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Introduction to living theory action research in a culture of inquiry transforms learning in elementary, high school and post-graduate settings

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Abstract

In this issue, we highlight personal journeys and collaborative pathways that explain educational influences in learning in terms of values, skills and understandings that we believe carry hope for the future of humanity and own future. We are focusing on values that are ontological in the sense that they are used to give meaning and purpose to our lives as individual researchers. Our values are used as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influence. These principles form our living standards of judgment for evaluating the validity of our contributions to knowledge. The explanatory principles connect flows of life-affirming energy with the living values that constitute our continuously evolving understandings of a culture-of-inquiry. In this first paper of the six contributions we share our present understanding of a culture-of-inquiry.

We are writing from our range of professional contexts: elementary, high school and, postgraduate settings. In the course of our cooperation we have clarified and shared our meanings of being 'loved into learning'. We offer this energy-flowing value as a living standard of judgment for evaluating the validity of our contribution to educational knowledge.

The constraints of poverty that we reference in our articles are traditional academic forms of print-based texts, which neglect the embodied expression of moral and aesthetic values. These constraints can limit the validity of the communication of the embodied meanings of the energy-flowing values of professional educators in explanations of their educational influences in learning. We are claiming that these constraints can be seen to be overcome through relationships based on trust and respect and through creative thinking with regard to the living curriculum. The articles in this issue follow our democratic way of creating together a shared meaning of a culture of inquiry.

Keywords: living-theory action research; culture of inquiry; elementary school settings; high school settings; post-graduate settings

1. Responding to a reviewer: Explicating our collaborative writing

The core of this EJOLTS issue began as the four of us met in virtual Skype space on a weekly basis. Our conversations centered on the preparation of a paper for the 2013 AREA conference with the focus of transcending poverty. Our discussions unfolded both organically, as each of us shared the nature of our personal inquiries into living according to our own values, and in a structured way as we periodically attempted to draw parallels between our work and compare what we were doing with the theme of transcending poverty.

As the deadline for the issue loomed near, we attempted to make our conversations more focused and tried to find a structure to use to tie our ideas and findings together. However, the organic nature of our conversations continued as our personal, lived inquiries continued. It is difficult to draw a line in the sand and say, "This is where the research ends and the writing begins." In the end, frustrated with the process of trying to impose structure on our organic process, we decided to write our individual pieces "separately," led by our own values and personal inquiry, each with our own voice.

Ironically, some of us still met in partners via Skype to talk through what we planned to write in our separate sections which emphasizes how naturally collaborative our work has become. In addition, all of our writing was done on Google Drive on a shared document. As each of us completed a section, we alerted the others and we were able to make comments, ask questions or edit each other's work right in the document (using a different colour of text). At times, we met another writer in the document and were able to "chat" within our text, just watch what the other was doing or make the decision to Skype and talk through what we were working on. Even while writing an "individual section" we were aware of its public nature and that validation or critical feedback was imminent.

Once our individual pieces were finished, Liz and Cathy read through each section together on Skype to find common themes. We met once more as a group of four to discuss and agree on their recommendations for a structure. Jack and Jackie agreed to revise their sections to match this structure. In further meetings, individual writing sessions and joint writing sessions interspersed with individual or joint editing sessions we pieced together the introduction and concluding sections. On many occasions we relied on the expertise and experience of Jack and Jackie to take the lead. However, another unintentional strategy we used was alternating roles through the process (i.e. editor, questioner, validator, writer, listener, facilitator). The collaborative nature of this project has widened since submitting the paper for EJOLTS publication.

2. Purposes

This paper intends to demonstrate the capacities of teachers and students in a variety of settings to create a culture of inquiry that addresses issues of intellectual and moral poverty (Tierney & Renn, 2012). The cultural of inquiry is shown to such issues of poverty by transforming social formations within classrooms, schools and school systems through the inclusion of ontological values in pedagogical relationships and explanations of educational influence. In these explanations individuals hold themselves to account for living as fully as they can the value that transcend the conditions of poverty. The explanations of these transformative changes have been accredited and validated over considerable time within the

Academy. The paper follows the work of the authors from its inception with the idea of Living Educational Theory (Whitehead, 1989), to its creative implementation and refinement in an original pedagogy and contributions to knowledge in living-educational-theories by masters and doctoral students and to the improvement of learning in primary, secondary and tertiary classrooms. We use a distinction between Living Educational Theory as an Abstract concept to describe a general field of inquiry and living-educational-theories as the unique explanations produced by individuals to explain their educational influences in learning.

This paper offers evidence in support of a theoretical analysis that explains how a culture of inquiry can be created that can contribute to transcending constraints of poverty. It addresses the issues of moral poverty of education discourses that fail to address the ethical bases of educational discourses and practices. It offers action research, evidence-based explanations of the educational influences of practitioner-researchers to show how environments of artistic impoverishment can be transformed through an inquiry and values-based pedagogical model to develop creative talent and aesthetic appreciation. The explanations focus on the development of self-evaluating individuals who can identify their values and learn to live according to their values for the greater good of society.

It uses digital technology to “bridge divides of economic capital through digitally-mediated education that connects rural and urban students to rich educational resources outside the classroom walls” (Tierney & Renn, 2012, p. 2). A method of *empathetic resonance*, using digital technology, clarifies the meanings of the expression of embodied values and energy that contribute to the explanatory principles of educational influences in learning how to reduce poverty and create attitudinal, behavioural, and social transformational learning opportunities. The use of digital technology to clarify and communicate meanings of embodied values as explanatory principles offers a way of transforming meanings of explanatory principles that are usually communicated through the traditional printed-text based media of academic research journals.

The paper draws on the action research of students and teachers as they develop and include their ontological awareness and values in their explanatory principles of their living theories. Schön (1995) called for a new epistemology to be developed for the new scholarship from action research. This paper shows how a new epistemology is emerging in the validation and legitimation of living-educational-theories. At the heart of this epistemology are the energy-flowing values that are used as living standards of judgment. In his work on “The Energy Paradigm” Vasilyuk (1991) pointed out that whilst we know how “energetically” a person can act when positively motivated, we have very little idea of how to link energy and motivation, energy and meaning and energy and value (p. 64) within explanations of activity. This paper demonstrates how energy-flowing values can be used as explanatory principles within explanations of influence.

In this paper, we will focus on the issue of the validity of the meanings of the energy-flowing values that as educators we use to explain our educational influences in our own learning and in the learning of others. In addition, we acknowledge the importance of Dadds and Hart’s (2001) idea of methodological inventiveness in which we are making methodological choices about ways of achieving our purposes (p. 169). Rather than apply an existing methodological perspective to the inquiry, the methodology emerges in the course of the inquiry. The important issue of legitimation will also be considered in the range of Universities that have now accredited Living Theory doctoral theses and masters dissertations.

3. Perspectives

One of the weaknesses in enhancing the spread of the educational influences of living-educational-theories in transcending constraints of poverty could be related to the importance of integrating understandings of Delong's (2002) original idea of creating, sustaining and evolving *cultures of inquiry*. While there are many evidence-based explanations from individuals working in particular sites (see <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/mastermod.shtml>) that they have influenced their own learning and the learning of others, there are far fewer explanations that focus on the learning of social formations, especially in relation to overcoming the constraints of poverty. We are providing evidence to show that explanations of influence in the learning of social formations are needed to spread educational influences from particular individuals working in particular sites to global influences that can move between cultures and social formations. We are showing how this could be done by integrating into our understandings and practices of the idea of a *culture of inquiry*. We see ourselves as "global citizens" in the sense of living as fully as we can the values we believe carry hope for the future of humanity.

We want to be clear in the meanings of the words that we are using. To clarify, then, by *social formations* we mean our classrooms, our schools, our school systems, our communities, our societies and the Academy. As examples, for all of us, our classrooms and schools are social formations; for Jackie, her social formations have included local school systems, communities and global communities, such as Brazil and Japan; for Jack, his social formations have included local and many global communities, such as in Croatia, Norway, Japan, Canada, The Republic of Ireland, and Africa; for Liz, her social formations include her classroom and school as well as her classrooms of fellow PhD researchers; for Cathy, her social formations include her classroom and school as well as the teachers in a math project that she is facilitating. For all of us, the culture of inquiry we have formed in preparing this paper is a social formation (Delong, Campbell & Whitehead, 2013).

In our capacities to build a culture of inquiry, with our hopes and expectations of trying to improve student learning and make learning more meaningful, we provided an environment conducive to overcoming constraints of poverty and impoverished learning. We believe that learning of curricular material is related to students feeling safe, loved and aware of themselves as learners. We make a distinction between the "given" curriculum that is imposed from outside the classroom and the *living curriculum* that is created with students and teachers inside the classroom. We have built cultures-of-inquiry that go beyond the given curriculum. Of equal, if not greater importance to the given curriculum is the learning in the living curriculum: how to love and be loved, what we need to do to feel safe, what we value, how we can tell if we are living according to our values and an awareness of ourselves as learners.

We shall provide evidence of the capacity of teachers and students to enable each other to learn together in a way that transcends the boundaries of impoverished learning sustained by traditional learning models and improve teaching and learning. We are thinking of a transformation that can overcome the constraints of poverty in academic discourses that have done well in advancing knowledge *about education* in encouraging scholarly inquiry related to education. However, they have done little, in relation to producing evidence-based accounts that show the promotion of educational research that improves practice in the sense of transcending constraints of poverty and serving the public good. The

distinction we hold between education researchers and educational researchers is that education researchers ground their inquiries in disciplines of education such as the philosophy, psychology, history and sociology of education and in fields of inquiry such as management, leadership, economics, politics and theology, while educational researchers produce validated explanations of educational influences in learning.

These include explanations of educational influence in the individual's learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work.

Our educational research has explicitly addressed the issue of transcending constraints of poverty and serving the public good by focusing on our inquiries in which we are seeking to live our values of human flourishing as fully as possible in contexts where economic, social and cultural pressures are leading to different kinds of poverty. In the course of this paper, as an evolution of Delong's (2002) earlier research on creating a culture of inquiry, we now include an explicit commitment to human flourishing (Reiss & White, 2013) in the sense of the two aims below of:

1. to lead a life that is personally flourishing
2. to help others to do so too. (p.1)

In our use of visual narratives and empathetic resonance in communicating the meanings of energy-flowing values as explanatory principles in explanations of our educational influence, we are claiming that such inclusional values in a culture of inquiry can transform what counts as educational knowledge in the Academy while explicitly engaging with transcending different forms of poverty.

The perspectives focus on the scholarly significance of the presentation in contributing to a new epistemology for the new scholarship through action research (Schön, 1995). Through these perspectives, we emphasize the importance of recognizing the social and cultural influence of normative backgrounds in both constraining and realizing the values that carry hope for the future of humanity. We focus on the significance of collaboration to provide a supportive environment for educational research inquiries and on the importance of strengthening the social validity of our communications as educational researchers.

The works of McNiff and Whitehead are seminal to our research process. McNiff and Whitehead (2010) affirm that:

The idea of influence is at the heart of action research. Because action research is always conducted with other people who constitute social situations, and because those other people can think for themselves, the way to influence the trajectories of social change is to encourage them to act differently, through influencing their thinking. (p. 73)

Drawing on the perspectives of education research assists us as educational researchers to situate our research within the field of educational research and provides a language to help us make explicit our embodied knowledge and our explanatory principles. We focus on the importance of humility in the support of learners (Buber, 1947) and the knowledge that we are all fallible in our knowing (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). We include Noffke's perspective about the need to address social issues in terms of the interconnections between personal identity and the claim of experiential knowledge, as well as power and privilege in society, "The process of personal transformation through the examination of

practice and self-reflection may be a necessary part of social change, especially in education; it is however, not sufficient" (Noffke, 1997, p. 329).

The living truths of educational action research researchers draw on the work of the co-authors (Campbell, 2012; Delong, 2002; Griffin, 2012; Whitehead, 2009, 2012). We also include Earl and Katz's (2009) perspective that a culture of inquiry involves others and makes time for the lengthiness of the collaborative process and the important discussions that make our research better. Marshall (1999) speaks of living life as inquiry. She sums up this process powerfully when she concludes:

By living life as inquiry, I mean a range of beliefs, strategies and ways of behaving which encourage me to treat little as fixed, finished, clear-cut. Rather I have an image of living continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges, bringing things into questions. This involves, for example attempting to open to continual question what I know, feel, do and want, and finding ways to engage actively in this questioning and process its stages. It involves seeking to monitor how what I do relates to what I espouse, and to review this explicitly, possibly in collaboration with others, if there seems to be a mismatch (p. 2).

Attention will be drawn to the evidence-based visual narratives that are being used to bring practitioner knowledge into the Academy with living standards of judgment.

4. Methods, techniques or modes of Inquiry

In this section we describe the processes in which we have engaged in order to attempt to answer the questions posed by this research. It is important to note that this is a cooperative effort by four researchers, three in Ontario, Canada, although at various distances from one another, and one in the United Kingdom. While self-study research has been conducted individually, this paper has been accomplished as partners in a culture of inquiry. We have used the available technologies: Skype conference calls, call recording, Youtube, email, and Google Drive to create the paper. In claiming that this is a co-operative effort, we are acknowledging the importance of co-operative values (Breeze, 2011, pp. 2-4) in our work together. When we use the idea of cooperation we are including co-operative values in our work together.

The mode of inquiry uses Whitehead's (2009) living theory methodology and McNiff's (2009) form of narrative for the generation of living theories. Action reflection cycles are used in forming, researching and answering questions of the kind, "How do I improve what I am doing?" The cycles include: the expression of concerns when values are not being lived as fully as the practitioner-researcher believes to be possible; imagining possible improvements; choosing one to act on; action and gather data to make a judgment on the effectiveness of actions; evaluating the effectiveness of actions; modifying the concerns, ideas and actions in the light of the evaluations and the production of an explanation of learning that is submitted to a validation group to help to strengthen the validity of the explanation.

We draw upon Whitehead's (2008) living-educational-theory perspective to understand the world from one's own point of view, as an individual, claiming originality and exercising judgment, responsibly with universal intent. Each individual's living-educational-theory includes the unique set of values that are used to give meaning and purpose to their existence. These values are expressed, clarified and evolved as explanatory principles in

explanations of educational influences in learning. The values flow with a life-affirming energy and are expressed in the relational dynamics of educational relationships.

Whitehead's (1989) perspectives on the importance of studying our values in action in our teaching practice using video, stresses the importance of the visual records of our practice and communicating our understanding of the value-laden practical activity of education. McNiff's (2009) perspectives on action research underlie this research: the intention is that one person improves their work for their own benefit and the benefit of others. We acknowledge the importance of Dadds' and Hart's (2001) idea of methodological inventiveness in which we are making methodological choices about ways of achieving our purposes (p. 169).

The technique for showing the significance of explanations of educational influence involves the use of visual representations of practice. The methods for clarifying and communicating the meanings of energy-flowing values as explanatory principles include the process of empathetic resonance with video data. We first encountered the idea of empathetic resonance in the writings of Sardello (2008).

For Sardello, *empathetic resonance*, is the resonance of the individual soul coming into resonance with the Soul of the World (p. 13). Sardellos' meaning carries a religious commitment. We are using *empathetic resonance* from a humanistic perspective to communicate a feeling of the immediate presence of the other in expressing the living values that the other experiences as giving meaning and purpose to their life.

When we are analyzing video and looking for explanations of our educational influence, we use two techniques for showing the significance of a relationally dynamic awareness of space and boundaries (Rayner, 2011): first we scan through the video data looking for moments of empathetic resonance in which we feel most strongly that we recognise the energy flowing values of the other, the activity of the participants is increased, or there is evidence of tension; second, we write visual narratives to explain our interpretation of the empathetic resonance.

The visual narrative is at the same time raw data and an explanation of the empathetic resonance. This means that in the moment of conversation and while reviewing the video, we are mindful of the dynamics of our interactions including the times when our ideas are resonating and there is a building of excitement between us as new knowledge is created and we recognize our shared values. But we are also aware of the tensions, the times when our meaning is not resonating with the others or when we feel there is something unclear, missing or not fully explained. In these cases, more dialogue or reflection is needed to uncover the source of the tension.

To frame our research process for the reader, Liz videotaped the evolution of our understanding of the Living Theory Action Research Process. Liz Campbell can be seen to be engaging in the action research process, as we understand it from Whitehead and McNiff, in the following clip and her explanation of methodology emerging from expressing her energy-flowing values such as "Being Loved into Learning" (Video 1).



Video 1. See 54 seconds into the 18:44 minute video of Liz Campbell for an expression of being loved into learning (<http://youtu.be/zmBcrUsDG8s>)

In addition to our individual inquiries, over the last 9 (nine) months, we have met in Skype conferences as the whole group of 4 (four) and as smaller groups, recording and uploading the video clips to Youtube. Once on Youtube, they were available to us for data collection, for review in data analysis, for editing for length and for smaller clips to show evidence of particular themes, concerns or revelations. In this collaborative process, the authors have acted as critical friends for each other in a safe space for risk and vulnerability. Costa and Kallica (1993) describe a critical friend as:

A critical friend can be defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. (p. 90)

The technique for strengthening the validity of research accounts involves validation groups of peers using questions derived from Habermas' (1976, pp. 2-3) four criteria of social validity in communication and social evolution of comprehensibility, rightness, truth and authenticity. What we do is to submit our evidence-based explanations of educational influence to validation groups that are usually formed with between 3-8 peers. We ask our peers to include in their comments responses to four questions that focus on:

- i. How could I improve the comprehensibility of my explanation?
- ii. How could I strengthen the evidence I use to justify the assertions I make?
- iii. How could I extend and deepen my sociohistorical and sociocultural awareness of the ecological complexities that influence my practice and my explanation?

- iv. How could I enhance the authenticity of my explanation in showing over time and interaction that I am living my espoused values as fully as I can?

The authors also delineate the concerns and obstacles to implementing this model of action research in their classrooms.

5. Data sources, evidence objects or materials

Our data are drawn from the descriptions and explanations of the action research of all four researchers. First, data have been drawn from Jack's master's and Ph.D. students' theses and his lectures and presentations across the globe. Second data are drawn from Jackie's Master of Education cohort classrooms and students, from her presentations and from her doctoral and postdoctoral research. Third, data are drawn from the data archive of Liz Campbell who draws on her research in her master's project and doctoral courses and in her classroom as she implemented a culture-of-inquiry with her high school students in Philosophy courses during the 2011-12 and 2012-13 school years. She also incorporated her visual art work. Fourth, Cathy draws from her data as she recorded the implementation of a culture-of-inquiry with her grade 6 and 7 students in 2012-13 and with her colleagues in a Ministry of Education-supported project on Math programming.

Visual data has also been drawn from videotaping of class presentations, discussions, local and global SKYPE recordings of our collaborative inquiries, located on YouTube. When we look at video, we troll through the clips for moments of empathetic resonance and interesting body language. Video clips from Skype conversations and classroom footage formatted into iMovie are sorted into important moments, into projects (or mini movies) and according to themes. We are clear that the path to engaging in this process is not without its challenges.

We have addressed all the ethical issues we recognise. As teachers we have a right to research our work in our classrooms. However, once that research moves into public fora, all those involved in the context and in the case of children, their parents/guardians, have been made aware and made informed consent for publication of this data. Smith cautions us as "insider researchers", meaning those who research within their own community, when she says, insiders have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis for ever more, and so do their families and communities" (Smith, 1999, p. 137).

6. Data collection and analysis

After each of us wrote a preliminary draft of this section, we found that there was a plethora of raw data that required editing and in that process, Cathy and Liz experienced the art of finding themes in a personal inquiry as Marshall (1999) describes:

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

encouraged because they have resonance for other people as well as me, but sometimes this is unimportant. (Marshall 1999, p. 4)

In the analyses of our four distinct but related papers we agreed to use the categories, with minor modifications, of Background; Loved into Learning; Praxis; Students as co-researchers; Building Trust and Respect; Unveiling Embodied Knowledge; The Living Curriculum; Influencing Self, Others and Social Formations; Influencing Social Formations Outside the Classroom; Challenges and Obstacles, to offer evolving insights into the meanings of a Culture of Inquiry that can face and transcend issues of poverty in educational writings and discourses. As we worked on our joint presentation for the 2013 AERA annual conference, we came to this agreement about our meanings of a Culture of Inquiry. This understanding has emerged and is evolving from our democratic way of creating together.

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