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**HOW CAN MY PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION RESEARCH TRANSFORM AND IMPROVE
MY PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND PRODUCE A GOOD SOCIAL ORDER? - A
RESPONSE TO ORTRUN ZUBER-SKERRITT**

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is draw attention to a new form of educational theory for improving professional practice and producing a good social order. The recent literature on action learning and action research has focused on their appropriateness as methods to develop managerial and other professional competences. Theoretical frameworks of action research have emphasised conceptual rather than dialectical forms of knowledge. This paper questions the emphasis on method and conceptual theories and argues for a greater concentration on the creation and testing of a living and dialectical educational theory for professional practice within which one's own philosophy of education is engaged as a first person participant.

KEYWORDS

Living Educational Theory; Dialectics; Educational Development; Educational Knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

In my paper to the First World Congress I outlined a dialectical approach to educational action research and attempted to synthesise a process of personal development with a process of social evolution. I characterised the dialectical approach as a process of question and answer in which an individual 'I' exists as a living contradiction in questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?', in the workplace. I gave two examples of action research. One on my own professional development in higher education and the other on my contribution, as Chair of Governors, to the educational management of a comprehensive school. To be consistent with my philosophy of action research I am now drawing your attention to an account of my own educational development which integrates this philosophy with my attempts to improve my professional practice and to contribute to a good social order. The account is grounded in my experience of my own 'I' existing as a living contradiction in that I hold certain values whilst at the same time experiencing their denial in practice. The inclusion of 'I' in my claim to educational knowledge establishes a non-conceptual form within the account. I will contrast the non-conceptual form of educational theory which is constituted by such an account with the theoretical, conceptual framework for action research proposed by Zuber-Skerritt (1991).

ACTION RESEARCH: A METHOD FOR THEORY GENERATION AND TESTING?

One point I would like to explore is the possibility that action researchers have given in too easily to the temptation to reduce their research to issues of methodology and model building, rather than tackling the more fundamental issues of theory generation and testing. In educational research for example, the last decade has witnessed a crisis in that there is no discernable agreement about what constitutes educational theory. The view that educational theory was constituted by the theoretical frameworks and methods of validation of the disciplines of education, was abandoned by one of its creators (Hirst 1983) with the suggestion that we ought to be looking to 'operationally effective practical discourse' as a basis for theory generation.

The demise of the disciplines approach to educational theory has seen a corresponding increase in the adoption of action research approaches to professional development in teaching (McNiff 1988), nursing and police training. In the United Kingdom, Professor John Elliott (1989) has been particularly influential in promoting action research in a variety of professional settings. Dr. Pamela Lomax (1989) has also been most successful in institutionalising programmes of action research for the professional development of teachers at Kingston polytechnic. What has yet to emerge from these initiatives is a view of educational theory with widespread academic credibility. The accounts of the action researchers are judged for validity and academic rigour in terms

of their methods (Winter 1989) rather than as contributions to the creation and testing of educational theory.

I can appreciate the importance of the methods which are used to ensure validity and rigour in a research paradigm with a well established theoretical base. Is there not a danger however, that in a period of crisis when there is a theoretical revolution in progress, the dominant concern with method is likely to be at the expense of encouraging the expression of the creativity of researchers in discovering new forms for the descriptions and explanations for the phenomena under investigation? What I am suggesting is that action researchers should, at this time in the development of the field, stress the importance of developing new forms of explanation rather than permitting their research to be dominated by method or by traditional forms of theoretical, conceptual frameworks.

To illustrate my point I will refer to the contents of a case report in which I explain my professional development in the workplace of a University (Whitehead 1992) and compare this with the contents of the theoretical framework for professional development in higher education proposed by Zuber-Skerritt (1991). My fundamental point is that my explanation contains a non-conceptual 'I', as a living contradiction, which cannot be adequately represented within a conceptual form. Therefore the conceptual form of theoretical framework of the kind proposed by Zuber-Skerritt below does not have the explanatory capacity to produce an adequate explanation for my professional development in higher education. The explanation for my educational development between 1976 and 1991 demonstrates how a living form of theory can include conceptual theories without itself being reduced to such a conceptual form. In other words I do not conceptualise the case being explained. I am the case. The 190 pages of my case report presents my explanation for my professional development in higher education. I have brought several copies to the Congress and would appreciate offers to test the validity of my explanation.

The following extracts from the contents of Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt's text on professional development in higher education offer a theoretical framework for action research. They indicate how she approaches praxis and theory in higher education and the integration of theory and practice. In the section on praxis in higher education, Zuber-Skerritt discusses technical and practical reasoning and discusses *The Case* in relation to the theories of Kelly, Leontiev, critical educational science and her own CRASP model. Theories of knowing and learning are described as behaviourist, cognitive and holistic theories. In the section on the integration of theory and practice the list of theories includes Lewin's theory, Kolb's experiential learning theory, Dewey's model of learning, Piaget's model of learning, Kolb's definition of learning and Boud and Pascoe's extensions of Kolb's model.

My purpose in comparing the contents of an explanation for my professional development in higher education derived from action research, with the extracts from the contents of *professional development in higher education: a theoretical framework for action action research*, is to raise questions about the validity of both accounts. In criticising Zuber-Skerritt's theoretical framework I am faced with the kind of paradox I experienced in criticising the views of Professor Richard Peters, one of my teachers whose professionalism I valued highly and who stimulated a love of philosophy. In the 1960s and 1970s Richard Peters elevated the status of educational theory in programmes of professional development. In 1971, at the height of the acceptability of the disciplines approach to educational theory, I rejected the theory on the basis of reflections on my own classroom practice with my pupils and my own professional development. My reasoning was as follows. One of the tests of validity of a theory is that it has the capacity to produce an adequate explanation for the behaviour of an individual case. One of the influences on my explanation was the video-camera I had been asked to use by an Inspector to explore its educational potential in the science department of a comprehensive school where I was Head of Science. In looking at my performance I experienced myself as a living contradiction in holding two mutually exclusive opposites together. I held certain values whilst denying them at the same time.

I reflected on the logic of Richard Peters' philosophy of education with his commitment to the Law of Contradiction. This states that two mutually exclusive statements cannot be true simultaneously. I could see that the conceptual frameworks of the theories in the disciplines of education, all excluded contradiction. I followed Popper's (1963) rejection of contradiction in theories through the application of the simple laws of inference which he used to claim that dialectical forms of knowledge were based on nothing better than a loose and woolly way of speaking and entirely useless as theory. Yet, on the ground of my own experience of myself as a living contradiction, I wanted to find an educational theory which had the capacity to produce an adequate explanation for my professional development.

I decided to explore the nature of an explanation for my own professional development in higher education as I continued my educational enquiry, 'How do I improve my practice?'. The result so far over the period 1976-91 is

the form and content of the above account of my educational development. In comparing this account with the theoretical framework for action research proposed by Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt I am drawn to a similar criticism to the one I made of the ideas of Richard Peters. I recognise the professionalism in the work. I understand its value in raising the awareness and status of action research in higher education. In claiming that the theoretical framework is too limited to produce valid explanations for the professional development of individuals in higher education I do not want to damage the growth of action research approaches in professional development. I want to see them strengthened by ensuring that a valid form of educational theory is emerging from the research. For this reason I want to put forward my own stipulative definition as an alternative to the theoretical framework above. Where Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt writes about *The Case* as if the case is independent of herself, I have taken myself to be the case and provided a case report on my own educational development between 1976 and 1991.

The alternative view I am proposing is that educational theory is being constituted by the descriptions and explanations which individual learners are producing for their educational development in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'

I see my philosophy of action research in terms of first person engagement rather than from the perspective of second person participant or of a third person neutral observer. I value the traditional role of an academic in making original contributions to knowledge. I see the methodology and epistemology in my claim to know my educational development as an integral part of my educational development. I ground my justification of the values, whose meaning emerges in the course of my educational development, in the name of my own education and humanity. In attempting to live more fully my values within the context of my workplace I believe that I am helping to produce a good social order. This belief is based on the evidence of my responses in the contents of the above case report, to actions and judgements which, whilst legitimated by the University's procedures existing at the time, exerted pressure which, according to a University Senate Committee, might have discouraged and therefore constrained a less determined individual than myself. I see my philosophy contributing to the production of a good social order within the form of dialogical community represented in the work of Richard Bernstein (1991) and Alastair MacIntyre (1990).

I am particularly drawn to MacIntyre's view that we should reconceive the University as a place of constrained disagreement. What I have in mind is the re-creation of forums for the debate of ideas in which academics with different perspectives agree to participate (Lakatos & Musgrave 1970). I think that this would ensure an engagement with ideas, especially those which are aimed at reconstituting the theoretical basis of a field of enquiry. Without the commitment to subject each others' ideas to public test, there is the danger that traditional, conceptual structures, are retained as legitimate, when there are tests of validity which would reveal their limitations. I make this point because of a response, of a Professor of Education to my explanation for my educational development, that it was outside his field!

I do not believe that my paper on its own should persuade you of the validity of my claims. What it can do however, is to draw your attention to where a living educational theory is being created and it may stimulate you sufficiently to want to test the validity of this new claim to educational knowledge. Those who are interested might also wish to see how I am developing these ideas in the context of my work as Chair of Governors of a comprehensive school (Whitehead 1990). I think of the significance of your commitment to test the validity of my ideas in MacIntyre's (1988) terms that the rival claims to truth of contending traditions of enquiry depend for their vindication upon the adequacy and the explanatory power of the histories which the resources of each of those traditions in conflict enable their adherents to write.

I suppose the main challenge to academics in the above views is the implication that their research should include a public account of their own educational development in an enquiry of the form, 'How do I improve my practice?'. To hold oneself accountable in this way, in the name of education and one's own humanity, may deter those who prefer the safety of conceptual structures. There is risk, a creative leap and an act of faith, involved in attempting to make original contributions to educational knowledge. I am fortunate that I can share my work with students, teachers and colleagues in the conversational research community of the action research group of the School of Education of the University of Bath. I do hope that you will respond and help to test the validity of my ideas.

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Whitehead, J. (1996) Living Educational Theories and Living Contradictions: a response to Mike Newby.

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Living Educational Theories and Living Contradictions: a response to Mike Newby

JACK WHITEHEAD

I feel sure that Newby's review (*Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 28. 1, 1994, pp. 119–126), of Jean McNiff's (1993) book *Teaching as Learning* will help to stimulate philosophers of education to contribute to debate about the nature of the educational knowledge and the logic(s) of the educational theories being produced by educational action researchers. I share his commitment to clarity of thinking in education and to the value of philosophy in examining the grounds on which other disciplines make their claims to knowledge. Let me take a number of criticisms that he explicitly makes of me in his review.

While Newby may see my work as an action research approach to pedagogical problem-solving I see my work as focused on the epistemologies of living educational theories. I am interested in the logics of educational theories and in the standards of judgement that can be used to test the validity of the descriptions and explanations that individual learners produce for their own educational development as they answer questions of the kind 'How do I improve what I am doing?' Recent research (Elliott and Sarland, 1995) and papers in *Teacher Education Quarterly* (22. 3, 1995) on Self-Study and Living Educational Theory show that, as Newby says, there are indeed 'several university departments of education adopting an action research approach to pedagogical problem-solving in the McNiff and Whitehead style'.

I am surprised at his suggestion that 'the McNiff-Whitehead position rejects the impersonal propositional form which research normally takes in favour of a dialectical approach', since Newby himself quotes me as having written:

I am arguing for a reconstruction of educational theory into a living form of question and answer which includes propositional contributions from the traditional disciplines of education.

I have argued (Whitehead, 1989) that living educational theories can be presented in a dialogical and dialectical form which, while not being validly reduced to a propositional theory, *can integrate insights* from such theories.

In his remarks on 'Whitehead's five-fold question-and-answer strategy' Newby clearly states that I have an approach to action research that 'never seems to ask philosophical questions about the logic of "improvement", the form goals are to take, and the criteria for choosing certain goals rather than others'. I asked and tried to answer such questions in public debate some 12 years ago over a period of two years in the *International Journal of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* (Whitehead, 1983, 1985a,b; Wilson, 1984).

Perhaps Newby might like to engage with these published papers and review his claim that I never seem to ask such philosophical questions.

Similarly, with regard to evaluation, Newby asks how evaluation can take place 'if the fundamental questions about improvement have not been asked, let alone answered'. Again, unless I misunderstand what he thinks counts as a fundamental question, I do think the debates in the early 1980s within the Classroom Action Research Network (Whitehead and Foster, 1984) and elsewhere (Whitehead, 1985a,b, 1989) show that I have engaged with this and related points.

I wonder about the evidence for Newby's claim that I impute arrogance and incorrigibility to professors of education:

Jack Whitehead accuses professors of education of unwillingness to open their own account of their educational development to public criticism (p. xi). Whether or not this is the case, it is quite unfair to impute arrogance and incorrigibility to them.

I must ask the reader to read my words in my introduction to Jean McNiff's book (1993, p. xi). At no point do I impute arrogance or incorrigibility to 'Professors of Education'. I think their logic and language is too limited to provide a logic and language of educational theory and I have put forward an alternative (Whitehead, 1985a,b, 1989).

Newby accuses Jean McNiff and myself of being 'unfairly judgemental and highly suspect. They have first had to assassinate the characters of the renowned before attempting to climb on the pedestal themselves' — this in the context of the writings and practice of Richard Peters and his colleagues.

I make no secret of the fact that I came to Bath University in 1973 with the explicit intention of trying to reconstruct educational theory because I believed the 'disciplines' approach of Richard Peters and Paul Hirst was mistaken. I believed it to be mistaken because it could not produce a valid explanation for the educational development of an individual. I recall studying under the team of philosophers led by Richard Peters with the utmost respect for their professionalism. Indeed in my own book (Whitehead, 1993) I say on the first page of the Introduction:

As a student of education at the University of Newcastle in 1967 I was influenced by the work of the philosopher Richard Peters on ethics and education . . . Peters emphasised the importance of other values such as rationality, consideration of interests, respect for persons and worthwhile activities. He also believed in the value of educational theory for the professional development of teachers and saw education as being related to the creation of a good social order.

I would also say that the idea of living educational theories is not the kind of idea through which an individual can elevate herself or himself on to a pedestal. The whole point of the view that educational theories are being produced by individuals in their descriptions and explanations for their own educational development is that it is open to all individuals to create their own living educational theory. There is a slogan on my office door at the University,

Undermine the Dominant Paradigm. The slogan is a constant invitation to critique.

There are two further general points I wish to raise about Newby's review. The first is his claim that Jean McNiff's book attempts to introduce an ethic of teaching and learning that is built around Habermas's ideal speech situation. He says that this is by no means new or original. While Jean must speak for herself I feel sure that her well-known Christian commitments exemplified in the book's preface:

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others . . . Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Peter 4:10, 3:15).

do more than suggest that her ethics are not built around Habermas' ideal speech situation. Because Jean and I, whilst agreeing on many things, have such a different base to our ethics and our spiritual lives I think some care is needed in referring to the McNiff-Whitehead or the Whitehead-McNiff position.

I do agree with Newby when he says that:

Any approach to research that, whatever it might sometimes appear to say, disregards all academic standards and refuses to deliver propositionally expressed truth-claims as opposed to claims made in the first person, is going to have real problems developing criteria of quality. This concerns me, because teachers are now being awarded MA degrees in this tradition of action research.

However, I wonder why my approach to research is associated with the idea that propositionally expressed truth-claims are opposed to claims made in the first person. The validation procedures, included in Jean McNiff's (1988) text on *Action Research: Principles and Practice*, following Martin Forrest (1983), show that Jean and I agree that propositionally expressed truth-claims can be integrated within claims made in the first person rather than being opposed to them. And Newby's criticism here is difficult to sustain in the light of recent texts on the criteria for judging action research (Lomax, 1994, 1996; McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 1996).

This brings me to a further point which is related to the previous paragraph. Newby says that:

Truth-claims have their context in traditions of enquiry. They are not personal or group preferences. Their context is historical. . . . It is when we become aware that thinking can be done expertly or badly, and that traditions of expertise are digests of the best that has gone before, that we have some chance, however small, of combating our prejudices and engaging in dialogue with experts.

I wonder if Newby's beliefs about truth-claims should be questioned. Where he says that they are not personal or group preferences, hasn't Foucault (1977) made rather a good case in showing that what counts as truth and truth-claims can be related to the power relations invested in particular interest groups?

I also wonder how he copes with the problem that some traditions of expertise, which are indeed digests of the best that has gone before, no longer provide the answers to some significant questions. If he rests in the best that has gone before how does he respond creatively when this best is no longer good enough for the here and now? I argue (Whitehead, 1985a,b) that new truth-claims are required to test the validity of new forms of educational theory and that in establishing a new view of educational theory personal or group preferences, rather than a context in traditions of enquiry, may be the basis for legitimating the new view. Again, this is not to deny the value of including standards of judgement drawn from the traditions in testing the validity of a claim to knowledge.

Newby gave the title 'Living Theory *or* Living Contradiction' to his review. As these terms had their genesis in relation to my own work, I would like him to consider my title, 'Living Educational Theories *and* Living Contradictions'. I wonder how I might share an understanding of my dialectical logic and commitment to education with an orthodox philosopher (Whitehead, 1985a) who is operating from within a propositional logic that sets up such oppositions by eliminating contradictions from correct thought. I suppose one way might be to show that I understand and share a commitment to Newby's academic values and, in a sympathetic way which does not deny his integrity, make a response which is intended to help him to enhance his own contribution to the philosophy of education.

For example I feel that Newby's critique addresses aspects of my life as a living contradiction. In the positive pole of the dialectic I am thinking of our shared values of scholarship, of our concern to represent the ideas of another with honesty and integrity and of our respect and insights into those qualities of spiritual and aesthetic sensibility that are required to communicate within an *I-You* relationship rather than an *I-It* relationship.

In the negative pole of the dialectic I am thinking of not living fully my value of scholarship which should lead me to address the points that, as he says, I never seem to address. I am also thinking of not living fully the values of honesty and integrity that should lead me to represent the ideas of others truthfully. I am thinking of not living fully my spiritual and aesthetic sensitivity to the *I-You* relation in the language of my written communications. These written communications often fall short of the full mutuality I can experience with you in face-to-face communication.

I want to say something in conclusion about the tone in which I have tried to respond to Newby's criticisms of my work. At the World Congress 3 on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management at the University of Bath in July 1994 I witnessed a dialogue between Dr Peter Reason, the Director of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at Bath University, and Orlando Fals-Borda, Emeritus Professor at the University of Columbia in Bogota and one of the leading proponents of Participatory Action Research. Orlando demonstrated the art of a dialectician in embracing opposites and working with contrary views. He showed great humility, yet enormous intellectual integrity, in focusing on the uniting influence of human values and the desire to contribute to improving the world through cultural renewal and education. Terri Austin (1994) of the Alaskan Action Research Network and Tom Russell (1995; Munby

and Russell, 1996) have also contributed to the kind of language I need to develop if I am to make a full contribution to such a community.

I hope that I have integrated what I have learned from the human qualities expressed by Peter Reason, Orlando Fals-Borda, Terri Austin and Tom Russell, in the content and tone of my response. I hope Mike Newby feels directly addressed and that he experiences my response as a genuine invitation to continue to critique my ideas. Other readers might like to join with me in showing how our philosophies not only interpret our world but are also integrated in our living educative relationships with our students, as we try to improve them. I am thinking of the creation of our own living educational theories that show how we are struggling to express more fully and to justify the values that we think will help to regenerate our culture and that at the same time will help us to improve the contributions our philosophies can make to the creation of an educated community.

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