When my contract is up, I will return to New Zealand. It is they, and others who choose to participate in the shared work, who will decide whether it is a worthy initiative to continue. While the work is in its infancy, it is my perspective so far that it’s been embraced by a range of action researchers across the country. We asked them for feedback on their work as they registered, and several have specifically commended the initiative.

## Conclusion

One of the reasons why I encourage students to identify and to work in accordance with their own values is just what my student has commented on above – to involve ‘a certain oppositionality’ to the status quo when they see the need. If we (using Palmer’s ‘we’) would all practise in this way – identify and act in accordance with our own living educational theories – then I believe it would be less likely for the broad values and knowledge that should be promoted in education to be subverted into a more technocratic form. But for this to happen, it requires critically-thinking staff and students who are aware of themselves, and their ability to act ‘divided no more’, as Rosa Parks did. We need to probe and develop our own identities to ensure that we’re working in ways compatible with our stated values, and this may require ‘oppositionality’ – as my student states – at times. We can easily feel powerless in large institutions that are pressured by governments to produce certain kinds of ‘outputs’ rather than educating students for the flourishing of humanity. But as Ransom noted of Foucault’s work (in Bruce Ferguson, 1999, p. 139):

[I]nstead of describing an omnipotent form of power with an unbreakable hold on our subjective states, the “power-knowledge” sign marks a kind of weakness in the construction of modern power. An unnoticed consequence of Foucault’s observations on the relation between knowledge and power is the *increased importance of knowledge* [italics mine]. If power and knowledge are intertwined, it follows that one way to understand power - potentially to destabilize it or change its focus – is to take a firm hold on the knowledge that is right there at the center of its operations. (Ransom, 1997, p. 23)

What I try to do with my students, then, is to encourage them to recognise the power of knowledge – knowledge that is presented in class or in society, and needs to be critiqued; knowledge that is developed by themselves; knowledge that can be constrained and contorted for the preservation of existing privilege – and to see how and where they might use knowledge for worthwhile ends that contribute hope for the future of humanity. Part of my constant investigation of ‘the I who teaches’ involves this kind of critique. My ongoing growth as a ‘becoming more self-aware’ practitioner derives from my reading; from feedback provided by critical friends such as my reviewers in this paper and colleagues; from my students; from my own reflection; and from the privilege of living and working in a new country at my stage of life. A quotation I came across at one point, and which has been attributed to Irishman John Philpott Curran in 1790, reads ‘The price of liberty is eternal vigilance’. I think one thing I have learned over my lengthy educational history is that I need to exercise that vigilance on myself. I need to exercise it so that my students are safe, so that I am safe, and so that freely each can investigate how best to take forward their own understandings of what contributes to the flourishing of humanity. As the feedback from my three reviewers has indicated, this takes courage; it takes humility; it can cause dilemmas that may not easily be resolved. But to resile from this kind of work is not an option for anyone interested in the ‘I who teaches’.

**Acknowledgements:** I wish to thank my reviewers Sigrid Gjøtterud, Moira Laidlaw and Swaroop Rawal for their thoughtful, appreciative and provocative comments. I hope these have contributed to a stronger iteration of this paper.

## References

- Bedford, R., Callister, P., & Newell, J. (2010). Old gaps are closing, new gaps are opening: Education, ethnicity and gender in New Zealand 1986 – 2006. In I. Snyder & J. Nieuwenhuysen, (Eds.) *Closing the gap in education? Improving outcomes in southern world societies*. Victoria, Australia: Monash University Publishing.
- Bishop, R. & Glynn, T. (1999). *Culture counts: changing power relations in education*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press Ltd.
- Bruce Ferguson, P. (1999). *Developing a research culture in a polytechnic: an action research case study*. (Doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, 1996). Retrieved 5 March, 2015 from <http://fergs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/PipPhD.pdf>
- Bruce Ferguson, P. with Gjøtterud, S., DeLong, J., Inan., & Salyers, S. (2015, in press). Building trans-national, cross-cultural skills through an online, open reviewed journal. In N. Wright & D. Forbes, (Eds.), *Digital Smarts*. Hamilton, New Zealand: WMIER.
- Codd, A., Middleton, S., & Jones, A. (Eds.). (1990). *New Zealand education policy today: critical perspectives*. Wellington: Allen & Unwin.
- Elliott-Hohepa, A., Bruce Ferguson, P. & Piggot-Irvine, E. (2009). *Te Kauhua Phase 3 Evaluation*. Unpublished evaluation report for the Ministry of Education. Unitec New Zealand: Te Whare Wananga o Wairaka, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Ferguson, P. (1991). *Liberation theology and its relevance to the Kiwi Christian*. (Master of Social Science dissertation, 1991, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand).
- Ferguson, B. & Bruce Ferguson, P. (2010). *Can the Goldfish See the Water? A Critical Analysis Of 'Good Intentions' in Cross-Cultural Practice*. Paper presented at the Action Learning, Action Research Association Conference, Melbourne, September 6 – 9. Retrieved 8 March, 2015 from [http://wc2010.alara.net.au/html/papers\\_f.html](http://wc2010.alara.net.au/html/papers_f.html)
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Truth and Power*. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972 – 1977* (pp. 109 – 133). Brighton: Harvester.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gjøtterud, S. (2015, March 20). Who am I who teaches? Message posted to <http://ejolts.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=154&mode=1>
- Horton, M. & Freire, P. with Bell, B., Gaventa J., & Peters, J. (Eds.). (1990). *We make the road by walking*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Laidlaw, M. (2015, March 17). Who am I who teaches? Message posted to <http://ejolts.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=154&mode=1>
- McNiff, J. (2008). Foreword. *Educational Journal of Living Theories* 1(1), i – iv.
- McNiff, J. (2002). *Action research for professional development: concise advice for new action researchers*. Retrieved 12 July 2014 from [www.jeanmcniff.com](http://www.jeanmcniff.com)

- McNiff, J. (1988, 1992). *Action research: principles and practice*. London: Routledge.
- Metge, J. (1986). *In and out of touch: whakamaa in cross-cultural contexts*. Wellington: Victoria University Press.
- Ministry of Education, New Zealand (2011). Annual Report. Retrieved 2 April 2015 from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/PublicationsAndResources/AnnualReport/AnnualReport11/DetailedInformation/Māori EducationSuccess.aspx>
- Murray, P. (2003). Iraq, Utter Humiliation and Hypocrisy: An educative contribution to the Practice of Co-Enquiring written in the first and third person. Retrieved 2 April 2015 from [www.actionresearch.net/writings/monday/pmlIraq.doc](http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/monday/pmlIraq.doc)
- Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986). *Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African literature*. Suffolk: James Currey.
- Palmer, P. (2000). *Let your life speak: listening for the voice of vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Ransom, J. (1997). *Foucault's Discipline*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Rawal, S. (2015, March 25). Who am I who teaches? Message posted to <http://ejolts.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=154&mode=1>
- Stephens, M. (2010). *Taonga, rights and interests: some observations on WAI 262 and the framework of protections for the Māori language*. Retrieved 4 March 2015 from [http://www.victoria.ac.nz/law/nzacl/PDFS/Vol\\_16\\_2010/05%20Stephens.pdf](http://www.victoria.ac.nz/law/nzacl/PDFS/Vol_16_2010/05%20Stephens.pdf)
- Tawhai, V., Pihera, K., & Bruce Ferguson, P. (2004). *Does the PBRF need reshaping? A new Māori educational institution's perspective*. Paper presented at *Transforming Knowledge into Wisdom*, 27<sup>th</sup> HERDSA Annual Conference held in Miri, Sarawak, Malaysia, 4 – 7 July.
- Whitehead, J. (1989). Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19(1), 41 -52.
- Whitehead, J. (2008). Using a living theory methodology in improving practice and generating educational knowledge in living theories. *Educational Journal of Living Theories*, 1(1), 103 – 126.
- Whitehead, J. & McNiff, J. (2006). *Action Research: living theory*. London: Sage Publications.