

### **Máirín Glenn**

*Co-convener of NEARI: the Network of Educational Action Research in Ireland, Eire*

Copyright: © Glenn.

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

### **Book review: *Living Theory Research a Way of Life*: Bath: Brown Dog Books.**

Máirín Glenn

This long-awaited book from Jack Whitehead contains eight previously-published papers dating from 1989 (many of which draw on much earlier work also), up to the present day (2018). It is a celebration of Whitehead's most significant writings, which contain his seminal ideas around his development of Living Theory research. Throughout the collection of papers, Whitehead creates and shares explanations of his educational influence in his own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of social formations. He guides readers to explore ideas around some key aspects of Living Theory such as: what constitutes a living-educational-theory, Living Theory as a methodology, living logic and the use of multimedia narrative to clarify and communicate the meanings of embodied values and their use as explanatory principles and living standards of judgement.

The well-chosen collection of papers has been selected by Whitehead to guide readers through various aspects and nuances of Living Theory and to encourage them to explore the process for themselves. The papers highlight important aspects of Whitehead's development of Living Theory, such as embodied values as explanatory principles to clarify and justify educational influence; validity; living contradiction and epistemology. A commentary precedes each paper which serves not only to locate the paper in the landscape of Living Theory, but also gives a sense of Whitehead's own reflexivity as he looks back, with current eyes on the content of the paper. In these commentaries, Whitehead highlights the connections that can be made with previous or forthcoming papers in the book, as well their relevance to current social and political phenomena.

It is as intriguing to track the evolving nature of Whitehead's own emergent insights into Living Theory as it is to gain insight into the foundations underpinning Living Theory throughout the chronologically arranged papers. For example, the reader can trace throughout the book how Self-Study, Autoethnography and Narrative Enquiry have emerged as contributions to how Whitehead currently understands Living Theory whereas in Paper One, Action Research cycles appear to

be the principle contributions to his thinking on Living Theory at that time.

One of Whitehead's recurrent themes, is his use of multimedia narrative to clarify and communicate the meanings of embodied values and their use as explanatory principles and living standards of judgement. He says 'Because the expression of energy in the meanings of these values cannot be communicated using only words on pages of text, I will use video data in a visual narrative to help with the public communication of these meanings' (p. 74) and many of the papers contain URLs with relevant video clips. While the idea of including video clips to enhance communication is an excellent one, I have a reservation about them. Accessing the videoclips can cause the reading of the paper version of the book to become taxing. Readers have to put their book down and type a lengthy URL into a device so as to access the video clip, thus breaking up the flow of the read. The inclusion of QR codes in future editions of the book might ease this problem a little for readers as they could access the clips directly from a smartphone, as they read. This problem does not arise to the same extent with the online version of the book, where the reader can click on a hyperlink to bring them to the clip.

While readers may be disappointed, initially, that the book does not contain a huge amount of new material, they will be enchanted to work their way through the gradually emerging ideas from Whitehead, the founder of Living Theory. Only as one reads these papers in sequence, does one begin to realise the gargantuan nature of the work Whitehead has undertaken. He cites Schön's 'development of a new epistemology in the new scholarship of educational enquiry (Schön, 1995)' (p. 63) as informing his own motivation for creating Living Theory. One cannot but recall Schön's description of introducing new scholarship into institutions as a 'battle of snails' (1995, p. 35). The book outlines how Whitehead engages in the battle of snails to have Living Theory accepted and embedded into the academy by asking questions like 'How can I improve what I am doing?'. From the clear-thinking integrity of the first paper, where Whitehead lays out his stall of innovative, exciting and unsettling ideas, we see him having battles and discourses over issues such as methods and methodology; propositional forms of logic; power; the rejection of the principle of life-affirming and life-enhancing values; generalisability and the importance of digital visual data in a multimedia narrative among others, in subsequent papers.

It is interesting to note, in this book, the account of the influence that some distressing events had on the evolution of Whitehead's thinking and Living Theory as we know it today. Beginning in 1976 when attempts were made to terminate Whitehead's employment, and continuing on for decades in the form of pressure from the governing bodies of the Academy, it is clear that this was a period of huge conflict for Whitehead and frequent references are made to it throughout the book. That Whitehead not only withstood these pressures, and that the conflict appeared to fuel his passion for Living Theory and living a life of integrity, is testament to his strength of character, resilience and passion for Living Theory. He describes how he rechannelled the anger he experienced at that time, which he says, 'could have become pathological and damaging', into 'the life-affirming energy and love for what I am doing, as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influences in my own learning' (p.84). It is fascinating to read in this book that not only has Whitehead survived and won many of these battles, but he has subsequently gone so far as to have 26 doctoral theses, which he has supervised, accepted and legitimated by the Academy.

---

This book is about an epic epistemological battle written by a fearless crusader. It is not for the faint-hearted or the fixed-of-mind. Whitehead said, 'I have faith that our creativity and originality together with our critical abilities will move our ideas forward' (p. 28) and this book certainly moves ideas forward. I look forward to the next book, which will tell of the legacy of Whitehead's continuing contributions to Living Theory research as a social movement.