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Pedagogical research, living theory, and the virtuous university

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Background

Background to the research

There is debate in the literatures about what constitutes pedagogical research. According to some (e.g. Norton 2008), it can take the form of action research, including in higher education contexts, in which practitioners ask and research questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' and offer their descriptions and explanations of practice in the form of their living educational theories (Whitehead 1989). I agree, but also believe that such questions indicate a speaker's intent to explicate the processes involved in practice improvement, as well as accept the responsibility of demonstrating the validity of such explications. This includes an articulation of the reasons and purposes for the practice, and why it is worth doing. The explications therefore form moral commitments, and, because these are practitioners' commitments, those practitioners can transform the institutions they work in into moral spheres (Nixon 2008) – public spaces for debates about the nature of a decent society (Margalit 1998) and how it can be achieved.

This view of the work of institutions is of course contradictory to the currently dominant discourses of management, money and marketing: 'the three horsemen of the new apocalypse' (Eyre 2003; cited in Nixon 2008: 21). It prompts an understanding that institutions exist within supercomplex structures and contexts (Barnett 2000), which in turn demands a full justification for a practitioner's adoption of one ontological, epistemological or ethical stance over another. In action research, these stances take relational forms, grounded in the logics and values of relation with and recognition of the Other as equal to self.

In this paper I explain how colleagues and I, working in higher education institutions, justify our stances through appeal to methodological and ethical rigour, especially through stringently conducted public validation and legitimation processes. This, we believe, vindicates our commitments to realise our universities as virtuous places, as, working and researching collaboratively, we transform our pedagogical practices into cultures of educational enquiry.

Research Questions

Focus of enquiry and research question

I support the action enquiries of colleagues in higher education, in my UK home institution and in other HE institutions in Ireland and South Africa. Through interrogating our practices, we can collectively show how and why we commit to the development of new relational epistemologies for educational knowledge (Whitehead and McNiff 2006). The accounts of practice we produce, some in the form of higher degree dissertations and theses, constitute our living educational theories (Whitehead 1989) that show how we hold ourselves accountable for our work. The living form of theory thus generated is communicated through our practices: a virtuous act of practical theorising whose virtue is accomplished through its doing (Aristotle, 1955, pp. 91–92).

Methods

Research methods/mapping the literature

Our action research stance reflects our appreciation of our work as 'care for the world' (Arendt 1958) – being part of the world, while critically interrogating aspects of the world, including our own

normative understandings from our positioning as worldly participants. This capacity for critical reflection is, we believe, what distinguishes academic practitioners from 'ordinary men' [sic] (Browning 2001): the capacity to reflect on the need for critical discernment and find ways for its actualisation. Our responsibility as academic practitioners is, through critical reflection, to set rigorously defensible ethical standards for the practice of knowledge generation and its legitimisation. This involves especially an appreciation of how values transform through their emergence in practice as living criteria and standards of judgement (Whitehead and McNiff 2006).

Frame

Analytical and theoretical framework

This view is commensurable with Said's (1994) understandings that working in higher education means accepting the responsibilities of being an intellectual, always creating new knowledge and seeking to legitimise it through public critique. It means also understanding that social evolution is intrinsically intertwined with knowledge creation (Popper 1952), as a process of new beginnings (Said 1997). This is the dynamic transformational form of action research as a process of the realisation of values as moral practices. We draw on the critical frameworks of philosophers such as Habermas (1976), Nixon (2009), Lather (1991) and Winter (1989), who variously ground criteria for the legitimisation of knowledge claims within the ethical dimensions of sincerity, authenticity, truthfulness, magnanimity, critical irony, all committed to a deconstructive turn (Norris 1998) that defies theoretical stasis and demands continuous re-assessment of the means of the legitimisation of truth claims.

Research findings

Research findings and contribution to knowledge

In the presentation I will produce multimedia evidence to show the dynamic relationships among colleagues and myself as we work and study together. I will invite the critical responses of listeners to my presentation, testing my claim that colleagues and I are practising in a virtuous way as we generate our own personal living theories of practice. Thus the presentation itself will become the site for the creation of educational knowledge through critically engaged response.