The influence of Action Research and Living Educational Theory on my life's work as an educator

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Abstract

This paper seeks to describe how my teaching philosophy and practice has evolved over time, influenced by principles of action research, reflective practice and Living Educational Theory. These influences have motivated me to strive to work in life-enhancing ways with peers and students, often in the face of considerable pressure locally and nationally, and in turbulent times. Evidence of this work permeates the paper, which is presented in an informal voice rather than in traditional academic language, as it is mainly a personal narrative.

The paper describes the evolution of my practice as an educator, from early days in primary-school teaching, through staff development at a New Zealand polytechnic for 18 years, then as research manager in a Maori tertiary provider, self-employment as a researcher, and later in university staff development units in New Zealand and now in Ireland. Over this time, my philosophy and sense of agency have changed as I have encountered influential theories.

The longer I have worked as a staff developer, the more I have realized that the action research approach lends itself both to individual as well as to collaborative inquiry, although the latter is my preference (see Bruce Ferguson, 1999). My work over the past two decades in particular has stressed the importance of declaring my own values and holding myself accountable for these. McNiff and Whitehead's (2006) Living Educational Theory approach requires me to provide evidence of this accountability, evidence that shows the impact of my practice on others. The paper provides such evidence.

Keywords: Action Research; Reflective practice; Living Educational Theory; Values; Teaching philosophy; Agency.

Introduction

An initial version of this paper was prepared for the Collaborative Action Research Network conference, held in Lincoln, (U.K.) in November 2016. It is published here with permission of the organisers although, in response to reviewer-comment, it has been adapted. The theme of this CARN conference was 'Integrating the Personal, Political and Professional in our Practice'. It is a worthy theme to explore in times of global turbulence, both educationally and economically. Living in Ireland at present, I have noted the apprehension of Irish commentators and colleagues about the impact of the British exit from the E.U. – Brexit – not only economically but also politically and educationally. Colleagues who are enrolled in Ph.D. study from English universities fear being identified as 'foreign students' when Britain leaves the E.U., and consequently incurring substantial increases in fees. Ireland stays in the E.U., so my university will not face the charging of fees to 'foreign students' to the large numbers of E.U. students who currently study here, although there may well be impacts for British students studying here unless reciprocal arrangements are negotiated. Indeed, we live in turbulent times.

As a concerned educator, I am wondering when education has ever *not* been affected by political and economic uncertainties? We practice our profession in the context of the societies where our universities are located. In my home country of New Zealand, the 1989 Education Act declared that universities have a statutory role to be "a critic and conscience of society" (Education Act, Section 162(4)a). Yet since the 1990s in New Zealand, as Shore (2007) and others (see, for instance, Kelsey, 1997; Middleton, Codd and Jones, 1990) have noted, the nature of education has been evolving into a far more instrumental, economically-oriented process than the Act indicated it should be. Turbulence has been the order of the day, and academics, myself among them, have considered it our role to carry out the critiquing and conscience-raising functions that the 1989 Act advocates. This paper traces some of my own work, and how I have sought to recognise and address the resultant inequities that turbulence has thrown up. It explains how my teaching philosophy has grown or changed over time in response to these actions.

The primary school and polytechnic years

I trained as a primary school teacher in the late 1960s, completing my first year of teaching in 1969. My pedagogy and my teaching philosophy at that point were fairly simplistic – they revolved around hopes to help my students to achieve their potential, using the tools at my disposal. My family history predisposes me to value and to work for social equity. Certainly I was aware of anomalies in education, although I probably felt that individual effort could help to rectify some of these. My awareness of the wider systemic issues affecting groups of students was minimal.

In my first degree, a Bachelor of Education started alongside my Diploma of Teaching and completed in 1971, I first became exposed to critical analysis of educational direction through the lectures of Professor Jack Shallcrass. Jack was sometimes disparagingly referred to as 'a Red' by those who found his critique disruptive. He had also been the Vice-Principal of the Teachers' College where I gained my Diploma, leaving to assume full-time University

lecturing. Under Jack's tuition, I began to realise that education was not the innocent process I had always assumed it to be. For instance, he was good at asking provocative questions about government policy and how it affected education, and helping students to gain some insight into the fact that education is not neutral, but is a political act. However, my pedagogy remained relatively static and focused on assisting individual children to improve their learning. I am not aware of engaging in any political action in those days, although I was a paid-up member of my union and have been throughout my career.

When my youngest child was at kindergarten – as I had taken several years off paid work for child-raising – I returned to study. I was starting to recognise the need to exercise agency in both personal and professional spheres by then. As an example, my choice of the words 'paid work' in a previous sentence is deliberate. I can well recall being told by a receptionist when I registered at a new doctor's, that, 'You don't work, do you, Mrs Ferguson?' By then I had two young children and was pregnant with the third. I replied, 'No, I lie on the couch all day and peel grapes.' It was not a subtle rejoinder but she got the message. The story is included to explain my emerging recognition that there was injustice in wider society that I, in whatever small way, could help to address.

I gained a postgraduate Diploma in Social Sciences (Psychology) by distance study. This, while interesting, didn't really add to my understanding of critical analysis in society and education, but what did help me to see things differently was my subsequent employment at a polytechnic in 1986. Here, as part of my own professional development, I undertook a course called "Culture, Identity and Learning", taught by John Kirton. John was definitely what could be termed a radical educator. The purpose of the module was to encourage enrolees to recognise the impact of *pakeha* (non-Māori) educational practices for both Māori and non-Māori students. The former were largely disempowered by their experience, the latter more often beneficiaries of the system. It was eye-opening. It led to my choosing to pursue further university-based study via a Master of Social Sciences degree at my local university. A paper exploring the pedagogy of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, alerted me to the transformative potential of radical pedagogy (Freire, 1972). It provoked my Masters thesis topic, an analysis of the impact of New Zealand's educational and wider social and economic pressures on the educational success of Māori students (Ferguson, 1991). So far, there is a pattern emerging here. My enlightenment has come about more through academic study and reading, than through reflection on my own practice. But that was about to change.

I was working as a staff developer at the polytechnic. This employment required me to study adult-education, not merely to draw on the now largely out-dated pedagogy and theoretical understanding of my primary-school years. I undertook mandatory two-week (equivalent) courses in topics such as Course Design and Assessment, closely focused on practice including my own. In 1988 I completed a course in Action Research. Lightbulbs went on. I could clearly see the links between the reflective practice I was observing in classes when I did observations and held subsequent discussions with staff, and the principles that action research promotes. As an aside here, it is interesting that by this stage I had been involved in teaching my own classes since 1969 (when I graduated with my teaching diploma and commenced practice) until 1988, without starting to see my own practice as a potent field for research. I did, of course, practice as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) but, until

I did my Master's thesis, I had not realised how complicit in the suppression of some ways of knowing and researching I had been. I subsequently wrote about this dawning under-standing in a paper with my husband (Ferguson & Bruce Ferguson, 2010) where we discussed how difficult it is for 'the goldfish to see the water'[1] in our respective practices as teachers.

My teaching philosophy over time, then, had progressed. It was initially fairly simplistic with an "espoused theory" of social equity but a "theory-in-use" (Schön, 1983) that belied the pro-activity that was required. Over time, it had become one in which I recognised my positioning, and in my writing I sought to describe this and to challenge myself and others to speak out against injustice. Subsequent research in schools, such as participating in the evaluation of a project that sought to help non-Māori teachers of Māori children to be more culturally responsive, made me aware of ways that other teachers had striven to be more equitable in their practice. This kind of work gave me ideas to incorporate into my own teaching.

This challenging of inequitable situations, coupled with my fledgling understanding of the potential for action research to improve practice, led to my choice of Ph.D. topic. In early 1990 our polytechnic gained the right to offer degrees for the first time, as did other polytechnics in New Zealand. I had been working with a nursing-tutor whose course became subsumed into a degree. By law, degrees are taught mainly by people engaged in research, and typically by those whose qualifications are at least a level higher than those they teach. My nursing tutor, whom I called Joan in my thesis, had a four-year Nursing diploma, but not a degree, and her course was now positioned within a degree. For diverse reasons, she wished not to gain an additional qualification and so was effectively 'eased out' of teaching at the polytechnic. Her pedagogy was not deficient; her knowledge was not deficient; her practice was sound – but the positioning of her course in the degree unfortunately led to her professional demise as a teacher. I was appalled. I wanted to do what I could to prevent this happening to anybody else.

The doctoral years

In 1992 I started considering enrolment on a Ph.D, early on writing a draft paper entitled 'On the Nature, Control and Certification of Knowledge'. This paper never actually made it to publication, though I presented preliminary ideas from it to colleagues in Norwich in 1994, where I was located for three months on a British Council Teaching Fellowship exchange. During this British Council-sponsored visit, I was also privileged to meet with Jean McNiff, Jack Whitehead and Moira Laidlaw, all of whose work has enhanced my understanding of the need to keep my own practice under regular scrutiny. Jack's (1993) book, 'The Growth of Educational Knowledge', explained major examples of injustice towards him in the gaining of his Ph.D., and actions he had taken to confront that – plus his own developing awareness of incongruities in his own practice. Jean's combination of action

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[1] One of my reviewers suggests that I explain this term. It means that one can be so immersed in one's own context that one does not even realise that it is there – that others have quite different contexts. It's a form of cultural blindness.

research and Living Educational Theory, and her kind mentoring of me over time and distance, encouraged me to grow as an educator. This included her visits to New Zealand on at least two occasions, to speak at institutions I worked in or for professional organisations of which I was a member. I met Moira on my U.K. trip and later read her doctoral thesis, the creativity of which, in its passion for justice and equity in educational practice, inspired me to seek such development in my own work.

My awareness of my own positioning – and ability to help or hinder the progress of others – was now firmly established, as was my enrolment as a doctoral student at our local university. My teaching philosophy had moved strongly from the 'sage on the stage' (being a didactic educator) to that of the 'guide on the side' (being more of a facilitator); from a Freirean "banking pedagogy" to an emerging "liberatory" one (Freire, 1972).

Living Educational Theory requires that evidence is provided for claims made. I have added some further examples at the request of my reviewers, who felt that more substance needed to be added to some of my vaguer claims to self-development and self-knowledge – also, as Living Theory requires, that I needed to provide more evidence of the impact of my practice on others. An example of this in my practice would be the idea I brought back from the U.K. of videotaping practice in order to improve it. I invited polytechnic staff, via the staff newsletter, to join me in this endeavour, in the end having only one teacher, Kate, join me. We videotaped our own classes, wrote an analysis of our own work, then exchanged tapes and reports. I fondly viewed myself as a 'liberatory Freirean educator' but the self I saw on the video seemed much more directive than this perspective would allow. Kate, on seeing my self-critique of the gap between "espoused theory" and "theory in use" (Schön, 1983), provided a much kinder interpretation. She pointed out that the video showed only me, not the students. She had been a student in my staff development courses, and was able to affirm that I am indeed more Freirean than Hitlerian! I have done a number of classroom observations for Kate over the years. My feedback is always voluminous as I am a good typist who takes notes throughout. Kate told me after one of these sessions that she had not realised how expert she had become in a number of areas until she read my 'fly on the wall' comments and could 'hear' her questions and responses to students. I think this feedback demonstrates that my relationships with those I work with are supportive and mutually respectful.

My early understanding of action research enabled me to implement small changes in my practice, such as the videoed critique, and latterly to encourage others I worked with to do likewise. The doctoral study provided me with the opportunity and motivation to take this further. I implemented into the staff development programme a course on action research. This introduced staff (who were my students in the course) to the action research approach, and sought to support them as they investigated aspects of their own practice. My thesis (Bruce Ferguson, 1999) tells this story in depth, but several of them *did* choose transformational projects that strove to overcome injustice – including one whose maths project in a regional prison contravened the prevailing norm of punishment rather than enlightenment. A year after the course finished, I interviewed the students who had agreed to participate, in order to determine its effectiveness in contributing to the emerging research culture. Had they learned how to convert 'classroom improvements' into potentially publishable work? Did they now see themselves as fledgling researchers? What

was the impact of this on the wider polytechnic research development? Answers to these questions took some time to emerge.

Concurrently with the formal study, I sought to insert myself into positions in the polytechnic that would let me argue for more equitable treatment for staff and students. This initiative was based on the work of Michel Foucault, whose theories on the working of knowledge and power in institutions underpinned my study. Foucault maintained that power and knowledge are inextricably intertwined; further, he argued that power operates in a net-like way throughout an organisation. It is not innately top-down, but rather those at any node of the net can exercise power in various ways (Foucault, 1977, 1980). This theoretical analysis made sense, and motivated me to become more active in the systems of my institution. These interventions were: my election as a staff representative on the Research Committee, previously dominated by 'hard scientists', to make space for alternative perspectives to be valued; and my participation in a mixed cultural committee that was instrumental in having the Academic Board pass a policy that required researchers to operate in ways that recognised the rights and interests of Māori when research was being conducted. My teaching philosophy had broadened to include wider societal concerns than I had previously considered in any depth, although my Master's thesis had hinted at these. I was consciously striving to improve my own teaching practice by incorporating different methods and taking cognisance of the examples I used in my teaching, to be more culturally responsive. So my actions were both at individual and institutional levels.

My actions had also become political – I participated in my local union committee, including a 'Contract Management Committee' comprised of union representatives and management, which sought to resolve issues before they became problematic. During the polytechnic years I also publicly demonstrated (at times on protest marches) for more equitable treatment of staff, both allied (support staff) and tutorial (academic staff). My sense of agency had expanded, and my teaching philosophy was no longer restricted to what I did in my own classroom or institution.

Post-doctoral work

I gained my doctorate in 1999, and fairly rapidly ended up working at a New Zealand university. Encountering widespread bullying within my department and Faculty, I challenged this through my staff union. This had the effect of 'outing' the bullying, although it took a long time to change. The university, recognising the validity of my claim, brought in an industrial psychologist who interviewed every staff member in my department. A key senior manager was sidelined into a research position in subsequent years. However, my action resulted in my choosing to leave the university for my own sanity. The situation gave me considerable sympathy for other 'whistle-blowers' and, despite the disruption to employment, I do not regret taking action. My philosophy as a teacher in that environment would not allow silence. I now saw teachers as vitally involved in the wider environment in which we teach, and silence as support for the status quo. One of my reviewers has requested me to expand on my comments about my philosophy not allowing silence. I believe that the collaborative approach that action research and Living Educational Theory have encouraged, along with the sense of solidarity with other staff that I have developed as an active union member, mean that I now recognise as part of my philosophy as a teacher

that we progress, or not, together. I feel a strong obligation in my teaching philosophy to contribute where I can to social justice and equity, even when the result – as it was in this case – is personally disadvantageous.

I had been doing a certain amount of research consultancy in both the polytechnic and the university, but after leaving that university, I moved to working independently. This let me conduct research evaluation in conjunction with colleagues from universities and polytechnics, as well as for the Ministry of Education. The areas of investigation were as diverse as:

- the successful induction of provisionally-registered teachers;
- the effectiveness of a programme to help mainstream teachers of Māori students operate more effectively (alluded to earlier);
- what contributes to success with Pasifika students in classrooms;
- the effectiveness of a 'parents as first teachers' initiative with Pacific Islands parents and parents in remote locations;
- the development of aspiring principals.

A reviewer asked whether there were any texts that had been particularly influential in this work. The main author whose work impressed me in the research above was Rosa Hernandez Sheets, an author whose insights into culturally supportive pedagogies helped our team considerably (Sheets, 2005).

All this evaluation work, while not necessarily being action research-based, gave me a much wider perception of how New Zealand's educational policies, practices and institutions impact on diverse groups. It also alerted me to the teeth-gritted pragmatism of principals and schools who have to chase limited-length 'pots of gold' to get funding for initiatives that they wish were funded automatically. I am encountering the same situation in my current Irish context – but that's looking ahead too far just yet.

The Wānanga years

I mentioned earlier about how my awareness of cultural issues in teaching practice had been raised through the course I did at the polytechnic. This awareness was about to take a quantum leap when, in 2003 and through to the end of 2005, I was employed as the Research Manager for Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (TWoA). This is a Māori tertiary provider that expanded so rapidly over its history (Weatherly, 2009) that it blew the government's budget for non-university-based tertiary education. As Weatherly points out, this was inadvertently responsible for its being placed, in 2005, under statutory management as a way of curtailing its activities. Government rhetoric was that Māori should be catered for effectively in the educational sector, but when an institution actually figured out how to do this on a large scale, political and economic concerns were brought to bear to limit its success.

Before this happened, in 2003 New Zealand's first-ever research assessment-exercise, the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF), had been implemented. I consulted with senior Māori managers at TWoA, including the *Tumuaki* (Māori word for CEO), on whether to participate. With considerable support from the government-funded Tertiary Education Commission, we gathered data on the research being done by staff and collated these into the required format for submission. Much to the considerable surprise of many,

TWoA came out 16th equal among the institutions that contributed to the research assessment exercise, with the polytechnic where I used to work. That polytechnic had had government research funding support since gaining degree status in 1990; the Wānanga had had such support only since 2001. To say it was punching above its weight is an understatement. The process was not, however, straightforward. Tawhai, Pihera and Bruce Ferguson (2004) tell some of this story, also reinforced by Smith and Bruce Ferguson (2006). The latter was a presentation to the Institute of Policy Studies' event in Wellington and subsequently converted into a chapter for a book (Bakker, Boston, Campbell & Smyth, 2006).

The time in the Wānanga alerted me further to the complex nature of working cross-culturally. As an action researcher, I strive to operate collaboratively in order to improve my own and others' practice. I am motivated by values of social justice and equity in doing this – a motivation that encouraged me to ensure that TWoA was not left out of the PBRF process. The Wānanga had already been substantially disadvantaged – financially as well as in other ways – during its development (Weatherly, 2009) and money paid by Māori taxpayers was contributing to the PBRF coffers. If the Wānanga had decided not to participate, effectively this taxpayer money was going only towards already-privileged, mainly non-Māori, institutions. The senior managers agreed with me that this was not equitable, and together we took the institution into the process – scoring well as previously stated. But down the track this participation was criticised by other Wānanga staff, including Hohepa-Watene (2009). Using a nautical metaphor, she described how a 'bird' called the PBRF had landed on the Wānanga 'canoe', wanting to change the flag on the canoe to one that didn't fit. This was rejected, and the bird flew away. Hohepa-Watene was reflecting on the resistance by another Wānanga to the culturally incompatible processes of PBRF. This resistance ultimately led the government to provide a separate research fund which the Wānanga could access. So the participation was done with sound consultation and with the best of equitable intentions, but ultimately it was deemed not to be culturally appropriate. The situation shows how tricky it can be to lead in environments in which one is from a different culture, even if supported by senior managers who *are* from that culture. I learned a lot from that experience and now would be reluctant to be a main player in such a situation.

Requested by a reviewer to expand on this claim, I would add that among the things I learned are that, in turbulent times such as the Wānanga was going through with government pressures and the funding issues involved in participation or not, the process would have been better facilitated by managers as similar as possible to the majority of staff. While it was a culturally diverse organisation, with a Tumuaki who prided himself in ensuring that this was the case, the bulk of the staff – and the ethos of the institution – were Māori. However well-intentioned I was, the process would have been better facilitated by a Māori manager. Unfortunately I had been appointed partly to facilitate the process, so I was perilously placed in some respects. Another thing I learned – from observing the actions of a non-Māori colleague – is that I would have been wise to have visibly and obviously sought mentoring from one of the cultural advisors who were available. I was, and remain, friends with one of these people but if her considerable influence as a foundation member of the Wānanga had been overt in the process, it might not have attracted the criticism that subsequently emerged.

Back to university (New Zealand)…

In 2009, having done a considerable amount of contract research since leaving the Wānanga in 2005 for health reasons, I joined the staff of the Teaching Development Unit back at the university from which I had gained my Master's and Doctoral degrees. I was fortunate to work alongside (and under the management of) Dorothy Spiller. Like myself, Dorothy is a passionate teacher with a strong urge to encourage the sharing of sound practice. Together, we were able to draw on the expertise of colleagues at the university, whose work we had been able to observe or to hear of. Much of our knowledge of these staff came about through their nomination for Teaching Excellence Awards. Dorothy and I were avid 'miners' of their data, both for their own benefit in the Awards, and to share with others through coaching and in our workshops. Our engagement in this process, both locally and nationally, led to our being asked, with colleagues at other New Zealand institutions, to write a booklet to help applicants to the award-processes (Spiller *et al.*, 2011). Our commitment to promoting excellent practice and to working collaboratively with these Award nominees and winners meant that we both continue to have strong connections and relationships with many of them years after the work. I have been in touch with one of these staff as I write the second iteration of this paper. She is now working in Quebec, and sent me a most interesting paper on her experiences as a 'transitional' person in a foreign culture, as she knows I am in Ireland and could identify with her experience. In return, I have been able to refer her to a conference I just located, being held in Halifax, Canada, next year and to which she could take her work. She is a passionate and innovative teacher, and her 'power-point with voice-over' reflection on her teaching is shared, with her permission, with my current students.

Another joint initiative of note that Dorothy and I carried out, this time in collaboration with two successive Pro-vice Chancellors of Postgraduate Study, involved the organisation of sessions for supervisors. These enabled sharing, input and mutual support across the university for staff engaged in supervising Masters' and Doctoral theses. For instance, techniques used to support students in the Law Faculty could also be useful in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. As I have done since polytechnic days, I continue to value opportunities for staff to mix across disciplinary boundaries. This kind of cross-pollination (sharing of diverse perspectives) can be difficult to achieve, given the pressured and siloed nature of most universities, where competition for scarce funds can be fierce. However, as was demonstrated in research we did on this process (Spiller, Byrnes & Bruce Ferguson, 2013) the staff appreciated the chance to meet, to share, occasionally to complain, and to find ways of strengthening the university's processes and support for supervisors. Despite my decision to leave that university in 2014 to take up a similar role in Dublin City University in Ireland, Dorothy and I have continued to explore our identities as educators (see Spiller & Bruce Ferguson, 2016). My teaching philosophy has expanded to include international networks – an issue I explore in the final section of the paper. It builds on connections between action research and Living Educational Theory that I have fostered over the years since first encountering action research in 1988 and Living Educational Theory in 1994. I have been an active participant, often in an office-holder position, for the New Zealand Action Research Network (NZARN); the Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management organisation (ALARPM – now ALARA); and the Higher Education Research and

Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA). In these organisations I have sought to live, to learn and to lead.

Again, pressed by a reviewer to indicate in what ways this kind of activity has helped me to learn, I would reference my connection with Prof. Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt – an ALARA colleague – as one example. Ortrun is a tireless author, and has asked me to be a critical reviewer and foreword-writer for several of her many books. This work has required me to expand my understanding of how action researchers (in this case) can operate in diverse countries, as Ortrun regularly works in South Africa as well as in her adopted Australia (her ancestry is German). I have also, through HERDSA connections, been asked to examine several Ph.D. theses, most recently one from an Indonesian candidate but also others from South Africa and Australia, all of which have caused me to expand my knowledge of other disciplinary and cultural norms as well as my own. This kind of work seems to me to be a way to give back to academia some of the benefits I have received in developing my own educational practices and philosophy. It evidences my values of social equity and inclusion as it can be quite a time-consuming process to fit examination and critical review into a pressured academic workload.

Another university – Ireland

In 2014 I was fortunate to be offered a position as a Teaching and Learning Developer at Dublin City University, Ireland. As I am now approaching the end of my tenured academic life, this was a chance I could not pass up. It enabled me to work in a part of the world I had had only limited academic exposure to previously – the three-month British Council Fellowship in 1994. My work enables me to work more closely with Living Educational Theorists such as Jean McNiff, Jack Whitehead, Moira Laidlaw and Marie Huxtable, with whom I have built relationships over the years. For instance, now I am located on this side of the world it enables me to take part in regular Skype meetings relating to the development and editorial work of this journal. Timeframes in New Zealand precluded this level of involvement. Living in Ireland also enables me to practice the cross-cultural skills I have striven to build up over my academic life.

I did not find it easy to locate other action researchers here in Ireland, however. I knew of two at my university and had had dealings with one of these in the past, so I anticipated an 'easy entry' into the action research community in Ireland. Alas, owing to heavy workloads, exaggerated by a preponderance of short-term contracts here in Ireland, this person felt unable to connect beyond at a fairly superficial level. However, we both knew Jack Whitehead well, and through his good offices I was introduced to four women who already operated as an effective action research group. One still works full time in a teacher-education institution; one is a primary-school principal; the other two are semi-retired but do contract work, and all four meet regularly to develop a series of books. Their output is prodigious, and their welcome was warm. I suggested, based on my NZARN experience and my struggle to find action researchers here, that we set up an Irish action research network (NEARI – Network for Educational Action Research in Ireland). I suggested the initiative on their blog – www.eari.ie (February 12, 2015) and it was supported. We have now each demonstrated our leadership by coordinating the group through a number of face-to-face events. Jack Whitehead was the keynote at one, although most of our presenters

come from our own ranks. The photograph below shows my facilitation of a 'fish bowl'[2] exercise at our latest face-to-face event.

Image 1. Pip facilitating 'fish bowl' exercise at NEARI event

We also run an ongoing communication process using Google mail, and have compiled a 'Padlet' (bulletin-board type display – see http://www.eari.ie/resources-to-help-with-the-action-research-process/) to share resources, such as useful books or articles.

This network has reinforced for me (yet again) the importance of connection for action researchers, and of knowing of each other's work. Since I have been in Ireland I have been able to offer accommodation – and action research presentation-opportunities – to two Australians with whom I have connected in the past.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPX1cr47h7c shows a short video-clip with Australian Professor Ernie Stringer speaking about doing action research with Aboriginal communities, which he recorded with NEARI members and Jack Whitehead while staying at my home. Ernie's use of action research is very respectful of indigenous perspectives and in the clip he was able to show how local knowledge can be shared through video and simple books, for the good of the wider community.

Through my work with the Educational Journal of Living Theories (EJOLTS – see www.ejolts.net) and its organising group, I and our NEARI group have been connected up via the very useful living theory e-poster, with action researchers around the globe (http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/posters/homepage061115.pdf , accessed 16 August 2016). I have been able to attend and to share with others my own presentation at

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[2] A 'fish bowl' is an exercise where a small inner group has a discussion, observed silently by the outer group. Members of both groups can swap places at will. If an outer group member wishes to respond to comments in the inner group, or to seek answers to questions, they join the inner group.

the ALARA World Congress (Pretoria, 2015, available at http://fergs.org/pip/; see 2015 presentations).

Lest this all sound like self-praise, I need also to admit that working in another culture has had its challenges. My immediate manager is Irish, but the senior manager of our unit and I are both New Zealanders. Our style of communication and interaction is rather more direct than Irish colleagues are used to, and from the feedback from two reviewers of this paper, also more colloquial. I have had to learn to be a little more circumspect in the ways that I phrase things. An example of this was in a recent meeting with the University's President, at which I had promised my immediate colleagues that I'd stay (relatively) silent. However, he asked if there are any ways in which the University could better support staff. The short-term contracts I alluded to earlier are extremely problematic for us in our unit. Not only do they remove colleagues we've come to appreciate and build relationships with, but they destroy any chance of drawing on the kinds of 'educational history' that Dorothy and I were able to do back at Waikato. Hence, faced with silence after the President's invitation, I launched in. I prefaced my comments with the recognition that what I was about to say might be controversial (sharp intake of breath from one or two colleagues); that I recognised the situation was largely brought about by Government policy following the collapse of the Celtic Tiger; and that I realise the President cannot pull rabbits out of hats. But then I went on to recount the pain and problems brought about by the short-term contracts. As I had broken the ice, colleagues who were affected by the contract situation – including one who was being 'terminated' the next day – felt able to speak. Interestingly, one of my colleagues later told me I've become 'half-Irish' in that I had learned to approach things a little more circumspectly than I had done when I first arrived! She said when I first arrived I'd not have prefaced my comments with a warning, nor alluded to constraints. I'd just have charged in with a 'bold' (not a compliment in Ireland) statement.

What this situation demonstrates is, I hope, that I continue to learn, as I seek to lead. My values of social justice and equity do not permit me to stay silent when I see situations that need rectification. My teaching philosophy is one that values good practice, and I grieve when I see good colleagues being dispensed with for largely political and economic reasons. But simultaneously, I hope it demonstrates that I *am* open to learning to do things differently in a different culture. I strive to work in life-enhancing ways that recognise and value the strengths of others. I encourage them to share these with others – more difficult in Ireland than in New Zealand, as the Irish can be very self-effacing. Getting them to write papers on their good practice is harder here than it is in New Zealand. There, we don't appreciate the highly self-promoting, but if someone else praises one's practice, it is appropriate to see it then as worthy of further dissemination. That is less the case in Ireland.

Conclusion

I commenced this paper, in the introduction, talking about the position of universities as 'critics and consciences of society'. I hope I have demonstrated through my life experience as a teacher, through my developing awareness as an educator, through the increasingly political and systemic ways I am operating, and the expansion of my own teaching philosophy, how I strive to critique my own work, and to encourage others to do likewise. I have demonstrated how I have moved from living less reflectively, through

learning in various ways, to leading where I can do so to improve practice. One of my favourite 'sayings' which I share regularly with new teachers, is the expression 'We do the best we know how, and when we know better, we do better'. I suspect I shall continue striving to 'do better' throughout my life.

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