



## **Editorial Foreword**

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*Ireland*

I am delighted to have been asked to present this volume of EJOLTS to you. I hope that it will grasp your interest, especially if you are a newly qualified teacher, a head teacher or are working collaboratively with other teachers; equally if you are an individual seeking to understand or manage your workplace or are trying to write an academic paper.

Previewing this volume has opened up for me a broad range of educational experiences from very diverse contexts. I find their variety is a welcome relief in a world full of media echo-chambering where communications on Twitter, Facebook and the like can contribute to a discourse of homogenising ideas. After I have explained what I learned from the broad span of the authors' research stories, I will go on to share the new, personal insights that I have gained – insights that relate to issues of continuous professional learning, contextual awareness, learning communities, questioning curricula and collaborative writing. I will then suggest a possible significance for all the efforts involved in writing, reviewing and preparing these papers for publication.

In Ireland forty-five years ago, I began my own career as an educator with a two-year teacher education programme. In Africa, Jerome Thamsanqa Gumede also had the same length of teacher training. In his paper *Living Theory Development of a Black African (Zulu) Male Educator: Management of Rural High School*, he reflects

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on and explains how he learned from his family and his education experiences to become a school head capable of values-based leadership. In his paper, I have the sense that he is theorising the un-sayable about preparation for teaching and school management. Neil Boland and Jocelyn Romero Demirbag also discuss the 'unsayable' as they describe and explain how it is necessary to critically examine the curriculum in order to attain meaningful, relevant teaching. Their paper, *(Re)inhabiting Waldorf education: Honolulu teachers explore the notion of place*, tells of their professional learning within developing learning communities in Hawai'i. In reading their paper, I realise that they open new windows on the collaborative nature of professional learning. Their story of a community learning can be read alongside the seven years of personal professional learning which is theorised in Neil Boland's *Travels in education: Towards Waldorf 2.0*. In this paper he reflects on his learning as he travels from New Zealand around the world. Amy Dyke and Sonia Hutchison take us to yet another context in their paper, *Our Understanding of Mutuality When Reflecting on our Values and Experience of Caring*. As young people, based in the United Kingdom, they cared for adults, generally family members. They are currently studying their practice with the support of Young Carers Development Trust. Their work context involves helping other young carers while their research context for his paper focuses on the process of writing a dual-authored paper.

Each paper is about some form of collaboration in theorising practice. The common underpinning of that process is a questioning of personal values. Twenty years ago, I began my own questioning process when I started researching my practice as a teacher in a classroom. I was fortunate to have Jean McNiff as my tutor at both Masters and PhD level. At that time, I was focusing on the creation of new theories of learning difference and their significance for educational practices (<http://jeanmcniff.com/interactive-symposium-2005.asp>). Since then, regardless of my work context, I have continued to work towards a better practice, and tried to generate theory from my new understandings as I conduct self-study action research. I am convinced of the potential of self-study action research as an effective approach to professional development, so I have spent recent years encouraging other educators to explore the possibility of using this approach. This has meant a constant questioning of what I understand as good-quality action research and dealing with the day-to-day challenges of conducting action research. These challenges include issues of validity, and the role of values. Twenty years after I started researching, I have not reached an 'end point' in my thinking. Therefore, I welcome this opportunity to reflect on the four excellent papers in this volume; they have reinforced my belief in validity and the practice impact of developing living theories from within one's practice.

Validity and values are the two key ideas in these papers that I will first consider. These can be major stumbling blocks for novice researchers as they try to theorise their practice. It is my current understanding that moving from data to evidence of claims, to new knowledge or theories, involves: first making a claim, finding examples for it in one's data, naming living values as the criteria by which a claim can be judged, checking claim(s) against standards of judgement which include one's living values and going public to have one's claim critiqued.

Consequently, it was a joy to read how other research approaches are adopted by the authors of the papers in this volume in order to generate living theories. For example, Jerome Thamsanqa Gumede engages in an auto-ethnography approach to developing his living theory. He cites *Ellis et al.* (2011) to explain this process, as follows: "Auto-ethnography is qualitative research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyses personal experience in order to understand personal experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially conscious act. ... auto-ethnography is both a process and a product." His theorising of practice is based on his ethical values.

Similarly, Neil Boland and Jocelyn Romero Demirbag highlight the epistemological values that are the foundations on which their theorising is built. They talk of an action research methodology and link it to the philosophy of Steiner, the founder of their schools' pedagogical approach where he says: "We will practice teaching and critique it through discourse." (Steiner 1919: 31). The validity of the methods which each author chooses is intriguing and reflects the idea that researchers, working towards developing a living theory, need to articulate their values as part of the process validity. Furthermore, they show how living theories can be developed using a variety of methods. Examples of possible methods include: action research, narrative enquiry, self-study, participatory research, auto-ethnography, ethnography, grounded theory, critical theory and case study ([www.actionresearch.net](http://www.actionresearch.net)).

In more recent years, I have become involved in teacher education in a number of colleges and universities. In these educational contexts, I currently find the concept of validity is often problematic for those setting evaluation standards for practice based research. Practice based research is "... much less predictable and predictive than other forms of research." (McMahon and Jefford, 2009 p.350). Hence, academic criteria need to reconcile rigour and unpredictability across the range of action research approaches. Practice validity, for me, reflects Elliott's (2007) suggestions of demonstrating practice based research as: being theoretically robust, methodologically robust, providing value-for use and as having the potential to enable beneficial change in actions or in understanding of actions. Steiner's ideas of discourse critique (in Boland and Demirbag's papers) remind me of how practical the concept of social validity is for evaluating good-quality research that develops valid living theories from practice. All the authors in this volume, I believe, have engaged with the process of social validity, which can be traced to Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). This theory shows how we can create social validity through dialogue. Habermas explains how understandings between people develop: that is, understanding happens when what is being said is agreed to be valid. If we want to communicate new knowledge from our research to others – to convey our ideas, experiences and information to others – we do so through dialogue. This communication may be in the form of a printed document, through which we communicate with readers. Or, it may involve oral presentation, such as a viva or oral questioning of the research. In order for agreement to be reached and validity to be shown, the researcher must speak "... comprehensibly, truthfully, authentically and appropriately" (Habermas,1981).

Values feature in all of the papers. There is a well-developed understanding of the importance of values alongside their importance in establishing validity. Amy Dyke and Sonia Hutchison explain that "... through the process of writing a dual-authored paper, we show how our mutuality developed as an explanatory principle and a living standard of judgement." In fact, they are describing how living values become the criteria and standards by which their research is judged. Neil Boland and Jocelyn Romero Demirbag talk of their values as embodied expressions of *aloha* and *anthroposophy*. During their research, they reflect on what their values might mean in practice and how they are able to show in practice "... the *aloha* spirit – which means a warmth – and *anthroposophy* (the philosophy which stands behind Waldorf schools) which means acceptance and inclusion extended to everyone. In this manner, their claims are contextually based and contextually validated by the evidencing of their values living in their research practice.

Jerome Thamsanqa Gumede unpacks his understanding of how and when his living theory develops. He selects values of *Ubuntu* – humanity – and *Ukuhlonipha* – respect. These values are globally understandable, yet are couched in culturally appropriate language. Neil Boland claims that,

... inclusion, social justice and education for social justice have become increasingly important to me; they form a major impulse for my research. Treading a path towards a (likely unattainable) ideal of a socially just education and remediating societal injustices through transformative educational practice is a driver of my work.

He explains the important significance of developing understanding of his living values since this "... in turn influences people I work with and those further afield. It was and is an expectation that all Steiner teachers are on a path of inner development, are striving to become better human beings."

The examination of validity and values evident in these papers reinforce my commitment to their importance in theorising practice-based research. Having reread each paper, I am left with a sense of hope and excitement. Hope for living theory, for values-based research and practice; and excitement as I read of global knowledge-creation contributing to knowledge democracy as opposed to the homogenisation of modern media echo-chambering.

Other key issues that excite me in this volume relate to continuous professional learning, contextual awareness, learning communities, questioning curricula and collaborative writing. I will now discuss what I understand by each of these issues.

### **Continuous professional learning**

The theme of continuous professional learning features in all of the papers. As I have already remarked, Jerome and I were considered to be teachers after two years in teacher training. Yet, like him, I believe our educative experiences throughout our lifetimes have contributed to making us the educators that we are. By this I mean educators both as practitioners and as academics. As Sonia explains: "... it is not merely a continuing

professional development process, but rather has a methodological clarity, that enables practitioners to make their ways of knowing public."

My learning from the papers in this volume is that continuous professional learning is about enabling practitioners to be aware of their epistemological stance in order that they might enhance their practice. By researching, editing, writing up and sharing their new understandings publicly they may potentially have an educative influence on others. Continuous professional development is fostered by developing new understandings with others, which can provide the 'glue' for helping groups of educators to come together and stick together as they enhance their practice.

### **Contextual awareness**

Although our authors vary in working contexts, in age and in experiences, I would consider them to be 'extended professional', a concept which Hoyle described in the 1970s as "The characteristics of the model of extended professionalism reflect a much wider vision of what education involves, valuing of the theory underpinning pedagogy, and the adoption of a generally intellectual and rationally-based approach to the job." (Hoyle in Evans, 2008 p. 28). There is a clear message in this volume to education providers that continuous professional learning is a necessary part of the life of the professional educators. The length and shape of continuous professional development may need to be rethought.

In reading these papers, I discovered that contextual awareness, from "... attentiveness to long grass" (Jerome) to "... changing teaching practice through consciousness of place" (Neil and Jocelyn), is shown to have importance for enhancing practice. Even more importantly, the authors all point to the idea that "... constant reflection on our actions will help to maintain an awareness of our values." (Sullivan, 2017). We have already heard how awareness of values not only underpin valid living theory research but may also enhance practice.

### **Learning communities**

Each author referred to learning communities where their engagement with others enhanced their learning. They describe learning communities where "... critical and questioning dispositions were nurtured." (Glenn et al. 2017). Neil traces such ideas back to Steiner (1912–1924), as follows:

The healthy social life is found when, in the mirror of each human soul, the community can find its reflection, and when, in the community, the virtue of each one is living. (p. 182)

The excitement I feel in reading these papers is similar to the amazement which Glenn et al. describe in *Learning Communities in Educational Partnerships* (2017). I was a co-author of Glenn et al. and, in writing it we used multilayers of collaboration and evaluation similar to the co-authored paper of Amy and Sonia. Glenn et al. began with the story of their own engagement in a learning community: they explain "...how we were amazed by the quality of our learning and the power of belonging to such a community" (p. 164). They sought to extend this excitement by sharing it with others and convened new learning

communities for groups of teachers meeting together outside school time, whole-school groups during and after school hours, online inservice programmes for teachers, student teachers in an ITE context and school/college partners. They claim that these learning communities supported them in their own research because they were sharing in "professional conversations" (Clark 2001).

From the papers in this volume, I learned to see clear connections between the living theory research and the organic growth of a learning community. It is "... the glue for helping a community to come together and stick together." (Glenn et al. 2017 p. 5).

### **Questioning curricula**

Critical questioning of curricula, as well as of context and community, adds another layer of learning in my reading of these papers. Neil and Jocelyn give clear examples of the importance of critical thinking. For example, they say "Teachers stated that they needed to question why they do what they do, and they needed to work on themselves – their own perceptions and reflections. This is the work critical to unlocking the hidden curriculum.". Neil tells us of his critical thinking about his work over a period of seven years. Here is how he expressed it, as:

... a personal journey showing how I became aware of increasing tensions between my own values and ones I saw being enacted in Steiner settings ...to confront, disrupt and review my own previously held opinions, to view familiar things through different lenses and to identify and develop my responses further.

His search is reminiscent of Roche (2004) who says: "As I tried to engage critically with that paradox, I have had to grapple with questions such as, 'Can I work creatively towards my epistemological values within a prescriptive curriculum?'" (ibid., p. 116). Similar to Neil's questioning curricula and re-envisioning of the Walldorf 2, Roche goes on to tell how she encountered resistance to her ideas on "Thinking Time and the Revised Curriculum". Thinking time is a democratic form of classroom dialogues that support critical thinking, even among children as young as four years of age. She explains to colleagues how classroom dialogue could support the whole curriculum, but only if teachers are willing to be critical thinkers themselves and ground their practice in a relational and humanising pedagogy. Roche (2007) says,

... my developing understanding is that the transmission of knowledge, primarily through didactic pedagogies (Murphy 2004, Government of Ireland 2005) in a standardised national curriculum can serve to discourage critical engagement and deny opportunities for dialogue (p. 116).

In practical terms, she adds that the structure of the school day requires teachers to provide coverage of the curriculum, so a culture of what Dadds (2001 p.49) calls "the hurry-along curriculum" begins to emerge, in which teachers' concerns are more about teaching to "...get through' the subject area requirements of the curriculum than teaching for understanding or critique" (Roche, 2007 p. 46).



So, what did I learn? The importance of professional conversations and how they may become powerful ways for facilitating teacher learning and professional development. They can encourage reflection, self-evaluative and emancipatory practices.

### **Collaborative writing**

Building on this idea of collaborative conversations, Amy Dyke and Sonia Hutchison's collaborative writing shows how their "... learning journeys can provide the inspiration for other teachers to form similar educational partnerships and enhance their professional development." (Glenn et al. 2017). In their journey, Amy and Sonia learn through the process of writing a dual-authored paper that they can show their definition of mutuality that allows for each person's unique insights and input; however, through the process of working together, both people are enriched in their learning and development.

Through the videos offered by Amy and Sonya I learned that I could actually clearly see how "... life experiences and daily performances that an educator or a professional engages in is the very context in which living theory is nurtured", as Jerome puts it in his current paper. This clarity was evident to me in my early classroom research; however, in my current role in teacher education, I find this harder to hold on to. Consequently, I am glad of the reassurances I have found in these four papers

### **Significance**

Drawing together the strands of continuous professional learning, contextual awareness, learning communities, questioning curricula and collaborative writing has reinforced my belief in the importance of values in determining validity in practice-based research. The contextual influence of these research pieces is potentially significant. I suggest that you cannot underestimate what might be attained by the critical reflection of the authors on their practice, the identification of areas of dissonance between their values and the way they work, because it "... has the potential to transform their way of working thinking and being." (McDonagh et al. 2012).

If you, dear reader, have the time when you have finished reading this volume, you may find it interesting to visit the EJOLTS open review process and follow the threads of conversations between reviewers and authors. In this transparent process you can read the openness of both the authors and reviewers as they challenge each other's ways of thinking, being and acting. You might then consider joining in this process.

As part of the significance of process of writing, reviewing and publishing a paper, I noticed that one reviewer reflected deeply on his own thinking and then commented on the author's respect for the knowledge of every individual person. Joining with the thinking of the author, he added that, "... we are interested in the personal knowledge that every individual has. They will have knowledge that we will be interested in and is it worth listening to. And how affirming that is for every individual, that they have a fundamental worth. Your worth in the world!". (<http://ejolts.org/mod/forum/view.php?id=5> )

### **Conclusion**

The research processes published here are, as Neil says "... of [their] nature unfinished". I look forward to having the opportunity to read more from these researchers in the years to come. I would like to thank the authors of these papers because they have, in the words Amy and Sonia "Shared values and how they came to them ... Their learning and ... Their ability to give to hope to others." They have given me hope and a better understanding of how living theories develop regardless of contexts.

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