

Foreword: Developing community through the open reviewing process

Pip Bruce Ferguson

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Dublin City University

Dublin, Ireland

It is an honour to be invited to write the editorial for this edition of EJOLTS. I am a long-term reviewer and a member of the Development Panel but I am not on the Editorial Board. Notwithstanding, I participate in approximately fortnightly Skype meetings with members of that Board and have had the opportunity to witness the deep commitment and concern for the best interests of the Journal that Board members have demonstrated in those meetings. It is this deep concern for the flourishing of humanity, in all its many guises, that also seems to me to motivate those who submit their work to EJOLTS. In an academic environment, so often the emphasis is on 'high status publications' for personal career advancement. I am encouraged to see authors from around the globe submitting to EJOLTS, a high quality publication that seeks to promote ongoing development of people's own thinking and practice – both that of the authors and that of the review team, in the open review process. In this editorial I want to demonstrate, through the papers submitted to this edition, how authors are providing evidence of the claims regarding commitment and concern that I state above. I also want to show how the Editorial team, Development Panel and reviewers are constantly seeking to review their own work and beliefs.

Recently, I was fortunate to attend the Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA) World Congress in Pretoria, South Africa. At that conference we heard hopeful stories emerging from seemingly-hopeless situations as well as research from better resourced parts of the world where the problems may also be challenging but are not usually life-threatening.

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One comment I heard several times, and usually from people who had not attended an ALARA event before, was a feeling of ‘coming home’, of finding a community of like-minded people committed to joint support and improvement of practice. Friends and connections made at these events often continue for decades. A group of us were asked, as part of an initial symposium that kicked off the conference, to reflect on what ALARA events had done for us over a 25 year period. My reflection was on how the conferences had stimulated and supported the growth of my awareness of cross-cultural issues in education (see Bruce Ferguson, 2015 – our June edition). I am hoping that this edition of EJOLTS will stimulate your thinking, encourage your exploration and prompt reflection about how you develop your own living educational theory and contribute to the flourishing of humanity.

The papers in this edition are avowedly personal explorations of growth in awareness and knowledge of the authors’ own ways of being and doing in the world, what has influenced them and how they, in turn, seek to extend that influence to others – what Forester (2015) calls the development of ‘living legacies’. But they do not stop at the individual level. They seek to acknowledge and to influence a wider world.

Moira Laidlaw has submitted to EJOLTS on two earlier occasions. In this latest paper, she reflects on how she has tended to undervalue some spheres of influence in her practice, citing individual coaching work in different contexts, and also volunteer work in a local charity shop. As well, of course, she draws on her more standard academic practice in both the U.K. and in China. Commenting on this synthesis of contexts, Moira states that:

An individual’s Living Theory is not intended, to my understanding, to be split off from the world of others; indeed it is from being with others as well as with ourselves that we grow, hopefully in the direction of the values we espouse as enriching our own and others’ lives.

She further states that *she* is the material she has to work with, and as such is largely responsible for herself and her actions. Reading about the pedagogy of Paulo Freire has led her to consider the notion of conscientisation (Freire, 2005) as she strives to make sense of and to live to the fullest her own life. She cites examples of how she works out her values in her practice and provides an interesting and novel form of evidence of her own reflection in the form of two sets of stories, included as appendices. Reflecting on the current massive refugee problem facing the world, she states that ‘I cannot save the world, but I can approach it in a more aware way. That is what I am trying to do.’ It is in synthesising these different facets of her own practice that Moira came to a new insight: ‘I begin to realise that there are links between my sense of a living legacy, my responsibilities and educational activities, and Living Theory as a social movement.’ This shows how a foundation member of the EJOLTS Editorial Board is working towards the evolution of the journal and its underpinning theoretical orientation.

Tackling massive world problems is evident, too, in the work of Moira’s PhD student Arianna Briganti. Included in both their papers are snips from video conversations between them. One of the benefits of an online journal such as EJOLTS is the ability to include diverse forms of evidence, and the videos show a mutually respectful concern for growth and for the flourishing of humanity in different parts of the globe. Arianna’s current work is as a development economist in Albania. She explains how her standards of judgment are

changing over time, responding in a very moving way to her work in a post-conflict environment:

I felt an all-encompassing sense of fragmentation, hopelessness and impossibility to react against what seemed to be values that serve particular sets of interests ahead of others such as peace, and compassion for humanity.

Rather than being overwhelmed by the situation, however, Arianna describes her wish to contribute to the building of a fairer world ‘by choosing the side of compassion and humanity and help[ing] people in overcoming hatred and differences’. This choice is not an easy one, however, and later in the paper Arianna describes feeling ‘sometimes pulled apart’ in the process.

Arianna and other authors in this edition explain the influence of multi-Skype conversations as members of different groups, both in offering support and challenges to their perspectives at times. It is my perception that these multi-Skype conversations are becoming an important part of the EJOLTS community, and that accounts of their effectiveness are encouraging others to try out this form of ‘online communities of practice’ in equitable ways (i.e., free and reasonably easily available, given internet access). For instance, one was used by Sonia Hutchinson during the World Congress to link up folk around the globe – Arianna was part of this. Arianna, like Moira, does not reflect purely on her work environment. In a series of moving video clips, she talks with her adopted Ethiopian daughters about their coming together, and their hopes for the future. Arianna concludes, ‘My living theory starts at the grassroots level, evolves into something that transcends the academic and impacts on those I have the privilege to meet along the way’.

A sense of sound ethics permeates both of the above accounts – the intention not merely to espouse values, but to live them out in diverse, frequently messy, and often overwhelming situations. It is this commitment to good ethical practice that motivates the third paper I shall describe – that of Donna and Jerry Allender. Donna and Jerry work in the United States, and describe in their paper wrestling with the challenge of bullying in a school they were instrumental in setting up, and whose values were being seriously breached by the bullying that was occurring. Rather than blaming the bullies, however, the Allenders sought to understand the systemic issues that might be influencing its occurrence. The students were in the junior high school (11 – 15) age range, an age traditionally fraught with the changes of puberty and the seeking of individual identities.

Their question revolved around ‘how bullying could possibly have occurred in a supposedly humanistic community’ and it led them to ask ‘a hard question: how were we irresponsible all the years of our careers as educators?’ Issues of power and of whose voice prevails in a difficult situation are evident in the paper, as they were in Arianna’s account of her work in Albania. Moving from an initial belief that ‘talking it out’ could solve the problem and bring real harmony, Donna and Jerry came to see that ‘We must expect to manage with imperfect agreements’ as they wrote a book called *Ethics for the Young Mind*. They were seeking to exercise influence in wider educational contexts than their own, drawing on the work they had needed to do to counter the paradox of bullying in a school posited on humanistic

values. They concluded, 'Thus we moved from the idealism of the possibility of perfection to the idealism of the imperfect being all right. So now there are other right ways to teach ethics'. The paper presents Donna's and Jerry's voices individually at times, and does so at the conclusion.

Individual voices are used too, at times, in the paper by Kelly Hanson and Sabre Cherkowski. These two are PhD student and supervisor, respectively, and their work challenges the power dynamics that all too often affect relationships such as this. While both live in Canada, they describe how their awareness of Living Educational Theory work happened through the Bluewater Action Research Network International, 'a group of practitioner-researchers from across the globe who meet virtually using emails, blogs and Skype'. The sense of each participant in these conversations being important comes through clearly, particularly where Kelly describes not having screen shots of live speakers in one conversation, and therefore not realising who was silent in the process. The Skype conversations helped Kelly and Sabre as

...we came to know ourselves in new ways, [because] within the group the 'I' changes. Through Skype we noticed how the 'I' and the 'we' are interrelated, because when one participant is missing from the discussion the experience of 'I' is somehow different.

It is rare to gain such an honest insight into the emerging dynamics between supervisor and student as we see in this account. The two drew on a Japanese way of working, *Kizuki* (Inoue, 2012) as a path to mindfulness. While this method can bring about 'small deaths' of some ways of being, it also opens up rebirths. They note:

Part of our inquiry process was learning to hold on less tightly to what we think we know about our selves and how we should enact these selves through our various roles and responsibilities.

Sabre wrote, towards the end of the paper, that:

For Kelly and me, our Living Educational Theory includes experiences of creating spaces of openheartedness and invitation, of co-creating meaning through authentic dialogue. These are new maps of learning for us and challenge what we think about what it means to be a teacher, a student, a scholar and a researcher.

By the conclusion of the paper, 'we noticed that 'I's' became 'we's' through our emerging collective wisdom'. It is this sense of sharing and community-building that I am arguing in this editorial we are developing in our EJOLTS community and through the accounts published in the journal. We are also, I would claim, challenging the traditional dichotomy and power dynamics of 'submitter' and 'reviewer'.

Kelly and Sabre noted new ways of being in their respective roles. This development is also notable in the final paper, Brian Williamson's *A five-cycle living visual taxonomy of learning interactions*. Brian's is the first paper to go through a new process we have initiated in EJOLTS, that of being referred to the Community Forum space for discussion on how to help an author construct a living theory account of their practice when the initial presentation appears not to meet the journal's criteria. What is evident in Brian's paper, in the final iteration of which he interweaves comments from his Community Forum mentor (Pip) and

his reviewers (Jacqui, Peter and Sigrid) is the dedication with which he seeks to improve his practice.

The paper provides an indepth analysis of how this practice has developed, from Brian's initial experiences of being educated himself, and seeing that there needs to be a better way, to his striving to meet the needs of both maths students and those with disabilities in his later employment practice. Brian works as a one-to-one tutor. Much of the paper shows the influence of the work of Vygotsky (1978) in Brian's seeking to move students from situations of comfort, where growth is unlikely to occur, to challenge, but not in such a way that they shut down out of fear of lack of ability to achieve targets set. Brian says that

...during a one-to-one session, I sometimes gamble by grasping an opportunity to delicately expose the student to snippets of mild age-appropriate torment and frustration; to help them *grow*.

Tormenting one's students is not the way teachers generally seek to practise, but Brian explains that his value of encouraging growth means that sometimes inducing a feeling of discomfort is the best way of assisting that growth. Later in his 'visual taxonomy' he describes helping students to move from a state of 'I know I know' (comfort) to one of 'I am stuck' (i.e., I need help to move forward). A further stage, 'That is remote', indicates a leap so great that the student feels alienated and disoriented (i.e., outside of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development).

Brian is obviously an educator for whom visual representation is important, and he provides a number of diagrams that help to explain his thinking. As a mathematician, he also describes his work in very sequential stages, as he illustrates from examples in his own practice and with his own students how these might work. While these might initially feel hard for readers to grasp, they well repay further reflection. Brian's emphasis in the paper is on the question, 'How do I improve this process of education here?' While his examples are derived from individual thinking and practice, he is keen to provide these to a wider audience, to contribute to the scholarship that he so evidently values. Not content with having developed the work to this stage, in his final section he presents a range of further ways in which he would like to continue his investigations. For instance, drawing on Peter Mellett's reviewer feedback, he says:

He [Peter] suggests that my living-theory is a system that attempts to describe this expert [within the meaning of Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1983] behaviour, and I believe that discussing, and investigating, this claim could lead to a fresh understanding of the quality of teaching and learning.

The reviewing process has been a lengthy one for Brian, and his paper alerts both authors and reviewers to issues that have a wider implication for the ongoing development of EJOLTS. That this all happens in an open reviewing process is vital. Probably most of us who have published in academic journals have been recipients of sometimes harshly critical reviewer feedback. This is occasionally the result of a reviewer who has misunderstood something of what is being said, or is clearly writing from a research approach very different from that posited in the paper. EJOLTS negates this possibility in the sense that the recipient

of the reviewing is able to respond; to present alternative perspectives that the reviewer may not have considered. I have written about the merits of this in a publication where I also cited as 'additional authors', four EJOLTS submitters with whom I had worked (Bruce Ferguson, with Gjøtterud, Delong, Inan & Salyers, 2015a). It is an aspect of this journal that I very much value, and that I know the Editorial Board and Development Panel keep in mind as the journal evolves. As Brian reflects towards the end of his paper,

At times, reviewing my paper has made [the reviewer] feel 'unheard' but later she considered this to be due to her living-theory 'simply not having relevance' to mine (Scholes-Rhodes, 2015). Perhaps comparing and contrasting living-theories in this way is just as important to the discovery process, as individuals growing their own.

There is another paper in the Community Forum space at present (that of Petter Øgland) where similar challenges and growth are occurring. Petter's point, 'Surely, not all Living Theory research has to be written as a living-theory account?' (2 November) is an excellent question that EJOLTS Editors and Development Panel members have responded to, and continue to investigate.

I hope that your reading of the papers contained in this journal will help you to further consider your own practice, and to think about whether Living Educational Theory research is a suitable way for you to grow as a practitioner and a member of the global community.

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