

# **HOW DO I CONTRIBUTE TO A RECONCEPTUALISATION OF EDUCATIONAL THEORY FOR MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE CREATION OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL ORDERS?**

**A PAPER PRESENTED AT THE PRACTITIONER RESEARCH SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP SYMPOSIUM**

## **'Academic practitioner-researchers: shifting the epistemological centre in higher education'**

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### **Introduction**

This paper is an account of my ongoing educational action enquiry into my practice, as I continue to make public how and why I hold myself accountable for my work.

The paper has a main theme and two subsidiary themes.

The main theme is:

- The need to explain how and why we hold ourselves accountable for what we do. This is what I hope to do in the paper, and I will ask questions at the end to see whether I have engaged with the issue to your satisfaction.

The two subsidiary themes are:

1. The need for a reconceptualisation of educational theory, which involves a shift away from the hegemony of traditional propositional theory and an increasing engagement with living theory (Whitehead 1989), as constituted by the explanatory narratives of real-life practitioners;
2. The need for people who are traditionally called 'practitioners' and those who are traditionally called 'academics' to work collaboratively and equitably in the epistemological transformation (Whitehead 2009) that is the basis for the reconceptualisation of educational theory. This reconceptualisation, and the collaborative nature of the work of all practitioners are, in my view, essential constituents for the development of a sustainable social order.

I feel passionately that these issues need to be given priority in debates about current and new directions in educational research; so to explain why, let me first outline my professional contexts.

### **My professional contexts**

Having taken early retirement in the late 1980s from my work as a deputy head teacher in a large secondary school in Dorset, I turned my hand to writing. The kind of writing I do, however, which is mainly writing academic texts, is not very profitable financially, so I went into the retail business for myself to earn a living. I

found that I was able to sell goods in my shop as well as read and write while sitting at a counter. The reason I am telling this story is to emphasise the point that I have been, and still am, a teacher, a business woman, and a writer, as well as doing minor jobs such as working as an Avon lady. Because the books started to attract attention, I found myself invited to different places, including universities, so in this way I gradually worked my way into higher education. I could therefore add 'academic' to my curriculum vitae, and 'educational researcher', although I have never taken a formal course in research methods in my life. What I know, I learned on the job.

I now work mainly in higher education, where I support academic staffs in finding ways of adding value to their research capacity, as well as their capacity to write and publish. I regularly visit universities in Ireland, the UK and South Africa, and I am an occasional visitor to universities in Iceland, Israel and Malaysia. As well as being research active in higher education, I also work with the National Centre for Guidance in Education in Ireland, and with the National Zoological Gardens in South Africa. So my working life is varied and busy, and I would not have it any other way. The main point, however, is that I remain independent, while enjoying institutional positions; and I write, and, like Steve Biko (1987), I write what I like – not because I have to, but because I have something to say that I believe is worth saying.

While my professional contexts are varied, a consistent theme permeates the work I do. This is the idea that all people are able to think and speak for themselves, and should do so. I believe, like Arendt (1958), that people should think critically about what they are doing and thinking; and, like Foucault (2001), I believe that all people should speak, and on their own behalf. As a shopkeeper I spoke for myself, as I do as a teacher and an academic. The nature of the life of a mind is not necessarily adjudicated by the kind of body it is in, or its place of work, though I recognise that this is often the case, a point that I address throughout. So this is what I do wherever I go. I encourage all people, practitioners in a range of workplaces, to think critically and reflexively (Winter 1989), and to give explanations for what they do and why they do it.

So, because I pose critical questions to myself as well as others, I now ask, Why does my work take this form?

### **Reasons for doing what I do**

I said above that the main substantive theme of the paper is to justify my own practice. Justifying one's practice is essential, I believe, not only because we live in an age of increasing public accountability, often from a bureaucratic and frequently litigious stance (Ball 2008), but also from the need to show how one holds oneself personally accountable for one's actions in the world (Macdonald 1995). This is especially the case for any person who is prepared to call themselves a professional, as many of us are. Saying that you are a professional carries a burden of responsibility, which is to profess, to explain why you are passionately committed to your work: 'What we must ask ourselves then is to really profess; to reveal and justify from our own viewpoints what we believe and value' (Macdonald 1995: 159). This in turn means explaining that you know your practice, that you can explain how you have come to know your practice, and that you are prepared to produce an

evidence base to show that your claim is justified. In Polanyi's (1958) terms, it means committing yourself to your knowledge and your capacity for knowledge creation.

However, contrary to my values, many people everywhere are consistently persuaded not to think for themselves, often by a constant barrage of media-controlled propaganda that aims to instruct them how to think as well as how to act, with a view to controlling the public mind (Chomsky 1997; Marlin 2002). The aim is to reproduce dominant stories and avoid critique – not to reconstruct dominant stories through the critical interrogation of their messages and forms of representation. In many places this culture of the ongoing reproduction of static knowledge goes by the popular saying, 'That's the way things are because that's the way things are.' The way to avoid critique and safeguard the hegemony of dominant forms is to deal only with 'the consequences of the disruption of secure knowledge rather than with the problem of received knowledge in the first place' (Jansen 2009: 145). My own commitments, however, are to encourage practitioners, in all walks of life, to withstand such attempts to control, to build up their own intellectual resources, and to feel confident in claiming their capacity to engage as legitimate participants in public debates about what constitutes a good social order and how it is possible to contribute to its evolution.

### ***Working with practitioners***

I bring these commitments to persuading people who are normatively called 'practitioners', such as teachers and managers, to show that they know what they are doing, and to explain how they know, by means of an authenticated evidence base, which they place into the public domain. This also enables them to validate their claims by recourse to specific standards of judgement: from a living theory perspective, they can show how their embodied values emerge as living standards of judgement (Whitehead 2008; Whitehead and McNiff 2006). Many practitioners have done this. My website contains some of their academically validated accounts, in the form of their masters and doctoral degrees (see Appendix 1); and my books, often written collaboratively with Jack Whitehead, contain many case studies of the work of practitioners we have supported (for example, McNiff and Whitehead 2009; Whitehead and McNiff 2006). Furthermore, I link my work with the work of other colleagues like Jack who are engaged on the same mission. Jack's website (<http://www.actionresearch.net>) contains the validated masters and doctoral dissertations and theses of dozens of practitioners, and is probably the most comprehensive evidence base for the reconstruction of educational knowledge in the world. As well as accessing this work, you can also see the work of other colleagues, such as Lesley Wood, at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth (see for example, [http://www.zsn.uni-oldenburg.de/en/download/NMMUWebb\\_Wood\\_Health\\_Leadership.pdf](http://www.zsn.uni-oldenburg.de/en/download/NMMUWebb_Wood_Health_Leadership.pdf)), and colleagues such as Elsa Lombard (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jupEvMiTbY4>). One of the initiatives of which I am most proud was the delivery of a masters programme in Khayelitsha, a township near Cape Town, through which ten classroom teachers achieved their masters degrees through studying their own practice: see, for example, Tsepo Majake's 2008 paper (available at [http://www.jeanmcniff.com/khayelitsha/tsepo\\_AERA\\_2008.htm](http://www.jeanmcniff.com/khayelitsha/tsepo_AERA_2008.htm)),

and Gerrie Adams's 2008 paper (available at [http://www.jeanmcniff.com/khayelitssha/gerrie\\_AERA\\_2008.htm](http://www.jeanmcniff.com/khayelitssha/gerrie_AERA_2008.htm)), both delivered at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting in New York; see also McNiff (2010, in preparation).

So this is what I do, in relation to practitioners. I urge them to make their knowledge of practice public, and I urge them to value that knowledge as legitimate knowledge.

Now let me tell you why I do what I do in relation with those practitioners who are normatively called 'academics'.

### ***Working with academics***

I work in higher education for a specific set of reasons and purposes. These are about how the Academy is one of the most powerful bodies for influencing what counts as valid knowledge and who counts as a legitimate knower, and how these issues enter into debates about the reconstruction or reconceptualisation (as well as the reproduction) of existing social orders. If we accept that how we act is informed by what we know and how we come to know it (our epistemologies), informed by particular values and logics, then it would appear that our dominant propositional epistemologies may be capable of imagining virtual societies in which all get on well together, yet do not seem sufficiently robust to contribute to the real-life realisation of those societies. And if the primary responsibility of all people is to think, as Arendt (1958) states, and the primary responsibility of academics is to think originally and creatively, then my view, like Chomsky (1967) and Said (1994), is that academics should also think critically, and be prepared to critique their own normative thinking in order to turn social intent into reality. My intent on entering higher education has always been, therefore, to influence the development of new epistemologies in the Academy, in the interests of creating a better social order than the one we have at present; those epistemologies are grounded in relationship, as I explain below, especially the relationship between intent and action. I believe that academics need to identify themselves as critics of normative knowledges, including their own, so that the potential solidification of normative orthodoxies (Habermas 1976) is constantly interrogated and destabilised to ensure that it maintains its moral relevance to changing practices and conditions. The question arises, however – what kind of knowledge? And who counts as a knower?

These are the same questions posed in a similar discussion initiated by Schön (1983), which contributed to what became known as the new scholarship (Boyer 1990). Schön painted the now famous caricature of the 'high ground', where academic knowledge is generated – 'pure' knowledge in popular terms – and the 'swampy lowlands' of practitioners' practical knowledge. In such scenarios, dilemmas arise for both 'academics' and 'practitioners' in relation to how the legitimacy of their knowledge is judged, and why it is judged like this. It is not difficult to see how this happens, when located within historical and cultural contexts. Whitehead writes:

For centuries, the knowledge that has been used to enhance professionalism in education has been presented to the Academy for legitimation in bound volumes of mainly words on pages of printed text ... The language and logics

of these texts have been dominated by Aristotelian logic with its law of contradiction to eliminate contradictions from correct thought, and to a lesser degree by a dialectical logic with the inclusion of the nucleus of contradiction in correct thought. (Whitehead 2009: 1)

The dominant form of knowledge in higher education remains propositional; it is abstract and conceptual, not necessarily a property of an individual knower. The reified form of this kind of knowledge is often used to legitimate hierarchies of power: the one who knows is the one with power (Foucault 1980), and in turn uses that power to reinforce the legitimacy of this kind of knowledge. An example of this situation is found in Jansen (2009). Speaking of his own experiences of what he calls 'epistemological fundamentalism' in a South African university, he says: 'It was the link between knowledge and authority that disturbed most – knowledge graded for truth depending on who was speaking and how high up the hierarchy the speaker was located' (Jansen 2009: 20)

I too experience deep difficulties with a view of the superiority of one kind of knowledge over another, and the superiority of one person over another. I do not accept the idea of hierarchies of knowledge, or hierarchies of knowers. In my role as a shopkeeper, I knew what I was doing; in Schön's terms, I was creating practical knowledge from experience. But this knowledge, from the perspective of normative hierarchies of knowledge, would not count towards valid theory. Yet while I was keeping a shop, I was also studying for my doctoral degree, so I knew what I was doing in the Academy, too. In Schön's terms, my scholarly knowledge would be contributing to valid theory. Yet for me, the two forms of knowledge did not cancel each other out; nor did my two roles, each with different responsibilities and purposes. I am a knower; all my forms of knowing are integrated. The problem with the dominant architectonics of knowledge, as I see it, is that role is often confused with identity: I did not see myself as 'belonging' in any one place (Sacks 2007 and Capra et al 1992 speak about identity as grounded in a sense of belonging), and am at home in any place I choose to be. I achieved my degree through writing about my experiences as a teacher, and today I teach the teachers who teach the teachers (Faculty of Education, Queen's University et al 1995). The more different we are, the more we are the same: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

I bring these understandings to my work with those who are called practitioners and those who are called academics. I do not see any justification for epistemological apartheid, or the so-called difference of status in forms of knowledge. Practitioners generate knowledge about their work in workplaces: so do academics. The Academy is a workplace: we get paid for what we do and we are subject to the conventions and rules of workplaces. We are academic practitioners, whose job, among other things, is to support the enquiries of other work-based practitioners, as well as one another's, in the production of knowledge and the procedures for its validation and legitimation. We are all knowledge creators, all potentially theorists of our own practices.

So, I have told you what I do and why I do it. Now let me tell you how I do it.

### **My research and pedagogical practices**

The practical pedagogical methodologies I use are those of action research, which enables practitioners to generate their living educational theories of practice, grounded in questions of the form, 'How do I improve my practice?' (Whitehead 1989). This involves understanding values as the basis of enquiry, and processes of enquiry as demonstrating how one lives in the direction of one's educational values. It involves appreciating how those values come to act as living criteria and standards of judgement to test the validity of claims to knowledge, as well as to test the quality of the practice (Whitehead and McNiff 2006). It involves the production of high quality accounts that offer clear theorisations of practice, whose communicative adequacy may also be tested against the critical feedback of others through the use of communicative criteria such as those articulated by Habermas (1976), of comprehensibility, authenticity, truthfulness and awareness of normative contexts. Especially it involves the production of an authenticated evidence base to demonstrate the truthfulness of knowledge claims.

However, to return to my situatedness in this paper, if I am maintaining that it is the responsibility of all, whether so-called practitioners or so-called academics, to show how they hold themselves accountable for their work, and if I am to live up to my own values of democratic and equitable forms of life, this injunction applies first to me. I therefore focus on producing my own evidence base, which will, I hope, contribute to the wider body of educational knowledge.

To explain the nature and significance of this evidence base, however, requires first an outline of the theoretical frameworks I use for my work.

### **Theoretical frameworks**

My specific theoretical frameworks are grounded in an overarching framework of ideas to do with generative transformational processes (Bohm 1983; Chomsky 1957; Said 1997). I see everything in process, where any element has its future always already within itself. These conceptualisations inform my processes of theorising. In relation to processes of theory generation, I see a transformational relationship between logics, values, epistemologies and social practices, and how these elements potentially influence the creation of new world orders. Therefore, like Whitehead (2008), I encourage the development of new epistemologies for a new scholarship of educational knowledge that is grounded in the accounts of practitioners, given that, in terms of this paper, the practitioners in question work in a range of workplaces, none of which is superior to others. Universities are workplaces, in the same way as shops are. All practitioners in workplaces know what they know, and all are capable of generating new knowledge that can contribute to valid forms of theory. These forms of theory, however, are not of the traditional conceptual kind, but of new living forms, where knowledge is embodied in the life of the practitioner, and grounded in relationships (Thayer-Bacon 2003). Explaining how we are with one another, and why, constitutes our living theories of practice.

These views have considerable implications for the nature and location of knowledge creating practices. It is not only the traditional epistemological base that becomes destabilised, but also its traditional locations, with accompanying implications for

the personnel within those locations. Until recently, the Academy has been seen as the exclusive location for knowledge generation. From the ideas discussed here, it becomes also the location for the legitimisation of knowledge that can be created in all workplaces, including its own. A new culture of shifting epistemological centres develops, where individuals everywhere deconstruct their thinking so that they decentre themselves and allow other centres to emerge, with whom they are in dynamic relation. Ngugi (1993) also challenges the dominant view that the academy is the epistemological centre, but for different reasons. He makes the point that the dominant form of knowledge is white knowledge, in the same way as Jansen (2009) does, and also Coetzee (1988) who speaks of 'white writing'. While I share their commitments to the de-racialisation of what is seen as valid knowledge, I also think of knowledge as residing in the ability of all participants to exercise their capacity for original thinking and to make it public, so that knowledge is, as in the words of Slade's song, 'everywhere and nowhere'. Knowledge is the property of everyone, exercising their capacity to think for themselves, and to pool that knowledge for the creation of a new public sphere, where everyone may speak and share their ideas about how a new social order may be produced.

These processes, I believe, go beyond Habermas's (2002) ideas of the inclusion of the other – in terms of this paper, in relation to epistemological matters – and proposes instead the development of cultures of mutually dynamic educational relationships, where each participant is able to contribute to the educational growth of the other as well as themselves. Spiritual and moral growth are grounded in the capacity to engage critically first with one's own thinking, and then to bring this capacity to a critical deconstruction of normative assumptions to test their validity as claiming to contribute to sustainable social practices.

So now I need to explain why I feel justified in holding these views, as I said above, and to produce an authentic evidence base to test the validity of my ideas. This evidence base resides in the accounts of practitioners, as told in their own words in a range of places. The places are, as noted previously, on my website (Appendix 1) as their public accounts of how they theorised their practices in their workplaces.

### **Evidence base**

The evidence base in which I ground my commitments includes the masters and doctoral theses of practitioners in workplaces and of academic practitioner-researchers who have found ways of interrogating and improving their thinking and practice as they show how they hold themselves accountable for their work. I draw especially on the accounts produced by practitioners in the following places.

#### ***St Mary's University College, UK***

I supported the masters programmes of a group of six staff. All had been in mainstream education prior to entering higher education; all still perceive themselves as teachers. All have engaged in their action enquiries to find ways of improving their learning in order to improve their practices. To show these processes in action, see Sinclair (2009, and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THua6Ywoswc>

); Pearson (2009, and [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JS5GI6sG\\_w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JS5GI6sG_w) and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejBrGm39Ysk>); and Renowden (2009, and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yND2Ra7vdhQ&feature=related>). These three practitioners are now engaged on their doctoral programmes.

### ***York St John University, UK***

I contribute to the development of a culture of educational enquiry among a group of academic staff, some of who are pursuing their doctoral programmes with me. Their public accounts presented at this symposium are as follows:

- ***Jenny Carpenter*** (2009): 'Building Reflective Relationships for and through the Creation of Educational Knowledge'
- ***Karen Llewellyn*** (2009): 'How does a teaching quality enhancement project contribute to pedagogic change?'
- ***Jill Wickham*** (2009): 'Developing a learning environment to support and enhance the learning experience of students in a clinical setting'

We do not yet have a multimedia knowledge base, as the development of this work is recent, but we are developing one.

### ***The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University***

Published work is available to show the development of new epistemologies for new cultures at NMMU. As well as the work already cited in this document, new work is available in book and multimedia form: for example, Wood (2008) (and see the video of Elsa Lombard above).

### ***The University of Limerick, Ireland***

Appendix 1 contains a list of the validated higher degree work of five teachers. See also <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/criticaldebates.html> for an account of a 'critical debates' seminar organised at UL that brought together second and third level practitioners to discuss how they could develop new relational forms of epistemology for new relational forms of practice.

### ***Schools in Ireland***

As well as this higher education located work, published accounts of the work of teachers and administrators are to be found in existing publications – see McNiff and Collins (1994); Collins and McNiff (1999); McNiff et al (2000).

### ***Khayelitsha, South Africa***

The work in the township of Khayelitsha is now being made public (see also McNiff, 2010 in preparation). Teachers speak of the growth of their educational knowledge, and how this has contributed to their sense of personal and professional wellbeing: see members of the group speaking about their experiences at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNiK7BUHyFo> and Tsephe Majake's reflections on his learning at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYty6rsiOGA>. The legitimisation of the teachers' knowledge challenges traditional epistemological hierarchies in South



Africa, and opens the doors for new debates about the knowledge-generating capacity of all practitioners within a new democratic era.

### ***The National Zoological Gardens (NZG), South Africa***

The work of the NZG introduces new dimensions to the debates about who knows and how they come to know. From my as yet limited involvement, I can already produce data that shows staff in relation with animals, from a full commitment to the idea that animals know what they know, in the same way as humans. In the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smiKLAwWd-Y> you can see Elizabeth, an animal keeper with responsibility for the welfare of spiders, speaking about her ideas that spiders know what they know, have their own personalities, and are able to make choices in their own ways. (You can also see me and my first close-up-and-personal encounter with a tarantula spider.)

I link these accounts with other evidence bases such as those at <http://www.actionresearch.net>. I do this also from a commitment to realise what Snow (2001) spoke about as the systematisation of teachers' professional knowledge; and this now gives the lie to what I see as the potential significance of the work and its evidence base.

### **Significance of the work and its evidence base**

In my view the production of this kind of evidence base by practitioners for practitioners, across the professions and across the sectors, comprises a powerful knowledge base that has the potential to inform new thinking and new practices. It has the potential to contribute to the development of new public spheres that are grounded in relational epistemologies, as we make public our scholarly accounts of how we enquire into who we are and how we are exercising our responsibility for truth-saying (Foucault 2001). It is this capacity for telling the truth that, in my view, is a major contributing factor in the creation of the kind of societies in which we wish our children to live.

Further, the published accounts of practitioners through books and other print-based media, as well as through web-based accounts, forms an international community of educational enquirers who are prepared to make public how they hold themselves accountable for their work (Whitehead 2009). The emerging body of knowledge has profound implications for the creation of new public spheres and new social economies by explicating the relationships between the creation of educational knowledge and social and cultural regeneration. This is not, however, an elitist practice, owned by the few to control the many. It forms the basis for a democratically constituted community of critical practitioners, all of who have the desire to improve their practices by improving their learning; and this can happen in shops, zoos and universities. Also, given new electronic forms of communication, the knowledge is spread rapidly and widely. The culture of shifting centres, of nowhere and everywhere, is relevant as much for the dissemination of knowledge as for its legitimation.

Immediately after this BERA conference, I return to South Africa. From there I go to Vienna, on to York, and then to Ireland. My nomadic lifestyle represents my commitment to the legitimisation of knowledge in all its forms, by all its practitioners, in all their workplaces. I believe it is the responsibility of all who are positioned as public intellectuals, with something to say and a platform from which to say it, to find every opportunity to encourage others to find ways of speaking their truth, from an authenticated evidence base that shows that what they are saying really is the truth and not their wishful thinking.

### **Asking questions about the validity of my knowledge claims**

I said at the beginning that I would ask questions about the validity of what I am saying. So let me do this. Do I show, as Macdonald says, that I fulfil my responsibility to profess, to explain how and why I believe it is necessary to justify my position, to explain why I do what I do? Am I contributing to the reconceptualisation of the epistemological base of educational theory for moral accountability in the creation of sustainable social orders? Do I explain how my values become my living criteria and critical standards of judgement to test the validity of my claims (**Michal Zellermeier and Jean McNiff**)

We are two professional educators in higher education settings, variously in Israel, Ireland and the UK, and have worked collaboratively for some years. We share the view that what we know and how we come to know it influences how we act, so we understand the need for transformational epistemologies that appreciate the dynamic relationships between theory, practice and institutional influence. These understandings ground our commitments to finding new ways of enabling teachers to investigate and conceptualise their practices as research-based, with a view to developing new relational epistemologies for institutional influence (Schön 1995). We can both claim to have exercised educational influence in the learning of our social formations in our different countries, using action research approaches that require participants and ourselves to offer our explanations of practice in the form of our personal living theories (Whitehead 1989). Our claims to educational influence in learning in our local contexts transform into claims about the significance of action research for new conceptualizations of globalization. These take the form of a new public sphere which goes beyond legalism (Habermas 2002) and celebrates the capacity of all to contribute to a conversation of humankind (Geras 2005).

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Whitehead 2006), through the production of an authenticated evidence base that shows the realisation of conceptual ideas and imagined possibilities?

I hope so. I hope that you, my listeners, my critical audience, share my views that the commitments and practices I am outlining here can act as the basis for what I understand as a good social order, a form of living with others that recognises the other for their capacity for creating and testing the validity of their knowledge.

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