

# THEORIES OF LEARNING

## 8. LIVING EDUCATIONAL THEORY

### 8.1. Overview

Living educational theory was first clearly defined and developed by California Professor William Barry in Liz Atkins and Susan Wallace's book (2012), *Qualitative Research in Education*. This book was one of four in a series regarding best practice progressive research methods in educational research. The originality and uniqueness of Barry's development of living educational theory (LET) action research is the importance of gaining *ontological weight* through the action research process. Ontological weight empowers the researcher's ability, and the ability of other people involved in the action research project, to have the research experience and focus of the research be transformational and add, or at least reinforce, a sense of meaning in learning and life. Professor Barry was influenced to use the concept ontological weight by the existentialist Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel.

The Living-Theory approach is an approach to explaining educational influences in a person's learning. Educational and other researchers are always faced with issues of validating their claims to knowledge. In the UK and elsewhere there is much interest in developing appropriate standards of judgment for assessing the quality of the knowledge generated by educational researchers. In 1995 Donald Schon advocated the development of a new epistemology for the new scholarship by and explained that this new epistemology would be generated from action research and would be a challenge to the epistemology of the modern research university.

The idea that individuals can generate their own unique explanations for their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of social formations, as their living educational theory has been gaining credibility since the establishment of the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. A living-educational-theory emerges from the methodological inventiveness of individual practitioner researchers. We generate our explanations with the help of our living-theory methodologies. These methodologies draw on the self-study methods of a self-study methodology.

## 8.2. Major Contributors

Living-Educational Theory was the inspiration of Jack Whitehead, when serving as a lecturer at the University of Bath, and was defined and transformed into a pragmatic concept by Professor and Director of Secondary Education, Dr. William Barry, of Notre Dame de Namur University where the university offers classes specific to using Living Educational Theory in earning an education credential in California to be public school teacher.

A major difference of Professor William Barry's version of Living educational theory, which was the focus of his successful completion of a Ph.D. thesis at Nottingham Trent University, UK is the essential question behind the living educational theory approach to action research. The question not being "How can I generate a living legacy for myself through an I-theory approach toward knowledge, and use the discourse of others out of context from the lived life of the researcher? Perhaps, Carson and Sumara said it best when they wrote the question of action research is not about how to conduct the research that has been a focus of Honorary Professor Jack Whitehead of the University of Cumbria, UK who considers the use of video tapping of participants mandatory, or at least media based accounts, but also that an action researchers spiritual/existential beliefs have no bearing on the action research project; rather, they are discourses which can go unaddressed or do not have to be made explicit in action research projects. Living education theory action research takes seriously the question, How does one conduct a life that includes the practice of educational action research? The theory/practice problem disappears when honesty about one's biases regarding spiritual, existential, and emotional intelligence are made clear in the action research process.

The phraseology educational theory originated with the work of Jack Whitehead, a former lecturer at the University of Bath, and it was further developed and greatly improved methodologically by Jean McNiff because of her willingness to be transparent about her values and intentions. Whitehead's main emphasis for conducting research is to promote the individual under the guise of collaboration and research outcomes must be captured on video for authentic validation. Whitehead's view of action research promotes that living educational theory (he uses living theory and living educational theory interchangeably so it is difficult for a reader to know what he is writing about) should be aimed at the bringing of energy-flowing values as explanatory principles and standards of judgments into the Academy for the legitimation of living educational theories. In the eyes of Whitehead radical constructivism is at the core of living educational theory

research. In 2013 Whitehead and McNiff separated as collaborators as McNiff saw spiritual, emotional intelligence as key to action research while Whitehead disagreed and believed that media accounts (primarily video tapping people) of action research could provide clues to virtues which held the future of humanity though energy flowing examples of collaboration.

### **8.3. Action Research**

The idea of action research as a living practice entered the mainstream of action research from the book, "Action Research as a Living Practice" by Terrance Carson and Dennis Sumara, in 1997. Carson and Sumara transformed the concept of traditional action research with the idea that participation in action research practices are particular ways of living and understanding that require more of the researcher than the application of research methods. Rather, action research is a lived practice that requires that the researcher not only investigate the subject at hand but, as well, provide some account of the way in which the investigation both shapes and is shaped by the investigator. This requires what Martin Buber called an "I-Thou" approach toward other and this approach applied to action research as well. To make Buber's language more modern and accessible, LET translated Buber's "I-"Thou" approach toward another human being to an "I/you/we" approach to action research. This differs greatly from an approach to living theory action research where they imagine living theory action research as forming an "I-theory" of knowledge. LET focuses on the connections between the researcher and the other person or subject where the lives of action researchers are inextricably linked in a profound manner with the individuals and communities involved in the subject of study. LET is a critical theory and emancipatory action research approach which seeks the dialectic in its approach, not debate and battles of discourse.

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the eyes of Whitehead radical constructivism is at the core of living educational theory research.

Dr. William Barry was asked by the BERA sponsored authors to reflect on the nature of living educational theory (LET) because there existed no clear definition of LET in the literature. Barry was asked because he had successfully used LET in an innovative fashion, and was the first to clearly define LET as based in critical theory which embraced transpersonal psychology through his earned 2012 PhD thesis at Nottingham Trent University Nottingham, UK. He proposed LET as a way of challenging the oppressive use of power using critical theory in a need fulfilling way. Dr. Barry proposed the following definition and approach to action research he calls living educational theory and his approach has been used as an action research method in undergraduate and graduate courses and research at Notre Dame de Namur University in Silicon Valley, California as well as by other researchers around the world.

Professor Barry explained that Living Educational Theory is a critical and transformational approach to action research. It confronts the researcher to challenge the status quo of their educational practice and to answer the question, 'How can I improve that I'm doing?' Researchers who use this approach must be willing to recognize and assume responsibility for being a 'living contradictions' in their professional practice – thinking one way and acting in another. The mission of the LET action researcher is to overcome workplace norms and self- behavior which contradict the researcher's values and beliefs. The vision of the LET researcher is to make an original contribution to knowledge through generating an educational theory proven to improve the learning of people within a social learning space. The standard of judgment for theory validity is evidence of workplace reform, transformational growth of the researcher, and improved learning by the people researcher claimed to have influenced.

Barry's LET approach to action research was heavily influenced by action researchers focused on emancipatory social change, collaboration, and liberation theology. Prominent developers of LET, without whose work LET would most likely never had been developed by Barry, are notable action researchers, educators, and philosophers such as Martin Buber's conception of 'I and Thou' and Krishnamurti's liberation pedagogy emphasizing education as significant to leading a quality filled life; Paulo Freire and his concept of participatory action research and the need to be politically aware; the work of Carr and Kremmis and Habermas and their concept and building critical educational knowledge; Professor Manheimer of UNC and his challenge to his readers to enfold the past into the

living present in order to become historical to oneself and then strive to linking life times with each other; Apple and Michel Foucault and the role of power and politics in education and Joe Kincheloe , Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren and their promotion of critical pedagogy.

Prof. Barry was the first Ph.D. researcher to successfully use living educational theory in conjunction with neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), spiral dynamics and auto-ethnography (based on a multiple intelligences model which includes spiritual and emotional intelligence and embraces transpersonal knowing) as valid methods of research working under the methodological umbrella of phenomenology and hermeneutics. His LET approach to Ph.D. level action research led to the unique use of fictional storytelling as a vehicle by which to replace the traditional literature review chapter in Ph.D. research but in a more rigorous and creative fashion. The process of storytelling allows the researcher to exercise their emotional intelligence in a superior manner than the traditional research literature review allows.

#### **8.4. Six-Step Process**

Living educational theory as defined and created by Professor Barry is part of the curriculum of multiple courses at Notre Dame de Namur University located in Silicon Valley, California in their credentialing program for teacher education. Dr. Barry's Living Educational Theory Action Research Method is based on a six step process based on research questions that normally start from the format, "How can I influence the transformation of....?" or "How can I contribute to the improvement of...?" The research is dialectical in nature:

1. I experience a crises in my sense of meaning when my values and beliefs as an educator/educational leader are oppressed by my passive acceptance of the status quo and the use of oppressive power to change my identity. In essence, I experience narrative wreckage in my educational life (Thesis).
2. I describe my contribution in promoting the status quo and my role in using oppressive power against others from both a phenomenological and hermeneutical perspective to illuminate my living contradictions (Anti-thesis).
3. I develop a solution to transform and improve myself, influence the transformation and improvement of the fellow human beings with whom I interact and the social and work places I share with people.

4. I enact praxis in the direction of the solution I developed from a critical theory perspective.

5. I evaluate the pragmatic outcomes of the solution based on the Hallmarks of Learning (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur 2005) and the implications from a holistic psychological perspective including transpersonal psychology.

6. I modify my use of power, pedagogy, valid and reliable assessment, and leadership to maximize social justice, ethical processes and results, and improve performance and knowledge as a result of my emerging living educational theory (LET) (Synthesis).