

## The heART of learning: Creating a loving culture of inquiry to enhance self-determined learning in a high school classroom

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### Abstract

In this paper, I will describe how I created a loving culture of inquiry that enabled students to have transformative experiences as they unveil their voices to generate unique epistemologies and ontologies. I will share how responding to the four guiding questions: Who Am I? How do I Know? So What? and Now What? provided a framework that helped students to transcend the moral, creative, and intellectual constraints of traditional education. I will draw on data from the student action researchers in my classrooms and my own action research as I continue to refine my living-theory (both my methodology and theory) to demonstrate how I use self-study, living-theory, action research projects to create opportunities for self-determined learning.

**Keywords:** loving culture of inquiry; self-determined learning; high school classroom

## 1. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to share my experience working with grade 12 philosophy classes as I created a culture of inquiry and employed multi-media to assist in the students' understanding of their values. I will focus on evidence from my teaching context that show the meanings of the energy-flowing values that I use to explain my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of social formations for addressing a frequently impoverished educational experience and for creating a loving culture of inquiry.

In addition, I am committed to improving my practice and writing this individual piece and participating in the collaborative writing of this issue of e-jolts enables me to review and revise my knowledge claims, re-examine my values which become the explanatory principles that inform my standards of judgement, and to continue to develop my living-theory. This is a lifelong process that provides the opportunity for me to flourish and to contribute to the flourishing of others. I am extremely grateful to be part of such a dedicated group of practitioners and humbled that my voice and the voices of my students are recognized and valued.

## 2. Background

Nagler, in *Spiritual Crisis* (2005) states:

A spiritual crisis occurs when a people (a civilization or a culture) finds itself trapped in an outmoded, suffocating network of values and conceptions, in a worldview, a "creed outworn," that has become too small to allow people to get on with their cultural evolution. (p. 5)

I have been a passionate learner as far back as I can recollect; however, I do not have many memories of academic success until recently. Interestingly, it was this paradox, this crisis, that provided a catalyst for my journey—a way to “get on with” my cultural evolution. I did not graduate from high school and lived with the shame of this until I investigated this experience during my Master's work. I also recalled and re-visited the memory of being removed from grade nine art class because the classroom teacher, who I respected and admired at the time, claimed I did not have any creative ability whatsoever. These, among other, experiences are what prompted me to become an educator. I believe that what happened to me was wrong and contributed to my sense of intellectual and creative poverty and although I did not know how at the time, I did know that I could make a difference in the world of education and so my journey began.

Too often, I feel that much of what I am doing contributes to the devolution of my students and myself — this is my living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989). The values that I sense are important are often in conflict with Ministry mandates, prescribed curriculum, board initiatives and school policy, including standardized testing and textbook learning. I was beginning to lose my sense of self as the ability to live according to my values was challenged. Lacking confidence in my self-knowledge created an impoverished learning environment for my students and me and prevented us from flourishing individually and collectively.

This crisis — my living contradiction — was the birth of the transformation that enabled me to see the potential of a culture of inquiry based on DeLong's model and the hope and wisdom in Whitehead's Living Educational Theory. While pursuing a Masters of Education degree, I was introduced to these ideas and I generated a way to blend theory and practice that transcended traditional linear, analytical and technical thinking and honoured alternative epistemology and ontology. Equally important, this was the space where I experienced being loved into learning — where I felt a true sense of belonging.

I recall with much delight the day Jackie DeLong told us all that she loved us. Many might consider this inappropriate or simply strange; however, it made perfect sense to me and was exactly what I needed to hear, feel and experience. I heard it because it was said; I felt it because of the personal interactions (Jackie listened with her heart and she created a space and time for everyone, always); I experienced it because a culture of inquiry based on trust, respect, and hope was created and I felt safe enough to take the necessary academic and personal risks to have a meaningful and transformative journey.

There was one particular presentation by a student who shared a very difficult and traumatic experience that moved me beyond words. Her story was heart wrenching but it was her courage and willingness to trust and be vulnerable that created a gateway for all of us to become a loving community where we could discover and share our stories. Through my relationship with Jackie and through witnessing and experiencing the courage and love of my peers, I discovered my authentic voice. It was because of this transformative experience that I requested a return to the classroom from the system job I currently held. I had moved from a construct of loving wisdom to the wisdom of love and believed I was now more prepared to meet the learners in my care.

Only by coming to terms with my own past, my own background, and seeing that in the context of the world at large, have I begun to find my true voice and to understand that, since it is my own voice, that no pre-cut niche exists for it; that part of the work to be done is making a place, with others, where my and our voices, can stand clear of the background noise and voice our concerns, [our fears, our joys, our love, our hopes, our presence] as part of a larger song (hooks, 1994, p. 177).

I found my own voice by accepting and then validating the claim that I am passionate about meaningful, relevant, and holistic educational experiences for all learners. I came to this realization after embarking on self-study living-educational-theory action research. However, it was only after unveiling my embodied knowledge, identifying and articulating my values, and holding myself accountable to my values that I was able to internalize and apply education theories which influenced and/or informed my living-educational-theory. Guided by Jackie, who was modelling the process she experienced with Jack, I first had to recognize and acknowledge the value of my lived experiences in order to make sense of theories from disciplines. Although this may seem simplistic and perhaps even more like basic common sense, it is perhaps the simplicity that can cause us to discount the transformative power of the experience which makes it anything but simple. Researching my lived experiences included identifying and reflecting on stories of victory and ruin (MacLure 1996, p. 283), validating this knowledge via a validation group made up of critical friends, and then acting on that knowledge. As Jackie shared her understandings and experiences of energy-flowing-values and empathetic resonance, she was also living them in our culture of

inquiry which enabled me to feel safe, trusted, respected and loved and thus confident enough to trust myself to direct my own research and learning and then appreciate the research of others. This was the academic freedom I needed to thrive and the emotional support I needed to embark on a courageous and relentless journey.

The following image is a picture of a painting I did to convey the experience of feeling liberated as I discovered and exercised my voice through living theory action research. I found a way to meaningfully join in the larger song. In the safe and respectful environment of the culture of inquiry I was able to experiment with painting as way of tapping into my embodied knowledge and alternatively expressing and representing my epistemology and ontology. I continue to paint my way through knowledge creation today as a result of facing my living contradictions and holding myself accountable to my values. Also, I now have a more inclusive and inviting attitude about alternative epistemologies and ontologies, which has resulted in a behavioural change and directly affects my ability to create a space for and mentor my students on their journeys as they discover their unique contributions to the larger song (see image one).



**Image 1.** The Dance



### 3. Praxis

My return to the classroom was and still is extremely challenging. The challenges are exemplified by our spiritual crisis which continues to be excused and/or ignored because of “economic rationalism” (McTaggart, 1992). Even though I know that ethical relationships should trump all, I am seduced and often morally oppressed by the claim of economic necessity. This is my living contradiction. However, I again realized that this crisis was an opportunity for me to continue to ask “How can I improve my practice?” and to put my living-educational-theory into practice. The awareness of my living contradiction is the foundation of my praxis. As I continue to research, reflect, share, experiment and seek feedback from peers and students, I continue to develop my living educational theory. Investigating alternative epistemologies and ontologies with my students as co-researchers as we learn together and note our educational influences on self, others and social formations with the hope of contributing to the greater good is my praxis.

I begin my classes by briefly sharing my learning experience with my students as one possible way of identifying embodied knowledge and creating a self-directed learning journey. I invite students to experiment with non-traditional ways of researching, representing, and knowing in order to create a more authentic learning experience that acknowledges the richness of their lived experiences and offers a way to transcend the moral, creative and intellectual constraints of impoverished learning fostered by traditional education models. We focus on four guiding questions: Who am I? How do I know? So what (why is this important)? and Now what (what actions will I take based on the information I have gained)? This is how we begin our self- study action research.



**Image 2.** Students as co-researchers

One of the theories I embrace is that a more holistic and democratic approach to learning creates a more nourishing and enriching environment for students. Instead of seeing my students in terms of what they cannot do (the deficit model) I seek to know and help them clarify their strengths and interests (the abundance model). The learners in my care arrive with rich and diverse experiences and knowledge. Unfortunately, many students are unaware of this or simply don't believe in their own knowledge (these concerns are validated by their own reflections — see excerpts below). One evening, frustrated and overwhelmed by the lack of self-worth that many of my students expressed, I painted the following picture (see Image two) and shared it with my students to demonstrate one way of alternatively expressing and representing knowledge. The image is meant to be a juxtaposition of how many of my students see themselves (all made from the same mold sporting different labels of gold, silver, bronze or merely nothing) with the image of the student in the center who is a unique, rich, and complex mixture of many precious experiences. This painting expresses my understanding of how I hope to encounter the other as an abundance of beauty and I know that my life will be enriched by our encounter.

Appreciating the importance of making the relationally dynamics component of a loving culture of inquiry explicit, I begin each course by telling my students I love them and before they get too uncomfortable with the idea, I share Scott Peck's definition of love to explain what I mean. Love according to Peck (1978) is, "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of one's own or another's spiritual growth." (p. 85) Immediately, I see my students relax a little as they process this definition of love. I wait a few minutes...often someone asks what I mean by spiritual and then I explain that I use the term spiritual according to the definition bell hooks provides, "one who seeks to know and live according to values that promote universal well-being" (2001, p. 19). As a class, we identify values that will contribute to the greater good and note that we feel trusted and respected if we feel loved. I demonstrate trust and respect for my students when I provide them with opportunities to direct their own learning. Students then begin their own inquiries to identify their values and unveil their embodied knowledge. They begin with their lived experiences and then move on to the voices of others and eventually produce validated knowledge claims which represent a combination of both education and educational theories.

In the past, I selected video clips and articles that I thought would resonate with them. Now I pass that task onto the students and facilitate their search by sharing sources such as Ted Talks, Vimeo, National Film Board (NFB), YouTube (including the uploads of former students) and Google Scholar and other online portals for accessing print and multimedia.

#### **4. Building trust and respect**

As the trust and respect builds in our culture of inquiry, students are more confident about taking risks and I am more confident in facilitating their risk-taking. In time, students move from seeking knowledge from experts to looking within. This is the safe environment they need to transition into unveiling their embodied knowledge. "Notes from the Heart" is one of the first videos a group of students made. The group invited all class members to participate but were sure to note that participation was optional. The video is a compilation of favourite lyrics. The exciting part of this project unfolded as students discussed how their

choice of lyrics reflected their values and helped them to realize and articulate their values. Making the video and posting it on Youtube was a significant step for all enabling them to make their values public and hold themselves accountable to their values. This was a very exciting and inspiring project but it did not end there. Like many living theory action research projects it continued to provide opportunity for reflection. As a class we watched the video several times and as we viewed the video, students became more comfortable with seeing themselves on camera and more aware and critical of the content. They were learning how to be critical friends and they were learning to appreciate the power of video to express what often lies hidden in the written or spoken word.



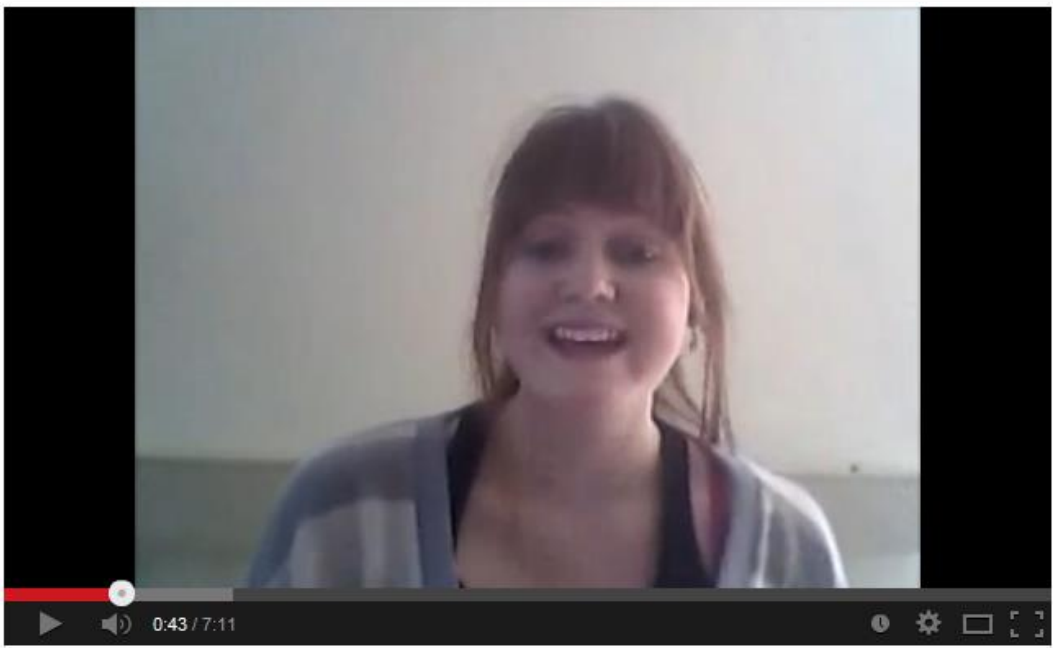
**Video 1.** The power of video - 2:09 minutes (<http://youtu.be/flBnLq1bOvw>)

## 5. Unveiling embodied knowledge

Transitioning from the use of published lyrics (the words of others) another group of students created a project around the concept of vulnerability that encouraged participants to express their inner voices. Again, we were all *invited* to share in a safe and trusting environment what it is that makes us feel vulnerable. Recognizing the difficulty of the task for some, the group provided the opportunity to participate anonymously or to opt out of the activity. After the written statements were collected, the group asked if anyone wanted to read their statement on camera and asked permission to read the remaining statements anonymously. The video is a mixture of these statements. This project: “Out on a Limb”, like “Notes from the Heart” revealed many important ideas to all of us and the recurring theme of fear of judgement resonated with many and became a powerful catalyst for further, deeper, and collaborative reflection.



**Video 2.** Out on a Limb Part 1 (<http://youtu.be/ZmJVN2r6iBQ>)



**Video 3.** Out on a Limb Part 2 (<http://youtu.be/MigBTfRDD6Y>)

As students learn to unveil embodied knowledge in a loving culture of inquiry they begin to flourish individually. In their final reflections, many students address this topic and openly share how enhanced self-awareness and recognizing commonalities in their concerns and values prompted an attitudinal change and in some cases an immediate behavioural change as evidenced by the following statements. From over eighty pages of profound and insightful statements, I have



selected a few excerpts to provide an example of the power and potential of student-centered, action research, values based learning to transcend constraints of educational poverty. Students discover and realize the power of their own voices and more importantly they realize the importance and power of love, trust and respect for self and others:

- This class has helped me gain a lot of new knowledge that I plan to use in order to stay true to myself, live by my values and be my own person. My life would be completely different if I didn't get to discover myself in philosophy. At the start of the semester I didn't see that, but now I do. Before this I never really knew who I was or had even thought of it for that matter. I affirmed my three values. Also I realized some things that were not. For example I am not fearless and I do indeed have vulnerabilities. Or when I thought going to school for the best program at the best school would be "the best", when really that wasn't a good idea at all. I have to do what I am passionate about and enjoy my time there. This semester I think I have went through a metamorphosis. I have uncovered so many things about myself that I didn't realize until now.
- Over the course of this semester I know I have gained many insights and had a transformative experience. I know I am not the same person I was when I first entered the classroom at the beginning of the semester saying sarcastic answers to the four questions because I did not know how to answer them.
- This was hard for me to do because I feel that I have so many, but when it all came down to it I felt like the underlying theme was that I don't feel like I am enough. I don't like to say that I don't feel "good" enough, because there are things about me that I think *are* good enough, though it's been hard for me to recognize these things. Ultimately, I always find that I criticize myself for everything: I always feel that I could have gone farther, done more, been better. I often feel like there is a lot that I'm missing: that for one reason or another I'm just not enough. I feel that if I can continue to integrate philosophy into my way of life, anything becomes possible. Now that I know, I can ask again. Now that I know, I can reflect on my knowledge; challenge it, question it some more, refine it, change it, and modify it. Now that I know, I can find a sense of security within myself. Knowledge is power, and if I feel that I have become knowledgeable then I can find confidence and pride. I think that if I seek further understanding, and if I find it, then perhaps my vulnerability will start to dissipate, and perhaps I will be enough. I'll live authentically and be happier because of it.
- This semester I learned a lot about myself as a person. I found that I am far more complex of a person than I had originally thought that I was. At the beginning of the semester when we were asked these same questions, I had no idea where to even start – I was completely at a loss. Until being in this class, nobody had ever really asked me who I was as a person, and I had never thought about it myself.
- I think that after being in this class, I am a changed person, and I see the world around me with a new, greater perspective. Now, I think about living in accordance with my values and morals, and also trying to embrace my vulnerabilities instead of trying to avoid them all together. I think that now I am a more comfortable person, and I am better at sharing things about myself with others. Some new actions I may take would include: telling the people close to me more things about myself, being more open around other people, trying to learn more about myself as a person and about my own values, and sharing my opinions and ideas with others more frequently.
- I live my life in constant fear. I am afraid of being judged, rejection, and disappointing others. I am also afraid of people not accepting me for who I am, however, one of my vulnerabilities is allowing people to see who I really am – for a fear of being judged or rejected based on

knowing me. All of the vulnerabilities I thought I had at the beginning of the semester were directly related to the fear of judgment, rejection, or disappointment. I thrive off pride and control, which can get the best of me. I feel like I always need to be in control in order to be perfectly content with a situation occurring. If I feel like I'm not in control, my fears and vulnerabilities start to kick in... I search for opportunities to get recognition to prove to myself that I am good enough. I set high expectations for situations I'm involved in. My expectations are so high that a lot of the time they aren't met, which leads to even more insecurity about not being good enough. Part of this is helping others. I always help people whenever I have the opportunity to. Because of all the insecurities and not feeling good enough, I have realized that I cannot truly love others yet because I don't think I love myself. (Students, personal communication, June, 2011)

I have outlined some specifics only to provide some background and this in no way is a formula or detailed pedagogical approach that can or should be replicated as it stands. I believe that seeing my students as unique individuals worthy of love, trust, and respect is what enabled us to create a community where all could flourish. Embracing a living-theory, action research, self-study approach provided the framework for unveiling embodied knowledge, identifying and articulating personal values, making our values public and holding ourselves accountable to these values. The action research elements of our studies provided the template for continually examining our assumptions, identifying and validating knowledge claims, and revising as needed based on reflection of actions to generate explanatory principles that become our standards of judgment.

Conducting self-study, action research projects, using a living theory methodology was a unique journey for each individual. Some students identified experiences of impoverished learning related to creativity, morality, representation of knowledge and knowledge acquisition. In all of these situations, the individual student decided on the standards of judgment, which were often guided by the values they had unveiled and their desire to live more authentically. We tried not to impose our values on one another as we helped each other to discover our unique voice. At times we would have to gently remind each other and ourselves that although we had a common goal of improving our lives and contributing to a greater good, the main purpose of our journey was to challenge our own status-quo thinking so that we could transcend the traditional status-quo thinking that created the impoverished learning environment we each experienced. Individually we journeyed in collaboration.

## 6. The living curriculum

Shared struggles and common values are revealed and made explicit through the use of reflective writing, videotaping, and individual and collaborative review and analysis of the writing and video footage. We refer to Habermas' concept of social validity to test knowledge claims as we ask and seek feedback for the question "Am I on TRAC?" i.e. truthful, right, authentic and comprehensible (Habermas, 1976, pp. 2-3). This is not to suggest that there is an imposed moral agenda; however, there is the intention of enhancing our individual understanding of our values and influences and hoping to improve our lives and the lives of others.

The analysis of our research is not confined to a scientific, logical, or rational process (although it may include these) however, there are patterns and themes within the diverse range of experiences and ideas that contribute to the sense of enlightenment as much as the differences and paradoxes provide insights. Drawing out the patterns, themes, questions, assumptions, paradoxes and contradictions from our lived experiences is the main source of our living curriculum. As action researchers, we are not looking for solutions, we are simply embarking on a journey of uncertainty and mystery; we are taking a wisdom of love approach to life to see what unfolds. Given the opportunity to mindfully reflect, work collaboratively, use alternative strategies (including video), and to direct our own learning enables us to transition from experiencing education to having educational experiences. In this educational environment many students have transformative experiences as evidenced by the sampling of comments below taken directly, as is, from student writings:

- Between the group validation and validating throughout the semester with [name deleted], I saw that my body language changes when I'm talking about myself. I fidget-play with my hair, or a paper in my hand, or look away. I wasn't even aware of these things until I watched the videos. Fidgeting could be showing the insecurity I have talking about myself and my past. From talking with you I realized that I need to write down the stories of my past. After writing one, I wrote many. Throughout the stories of ruin, I noticed that a common theme was being put down, having no self-confidence, and having virtually no control over what had happened. These stories helped me realize that I think they're the reason I have to be in control, and never let people in for the fear of the stories coming out. They're also the reason I walk around with a smile on my face all the time, because then no one will know that I even have these stories in the back of my mind. This behavior affirms my fear of letting people know who I really am.
- Watching videos that we had created and posted in class touched me in ways that made me want to change and be a better person... it was the openness and sincerity of my classmates speaking out. Watching myself in the videos also showed me what kind of person I am, by the way I spoke and my body language, which helped me a lot find out who I am.
- At the beginning of the semester I was scared to join class discussions, participate and trust all these people I don't normally talk with, and I somehow came to slightly overcome that fear. My validation videos gave me hard evidence to show how I interact with people I'm not necessarily close with, and I think that helped me a lot to grow. I saw myself being timid at first but as the video went on I started to become more comfortable with the group and as a result I was able to break out of my shell so to speak.
- I have knowledge based on validation that we have done throughout this course. I have watched myself talk about my beliefs and my ideas on camera, I have discussed with my classmates my project plans and my revelations, I have chosen to make videos of my own and I have observed and reflected on others' plans and actions to relate them to myself. I know then, I suppose, through validation and experience. I know because I have faced my ideas and been forced to agree or disagree – to form a defense for my way of thinking.
- It began as a simple exercise of speaking to the camera for a couple of minutes but it transformed into something so much more. I went into the exercise with an open mind, not really planning what I was going to say, but inevitably ideas came. Validation was a way to discover the real truth behind what we believed and even was a way to discover what we actually believed. By having other people around to use as proofs of your own activities was truly remarkable. After reviewing both of my projects so far I was able to make the most profound connection. (Students, personal communication, June, 2011)

As we unveil our embodied knowledge, we become more aware of how we are influencing others and become more accountable for our action reflection cycles and living more fully according to our values.

## 7. Influencing self, others, and social formations

As the semester progresses, my role shifts between guide and facilitator and learner, as does the role of the students. As co-researchers we witness the blossoming and flourishing of individuals and we begin to understand more clearly how we influence one another and our culture of inquiry. It becomes apparent that the more we feel trusted and respected, the more we are willing to trust and respect others and this enhances our culture of inquiry to a level that surpasses what I imagine could be possible in such a short time frame. In the last month of the semester, students volunteer to be critical friends and actively seek out opportunities to record their thinking and test the validity of their ideas with their peers. It is truly remarkable to simply be in the background watching the relational dynamics and the flourishing of the community. I am both humbled and inspired as I realize what meaningful learning can take place once students discover their voice and learn to trust their embodied knowledge. This is when I can step aside (get out of the way) and let students get on with their own cultural evolution. Once students become more confident, they often become attuned to what is taking place outside of their own minds and become more aware of their influences and their connection to self and others as evidenced in the following example statements:

- As I delved further into my action project of discovering self, it became a lot more personal than I had anticipated and by then honesty was crucial to me; honesty to others, and as I discussed with Mrs. Campbell, honesty towards myself. With this prominent theme of honesty I tried to better my connections with people around me.
- This semester I have also learned to let myself open up and trust the people around me in this class. I picked trust as one of my main values because in every relationship you need some degree of trust before you can have any relationship at all. I think all the students in this classroom felt some degree of trust with the peers around them and I think everyone fed off of that and became more trusting. I thought it was amazing how many people at the beginning of this semester felt vulnerable sharing in general and now most of us are all able to share confidently without *ad hominem*. I think the bond that was formed between all of my peers and myself will be never ending because we've shared so much this semester. (Students, personal communication, June 2011)

## 8. Influencing social formations outside of the classroom

As I continue my own self-study action research in an attempt to answer the question, How can I improve my practice? I am mindful of my influence on self, others, and the social formations in which I interact. I consider my influence not in the egotistical sense but as part of my responsibility *for* others (Levinas, 1969). I know that I am influencing the learners in my care and I want to be sure that I do so in a positive and respectful way. This influence is in part one of the essential components of the sustainability of living theory action research. In order to transcend the constraints of impoverished education, I must be

fully aware of my influences and willing to revise my practice as necessary. To this end, I specifically monitor my practice by reflecting in action and on action and seek critical feedback from my students and my critical friends.

The clip below includes an example of my influence and also examples of the sustainability of living theories and communities of inquiry. Three graduate students who individually contacted me over the December holidays with a desire to reconnect accept an invitation to lunch at my home. All three give their permission to videotape our dialogue and to upload the footage into the public domain. This alone is evidence of their willingness to experience personal flourishing and to contribute to the flourishing of others.



**Video 4.** Sabrrea, Brianne, Becki and Liz - a loving culture-of-inquiry  
([http://youtu.be/oqlsET8z0\\_M](http://youtu.be/oqlsET8z0_M))

I begin the discussion by stating my claim that our philosophy class was a loving culture of inquiry where students learn how to unveil their embodied knowledge and I invite them to comment on this or anything else they feel is significant. [Brianne begins \(at 3:46\)](#) by commenting on how refreshing and inspiring the alternative environment was for her and the importance of being trusted to direct her own learning. Sabrrea comments on how she is still applying the learning that she experienced ([at 5:00](#)). In addition to completely changing her program of study to something she is passionate about (media arts) instead of a program that her parents wanted her to complete (business), she talks about how she is far more confident and now goes out on her own. Becki, still feeling a little uncomfortable recalls her risk taking in the class and Sabrrea reminds Becki of how influential her risk taking was (at 8:00) on her and other students.

I have shared some of the highlights of one particular year of teaching with the intention of naming what I do and believe so that other educators might benefit from this



experience. I do not want to suggest that our experience was some kind of utopia but I do want to emphasize that almost every student, myself included, benefitted more from a non-traditional approach. Four Arrows (2008), also known as Don Trent Jacobs, dedicates an entire volume to the importance of embracing different thinking to solve the problems that plague our world today:

In fact, a number of us believe that in many ways, directly or indirectly, the “academy” may be partially responsible for our collective inability to significantly mitigate warfare, global warming, social and ecological injustices, domestic violence, loss of habit, racism, economic despair, loss of the commons etc. The dissertation authors featured in this text recognize how tapping into more diverse perspectives, more authentic experience and reflection, and more creative abilities can address the problems (2010, p. 1).

As my students experimented with different ways of knowing, researching and representing they were able to unveil embodied knowledge which enhanced their perspectives and provided authentic experiences that influenced their own learning and the learning of others.

I again want to emphasize that our experience was not without challenges and obstacles; it was not a seamless process whatsoever but was more reflective of life—full of uncertainty and contradictions. Knowing that we did not have to take this journey alone and that there was a promise of growth inherent in the process we embraced the tension as much as the joy. O’Donohue (2004) describes this process quite eloquently:

We need to have greater patience with our sense of inner contradiction in order to allow its different dimensions to come into conversation within us. There is a secret light and vital energy in contradiction. Where there is energy there is life and growth. Your ascetic solitude will allow your contradictions to emerge with clarity and force. If you remain faithful to this energy, you will gradually come to participate in a harmony that lies deeper than any contradiction. This will give you new courage to engage the depth, danger and darkness of your life (p. 115).

## **9. Endpiece**

All of us experienced moments of self-doubt and felt overwhelmed at times and it was during these times that we turned to our community for the support and guidance to persevere. I was extremely fortunate to have a sense of belonging in both the classroom community and the research community made up of Cathy, Jackie, Jack and myself. In both of these communities I felt trusted and respected and I was able to speak honestly and openly about my concerns and beliefs even when this meant exposing my vulnerabilities or living contradictions. In addition to feeling trusted and respected, knowing that I am loved by Jackie, Cathy and Jack provided me with the courage to face my fears and celebrate my victories. Each time we meet in cyberspace I am rejuvenated and more prepared to meet the challenges that await me.

Feeling loved provides me with a true sense of belonging and in that space I know that I can expose my authentic self and experience growth. Although this sounds rather simple and straightforward, it took time and trust to feel confident enough to say I do not

know or I do not understand or to share a classroom situation that did not unfold as expected. It was actually very difficult to continually self-assess my actions seeking moments of inconsistencies and contradictions. I often recall feeling frustrated, confused, and chaotic — messy business indeed. I know that I never would have achieved the level of understanding, clarity, confidence, and authenticity that I experienced without the support and trust of both my communities. I do think that it was the act of making these struggles public and living them in collaboration that helped to nourish both communities. The research community supported the classroom community and vice versa. Each informed the other. Like the collaborative writing process within a loving culture of inquiry it is often difficult to pinpoint with accuracy the single event or person who influenced something. There is so much overlap and blurring of boundaries in a true collaborative process. My teaching, learning, and writing are collaborative, holistic and organic much like life, which is what makes it so relevant and meaningful for me and also what makes it so difficult to compartmentalize.

Much has happened since the initial writing of this paper: I co-presented this paper and another with Jackie, Cathy and Jack at AERA and ARNA in San Francisco; I accepted a different teaching position that provides new challenges and rewards; I became a grandmother, twice; I completed all of the courses in a doctorate program and I am now preparing to write the comprehensive exams and the thesis; I have co-written a proposal with Cathy Griffin to create a board wide living-theory, self-study, action research organization. All of these experiences allow me to continue to develop my living-theory and live a more full and authentic life. They overlap in ways that even I cannot articulate in detail but I am always aware of as I live my life as a mother, teacher, student, researcher, writer, artist, wife, daughter, friend, grandmother and global citizen with the aim of contributing to the greater good.

Recently, after reading feedback from Tim Cain on the original version of this paper posted on EJOLT's open-reviewing, I was reflecting on his comments about the acquisition of ontological values and the cultural and/or experiential definition of love. He writes:

I have recently acquired a grand-daughter who has ontological features - eyes, mouth, nose etc. but it would be hard to argue that she has ontological values. No doubt she'll acquire some but I wonder what the process is, for this acquisition. Fortunately, her experience of 'love' is likely to be warmth, cuddles and having her needs met but, for some children, 'love' is sex and abuse and a lot of lesser, but still painful, experiences. (This might why two of the sections in the article define 'love'.) This makes me ponder the status of the word 'love' as descriptive of a value that we can all recognise. (Cain, 2013)

I had the pleasure of holding my newest granddaughter as I reflected on Tim's comments and questions. Avah Elizabeth is one month old and as she nestled on my chest her cheek touching the bare skin exposed by my tee shirt and her tiny fingers curled around the index finger I offered her, I rested my chin gently on the top of her head. I could feel a connection with her as I felt the beat of my own heart and hers. In that moment I felt a love infused energy emanating from every pore in my body and hers. I had an overwhelming sense of interconnectedness to her. As I gazed at her profile and felt the beating of her heart I asked myself: Is she simply a combination of ontological features or is there more? How do I account for the energy that resonates between us? Would it be the same with any

newborn? Would Avah have a similar experience with a stranger who is simply providing warmth and comfort? Below is a picture, taken on a different day, of me holding five week old Avah as she seeks and receives comfort. Only moments prior to this she was fussing and did not settle when I picked her up and gently swayed her back and forth but the moment I sat down and laid her on my chest she immediately began to settle. Was she comforted by the beat of my heart, my smell, the tremendous love I feel for her?



**Image 3.** With my new granddaughter

I cannot provide any scientific explanations or answers, nor do I have any desire to conduct any empirical analysis, I can only seek patterns and themes in my experiences as I recount them and offer them for criticism. I can claim that I have experiences that seem to transcend logical and rational explanations both as a mother and teacher and what I have observed is that if I am able to focus on trust, respect, and love in relational dynamics then we all seem to flourish. I can claim that in all of the experiences I have encountered since developing my living-theory I have not done any harm and in most cases I have contributed to a greater good. I know this because I am constantly seeking feedback and have made it quite clear to those I interact with that I want to improve my practice and my life so I genuinely want honest criticism. I do not expect everyone to agree with me or even to share in the recognition of my values but I do trust that should you wish to generate your own living-theory and you do so within a loving culture of inquiry you will come to understand your own values in a new light.

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## About the Author

**Liz Campbell:** After almost two decades of high school classroom teaching experience, I accepted a lead teacher position at the board office at which time I also completed a Masters of Education and immediately thereafter requested a return to the classroom. I teach at a mid-size (660 students) rural high school in an affluent community. I am also completing a PhD in Educational Sustainability at Nipissing University in North Bay. I am passionate about inclusive, holistic education and believe that fostering a loving culture of inquiry challenges the constraints of poverty for all learners. In the classroom we co-create a space for alternative knowing, researching, and representing and as co-researchers we embark on a journey of discovery through living theory action research projects. This is my first endeavour into the world of writing for publication and I am honoured to be working with such passionate and loving researchers. This collaborative effort is evidence of the hope for humanity and provides a model for what otherwise might be considered elusive or unattainable (i.e. collaborative self-study living theory action research). In our attempts to make explicit how living-theory action research can transcend the constraints of impoverished learning, I lived the experience in this collaboration. It is the sustainability of living-theory action research that inspires me to continue researching and writing with the hope of contributing to a shift in education that addresses our spiritual crisis.