Learning who I am: The exploration of my guiding values through a Living Theory methodology

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Abstract

This manuscript follows my journey of self-discovery as I uncover and validate my core value of connection with students through the lens of living-theory. Simultaneously learning about the role living-educational-theory plays within our identities as practitioners and scholars alongside my own living-theory work, I intend to capture the developmental experiences of new scholars to this field. Through a longitudinal analysis of student evaluation comments and critical conversations with students and mentors, I attempted to validate my core values of connection and caring as well as discover where the tensions in my practice exist. Additionally, I engaged in an action research cycle designed to address tensions I found in creating relationships with my online students. By sharing my work within my community, I hope to create safe places where others can embark on this journey and experience the sense of wholeness and peace that comes with aligning your practice to your living-educational theory.

Keywords: Connection; Living-theory; Caring; Dialogue; Online students

Introduction:

In this paper, I aim to tell my story of peeling back the layers of my practice to get to the core. While I know there is still more work to be done, I think it is essential to document the beginning, both for myself and for others, so that we, as a community, can appreciate both the advanced comprehension of this methodology and the early developmental stages of understanding, while highlighting the various entry-points for those wishing to explore their living-theories. This journey vacillates between deep reflection on my practice, validation of my thinking through dialogue with students, and validation of parts of my practice through a historical account of qualitative student evaluations. I will end with where I believe my living-theory is today and how I will move forward to embrace my core values as standards of practice. It is important to note that not everyone knows who they are in the beginning, and this place of unknowing has its own value because it requires vulnerability. To learn who I am, I had first to admit that I didn't know.

In my current role as an Assistant Professor in the College of Education, I primarily teach graduate courses and advise both masters and doctoral students throughout multiple programs. Our Master's program made the transition to an online degree five years ago, and within that program, I teach our capstone action research course. This action research course is taught online and is also taken as a research elective by many of the doctoral students throughout our College of Education. Additionally, I work with faculty throughout the university to support their growth and comfort with online teaching as my department's eLearning coordinator. Before my role at the university, I worked as a curriculum manager for a large virtual school, focusing on curriculum design for distance-education courses for secondary students across the state. As an action researcher, I have studied my practice and context for years, examining the impact of the online medium on various aspects of my pedagogy and reflecting on how we, as teacher educators, can continue to create quality learning experiences for our students within multiple mediums (Uribe & Vaughan, 2017; Vaughan, 2014). I have also focused much of my writing on the role action research can and should play with Colleges of Education (Vaughan & Burnaford, 2015; Vaughan, Boerum & Whitehead, 2019). I have never defined myself as a person who was either 'tech savvy' or 'tech-averse', but my focus has always been on how to recreate or redesign educational experiences that are meaningful or transformative for students in a face-to-face format, simultaneously modeling these practices for my students, who are usually currently teaching or about to enter the field.

My introduction to Living Theory was serendipitous. Within my action research course, I often direct my students to examine the tensions in their practice as a starting place for their research. I encourage them to explore the uneasiness and make careful observations about what may be causing friction in their practice before we work together to plan their classroom research. Yet I wondered, was I paying attention to my own tensions? In the summer of 2018, I attended the ALARA World Congress in Vermont to present on the role of action research in doctoral coursework. While there, I participated in a session with Jackie Delong, Jack Whitehead, and Marie Huxtable entitled, 'Where do we go from here in contributing

to '*The Action Learning and Action Research Legacy for Transforming Social Change?'*

As I sat in this conference session and was asked to discuss the values that make up my living-educational-theory, I began to feel negligent about my core values as an educator. I could think of many things that were important to me … but how could I get beyond naming the pedagogical pieces of my practice to identify the core values from which all my pedagogical decisions are made? I traveled back home after the conference heavy with reflection but with a renewed enthusiasm about my practice and this notion of uncovering my living-educational-theory.

Uncovering My Building Blocks

I started this process by thinking through what was important to me as an educator and landed instead on *who* was important to my education. I engaged in an exercise that I have previously taken preservice teachers through, asking them to think about their favorite teacher, identify why that person made an impact, and what characteristics they had that my students would want to emulate. The purpose of this exercise is usually to hone in on what they feel are vital characteristics of "good" teachers. This was as good of a starting place as any for me, and I wrote the following narrative in late August (Vaughan, 2018):

"My favorite teacher was my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Tavitian, but not because of anything she did while I was a student in her class. As a child, I was an easy student, the kind that got all A's and the one you sat next to another child who needed a "good example" of behavior. In 2002, as a college student home for the summer, I went back to my home elementary school to volunteer for the last month of school before they ended for their own summer break. They sent me to volunteer in a third-grade classroom with a young male teacher who was, as they defined, "cutting-edge." As I walked the familiar route to the third-grade wing, I stopped right outside his classroom and realized he was teaching directly across from Mrs. Tavitian. I was too scared to go in, afraid of her not remembering me; perhaps I hadn't made as significant an impact on her as she had on me. As my volunteer hours came to a close, I asked the young male teacher how Mrs. Tavitian was, and he informed me this was her last year, she was retiring in just a few weeks. I told him I was her former student and asked him to tell her I said hello. The next time I came to volunteer, he informed me that she wanted to see me. I nervously popped my head in, and she enthusiastically jumped up to hug me (she was reading James and the Giant Peach from her stool, precisely as she did with me 13 years prior). In our brief conversation, she asked me about my life, my sister, and my mother, recalling details I had long forgotten about my childhood and our year together. When I told her I would have my first classroom in just a few short years, she scribbled down her address on a sheet of paper and told me to write to her and tell her all about it, that she knew I would be perfect.

"My first year of teaching was a challenging endeavor. I was hired at a school that took teacher requests from parents and being in a new teacher's class meant one of two things...you either didn't know enough about the school to request a teacher or your request was not filled. Many parents were less than thrilled for their children to be in my classroom. My assigned mentor was the school librarian, who was only serving in that role for desperately needed volunteer hours for another project she was involved in. I felt alone and scared. After my first day with my students, I sat in my portable classroom and cried. I took out a sheet of paper and began writing a

letter to Mrs. Tavitian (as I had promised) and told her how I didn't know how she did this for 30 years, that she made it look so easy, and that I certainly wasn't perfect and was failing. I quickly sent it and forgot about it, admitting my failure to a retired teacher who lived five states away was the closest I got to being vulnerable in that moment. A few weeks later, I received a card back from Mrs. Tavitian where she acknowledged that my struggle was typical and that it would get better. She ended with this, "You will be a wonderful teacher, of that I have no doubt. I wish you all the best in the future. I am so proud of you." From then on, when faced with decisions in the classroom, I asked myself…What would Mrs. Tavitian do? She became my North Star, and my perception of her values became my own in those early years as an educator."

I was in tears when I finished writing about Mrs. Tavitian. I had never admitted to anyone that there was a point (or many points) where I thought I was going to fail as a teacher. And when I finally did, I was met with such kindness and love from her that it still takes my breath away to read those words written in her beautiful script from so many years ago. Her love shaped me and absolutely shaped my practice. This first layer of reflection led me to see the importance of unwavering love and caring for my students as well as the necessity to create creating relationships where they are safe to admit failure. This was not a surprise to me, as I have clear memories of the first time I read the work of Nel Noddings in my doctoral program and felt a sense of validation and relief that my emotional approach to pedagogy was indeed an existing part of the theories within the educational landscape. I will use the section below to further explore those theoretical connections.

Grounding My Beliefs

With the tears behind me, I embarked on an exploration of the educational theorists who spoke to me as a practitioner and who also challenged me in my understanding of what it means to connect and engage with my students. My goal is to weave together the ideas that have supported not only my thinking about pedagogy and theory but my actions within the classroom and my relationships with students. Working from a definition of living-theory as: 'an explanation produced by an individual for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work' (Whitehead, 2008, p. 104), I sought to identify key theories and scholars who, along with my own educational experiences, have informed the creation of a framework that Brock (2005) refers to as a 'pedagogy of wholeness,' which recognizes the inadequacy of one pedagogy to capture all the unique goals of a single educator in their context. As previously mentioned, central to my early thinking was the value of connecting with my students through values of respect and caring.

This value grew initially from the work of Nel Noddings, who explains that, "every human life starts in relation, and it is through relations that a human individual emerges" (2012, p. 771). The relationship between student and teacher is multidimensional, and each person within the relationship may seek something different. Yamamoto (1998) discusses the significance of being seen and validated in a mentoring relationship, which is an accurate description of my work with graduate students, specifically in my role as an advisor. But it is not only the student who needs to be seen, for the relationship to work there must be, "a delicate interweaving of a sense of seeing and being seen" (p. 184). Without both, the synthesis or

symbiosis of the relationship cannot occur. Noddings (2005) explores this same principle in her discussion of the roles of the cared-for and one-caring:

> "In order for the relation to be properly called caring, both parties must contribute to it in characteristic ways. A failure on the part of either carer or cared-for blocks completion of caring and, although there may still be a relation – that is, an encounter or connection in which each party feels something toward the other – it is not a *caring* relation." (p. 15)

For me, this caring relationship is the foundation of the connection I am attempting to make with my students. One of the challenges of making meaningful connections with students in higher education can be the traditional hierarchy in the roles of professor and student. Higher-education settings may paint a picture of a professor as a *sage on the stage* and create implicit expectations to convey this image to students. While professors do possess deep knowledge about the content we are teaching, recognizing and validating the knowledge students bring to our classrooms may be the first step in creating relationships with our students. In *Teaching to Transgress* (2014), bell hooks unpacks her ideas about creating an educational community in which students are highly valued members, as well as the tension that can exist between traditional perspectives or perceptions of what it means to be an educator in academia as she shares her own experiences:

> "Most professors were often deeply antagonistic toward, even scornful of, any approach to learning emerging from a philosophical standpoint emphasizing the union of mind, body, and spirit, rather than the separation of these elements. Like many of the students I now teach, I was often told by powerful academics that I was misguided to seek such a perspective in the academy." (p. 18)

I experienced some of these same feelings as warnings from senior faculty, explaining to me that I was *too nice* or *naive* and would be taken advantage of by students. However, like bell hooks, I could not turn off the caring I felt for my students and felt intrinsically that this was key to my success as an educator and not only the cornerstone of creating a classroom community, but a necessity. She goes on to explain: 'as a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence' (hooks, 2014, p. 8). In order to do that:

> "teachers approach students with the will and desire to respond to our unique beings, even if the situation does not allow the full emergence of a relationship based on mutual recognition. Yet the possibility of such recognition is always present." (p. 13)

This approach to teaching and creating relationships with students is described by hooks as engaged pedagogy and creates space for multiple voices in a classroom, ensuring that all members of the classroom community are empowered. Similar themes can be seen within the literature on relational pedagogy, which focuses on mutual respect between students and teachers as necessary to ensure that an environment is conducive to learning (Baxter Magolda, 1993).

Knowing that relationships and connection are firmly rooted in my pedagogical stance, it is essential for me to explain what I view as a meaningful connection with my students. In unpacking what connection looks like in my practice, I draw again upon feelings described by Noddings (2005) as engrossment. The total and complete

focus on the other individual at that moment in time, the act of truly listening, caring and an overwhelming feeling of wanting to help or connect with that individual to move them closer to their expressed goals. This often occurs through conversation filled with 'genuine dialogue' in which, "neither party knows at the outset what the outcome or decision will be" (p. 23), as opposed to a one-way conversation where the teacher imposes their viewpoint onto the student. It is through this dialogue that I can sift through my own beliefs about what my students may need (assumed needs) and their actual expressed needs. This notion of open dialogue can be found in Freire's (2005) explanation as well:

> "Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming – between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them." (p. 88)

Frieire's definition requires that I, as the educator, enter the conversation with an open mind and an open heart. What I view as important is the approach to connection that tries its best to be unassuming and leads with respect for those involved in the conversation.

But why are these connections important to students and how does it help them to learn? These questions led me to the model of motivational development, based on self-determination theory. This model explains that the teacher-student relationship can support (or hinder) the fundamental human needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy that, when met, build a student's motivation to learn and educational resilience (Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014):

> "Relatedness is the need to be connected to others or belong to a larger social group; competence is the need to feel effective in interactions with social and physical environments; and autonomy is the need to express one's authentic self and be the source of action." (p. 104)

Figure 1 below shows the interaction of these key elements within a learning environment and illustrates how the presence of relatedness, competence, and autonomy can impact student engagement and student learning.
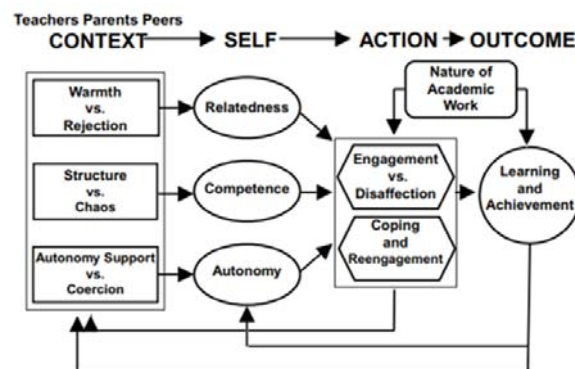

Figure 1. The Self-System Model of Motivational Development.
Reprinted from Furrer, C. J., Skinner, E. A., & Pitzer, J. R. (2014).

This model supports my core value of connection as well as the pedagogical strategies I use to embody that value; showing vulnerability, generating excitement through interest, and respecting knowledge, time, and limitations of my students. While connection is a core value of mine, the context in which that comes through in a classroom or relationships with students, is key to its presence in my practice. The contextual characteristics on the far left of Figure 1 embody those instructional strategies I believe I use within my practice that act as a vehicle for the transmission of my core values. For example, the contextual factors that support the presence (or absence) of competence are structure and chaos. As an educator, whether teaching elementary students or doctoral students, organization and structure have always created a foundation for learning in my classroom. This does not mean I am incapable of flexibility; for me, organization is a sign of respect for my students' time. Particularly in my online teaching, by thinking through what they will need to be successful in the upcoming semester or year and investing my time to plan accordingly, I strive to remove or lower stress and create a learning environment that supports creative thinking and risk-taking.

I believe I show warmth through my feedback and attentive nature, embodying the 'golden rule' in my relationships with students. I respond quickly to emails, give compliments along with constructive feedback, ask about their lives, and listen attentively to their responses. While this may sound like a simple list, my warmth is genuine because I truly care about my students and am invested in their academic journey. I often tell my students that it is the goal of every educator to work themselves out of a job, to gradually release the support you give to your students so that they no longer need you and you become a great teacher in their past. This is how I interpret the autonomy-support in the model of motivational development. The complexity of supporting autonomy is in distinguishing the individual needs of each student, by connecting with their own core values and adjusting my practice accordingly. Creating an organized context that exudes warmth sets the stage for a meaningful relationship to flourish and shows respect for students. In doing so, I am working from Freire's (1998) ideas on the role of respect in student learning:

> "The climate of respect that is born of just, serious, humble, and generous relationships, in which both the authority of the teacher and the freedom of the students are ethically grounded, is what converts pedagogical space into authentic educational experience." (p. 86)

Listening carefully to the needs of your students allows educators to tweak their level of support throughout the relationship, always being mindful that the goal is no longer to be needed by your students.

Testing My Value of Connection

As part of the validation process of my living-theory, I engaged in a series of steps to uncover where my core values were present in my practice and where potential tensions might occur. For me, the validation process required multiple perspectives and voices to ensure that the data I collected triangulated in a way that considered the variety of roles and relationships that make up my practice. My

validation process began with a more traditional qualitative analysis of our university's student evaluation-system to provide me with a longitudinal view of how students perceived my teaching. I then began a series of critical conversations with my students and a member of the Living Theory community, Jackie Delong, about my findings. The next section includes their voices and insights.

The current university's evaluation-system asks students to answer 'what they liked most' about the course and provides them with a space to give additional comments about the course. I began by reviewing my student comments from the previous seven semesters of teaching (140 comments). Comments represented all levels of classes (undergraduate, graduate, doctoral) and both online and face-to-face courses. I conducted three rounds of analysis for the 140 comments pulled from student evaluations. In the first round of analysis, I analyzed the topics students commented on and coded them into the following five categories; professor, assessments, content, course activities, course structure. In my second round of analysis, I reorganized these comments by a delivery method (face-to-face and online), and in the final round of analysis I did a further examination of the professor category through the lens of the model of motivational development. The multiple levels of analysis allowed me to validate my working educational living-theory as well as look for where the tensions between my living-theory and practice may exist.

Table 1 shows the results of the first two rounds of analysis. In face-to-face sections, the highest percentage of comments were made about the professor (40%), while in the online sections, comments on the course structure ranked highest (40%).

Topic of comment	Comment totals in face-to-face sections	Comment totals in online sections
Course Activities	7% (6)	0% (0)
Assessments	12% (11)	16% (12)
Content	19% (17)	14% (11)
Course Structure	22% (20)	40% (30)
Professor	40% (37)	30% (23)

Table 1. Analysis of Student Comments by Topic and Course Delivery Method

The results of the third round of analysis are in Table 2. Using the model of motivational development as an analysis tool, the professor comments were analyzed again for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. After seeing the differences between the percentage of comments related to the professor in each delivery method, the comments were again separated by online and face-to-face (F2F) to see if the core values in my living-theory were translating to my students.

Terms of Relatedness (F2F)	Terms of Competence (F2F)	Terms of Autonomy (F2F)
• Helpful • Fun • Engaging • Passion • Comfortable • Entertaining • Caring • Inspiring	• Effective • Informative • Experienced • Knowledgeable • Efficient	• Flexible • Fair • Respectful • Encouraging • Openness • Honesty
Terms of Relatedness (Online)	**Terms of Competence (Online)**	**Terms of Autonomy (Online)**
• Easy to talk to • Engaging • Positive feedback • Supportive • Kind	• Responds quickly • Organized • Accessible • Informative • Scaffolding • Thorough feedback • Professional	• Constructive feedback • Shows respect • Sense of fair play • Fair grading

Table 2. Analysis of Student Comments by Model of Motivational Development

It seems clear that some fundamental values exist regardless of the medium, such as respect and fairness, efficient communication, being informative, engaging, kind, and caring. Many student comments about feedback came across in online sections, described as positive, thorough, and constructive. Looking closely at the terms in the relatedness categories, words that would be close to my core values and theories I connect to, seem to be prevalent in the face-to-face section but missing in the online sections (fun, passion, entertaining, inspiring). While they are both positive and represent my value of connection with students, I am left to wonder about the tensions that exist in my role as an online instructor. While I did not start this journey to examine the differences in my practice by medium, both the number of comments about the professor between the delivery methods and the type of comments indicate that there is work to be done in meaningfully connecting with my online students and finding ways for my core living-theory values to come through that medium.

Creating Space for Critical Conversations

With a working knowledge of my core values and a hypothesis about where tensions may exist in my practice, I next engaged in some critical conversations with

students and advisees about my practice and living-theory. The analysis of my university evaluations gave me the breadth of data, but I engaged in these critical conversations to provide me with deeper insight from a more personal vantage point. I invited three of my doctoral students to meet with me to discuss their feedback about an early draft of this manuscript. All three students have had courses with me both online and in a traditional face-to-face format, so I was interested to hear their thoughts on my interpretations of my core values as well as the results from the student evaluation data. I asked them to review the working draft and reflect on my strengths and weaknesses in connecting with students and how they felt my 'teaching personality' came across when they were in an online course with me. I also asked them to think about what advice they would give others when taking a course with me or being my advisee.

Of course, the conversation grew into other areas, but these were some of the initial starting points. First, we discussed their feedback on the draft I shared with them (most of which is still in this manuscript). They added additional insight to the model of motivational development, commenting that connections that occur with instructors 'outside of the content' can often make students feel more comfortable and create a space where students can take risks and ask questions. They agreed that it is easier to build those relationships in the 'chat time' that occurs with instructors before class starts and at breaks or after class. These small moments in a class can lead to a richer connection between an instructor and student, where the student is seen as a 'whole person'. This supports some of my earlier thinking about creating opportunities to talk with students about shared experiences by being more vulnerable. In one portion of our conversation, we shared our individual experiences with the struggle to show vulnerability with our students in higher education. Having all served as adjuncts at the university, they reflected on their journey to be a 'whole person' when working with students. The video of that conversation is in the link below, and it is important to note that all students included in these videos were sent the video clips and gave permission for their use in this manuscript.
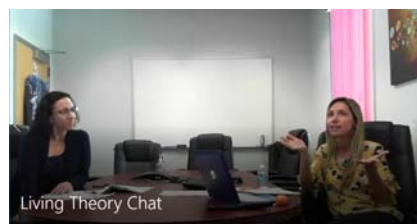
Video 1: Critical conversation with doctoral students (Vaughan, 2018a)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbUoE1wgqWI&feature=youtu.be

This video also highlights that this conversation created a space not only for me to receive critical feedback on my growth, but also validated some of their feelings about their own instructional practices and shared experiences in the group. Perhaps they felt that space was created for them to admit the tensions they also felt about being that 'sage on the stage' and while this was not the intended outcome of this conversation, just the process of sharing my living-theory journey brought about this shared moment in time. This conversation is evidence of the theory of engrossment discussed earlier (Noddings, 2005), when our dialogue took a turn

through the genuine focus and interest in the experiences of others in the conversation. There were many opportunities for me to pull the discussion back to the original topic, but my vested interest in what they were sharing allowed us to travel somewhere new as a group and create an additional level of connection through our shared experiences, and for that I am thankful.

Further in the conversation, when discussing the details of my working living-theory, they commented specifically about my ability to be responsive to students. When I asked if this was represented by some of the comments about being quick to respond to emails, they further explained what they meant by responsiveness as it related to their experiences with me as their advisor in the doctoral program (Vaughan, 2018).

"Nicole: You were very responsive to the preplanning I did when I came into this program, which was awesome, you were very receptive and prepared me for what I could expect and what I wanted to do and potentially preparing me for the alternative, which wound up happening. So that was really great, but I wasn't discouraged, I still felt like I could do the plan I set in my head and you were also there in case it didn't work out, which it didn't and you were still there…I felt like you were there when I needed you.

Linda: I put my complete faith in your advising, when I made the decision in my profession to change jobs in order to afford myself to pursue, what I saw even at my age, as my professional goal of earning a doctorate…and try to give back to the profession that has provided and supported me to become the educator that I am. I have to tell you, I don't think I have ever not gone with your suggestion, you've just nailed it for me. Even with what I am doing now. I am the opposite of Nicole, I made everyone know what was going on in my personal life…I have an end goal in mind and because of your years and experience with the program, you are able to navigate me through so I am one of those that put my full faith in your recommendations to me so I can make that balance…you're not setting me up for something that I am not able to accomplish and that means a lot to me.

Amanda: I think I have had a similar experience to Linda, where I just trust what you tell me to take and it's been magical. I don't know how you knew what, exactly, I think you have a very good way of differentiating. In my mind, you must just have a path laid out for all of us and you say it quickly and it works out magically…I don't know if that's from your experience or how well you know me…but you have laid out this foundation, I guess for all three of us in different circumstances. And even before I came into the program I noticed that the feedback you gave me, and I took Action Research as a nondegree seeking student before I even applied to the program, I had no idea what I was going to do in the program and your feedback to me was very on my level in that moment and you somehow knew that and gave me very constructive feedback that made me feel like I could do this program. And I go back and read that paper now and think 'Oh my gosh, I was so naive" but you never made me feel like that, you made me feel like I was successful and that encouraged me to move on."

Through their stories about the meaningful moments we shared in advising, it became clear that being responsive didn't mean timely (although they also appreciated that), it meant that I was responsive to their needs, their life goals, and, at times, their life stress. Because we spent time developing a relationship that was

respectful and allowed space for vulnerability, I was better able to provide advising that was individual to their needs. As Yamamoto (1998) describes, it is the recognition of the other individual, the experience of being seen that has an impact far beyond what the message or advice may be:

> "What is sought is not praise, reward, or pity, all of which are an accounting for past deeds. Rather, it is regard-an acknowledgment of one's personhood as well as trust in what is and is to come-that is desired…If that is the case, the recognition and affirmation by a mentor may be expected to have a profound influence on the chosen few." (p. 184)

The outcome of this critical conversation along with my own reflections on my practice has given me the knowledge to define living-educational-theory for myself, as it exists for now.

It is clear to me that my living-educational-theory focuses on my core value of connection, but an essential part of this validation process is examining *how* that value permeates my practice. I am suggesting that I make the following choices within my pedagogy (consciously and unconsciously) to allow my values to flow through my practice without tension: showing vulnerability, generating excitement through interest, respecting knowledge, time, and limitations, and focusing on caring relationships. I believe these pedagogical choices encompass the terms used by students to describe my practice and the feelings expressed by my doctoral students to describe our working relationship. I look forward to the continued focus on the *how* in my practice now that I have a greater sense of the *why.*

Addressing the Tensions and Moving Forward

After discovering where the missed connections are occurring in my practice between online and face-to-face sections, I can now begin the work to close the potential gap in the experiences of my students based on what I found in the student evaluation data. As Whitehead explained in his own early work in Living Theory:

> "I found my imagination worked spontaneously in generating ideas about how I might improve my practice…making it explicit helped me to see the importance of strengthening the data I collected to make a judgment on the effectiveness of my actions and understandings." (2008, p. 110)

I engaged in the following action-research cycle in order to explore ways in which I could create connections with my students in an online medium.

Increased Video Opportunities

The nature of online learning can lend itself to be an isolating experience, and for my students to 'see' me as a real person and interpret my nonverbal body language, they need to be able to actually see me (Brinthaupt *et al.,* 2011). In previous semesters, I have occasionally used the video option when meeting synchronously with students, but this semester every student meeting will include attendance via video. While this practice is still evolving, I want to share a short clip of a conversation that occurred this semester during a graduate course in action research. In the clip, I ask one of my students about her experience as a teacher-

researcher this semester, and she reflects on the impact this work has had on the student she has chosen to focus her project on. In this course, students are asked to design original research-projects based on their context. In this video, she discusses her decision to abandon her first idea and focus instead on a single struggling middle-school student.
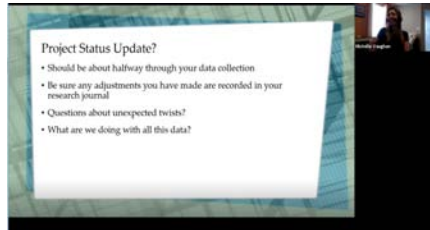
Video 2: Conversation with a graduate student about becoming a teacher-researcher

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa2s8nU2lZg&feature=youtu.be (Vaughan, 2018b)

When I watch this clip, I see the beginning of an evolution for Afifeh, and I hope that watching me smile and nod my head and encourage her to grow has played some small role in supporting her. While we never know which moment will stay with our students, I am further encouraged by what she wrote in her final course reflection, and I do believe that an increased focus on my practice of connecting to students may be starting to have a ripple effect:

> "What I once thought was intimidating and daunting has now become a welcome challenge that I hope to continue to conquer. I realized during this process that I enjoy research. In the past whenever I heard the term "research" I shied away because of my fear, however, through this project I realize that I have been a "teacher-researcher" for many years. As educators, we are continuously researching for strategies to implement in our classrooms that would be of most benefit for our students' academic success. We equip ourselves with knowledge through trainings and field experience that essentially lends itself to action research plans. I feel that this project has given me the confidence to conduct future action research and share my findings with my colleagues. I would like to challenge myself to conduct research on a larger scale for the benefit of more students and teachers with the support of my administration and colleagues. As teachers, we sometimes become disheartened due to the overwhelming constraints forced upon us because of policies, however, when we reflect on the impact we have on students, we push forward and continue to work diligently for the sake of our students." (Shatara, 2018)

Opportunities for One-on-One Time

Individualized and specific feedback on formative assignments is already a significant part of my practice (Uribe & Vaughan, 2017). In addition to this practice, I added one-on-one 'phone calls, emails, or video chats to my practice to follow up on feedback given or check in on students' progress. Every student signed up for a phone conference at least once during the semester, and other one-on-one sessions occurred as needed. In this first semester, one of my students, Beth, was chronically late turning in assignments and showed little participation in certain portions of the course. In an online environment, a lack of involvement can often be interpreted by an instructor as a sign of apathy or disengagement. However, this semester had me

engaged deeply with my core values, with constant reflection on their presence in my practice. I scheduled a one-on-one phone conference with Beth to discuss her project and her participation in the course.

As we spoke about her progress one afternoon, I asked Beth how everything was going and if she was O.K. She began by telling me how sorry she was that so many things were late. I told her I knew she was more than capable of doing the work and asked her what was preventing her progress. It was then she told me about her anxiety and fear of failure. She said she was often crippled by self-doubt when working on assignments and this led her to start her work over and over again, missing deadlines and then being cast as a bad student. We talked for another 15-20 minutes about questions she had, made a plan for turning in the rest of her assignments, and promised to speak again soon.

As I hung up the phone, I felt so connected to her that I wondered how I could have ever doubted her commitment to the course. She has since completed all her assignments and has made plans to continue her research next semester. While these interactions often happen in face-to-face classes I teach, where students can quickly tell me what is going on in their personal lives, they are few and far between with my online students. To create a space where my core value of connection can flourish, I need to create opportunities for this to occur intentionally.

Humanizing the Instructor

To combat the traditional roles that we may fall into in higher education, I am exploring how to humanize my role as an online instructor. This may include sharing more personal stories related to the course, admitting mistakes and showing vulnerability, and connecting to my students over topics we share (like when technology fails us) instead of reverting to solving their problem. Of course, this may be the hardest strategy to document and may be more of a shift of mindset than a change in practice. Our values guide our practice, yet perhaps through conscious awareness of the impact our values have on our practice, the role of the instructor, especially online, may naturally become more humanized. Further, by breaking down the imaginary barriers that exist between students and instructors, conversations about values and practice can become a standard part of classroom dialogue. As I work with practising teachers, I also hope to model how this relationship between values and practice exists and evolves, providing support and encouragement for teachers to focus on their own living-theories as others have done for me.

It is my goal to continue to explore, through dialogue and video, how I can adjust my practice as an educator (online and face-to-face) to consistently reflect my core beliefs and ensure that all my students, regardless of the medium, build a strong rapport with me and are engaged in a learning environment that values them as learners.

### Shifting from Examining my Values to Living my Values

As I reflect upon this initial phase of uncovering my core values and validating their presence in my practice, a significant shift has occurred within the energy I bring into my relationships with students. As a result of a deeper understanding of my emerging living-theory, I am no longer uncovering my values, but ensuring that my values become the

standard of practice for which all my decisions are measured against. In my initial narrative about Mrs. Tavitian, it is clear to me that she served as a 'stand-in' set of guiding values for me while I developed my own values, honing my craft and beliefs about students over the first decade of teaching.

I embarked on this journey to have a better understanding of what lies at my core, yet what I have come to realize is that this journey was indeed about bringing my core to the surface and creating the space to let it flow outward with confidence and purpose. When we talk about cores, they are often hidden, as in the middle of the earth or even the center of an apple, but this work is about exposing them and bringing them to the light for examination and discussion. Once my inside was revealed, I felt the sense of wholeness described by Moira Laidlaw (2008), the fragmented pieces of things that were important to me suddenly aligning themselves to create a scene that made sense for this first time. I found I could not do this work alone, and through the mentorship I received from those within this field, I was encouraged to talk about my work, share my thinking and expose my core. While initially uncomfortable, once I started, I found that I could not stop. Like a good book, I would share my story with anyone who would listen, making new pathways for this energy to travel. Marie Huxtable (2016) shares that:

> "A key concern of a Living-theory researcher is to create and make public valid accounts of their living-theory research to contribute to the development of an educational knowledge-base. In doing so the researcher is going beyond researching to improve 'personal educational practice' to contribute to improving their own and other people's 'professional educational practice." (p. 15)

I found another shift occurs when you move from an *i* to a *we* – the *we* being the community in which the work of studying your living-theory is not only encouraged but highly valued. As a part of this new *we* – I have gained strength in my conviction to share this work and the work of others in this field. Just the awareness of an international support system has helped me be more accountable to my own living-theory work. In a conversation with Jackie Delong about this manuscript, I describe the levels of deep reflection that occurred during the actual writing process and how committing to writing about my living-educational-theory permeated every aspect of my life. In the video, Jackie encourages me to include this clip as evidence of the impact this work has had on me, not only within my practice but within every context I participate in.
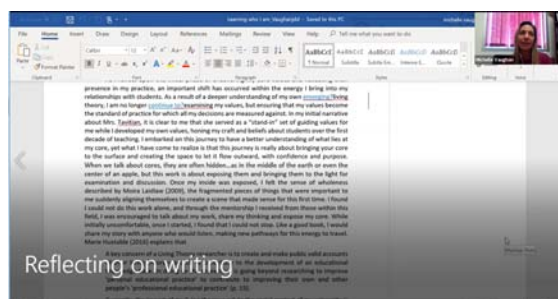
Video 3: Reflection about the writing process with Jackie Delong (Vaughan, 2019)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnyXGcLrrtU&feature=youtu.be

Next Steps

I have discussed the impact of this work on my own thinking, but as I grow in my knowledge, I hope to have a more substantial impact on those around me. Currently, I believe the effect of my living-theory work on the social context of my university includes the acquisition of new knowledge through exposure to the field. But as time goes by, I am confident that knowledge will turn to action, first inward and then outward, creating ripples of self-awareness and change around me. In my doctoral courses, we have begun to discuss the role of living-theory in defining who we are as teachers and researchers. My students are reading published work in the field of educational living-theory and examining the work of other doctoral students who have published their dissertations on www.actionresearch.net. I hope that becoming aware of a place for this work will encourage those students who are ready to engage in living-theory work to start their own journey. Following a class session in early Spring, I emailed Jackie about the initial response from my doctoral students:

> "Just wanted to send a quick email to let you know that last night was our 'Living Theory night' in our doc class. The students spent time before class exploring www.actionresearch.net and reading some pieces to help them understand the methodology. We used the AR planner Jack shared with me after the conference and had some really great conversations. I usually don't take tears in class as a good sign, but it was a welcome sight last night as students talked about things in their practice that they held dear to them. I look forward to doing more of this work and taping it (I wasn't ready to do that last night) and asking you more questions!! Just wanted to share!" (M. Vaughan, personal communication, February 7, 2019)

I anticipate that there will be moments of struggle in maintaining my deeply held values within the dynamics at play in higher education, and I may need the support of the living-theory community to address these tensions. Similar to the instances described earlier by Brock (2005), I may need to defend my deep-rooted beliefs about the role of caring and connection in higher education. While some of my students were aware of my research this semester, most were blissfully unaware of the deep reflection and examination I was conducting on my own values. I do believe that the constant small changes and shifts I made in my practice, such as removing barriers that may inhibit my connection to students, benefited them and us in the development of our relationship. I feel more connected to my students, online and face-to-face, and I look forward to seeing how those connections develop over time.

Further in my conversation with Jackie Delong, she asked me to explain what I would focus my energy on moving forward with my living-theory. The transcript of that conversation is below so readers can see the evolution of my thinking about these next steps and Jackie's support in the development of these ideas:

> "Michelle: I think there's a natural next step that occurs in my practice, the application of my living-theory to my practice will continue to see me create a space where the connections I have with my students are first and foremost, not second. Not content first and then let me see if I can make a connection, but connection first and then content second, so I think there's a reshifting in that pyramid and that's in my practice. But I think also there's a next step in me as an advocate of the field, I guess, because I do feel that I have been enriched by the process and I want to, similarly how you

have been a shepherd for me, I would like to also be that person for others. Even though I am certainly a novice in this game, I am happy to learn alongside people.

Jackie: And we all were, at some point, we all started with a little bit of information and support and that's how we all started. So that's how the community grows.

Michelle: And community is the right word I think because I would like there to be a community here, yes, I think people are ready to look at themselves, I think we live in an era where people are more openly looking inward. I think people have been looking inward forever, but I think it is more of a dialogue about why we do things and how you do things and what things we struggle with and I want to be able to create a safe place for students to do that…I think that the role that this plays is really about planting your feet firmly and knowing who you are so that you can be aware of when you are not who you are and know that that is toxic for you and find a way to find a safe place. I would like to create a place where values are valid and the conversations matters and it's not secondary.

Jackie: Lovely." (Vaughan, 2019)

Following this conversation, Jackie pointed me back to an earlier publication of hers in EJOLTS that discussed the role of cultures of inquiry in living-theory action research (Delong, 2013). This article provided me with a framework and the language to capture the type of community I described in my conversation with her. As I move forward with my living-educational-theory work, my goal is to bring others with me in a culture of inquiry, defined beautifully as the 'creation of a safe, supportive space where students and teachers are enabled to make explicit their values and make themselves accountable for living according to those values' (Delong, 2013, p. 26). I am hopeful that the paradox of mentorship that Yamamoto (1998) discusses has occurred, that in Jackie mentoring me to see beyond myself and become more fully the person I was meant to me, I am simultaneously helping to fulfill her own potential as I serve in my role as the mentee. By modeling for me how to support others in developing their ideas about living-educational-theory, I am now able to advocate for the role living-educational-theory *must* play in our development as practitioners and scholars.

Change is not always easy, and while I believe most of my change has occurred internally, it will no doubt continue to impact those around me. I am eternally grateful for my serendipitous introduction to this field and hope that sharing my developmental work will encourage others to peel back the layers of their own practice to reconnect or connect for the first time with the values that influence their work and the relationships around them.

Your own Self-Realization is the greatest service you can render the world.
(Ramana Maharshi)

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