

## **Transcending boundaries and borders: Constructing living theory through multidimensional inquiry**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this collaborative action research inquiry, by a team of university professors and doctoral students, was to assist us as we tried to transform and transcend to new levels of understanding regarding the overlapping relationships of teaching and learning through the methodologies of collaborative self-study and action research (Loughran, 2007). This paper describes the evolution of our journeys to understand how we influenced each other's learning and by extension the learning of others in our respective spheres. The research stories included are described through the theoretical lenses of living theory (Whitehead, 1999), pedagogy of care (Noddings, 1984), and I-Thou relationships (Buber, 1970). In this self-study we offer explanations for how and why we acted in the context of our self-study. Data sources included journals, video and audio tapes of self-study group meetings, notes, email correspondence, and a variety of narratives and visuals. In order to justify our claim to knowledge, we produced evidence to show the extent of our influence on each other in a reciprocal way. By sharing these evidences we hoped to show "critical standards of judgment" (McNiff, 2005) by which others could evaluate our knowledge claim and the significance of our collaborative work in adding to the development of an educational knowledge base.

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## Objectives/Purposes

As twenty-first century educators, acutely aware of the increasing polarization of specific groups due to class and race, we recognize the pivotal role we must play in supporting and advancing the well-being of our global community. Our struggle as educational “scientists”, with respect to questions about ways of knowing and what and whose knowledge counts, has led us to realize that theory and practice cannot exist independently of each other, and a science of education cannot exist without an understanding of how we can live together and work interdependently to make the world a better place. Therefore, members of this collaborative self-study group acknowledge our interdependence and on-going commitment to the improvement of learning – our own as well as that of the various others that we each intersect with in our collective and respective communities of learning.

As action researchers engaged in self-study of our own practice, and as members of a collaborative research team, we feel the need to “offer explanations for how and why” (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) we have acted or not acted in the context of our self-study. Within these parameters, we tried to understand how we, as collaborative self-study members, have influenced our own as well as each other’s learning and, by extension, the learning of others. This has led us to examine our evolving views regarding action research and self-study, and the critical role of collaboration, both as a process and construct.

As researchers our goal was to make contributions to quality practice and quality theory through original, significant, and rigorous work, while helping the other members of our group to do the same. We realize that in order to reveal and justify from our own viewpoints what we believe and value (Macdonald, 1995), we have to value the quality of the relationships we have with each other. We wanted to come to a better understanding of the quality of these interactions and relationships that we believe influence the nature of our responses to each other as the participants in the dialogue that brings about transformation of the selves, enabling each of us to accept our commitment and profess our educational values (McDonald, 1995; McNiff, 2005). We understand this dialogue to be embracive of a “caring attitude” (Noddings, 1984 & 1991; McNiff, 1999; McNiff, 2005) based on authenticity supportive of each other’s confidence and self-esteem. This relation is “reciprocal” (Buber, 1970) and facilitates a holistic experience between individuals who perceive others as extensions of themselves and value genuine dialogue.

The way in which we have engaged in processes of inquiry, which included values of caring, reciprocity, and transformation, has served as our explanation in the generation of our own “living theory” (Whitehead, 1989). It is through the way we conducted our inquiry that a theory of practice has begun to emerge. As we tell our “research story”, which is authentic, and judge our processes of communication, we do so in the hope that we are being helpful to each other and to others. Our purpose in doing this was to assist us to transform and transcend to new levels of understanding regarding the overlapping relationships of teaching and learning. To make sense of teaching about teaching, and learn more about learning, we employed collaborative self-study and action research methods (Loughran, 2007).

This said, we thought it would be helpful to include a description of who and where we are now, juxtaposed against the context through which our research was conducted. In this paper, we have attempted to revisit an earlier study done at a particular moment in time, when each one of us was experiencing differing levels of transformation, in our efforts to look retrospectively at the educational influence that resulted from the inquiry described, and the impact that it has had on us.

## Introduction of Authors

At the time of the initial study, Jill and Sam were Professors who taught courses in the doctoral program in our university. Natasha, Jennie and Dan (now deceased) were students enrolled in the program. During one of our doctoral classes, “Research and Policy Trends”, we were introduced to Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff’s 2006 book, *Living Theory: Action Research*. Natasha raised the question; “As educators and doctoral students, can we influence each other’s learning?” This stimulated much discussion and by the end of the session we decided that this could be an interesting topic to explore further. Jill encouraged Natasha to email Jack, who replied! At the same time, Jill had met Jack and was also beginning a dialogue to better understand his conception of the nature of “educational influence.” This subsequently gave birth to our research project which included various data collection tools and processes, such as regular group meetings, individual journaling, face-to-face (F2F) and electronic dialogues, many of which were collected via mulitmedia.

As our small group convened to plan the way forward, we realized that if our research was to be successful we would have to relinquish some of the formalities existing between professors and students and assume a more informal and collegial relationship (e.g. addressing each other by first names). We also recognized that given the explicit connections we were making with Buber’s (1970) theories of I-Thou/I-You relationships, and our commitment to an “ethic of caring” (Noddings, 1984) we would need to put aside the personal and professional boundaries that are common in higher education relationships, in order to be authentic in what we were claiming. For example, an excerpt from one of our transcripts revealed that:

...what we have done and the evolution of our study, of our research and of our retrospection has been like transcending boundaries in terms of the cross-over between students and faculty, and I guess that is the borders, and boundaries in terms of what we think we are allowed to do and not allowed to do, so we have given each other freedom, and the opportunity, to transcend those boundaries. (Personal communication)

The idea of “Transcending Boundaries and Borders” became the focus of our research title as we worked together to understand how we were influencing each other’s learning through our F2F and on-line dialogues, which increasingly became more intimate and transparent as we engaged in on-going cycles of personal and communal reflection, and a constant free flow of information. Simultaneously, we explored and connected our work to Whitehead’s (1999) “Living Theory” because we thought that this would enable us to individually and collectively reflect on our own emerging living

theories throughout the process in order to document what we were doing through the collection of our evidence.

The excerpts that appear further in this paper provide some of the thoughts that were generated as we met as a group. They represent the connections we were making with all of the readings and theoretical background that we discussed during the initial course. At any point in our meetings depending on the focus of our dialogue we would make connections with what we espoused as our “living theory/theories”. These theories guided the quality of our interdependent and collaborative relationships. Our theoretical framework has strong and collective inclination towards Nodding's (1984) “Pedagogy of Care”, Buber's I-Thou Relationships, and the idea of transformation. These theories will be discussed in the forthcoming section. We also realized that at any given point during our collaboration there was that “aha” moment as we reflected on how and what classroom practice should look like. This was possible because we realized our interdependence as educators and practitioners.

## **Perspectives/Theoretical Framework**

Our theoretical assumptions are aligned with Whitehead and McNiff's (2006) scholarship of educational inquiry. Whitehead and McNiff assert that practitioners should produce their own living educational theories to account for their work by asking such questions as, “How do I improve my practice?” and “How do we work together?” These questions are conceived in the context of “living theory” which enables practitioners to produce evidence within their narratives of practice to justify their claims to knowledge, and submit their evidence to the critical scrutiny of others in testing their claims. Living theory offers an alternative explanation to the disciplines approach to educational theory which was mistaken in its belief that educational theory was constituted by the disciplines of education – the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history of education (Whitehead, 1999). Living theory research accounts, as explanations of educational influences in learning, contribute to the development of a new scholarship of educational knowledge, one that includes “expressions of a loving, life-affirming energy, of justice, of compassion, of freedom, of gift and knowledge creation as values that give meaning and purpose to a human existence through education” (Whitehead, 2007, p. 1). According to Whitehead the characteristics of a living theory approach include:

...sharing experiences of existing as a living contradiction; using an action/reflection cycle in working to improve my practice; acknowledging the importance in explaining what I do in terms of the values I use to give meaning and purpose to my life; showing that the meanings of these values can be clarified in the course of their emergence in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' And, showing that in the communication of the meanings of these embodied values, the meanings can be formed into living standards of judgement. These standards are used to evaluate the claim to knowledge being made from within a living theory perspective, which gives meaning and purpose to our existence. (Whitehead, 2006, p. 1)

In essence, *living theory* is defined within the context of real-life theorizing, evident from the way we as teachers reflect on our practices, gather data and generate evidence to support our claims based on what we believe, and test these beliefs to validate these claims through critical feedback.

Embedded within a scholarship of living theory is the concept of educational influence. By educational influence we mean the influence we have in our students' learning in the direction of our values. The educational influence we want to have in our students' learning is one that enables our students to decide for themselves how to proceed with the knowledge we impart. We seek to have such an educational influence by encouraging our students to think independently and become aware of their own sense of self. The "free-flow interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships" (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006, p. 116) that ensue are reciprocal. Moreover, the concept of reciprocity is also grounded in Buber's (1970) thesis of human existence. The relationships we choose to develop amongst one another are deemed as *I-Thou* or *I-It* relationships, and are determined by how we approach and view others. *I-Thou* relationships stress the holistic experience between individuals who value genuine dialogue. The relationship between the *I* and the *You* is unmediated. Through encounter, the *I* and the *You* are transformed. Hence, the encounter requires the *I* and the *You* to be active participants, allowing themselves to be transformed by it.

As we examined our educational influence, we embraced the theme of caring and how it drives our actions in relation to self and others. Care in this sense attracts an ontological perspective as it defines our existence. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) use caring as an ontological foundation to communicate their professional values within an organizational context. Similarly, Smith (2004) highlighted four key components of care within an educational perspective as perceived by Noddings (1984). First, is modeling the attitude of care by demonstrating our caring relations with those within our social formations. Second, is using dialogue to help people to critique and better understand the relationships of caring encounters. Third, speaks to practice and our immersion in caring experiences from which we can practice and reflect on these caring encounters. Fourth, is confirmation, which is linked to Buber's theory of affirming and encouraging the best in others. Hence, we see the act of caring as involving genuine dialogue based on authenticity if caring relationships are to develop in academe.

Because we care about our professional values we were willing to totally immerse ourselves into the inquiry being cognizant of the importance of interaction and environment to enable us to gain the kind of experience that would help to nurture and sustain our community. The continuous self-renewal generated by our educational growth (Dewey, 1916) throughout the study was evidenced by the recursive cycles of reflection leading to various levels of meaning-making. While this varied depending on each of us as learners, the value for each other's growth, as well as that of our community was evident.

## Methods/Modes of Inquiry

We agreed to utilize a collaborative action research methodology, grounded in principles of self-study. This required each of us to be responsible for sharing accounts of our

educational journeys publicly as we grew in our understanding. We knew that this would not be a solitary journey, since no meaningful research in the human sciences can be conducted by one person separate from others (McNiff, 1999). The members of our collaborative group made a commitment to explore alongside each other and to serve as inclusive and active participants, while striving to build support for the importance of action research and self-study within our educational contexts – both for teachers in the field and for university scholars.

Given the paradoxical nature of self-study, individual and collective, personal and interpersonal, private and public, (Samaras & Freese, 2006) we agreed that our study would be focused on each of us as individuals (the self), but our work would be collective. We felt that this would be more closely aligned to the smaller body of action research which is critical and emancipatory and geared to the improvement and self-understanding of the practitioners involved. It also leads to a critique of social and educational work and settings (Kemmis, 2006). Our belief was that engagement in Habermas's (1981) *communicative action* would orient us towards mutual understanding helping to privilege the kind of reflection and discussion that would take place as we took the time to explore the nature and dynamics of what we had committed to in this endeavor. Through this process, each of us, as participants, was able to test for him or herself what Kemmis interprets as the, "comprehensibility, accuracy, sincerity, and rightness" (Kemmis, 2006, p. 98) of the substantive content of the processes in this action as applied to our situation.

From the onset, it was agreed that the relationship of our group members to one another would be a democratic partnership, and all dialogue that occurred would be a *dialogue of equals*, grounded in respect and honesty. Putting aside status was a given if we were going to *learn and grow* together. The quality of our interactions and relationships influenced the nature of our responses and brought about transformation of our selves, enabling each of us to accept our commitment and profess our educational values. Transformation in this sense is perceived as a shift in our consciousness which was irreversible and this consciousness influenced our philosophical views of what teaching and learning should be. Our claims to transformation of self were guided by the way we chose to understand our experiences which gave us more autonomy to critically reflect on our practices and that of others thus exposing our vulnerability as practitioners while highlighting our desires for "continuous learning" (Dewey, 1916).

## Data Sources

In our efforts to legitimize the form and content of our data sources, we were challenged by Habermas' (1982) criteria for social validity, as interpreted by Whitehead and McNiff (2006). Whitehead and McNiff concur that the criteria for social validity involves the critical and supportive feedback that occurs within the group setting which aims at identifying standards of judgment for validating the evidences that are generated within the group. To validate these evidences, it was important for us to distinctively articulate our criteria and standards of judgment to show why the evidences chosen were considered as such. As we struggled to determine how we would collectively validate our influence on one another, and how we would document the extent of our influence, we decided that

evidence of the comprehensibility, truthfulness, sincerity, and appropriateness of our own accounts of educational influence should go beyond traditional linear accounts due to the organic nature of the collaborative that we envisioned. Given the importance of developing forms of representation that are consistent with what they are intended to communicate (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), we decided that a combination of the aesthetic along with textual representations would serve to show the dynamic and multidimensional nature of our collaboration and developing educational relationships.

Data sources included journals, face-to-face captured through video and audiotapes of self-study group meetings, notes, email correspondence, and a variety of narratives and visuals. We also agreed that analysis of data sources would be on-going, as we met and shared evidences of the influence we perceived through the artifacts that we shared, while searching for common patterns and themes. The written forms of representation that we initially utilized when sharing our evidence led some group members to experiment with diverse ways of communicating our living experience, such as with graphics and drawing. As data were generated and connections made between and amongst us, we saw the potential in what we were creating amongst the group, thus images were chosen that might better express the *living logics* of our relation to one another, and to others (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006, p.39).

## Analysis

We aligned ourselves with Whitehead and McNiff (2006) who asserted the need for evidences in the creation of a living theory. In our critical reflection, we realized that there were several themes identified in the data analysis of our transcripts which included I-Thou transformation, caring, reflection/contemplation, self, influence, reciprocity, validity, self-study, and paradox. However, we also realized that, as an ongoing work in progress, further sub-themes would be identified from our continued data analysis as we progressed.

In order to generate evidence of our influence thus far, we were selective in using only those pieces of data that justified our collective realization of our ontological and epistemological values. Overall, we aimed to demonstrate our methodological accountability by drawing from the textual narratives produced by each self-study group member, literary and artistic artifacts, journal entries, and video clips of some of our meetings. To begin our research story, we decided to include one of the emails which Natasha and Jill sent to Jack which subsequently ignited the interest in conducting the inquiry. We also agreed to use excerpts of Natasha's poem and Jennie's narrative, which provided the backdrop for explaining the beginning of our encounter with Whitehead and McNiff's (2006) text, *Living Theory: Action Research*.

### Email Sent to Jack Whitehead from Natasha

I was greatly impacted by the idea of creating an educational theory that generates an explanation of my educational influence in my learning and the learning of others, and how engaging in this type of research is profoundly distinct from the social science approaches... I

believe that my colleagues and I can all relate to the concept of our pedagogical standards of judgment (Chapter 5), and understand how the idea of educational influence relates to our values and standards as we influence our students' learning. Would it be accurate to say that the idea of educational influence can also be applied to a cohort of doctoral students in that they may influence one another's pedagogical values? (N. Vernaza, personal communication)

The responses from Jack to both Natasha and Jill confirmed the importance of conducting this self-study inquiry. We began the self-study journey with what Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) also describe as the beginning of a unique process aimed at unveiling the voices of teacher educators through the use of stories and/or vivid metaphors that illuminate the accounts of our own professional lives. Natasha's poem and Jennie's excerpt, although very personalized, echoed the sentiments of the self-study group as we began our engagement in the project.

## **Generating Evidence in Relation to Our Influence on Each Other's Learning**

In order to justify our claim to knowledge, we produced evidence to show the extent of our influence on each other in a reciprocal way. By sharing these evidences we hoped that they would show "critical standards of judgment" (McNiff, 2005) by which others could evaluate our knowledge claim and the significance of our collaborative work. We drew from the textual narratives produced by each self-study member, literary and artistic artifacts, journal entries, and video clips of some of our meetings. The next section illuminates our respective stories and the extent to which our individual living theories were developed with the support of each other which subsequently led to our claim of transformation.

### **Natasha's Story**

#### ***Reflections of One Doctoral Student's Influence***

*As a lifelong learner with a thirst for information,  
I embarked on a journey towards a doctorate in education.*

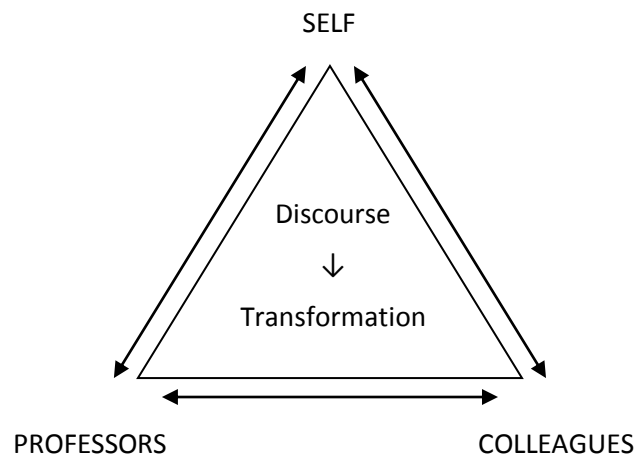
*Keeping an open mind, seeking meaning through social construction,  
I embraced provoking content on curriculum and instruction.*

*Immersing myself in the texts, making connections through my writing,  
Transformation was bound to occur with each class being enlightening.*

*Until one afternoon, in the Spring of 2007,  
I was introduced to something I wouldn't have imagined...  
A recent publication by a pair named Jack & Jean-  
"Living Theory: Action Research" – these two were amazing!*



Our journey describes our distinctive efforts to provide evidence to articulate the extent to which we now claim similar educational influence on each other within the group and by extension to others outside of the group. As we began to tell our stories, we realized that our self-study meetings provoked us to reflect on our collective influences on one another, which in turn contributed to the development of each of our own living theories. Initially, based on Natasha's personal visualization of our collective influence of university students and professors upon one another, we agreed that this was reflected in the form of a triangle, as seen below.



**Figure 1.** Initial Conception of Group Influence

### **Natasha's Narrative Explaining the Conception of Group Influence as shown in the triangle**

We agreed that each of us has the potential to influence one another and that this influence is dynamic and reciprocal in nature (as indicated by the double-sided arrows): self-influencing colleagues and professors; colleagues' and professors' influence on self; colleagues' influence on their professors and vice versa. 'Discourse' is purposefully placed at the center of the triangle, since we agreed that it was central to the life of the university. Our shared discourse grounded in values of care and reciprocity heightened our mutual awareness of a shift or "transformation" in our individual and collective consciousness regarding the potential influence we were having on each other's learning and practice. Had we not formed this group, my fellow collaborators and I may have lost valuable opportunities to collectively reflect on our commitments to influence others as rooted in our ontological values. In turn, these meetings spurred further personal reflections, thereby enabling insight into our selves and subsequent relations with each other. (N. Vernaza, personal communication)

### **Jill's testimony to being influenced by the group members**

Our culture demands more and more from us, while offering less and less in the way of support. At all levels I see that teachers are being asked to do more with less, to produce

more “stuff”, but with less time and fewer opportunities to analyze and reflect on what they’re being asked to do. My engagement in our self-study has subtly transformed my own teaching - of action research, of leadership and change, of VTS, of collaboration. I find myself stepping back and offering less “stuff”, while at the same time inviting more in the way of engagement. More and more I am seeing that it always has to come back to “I” – first concentrating on my own quest to know “I” through the intersection of my identity and integrity, and then venturing out to explore relationships that are grounded in the “I-thou”. Engagement in our collaborative self-study has made me more conscious of this in my daily interactions with students, colleagues, and practitioners out in the field. If nothing else, the collaboration amongst the members of our self-study community has given me license to verbalize my living contradictions, to try to articulate my values and beliefs. Our collegial reflection has enhanced my trust in myself, who I am and how I act on this. This has helped me in trying to make sense of the paradoxical times we are living and working in so that I can at least try to improve the situations of those with whom I interact, so that they can then begin to do the same for those with whom they work. (J. Farrell, personal communication)

### **Dan’s narrative alluding to Natasha and Jill’s influence on him**

I remember my first class together with Natasha. She was shy, quiet, gentle but caring and sensitive to others; there was something about her that mesmerized me. As time elapsed, I came to realize that Natasha had the gift of contemplation, an ability to retreat into the inner self...My interactions with Natasha have always reminded me to return to my contemplative inner-self for it is there I make sense of the world around me. Her example has a profound educational influence on me ever calling me to “become aware of my own sense of self”. Natasha’s influence on who I am, at this moment of my life, validates and provides evidence that a cohort of doctoral students can have an educational influence on their peers... My reflection on educational influence would not have been complete without mentioning the profound influence that Jill Farrell has had not only on me as a person, but also on me as a developing researcher and education practitioner. Through her educational influence I have come to be a more critical reflector questioning and challenging prior held epistemic distorted views and assumptions of the world and reality (Mezirow et al., 1990). This has been truly transformative. (D. Kimbar, personal communication)

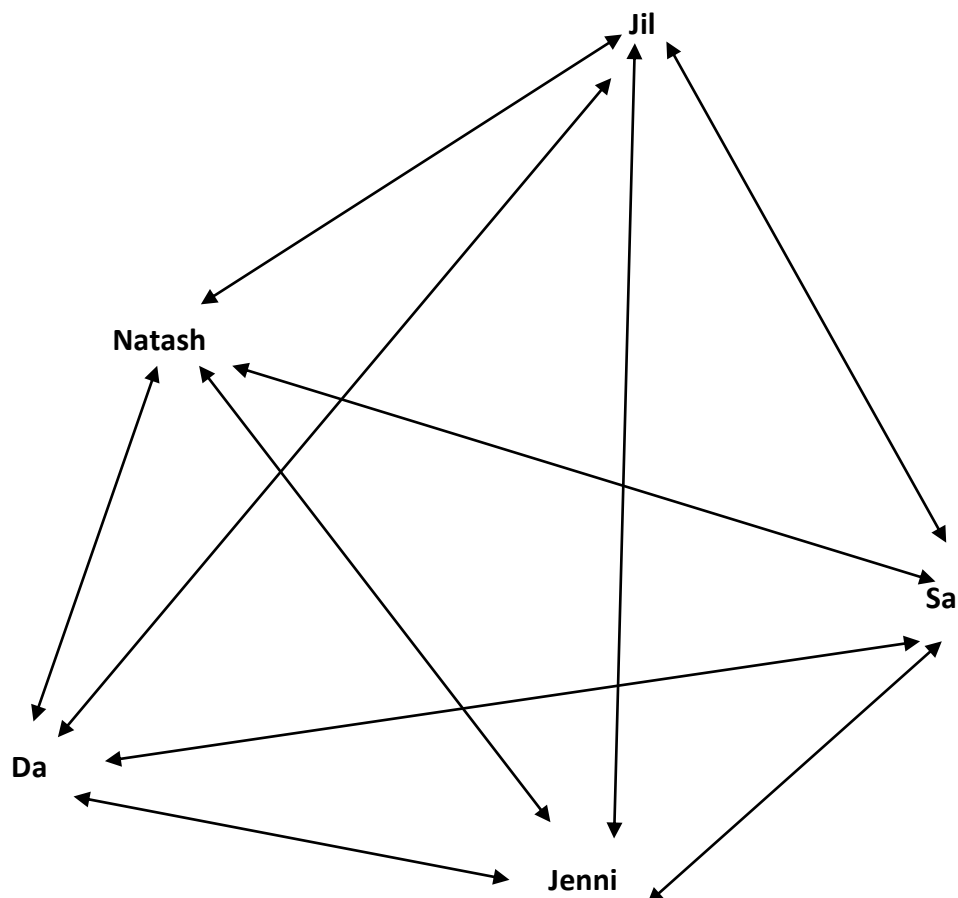
### **Sam’s claim to Jill’s educational influence and that of the group**

As Jill stated in one of her narratives, her multitasking “is preventing me from just being.” I, a Virgo, have learned the art of just being – just being still and contemplative and letting the answers to the questions sometimes come to me, rather than driving myself and others crazy to find answers to all the questions in my head... I have realized my own power and have control of myself and my life. And this has reinvigorated my practice of teaching – my service to the thou- my students.

...On my journey as a contemplative practitioner, I now offer my reflections of some of the changes in my practice of teaching (a significant component of my living theory) that have occurred in conjunction with this year-long collaborative self-study. First, I am more relaxed in my practice of teaching...when I prepare for and teach my classes, I employ a philosophy of each class being a learning experience in which I learn from the students and they learn from me. (S. Perkins, personal communication)

### Jennie's description of Jill's influence on her

I sense this genuine act among us that we truly care about what we do and that is what motivates me to share. I have been with Jill long enough to sense what ignites her passion for her work. I know she is passionate about this project and this is what has influenced me to spend the time to do the transcription so that we all could have it to reflect on before we meet again. I have learned from her that if you are passionate about something, you have to find ways to propel it forward. As a group, we really want this project to move forward as our vision is to extend it beyond our little community of learners. (J. Lee Ricketts-Duncan, personal communication)



**Figure 2.** Socio-gram Representing Our Self-Study Group Collaboration and Educational Influence

As our collaborative engagements continued, we began to see Dewey's idea of a reflective community unfold. Not only were we embracing each other's ideas, but we were also negotiating how to articulate these ideas in a meaningful way so as to communicate to others our understanding of the transformation that was taking place in each of us as a result of our dialogical encounters. In Jill's words, "I am feeling so grounded and comfortable. I am much more desirous of the students trying to find out on their own and kind of going through an inquiry. I think the influence of each of you on me helped me to

make this year's action research seminar the best that I've ever had." Because of what we did together and the influence we had on each other, we made better connections with the work of Whitehead and McNiff (2006), Habermas (1982) and others who are mentioned herein. Using Rogers' (2002) criterion of "reflective community" (p. 855) we subsequently decided to display evidence of the group dynamism through a socio-gram that visually represents the further transition of our group interactions. Our aim was to step outside of the experience and see it through the eyes of another. This required consideration of our multiple perspectives and appreciation of their meaning (Rogers 2002). Therefore, we believe that the socio-gram below and all other images represented hereafter portray the unique fluidity of how our dialogue and relationship transformed each of us from the general to the specific.

The double-headed arrows represent the level of enthusiasm and whole-hearted interaction that emerged in the context of our discussions from various settings. The display subtly illuminates the flexibility of our communicative process which was also captured in audio-visual format. These portrayed the rich and evocative contexts that ensued as we negotiated and renegotiated pedagogical experiences, concepts and themes that we considered fitting to convey our living theories.

### **Educational Influence Outside the Self-Study Group**



**Figure 3.** Tree-like Conceptualization of Our Relationship

Throughout the process of our data analysis, we were cognizant of Whitehead and McNiff's (2006) reminder that in order to fulfill our pedagogical values, we have to articulate how our values emerge and transform over time. We also had to show and explain how these pedagogical values justify the epistemological and methodological rigor that provided the standards of judgment that guided our claims to knowledge. To enable our accounts to have an influence beyond our learning community we also had to show clearly the rigor of our research and the epistemological contribution we were making. When it started we talked about looking amongst ourselves; how we had been influencing each other and how we continued to share our ideas. However, it extended beyond the group in the sense that we could not just isolate our group but began to document evidence to show both the influence within the group and our relationship with others outside of the group. We envisaged this reality through the free-flow of dynamic relationships that were beginning to emerge as depicted in Jill's drawing of trees in Figure 3.

### **Excerpt from Jill's Narrative describing the metaphoric tree-like relationships that are occurring throughout her practice**

I see my current life as an educator in landscape. I'm not sure where it begins and where it ends. My educational landscape is quite detailed, and at the same time quite blurry. A focal point is the (a) tree – deeply grounded in foundations – of knowledge, skills, dispositions and experiences. The roots are deep; they are interwoven and intricately connected to other roots. It's hard to tell where they begin and end as they are all rooted in different times and experiences, yet they have come together to converge, and merge, and now they blend into other roots of other trees. In a similar fashion the branches and leaves are also connected, they touch and overlap and go off in different directions. Am I the tree? Am I in the center of the tree? Are we all trees? Is the tree my metaphor for my life? (J. Farrell, personal communication)

### **Excerpt from Sam's Narratives**

Each of us is a tree, each with roots that spread out and impact others – whether we wish that impact to be positive, negative, or neutral is up to us. As I stated in my first narrative, “one transformation can't be isolated from others occurring in life,” but my recent, ongoing transformations of self and of my practice of teaching have their roots largely in the *sprouting tree* of this collaborative self-study. As Russell (2006, p. 5) stated, “Self-study relies on interaction with close colleagues who can listen actively and constructively” (as cited in Loughran, 2007, p. 16). This is a bull's-eye description of the connection of the participants in this self-study. (S. Perkins, personal communication)

Further claims of our influence on others outside of the group are evident in the excerpts from individual narratives as indicated below. First is Natasha's poem, which revealed her probing questions about being able to influence a fellow colleague. The remainder of the poem describes explicitly the process of her engagement in order to answer her own question. Included also was an email correspondence that further extended the dialogue between them.

**Natasha's Poem**

*Could I possibly be an influence on a fellow colleague?  
I quickly searched for an answer in response to my intrigue.*

*After writing Jack Whitehead with great anticipation,  
I posed the question to my professor and we engaged in deliberation.*

*Then soon thereafter, Jack's response was received,  
Containing several valuable comments, quite worthy of taking heed:*

*'We influence others, exercising our own imaginations,  
As we construct living theories through knowledge-creation.*

*Yet equally important is the gathering of valid evidence  
That helps us make judgments about our educational influence.'*

*Reflecting on this response, one colleague came to mind...  
Was I an influence on her writing through our encounters over time?*

*Through our free-flow encounters and our I-Thou relation,  
I acknowledged her choice to learn, her attentiveness and patience.*

*Did I influence my colleague's writing? Can I justify such a claim?  
According to Jack & Jean, this involves more than just saying.*

*So I've generated evidence in the form of an e-mail query  
To validate this narrative of my own living theory.*

*Attached I include quotes from my colleague's reflections,  
Attesting to my influence, including thoughts and impressions.*

**Excerpt from e-mail communication**

For the class Models of Instruction... my Literature Review... gave me excellent feedback ... including better ways to express some ideas. That was very helpful and helped me to improve my writing.

Grant Writing... In this class, your help was decisive for me... You guided me... Your feedback... was VERY HELPFUL.

Your interventions in class...when you talk, I feel that all people are listening attentively because in my opinion your interventions in the class meetings are very powerful, very concrete, and let the audience know their purposes clearly. You are direct and concise. I am working to build this skill in myself. It is another example of your professional influence on me. (Personal communication, November 11, 2007)

**Excerpt from Dan's Narrative**

I submit to the discussion that there are two documented situations where I have had educational influence on my peers. During my second semester I was enrolled in a class with

the new Taiwanese students. It seemed natural for me to establish a bond of support and care. In fact, I remember bringing the issue to Jill Farrell that a group of caring doctoral students need to assist the group with proofreading papers and PowerPoint presentations for English grammar. Overtime, the bond has developed into bonds of collaboration and knowledge sharing. Caring is at the very heart of the mission of Barry University, and is an integral part of who I am as a person; as a student within the Barry community of learners, the need required a caring response. Consequently, educational influence among the Taiwanese cohort has been one of “influence incorporated within human relationships” (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). (D. Kimbar, personal communication)

### **Excerpt from Sam’s Narrative**

In addition, I now perceive and interact with my students first as unique human beings: emotionally, cognitively, developmentally, spiritually, etc. This facilitates (often subtle) transformations of (students’) selves, which as stated earlier are prerequisites for transformations of teaching curricula, etc. And an unexpected perk from this is that I now more fully perceive myself as a unique human being – I am being transformed as I am facilitating my students’ transformations. (S. Perkins, personal communication)

### **Excerpt from email communication to Jill from a student**

I wanted to get in touch one last time this semester to share some thoughts about my action research experience ...the truth is that despite all of the work, the stress ,and the insecurity I felt along the way, completing this course was one of my greatest achievements. The responsibility of looking at my own practice and how I am impacting my students, but also how they are impacting me, was a great one that I won’t soon forget... In the end, I feel that I am not only a better teacher for this experience but also a better person. I believe all too often we make our way through life without stopping to think about the impact we leave on the people around us with each of our actions (or lack thereof). A little self reflection could do a lot of people in the world today some good. That is a lesson that I think is worth teaching and so I hope you continue to do so (as you do it so well!).

So, I just want to say thank you... for helping me find my way when I was completely discouraged and continuing to have faith in me when I wasn’t even sure where this whole thing was going...for sharing with us your experiences and the value we would find in the empowerment of this methodology...for having such a positive outlook and finding the tiny light when it seemed there was only a room full of darkness. Your guidance has left me with a lesson to carry for a lifetime... Sharing and learning from each other has been a wonderful experience and it was a fitting way to end my Masters program... this last semester with fond memories of the supportive and safe environment you created... thankful to my classmates and to you for sharing this experience with me. (J. Farrell’s student, personal communication)

### **Excerpt of an email to Jennie from another PhD colleague**

.... I think you were one of the very few people who brought in extra materials and articles to share with us. I truly believe that all the resources have been extremely useful. I can personally state that because after noticing your example of bringing into the classroom and

sharing articles related to the topic discussed, I began searching for extra ones that would enrich my knowledge about a particular issue that was discussed throughout the courses. I also understand the significance of searching for other resources that are not always provided by our professors and that we do not need to wait for them to do so. Thank you for being such a wonderful role model! (J. Lee Ricketts-Duncan's colleague, personal communication)

## Conclusions/Point of View

Members of the collaborative have alluded to levels of *transformation*, which have been a result of our mediated influence and have served as a type of scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1987). For instance, the shift in consciousness resulted in honest reflections as we asked questions like, "Am I making a difference?" or "Should I do this?" The opportunity to reflect *in community* was what gave us the impetus to move forward and have the courage to act on some of the things that came from what we verbalized. As we talked and interacted with each other we improved and built on our practice. In other words, each learner made decisions for himself or herself, but each collaborator influenced the others through invitation and exposure to new ideas. Each of us as learners agreed (or not) to be influenced and made new choices based on the influence. Each of us was accountable for what we were doing and thinking, as individuals, and as members of the collaborative.

Our desire was to be transformed as educators and to extend our influence to other teachers and learners with whom we interact now and in the future, all the while striving to unveil our potentials and those of others (Macdonald, 1995). We hope that our collaboration with one another has helped us become more conscious of our own ways of being, knowing that as teachers we must be more responsive in our practice and must embrace our connectedness with each other in an atmosphere of care. Although we are cognizant that action research requires each of us individually to commit to the improvement of our practice, in this study, we accept that we are in reciprocal relationship to others, always acting in the best interest of each other, rather than as one individual over another (Macdonald, 1995). This requires an on-going cycle of planning, action, reflection, and new action, similar to Dewey's reflective cycle, where the transformation is generative.

In telling the story of our unique influence on each other, we continue to be mindful of Habermas' (1984) criteria of social validity, which allows us to explain our living theory as comprehensible, truthful, sincere and appropriate to facilitate critical responses from our colleagues, teacher-researchers, and other interested audiences. By doing this, we hope to communicate our ontological values which we believe were realized in our social formation that conveyed our "epistemological standards of judgment" (McNiff, 2005).

Our circumstances and roles have changed since we engaged in this inquiry, but we remain steadfast in our belief that we can legitimately claim the significance of this study on each of us, as sources of educational influence and as catalysts for our own influence on others with whom we have since interacted. Jennie is now a professor in the Reading Department of our university, having successfully completed her program defense of her dissertation. Jill has moved into a new role as Associate Dean, and Sam directs the undergraduate teacher education program. Natasha also completed her doctoral degree and continues to serve as a teacher leader in our local school district. In



our efforts to continually reflect on our practice, and our commitment to the improvement of our own learning, we have attempted to revisit our prior work and to articulate our current living theories, which we agree are a result of the work described in this paper.

### **Jill's epiphany of her living theory**

At the time of the initial study I don't think I was quite ready to name my living theory, although I was certainly living it, and modeling it through both my actions and intentions. My entire professional life has been built on collaboration, as both a process and a construct, and I believe that the study described in this paper was where I was truly able to "let go", and surrender to my core values and beliefs, which I believe helped others in my research group to do the same. The love and passion I have always had for my students, my colleagues, and my work is what motivated me at the time to engage in this collaboration. At the time, I shared a very special relationship with the other members of our group, grounded in mutual respect, love and shared values. My desire to share my own questions, and to encourage those around me to pursue their questions was at the heart of our inquiry and continues to be central to the work that we all cherish regarding the transformative potential of education, and our potential as educators. The inquiry described in this paper was truly a pivotal time for me, in that it became a catalyst for me to begin to explore the use of multiple forms of inquiry to both document and represent my *emerging theories* and those under construction. The freedom that we offered to one another with respect to our choices for collecting, documenting and sharing our findings, was the impetus I needed at the time to allow me to use my own aesthetic sensibilities, buried far too long! The exploration of multiple dimensions for documenting and explicating our work caused a "shift in my consciousness" and an epiphany in terms of my perspectives on my role as a researcher and an artist, leading to new insights in my work with others at that time, and in subsequent inquiries since that time.

I have always seen my roles as teacher and learner, as one and the same with collegial coach and mentor natural extensions of this duality. As I have continued on my educational journey building on the experiences and knowledge gleaned through my various roles, I am more and more convinced that true communities of learning are a result of continuous collaboration, on-going and clear communication and the willingness of constituents to connect to others on various levels. I believe that if we truly want to create and cultivate transformative communities of learning, we must offer opportunities for all learners in the community to engage interdependently in research inquiries that focus on the how and what of our practice, ultimately contributing to the transformation of the individual as well as the collective. In our setting, this is manifested in our culture of teacher education and professional pedagogy, which I am proud to claim and name as I feel I have had some small part in helping to foster this. I do believe that I can name this study as one that was pivotal for me in that through the sharing of my values and vision in my individual narratives and my contributions to our group dialogue, I was helpful in assisting my colleagues to do this for themselves. Conversely, their willingness to take this leg of the journey with me at that time, was the push I needed to continue on this path with respect to my research and my practice. I clearly see now (while it was probably fuzzy at the time) that

while it was not then named, I was using the work with my colleagues as another lens to better understand the nature of collaboration and how it is best learned and cultivated. The lessons learned from this study, and subsequent studies of a similar nature, have indeed been instrumental in helping me to transform beyond the boundaries I have often put up for myself, as well as those imposed by the institutional and cultural barriers of our contexts.

### **Jennie's living theory**

Spring 2007 was an unusual one, at least for me. Not only was the atmosphere decorated with the new buds and early petals of the flowering plants but there was a luster of freshness among us, a small group of doctoral students, as we greeted and welcomed each other back for the new semester. As expected the semester was quite dialogical and interactive as we were introduced to action research and Whitehead and McNiff's (2005) text on "living theory" for the first time. Imagine a small lecture room transformed into a lively seminar or symposium style conference with everyone eagerly voicing his or her ideas and perspectives on policy-related issues pertaining to urban schooling in America from an action research perspective. This was where we integrated Whitehead and McNiff's text along with other literature to better understand our significance, as educators and researchers, on the policy-making process.

Resulting from our engagement as a community of learners during that semester, we undertook this self-study project to better understand how we were influencing each other's learning. As we explored some of the relevant theories to better understand self in relation to others, I realized that Nel Noddings' "pedagogy of care" resonates with me. I have always wondered what motivates me to consistently honor my professional responsibilities even in the most challenging situations or what triggers my willing to go beyond the call of duty. This extension of self has puzzled me even to this point in my professional life and, as we interacted within our self-study group, I became convinced that the theory of *care* best explains my actions and beliefs.

While my colleagues can easily attest to my dedication and commitment it is not easy for me to articulate what might be those underlying factors that stimulate and encourage me to engage in the kind of professional behaviors that could be classified as caring dispositions. However, as we engaged in our research, I was aware of the consciousness to see our project unfold gradually towards our desired goal. This depended greatly on our relationship as group members and our willingness to risk our vulnerabilities whenever we convened thus building a relationship of care and trust. For instance, early in our research, we individually took our own notes during the group meeting. However, we were so excited about where we wanted to see the project going that when we met the second time we found that we couldn't keep up with the voluminous amount of note-taking. The next time we met, I decided to tape record the conversation, then typed it and took the script for everyone. Not once did I think about the time that was taken to type the script because to me, the benefit of having the script superseded everything. Subsequently, all of our meetings included the use of multimedia as the medium of data collection.

As I explored the theory of care alongside my colleagues, I realized what was meant by "engrossment and caring" (Noddings, 1984) and the dynamism between the carer and the cared-for. To me this was the dawn of transformation as our reciprocal relationship was

juxtaposed with Buber's "I-Thou Relationship" and provided the synergy that was needed for each of us, to realize individual act of caring and respond. This transformation was ongoing as we learned spontaneously that at any point in our collaboration there could be a moment of philosophical enlightenment.

### **Sam's transformed lived theory of transformation**

This morning, I took my spouse to the airport. I have been half of a long-distance relationship for eight years. I write this because each human being is a holistic person composed of many intertwined and interdependent components. My personal life and identity is an integral part of who I am as a person and an educator. The long-distance relationship of which I am a part has transformed me as a person (and hence as an educator). I have strength and clarity I never knew I could possess and am fully aware of what is important in life and thus have more balance in my life. I feel empowered. This is my living theory.

As this "transformed Sam" I teach and interact with my students knowing that they are holistic human beings composed of many intertwined and interdependent components, and that if something in their personal or professional lives is weighing heavily on their minds, it will impact their performances. The "transformed Sam" is a real, authentic, and caring person and educator, who, through my actions, communicates that I am such a person and educator who is available to my students, not only as their professor or advisor or the director of their program, but as a less-than-perfect person who has challenges in life and who can empathize and provide care and tough love to help students. What a gift and what a responsibility to be able to share my living theory with so many people!

Returning to this article four years later, I see how I am similar in so many ways (with the same basic core values and same warped sense of humor) but how I have evolved in so many ways. I love myself, I value myself, I care about myself, and I know myself! Therefore, I can love, value, care about, and know others. Initially, I was hesitant to return to this article – to revisit the past, but once I did, I was transformed and simultaneously taken back to a period in my life replete with memories and emotions while being transported to the Sam of 2012. What a gift to have this opportunity for continued reflection and growth!

As a group we believe that our individual living theories came to fruition through the bond we created together. Ultimately we created collective living theories rather than individual living theories through shared values of care, collaboration, and reciprocity which propelled us to remove traditional boundaries of status and formality (professor vs. student) in a university doctoral setting to support each other's emotional and intellectual progression. In essence, we shared the same values (care and reciprocity), which served as our living standards of judgment.

## Educational Importance of Our Work

Our work will help us to develop a more critical stance with regards to the way our setting and other settings with which we are involved, are shaped and re-shaped, “discursively, culturally, socially” (Kemmis, 2006, p. 96) and politically. As we struggle to transform situations where we have felt alienation, ideological distortions, oppression, domination, or merely dissatisfaction, we will be engaged in collaborative action and research that uncovers the theories and processes that help to form our own theories in action (Kemmis, 2006).

In addition, our study contributes to the development of a new scholarship of educational inquiry (Whitehead, 1999), as the grounding for new institutional pedagogies that may contribute to the continuing education of sustainable social formations. The social formation that we have formed is a group that has come together for a common purpose, with a common focus. We realized that this relationship did not require explicitly stated rules of discourse and analysis, as we found it embedded within our theoretical constructs, which were a reflection of our commonly shared values. Engagement in our self-study action research project empowered and supported each one of us as we continued to construct our own living theories, while searching for evidence to support our claims (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006).

Our willingness to tell our research stories has illuminated the evidence needed to answer these questions and we believe this can genuinely affect the work of teacher education by making more, “work available for public critique, critical review, and evaluation” within our own learning community so that others with whom we interact may be able to, “use, build on, develop, adapt, adjust, and innovate their work in ways meaningful to their own teaching and learning context” (Loughran, 2007, pp. 18 - 19). Therefore, we foresee the continuation of a lifelong connection within our practice, the kinds of connection that will motivate us to reach out and beyond the call of duty as we strive to make a real difference in the lives of our students and other people we encounter in our everyday interactions.

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