

## The transformative potential of living theory educational research

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### Abstract

Transformation, based on the values of social justice, inclusion and respect for human dignity, is espoused by the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University as a core value. However, there is a danger that transformation and its accompanying values will remain empty rhetoric unless they are incorporated into everyday practice at micro-levels. I am therefore prompted to ask 'How can we use educational theory to transform our practices at higher education?' In this article, I will attempt to demonstrate how values-based, self-study action research can help provide answers to questions about educational theory: I will demonstrate how I, together with colleagues, hold ourselves accountable for our own practices via the generation of living educational theories (Whitehead, 1989) and by so doing, make significant contributions to the growth of educational knowledge. I make a case that self-study practitioner inquiry has a vital role to play in the development of new theories of practice which will contribute to the transformation of the epistemology of educational inquiry in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

**Keywords:** Action research; Living theory; Transformation at higher education; Educational research

## Introduction

The vision statement of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) reads as follows: '[It will] be a dynamic African university, recognised for its leadership in generating cutting-edge knowledge for a sustainable future' (NMMU, 2010).

This vision implies that the university acknowledges its main function to be the generation of knowledge that will contribute to theory and to innovations that will, in turn, lead to sustained societal improvement. The values chosen by the institution to inform and define the institutional ethos and distinctive educational purpose and philosophy are: respect for diversity, excellence, Ubuntu<sup>1</sup>, integrity and respect for the natural environment.

This article will attempt to explain how I, together with colleagues at NMMU, are contributing to transformation of the academy in line with its stated values, through embarking on self-study action research in order to generate our own living theories (Whitehead, 1989) and by so doing, make significant contributions to the growth of educational knowledge. I argue that the cumulative effect of such self-transformation not only contributes towards transformation of the faculty and institution, but, if researchers hold themselves accountable to living out their educational, epistemological and ontological values, they will be able to exert a positive and sustainable educational influence upon other social formations (Whitehead, 1989).

I will explain how I come to this conclusion by means of a narrative outlining what my educational concern is and why I am concerned; what I think can be done about it and what I am doing; how I can evaluate the educational influences of my actions; and how I demonstrate the validity and significance of the account of my educational influence in learning (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). In providing an explanation of my own learning, I will elucidate how I came to formulate emergent answers to some of the questions that need to be addressed regarding theory generation:

- How does educational theory need to change in a changed society?
- Who should develop theory?
- What difference does this theory make?
- How can we ensure that theory generated is valid and significant?

In answering these questions, I hope to make a case that values-based, self-study practitioner inquiry has a vital role to play in the development of new theories of practice which will contribute to a transformation in the epistemology of educational inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.buzzle.com/editorials/7-22-2006-103206.asp> for a definition of Ubuntu. Essentially it refers to a selfless love for others and incorporates the values of compassion, love, respect and a recognition of the fact that we are only human when in relationship with others.

## My educational concern

In my experience, if research interventions do not fully involve the participants in defining the problem, setting goals and learning how to take action to reach them, how to evaluate progress and to change their practices according to what they are learning, then any change is likely to remain fleeting. Once the 'interveners' leave the social setting, participants are likely to revert to 'old ways' of doing things because they have not internalised the change.

Past studies have indicated that teachers tend to view researchers and their research as being too theoretical and not taking the real lived needs of teachers into consideration (Blumenfeld, Fishman, Krajcik, Marx & Soloway, 2000; Watson, 2001). If scholarship and practice remain separate, research cannot be said to contribute to social improvement. Watson (2001, p. 186) suggests that 'home grown experts' – teachers and academics who have first-hand knowledge of what is happening in the schools and classrooms and the theoretical understanding to explain it, seem to be more effective in contributing to sustained teacher development and subsequent change in the school system. Effective development is a process of social transformation (Gaumathadas, 2005), therefore if we are to contribute to sustainable amelioration of social/educational problems, we have to proceed from an epistemological base that is people-centred, and thus non-linear, emergent and unpredictable.

I am concerned that, in spite of the lauded values that universities in South Africa have adopted as guiding principles, and their stated commitment to societal improvement, there is little evidence of change in how we approach theory generation through research, both within and without our institutions. In spite of the vast number of dissertations and theses in our libraries, the many articles written for journals and the books and chapters in books that academics produce about how to improve education in South Africa, how to provide quality education in a context beset by social problems such as HIV and AIDS, poverty, crime, violence, substance abuse; how to change gendered social norms that threaten the quality of life and educational opportunities for more than half of the population; how to improve teaching and learning in the schools; how to address discipline problems; how to improve school leadership and so on – education remains in crisis, at least for the majority of children, as the national Minister of Basic Education reiterated recently: 'We should not mislead ourselves and say the whole [education] system is in crisis... It is the education of an African child that is in crisis' (Motshekga, 2010).

This situation troubles me as it contradicts the ontological values that ground and direct my research and my teaching practices. We have had a democratic government representative of the majority of the population since 1994, yet the Black (and/or poor) child is still disadvantaged in spite of the fact that many recommendations, models and theories have been produced to try and encourage more equal educational opportunities for all children. Neither the plethora of policies (Department of Education, 2002, 2001a, 2001b) promulgated by the Department of Education and based on constructivist educational theories (Chisholm, 2005), nor the institutional research outputs referred to above seem to have made much difference to the educational opportunities of the vulnerable child (who happens to be in the majority). So what is the use of such educational theory? I am not sure

of its value outside of a purely academic exercise in training students to acquire the skills of independent research or to gain career kudos for professional academics.

I also believe that educational research and its resultant theories should have an indigenous character. If we take the case of HIV prevention education as an example, it is apparent that theories developed in the West may not be the most suitable for an African context. Often, 'solutions' for preventing HIV transmission, which meet with success in one context, simply fail to deliver in other contexts, because they ignore the cultural and social constraints specific to that setting (Mirembe & Davis, 2001). Programmes developed for use in the Bronx, are simply 'imported' to Soweto without taking into consideration the differences between the two settings. Poverty is endemic to both settings, as are gender inequalities, but the cultural influences are very different, as are the educational contexts. Poverty is also a relative concept and there can be no comparison between what is considered to be a 'poor' lifestyle in the more developed countries of the West and the extreme levels of poverty found in South African townships. On the whole, teachers are better educated, schools are better resourced and there are fewer cultural taboos around sex education and the use of condoms in the West than there are in African communities. There is, therefore, a need for an 'insider' approach to HIV prevention to promote the development of an indigenous epistemology generated by Africans living in an African context – in contrast to the current 'outsider' approach of adopting programmes based on paradigms that have little relevance to the majority of the population.

The concerns described above elicit a certain amount of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) for me. I feel like a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989, p. 44) since I am representative of an institution, that while professing the values of Ubuntu and respect for diversity and striving to produce knowledge that will result in sustainable societal improvement, I do not perceive myself to be doing that if I adopt traditional scholarship (Schön, 1995) approaches to research and teaching. I also find my value of integrity being contradicted by the large amounts of money allocated for educational research that is not making much difference.

If we are serious about transforming education, we cannot continue to pay lip service to transformative values. We need to find ways to create knowledge derived from the embodiment of our values in our everyday practices, so that any theory we espouse will be truly transformational for ourselves and others in our sphere of influence. This realisation leads me to seek answers to the question 'How can I, as an academic, ensure that my research and teaching make a positive impact on societal and educational transformation?'

## How can I best address my question?

In order to provide a transformative teaching and learning experience for students, and for my research participants, I need to interrogate my own practices to ensure that they are representative of the values I espouse. If I accept that teaching is an historically and socially constructed practice (McLaren, 1988, p. xix), then I need to explore and question what I do in this light, in order for transformation to take place. In other words, I have to start the change process by changing myself, continually posing questions to myself as I engage in teaching and collaborative research:

- Do I treat every student with the same respect and dignity?
- Do I treat colleagues with respect and dignity?
- Are my classrooms emancipatory?
- What do I do (or not do) in my teaching to contribute to the myth of student powerlessness?
- How do my values/cultural background benefit/victimize my students?
- Do I acknowledge and encourage diverse opinions?
- Do I provide for educational self-determination?
- Do I take student diversity and individual differences into account?
- Am I providing a quality education?

While asking such questions I need to keep in mind that I am part of a system composed of multiple other 'I's' and therefore need to create a shared understanding in my quest for improvement and learning. This ontological commitment opens the way for the realization of shared values at a personal level. We can transform ourselves by living out our values in our everyday interaction. Self-study action research has universal human wellbeing as its value base and communicative action (Habermas, 1975) as a method of realizing it (McNiff, 2005b, 1). It provides an ideal platform to realize transformative values while simultaneously generating contextually relevant theory – educators, and education, can thus be transformed through the generation of their own living theories (Whitehead, 1989).

Action research is a methodology, not a theory in itself, but it gives rise to dynamic, personalised and life-changing theories that operationalise the values of inclusion, people-centredness, democracy, social justice, compassion and respect. Action research is aimed at improving lives through 'bringing scholarship and praxis back together... our immodest aim is to change the relationship between knowledge and practice... usually practised by scholar-practitioners who care deeply about making a positive change in the world' (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 12). I count myself among those scholars who do not want to create knowledge for knowledge sake or to produce journal articles whose primary function is to enhance my personal CV. I want my research and the theories that emerge from it to make a real difference, to contribute to continual and growth enhancing learning both in my life and in the lives of those I touch. Theory cannot be static since this implies stagnation and hence eventual atrophy and irrelevance. Society is dynamic and ever-changing and change, however slight, in one part of the system, leads to change in the whole (Senge, 1990). From this paradigm, any theory that attempts to improve social problems also needs to be dynamic and able to change and evolve. Living educational theory is a notion first mooted by Jack Whitehead (1989) that is being adopted by academics and practitioners in South Africa

as a feasible way to engage in teaching and research that is truly transformational (Wood, Morar & Mostert, 2007).

The main purpose of this genre of action research is to enhance learning, leading to a better understanding of social and educational situations, so that action to improve the situation will be more likely to be effective and relevant. To do this, it collects data from a 'whole range of information based on the experience of those involved' (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 9) – inquiry into values and purposes, perceptions, ontology and practical inquiry into teaching and learning practices. Through critical interrogation of purpose, values and behaviour, academics can create their own living theories to improve the quality of their research and teaching practices. By making these living theories explicit and disseminating them, we can influence the education of other social formations and have an impact on the transformation of education on a much wider scale than our immediate environments. This 'educative influence' (Whitehead, 1989, p. 1) can have positive effects on the whole academic system – changes that the academic makes in teaching and learning practices will influence not only students, but also colleagues and the academy in general. The Action Research for Education group at the NMMU was formed in 2005 and attracted the interest of at least twenty academics at the time, from the Faculty of Education and other units in the university. The Action Research Unit at NMMU was founded in 2008 as a result of the continuing interest and activities in this field. Since 2005, several articles have resulted from academics who have actively interrogated their own practice in light of their educative values and at least 4 Masters students have completed their degrees using the self-study action research approach. Taylor and Fransman (2003, p. 1) propose that learning takes place much more effectively when 'individuals participate in generating their own personal theories which are relevant to their own context.' The generation of personal theories changes a person from within: such change is more likely to be sustained when it is voluntary and when the actors personally experience an improvement in their lives. Examples of this work can be accessed at <http://www.nmmu.ac.za/default.asp?id=9846&bhcp=1>.

The focus on self-reflection does not mean that traditional scholarship and propositional forms of theory should be ignored – on the contrary, to be scholarly, action research must draw on established propositional theories to guide the choice of strategies to address the problems (Whitehead, 1989, p. 42). However, since it is values based, the choice of propositional theories must be reflective of transformational values and is therefore likely to be derived from a critical paradigm. Methodologies are participatory and inclusive, emanating from notions of research as change (Schratz & Walker, 1995), where the process of conducting the research is a transformative experience in itself. By following a repetitive cycle of critically observing – analysing – acting to change – and evaluating, the researcher is continually learning how to improve their personal educational experience, changing their mindsets, their behaviour, their views of self and others. This form of self-study is vital for transformation in times of great social change, such as we are currently experiencing in South African society, including the Higher Education sector. In times of relative stability, Schön (1996) claimed that knowledge is static and problems can be solved using previous experience and proven solutions. In times of change, past experience cannot be relied on to provide solutions and there is a much greater need for critical and creative thinking in order to provide solutions to dilemmas. There is also a need for people to change their frames of reference and be open to diverse opinions and differing forms of knowledge.

Real reflection on this level therefore involves not only analyses of practice, but also of frames of reference and hitherto accepted philosophies. It necessitates collaborating with others within our social context, discussing and sharing our insights and mutually influencing each other in order to arrive at transformed practices which are mutually beneficial to all.

In order to transform social constructs, people need to do more than just acknowledge diverse perspectives and multiple voices – they also need to commit to working with them to create a mutually acceptable reality which is suitable for the specific context in that specific time (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 6). The inquiry process does not remain an impersonal reflection – it becomes an emotional and intellectual process carried out in the midst of everyday practice. Values have a strong emotive component and this emotion contributes to the passion which propels effective action research. The commitment to self-transformation becomes the driving force behind everyday practice, and in this way transformation is attained from within. How we understand ourselves in relation to one another and to our environment (our ontology) determines how we interact with others. The ontological value underlying action research is that, although we see ourselves as individuals, we recognize that we live with others in a shared environment. However, rather than trying to change/improve others, action research focuses on self-transformation in an attempt to work together for sustained development, on both a personal and collective level. This implies accountability and acceptance of personal responsibility for all we do.

Based on my experiences of conducting self-study action enquiries and from working with teachers, colleagues and students to do the same, I can say without doubt that the people who should be creating educational theory are those that are struggling to solve their own educational problems. Action research democratizes research, in that it is no longer seen as the domain of members of the academy, but that teachers and other practitioners can become researchers and create their own living theories, fully owning them and therefore more likely to continue to operationalise them and continue to develop them. It allows educators to become ‘theorists in their own right’, rather than ‘implementers of external researchers’ theories’ (McNiff & Collins, 1994). This may threaten traditional ideas and existing power bases but the political component of action research as an approach is what makes it so suitable to contribute to the transformation of education. This participation in the research process is, according to Reason and Torbert (2001, p. 6), ‘...a political as well as an epistemological imperative which affirms the basic human right of persons to contribute to decisions which affect them and to knowledge which concerns them and purports to be about them.’ As Sartre said, reflection can only be said to be authentic when it has practical implications for our real life situations (Sartre, 1993, p. 185).

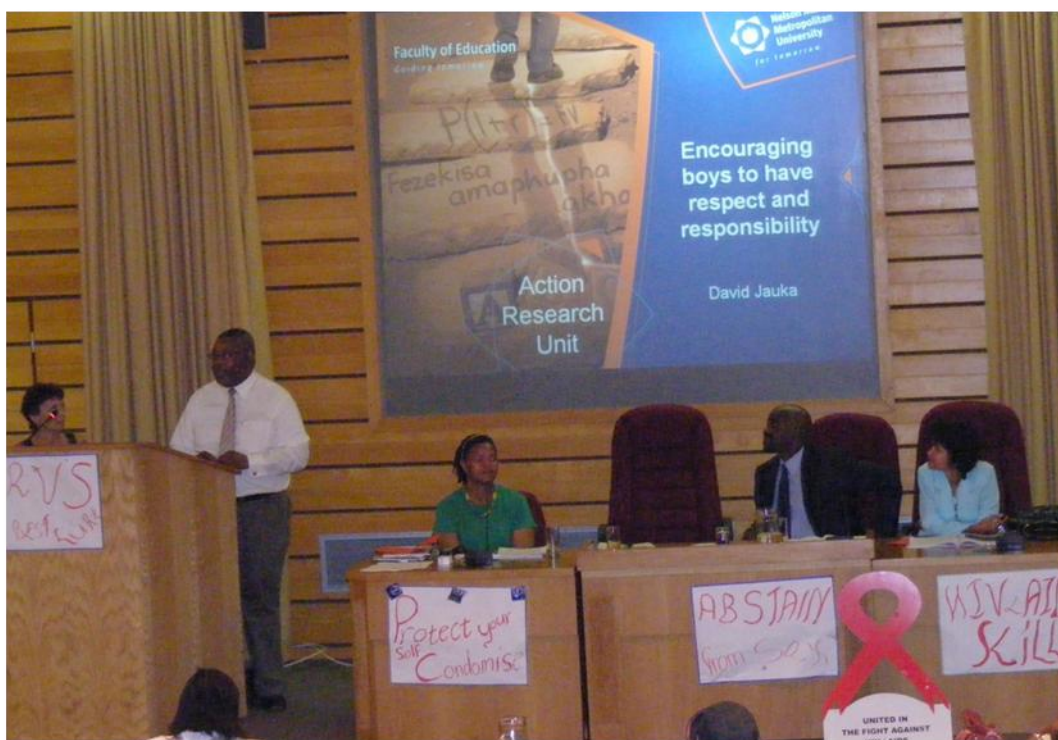
## **How do I know that I am making a difference?**

In answer to the question, ‘What difference does theory make?’ I argue that if it is self-generated it is more likely to contribute to sustained change. I have experienced this in working with teachers from disadvantaged schools in the Eastern Cape, when I used action research to engage teachers to create their own living theories around how best to address gender issues in their school as an HIV prevention intervention (Wood, 2009). I began by helping them to conceptualise and operationalise their concept of respect, a value they felt



was necessary to improve the gender imbalances in their communities. Because they created their own 'insider' epistemologies and practices for HIV prevention, change in their thinking and subsequent practice was more sustainable than if I had come along and told them what to do and how to do it. By facilitating their own critical reflection around their gender constructs and how these impacted on their professional and personal lives, I could help them to first change their own mindsets around gender, before they devised strategies and interventions to use with their learners to promote gender equality. Their values became 'living standards of judgement' (Whitehead, 1989, p. 45) against which to compare their actions, and in this way they can continue to hold themselves accountable for their actions. Drawing on notions of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1990), I helped them to recognise their potential as agents of change in this arena. Using values-based action research, I could provide them with a 'tool' that would help them to move to action and facilitate their development as researchers and creators of their own living theories to inform how they can best address gender inequalities within their spheres of educational influence. The experience of those participating in the project, however, had implications for a wider sphere than just gender issues – the teachers perceived themselves as having learnt many valuable lessons about themselves, their learners, the parents and the community which will have a profound impact on their future teaching practice and will contribute towards the creation of sustainable learning environments, as explained by one of the teachers:

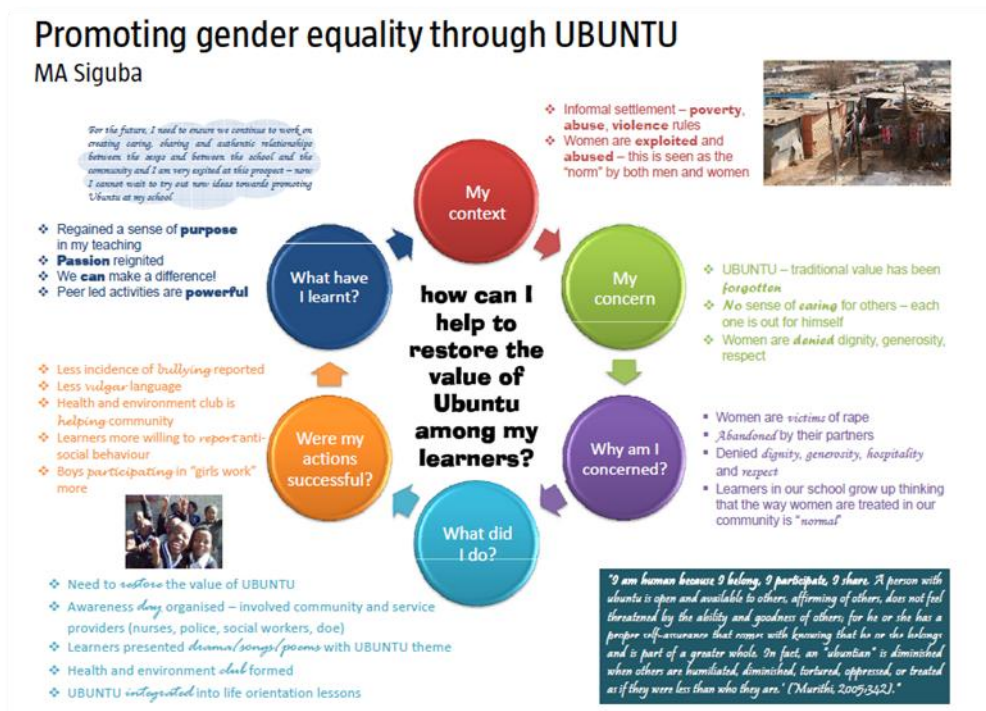
This has been a motivating experience for us and we have grown in terms of self-esteem and self-efficacy. The more involved we become in projects like this, the more we enjoy our job, therefore we plan to continue with further cycles of action research to address gender equity and other problems. (personal communication)



**Figure 1.** Participant teacher presenting his project at a seminar attended by teachers, departmental officials and academics



Since the teachers were able to fully own the problems created by sustaining gendered cultural norms in their personal and professional lives, they realised that they could contribute to social change by changing their own opinions and behaviour. Change is thus not imposed from without, but emanates from an internal epistemological and ontological shift. As Reason and Torbert (2001, p. 1) state, transformation takes place when our usual 'assumptions, strategies and habits are challenged', and I would add, that transformation is more profound when we challenge ourselves, rather than being challenged by external agents.



**Figure 2.** Example of a project poster presented at the seminar

This research project changed me as a teacher educator by helping me to live out more fully my ontological values of mutual respect and sincerity, while working with others to identify and live out their own values. I also learnt that once teachers realise that they are able to question hitherto accepted norms and beliefs, they can free themselves from feelings of impotence and restore their capacity to act. Once they had interrogated one aspect of cultural compliance, they were more open to engaging in critical thinking about other aspects. The essence of values-based practitioner self-inquiry is based on an on-going quest for improvement, rather than the need to arrive at a definitive truth (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005) therefore their acceptance of the need to first change themselves before they can influence others is evidence that they have begun the process of self-transformation, which is the start of normative change in society. Each of the teachers' reports ended with a section entitled *The significance of my learning for the future* and, although impossible to list everything they mentioned, it was apparent that they had experienced the project, as one teacher wrote, to be 'a life changing experience.' Almost

every teacher in the project made comments about how they had come to a 'better understanding of themselves and their learners' through action research; that 'working together as a team was a powerful way to expand capacity and improve relationships'; that they can take steps to improve their own knowledge and skills; that it helped all educators involved to 'regain a sense of purpose'; and that they can be 'resourceful and powerful leaders if [they] systematically plan[ their] interventions and base them on the values [they] 'have identified.' Such insights can only contribute in a positive way to the creation of sustainable, empowering learning environments in their schools. The full reports can be accessed at <http://www.nmmu.ac.za/default.asp?id=9846&bhcp=1>.

### **How can I demonstrate the validity and significance of my account of my educational influence on learning?**

In traditional positivist research terminology, validity refers to how 'true' the findings are, judged by applying certain statistical tests; in research informed by interpretivist paradigms, trustworthiness is the criterion employed to ensure the rigour of the research process and analysis of the findings; in self-study action research, values are used as the 'living standards of judgement' (Laidlaw, 1996). Researchers who are producing their own living theories have 'established a new epistemology in terms of living units of appraisal, standards of judgement and logics' (Whitehead, 2009, p. 4). McNiff claims that the 'validity of their accounts lies in practitioners' capacity for creative critical engagement, as they explain how they transform their practices into processes of critical theorising, using their articulated values as their living epistemological standards' (2005a, p. 1).

Since 2005, I have been actively doing just this by promoting Action Research in the Faculty of Education and other faculties/units within NMMU by organizing regular discussion meetings and workshops by external experts. In 2008, I launched the Action Research Unit in the Faculty of Education which aims to promote action research as a methodology for the improvement of education at university, school and community levels (see <http://www.nmmu.ac.za/default.asp?id=9846&bhcp=1> for more information). I have, for example, presented action research workshops to various faculties; addressed the Teaching and Learning Committee of the university; published journal articles; led a post graduate action research group of 6 doctoral students and their promoters; acted as a critical reader for colleagues who have written up their own accounts for publication and organised an international conference which we will be hosting in August 2010, with the theme, *Action Research: the Transformational Potential*. However, the most significant shift in the Faculty of Education has been the 'official' adoption of self-study action research as a strategy for improving our teaching, learning, research and engagement activities. At a 2-day workshop on 21 and 22 May 2010, the idea of action research was introduced by the external facilitator with the backing of the Dean and faculty management, and faculty were encouraged to undertake individual and group enquiries, the outline of which they will be able to present at the next session in July 2010. One of my doctoral students shared her experience of action research at the workshop. The facilitator openly acknowledged that she and the Dean had been influenced by our prior conversations around action research. I received the following e-mail from her before the workshop:

Hi Lesley -

I am very excited about how these more rigorous processes of action research can form part of our faculty process. Thanks again for passing all of it on!

I have also found some work by a Khayelitsha Maths Teacher on Jean's website - using these self-reflective and learning methodologies which is going to be very inspiring for the Faculty - and directly relevant to our context. (Ilze, personal communication)

This explanation of what I have been doing, together with colleagues, over the past few years is provided as evidence of the significance of my work in influencing the adoption of action research at faculty level. I believe this explanation also provides evidence of my adherence to my values of inclusion, social justice and perseverance! I have been unstinting in my pursuit of influencing the transformation of the academy (and external communities) by promoting the use of values- based, self-study inquiry as a means of personal and professional transformation.

I thus invite you, as reader of this article, to consider my argument that the generation of living educational theories will contribute towards sustainable personal, professional and ultimately social transformation by pondering the following questions, the answers to which will be indicative of the social validity of the argument (Habermas, 1972):

- Is my account comprehensible and does it make sense in the context of educational research in a developing country?
- Have I presented action research as an appropriate approach to attain the aim of releasing the transformative potential of individuals?
- Does my narrative convey sincerity about living out my stated values of respect for diversity, excellence, Ubuntu, and integrity in conducting research and generating theory?
- Does my account appear truthful and do I present enough data to support my claims?

The main questions that should be posed by all action researchers to validate their work are: 'Do I accept and live out my values as fully as I can?' and 'Are these values acceptable and useful for others in promoting transformation in educational practice?' (McNiff, 2005b, p. 24).

Feldman (2003) suggests that because we want our research to have a positive impact on the quality of our teaching and learning and that of others, moral arguments are not sufficient; we have to provide evidence that our work can produce the results we wish to achieve. Self-reflective work can lead to inaccuracies of thought, since our personal paradigms can distort how we view and understand new knowledge (Feldman, 2003). The use of critical validation groups can circumvent this, and ensure that our research encompasses multiple ways of knowing and multiple landscapes from which knowledge can be gathered. Claims to knowledge/theory generation can be made by critically reflecting on and 'seeking synchrony' among these manifold perspectives (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 7). By making public our accounts in the academy, we are more likely to recognise flaws in our thinking and reasoning, as other practitioners feed back to us what they can learn from and relate to (or not relate to) in our work. Action research calls for freedom from the rigid discipline-based rules apparent in more traditional forms of research. However, just as with

traditional approaches to research, data must be gathered and evidence generated to justify the claims that we make. The data collection and analysis methodology should be clearly detailed to improve trustworthiness (Creswell, 2005) and empirical evidence should be presented to support our claims for having improved our own learning or influenced the learning of others.

But the fact remains that research can only be transformative if it is seen to generate theory which actually can be put into practice and be seen to make a positive difference in any given situation. The bottom line in action research is “Will it improve my practice?”, but rather than being a ‘recipe’ of how to do things, it is a sharing of what worked for a particular researcher working in a particular context. This removes the traditional concepts of generalisability and validity from the equation. Those to whom the research is disseminated can take from it what may apply to them, try to incorporate it into their own situation and, through a cycle of reflective action, create their own living theories. If you give people the freedom to live and work according to their values, they usually assume the responsibility to do so and are morally bound by the choices they make.

## Conclusion

I am not claiming that education alone can change society, but as Freire (2004, p. 47) says, ‘without it society cannot change either.’ Like Freire, I believe that as educators who stand for certain values, we have no option but to live them out, embody them in our quest to set an example and influence others to do the same. Action research allows anybody interested in improving their educational situations to become a knowledge-creator, thereby generating epistemologies and theories that are more likely to be workable, relevant and contribute to sustainable change than the more traditional approaches to research. As the individual produces explanations for their own learning and the influence they have on the learning of others, personal living theories are generated which, because learning is regarded as ongoing, are dynamic, flexible and ever-evolving. I have argued that such theories are useful lenses through which to attain educational improvement in our post-modern society; that the best people to develop theory are those that are expected to implement it; that living educational theories can make a difference as the cumulative effect of many people involved in self-transformation starts to impact on societal norms, attitudes, culture and practices; and that self-study action research produces theories that are no less rigorous and scholarly than the more traditional ‘outsider’ approaches.

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