How am I contributing to improving the lives of others?

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In this response to Mark Potts’ question, ‘What do you do to improve the lives of others?’ (<http://www.livingcitizenship.uwclub.net>) I am focusing on my question, ‘How am I contributing to improving the lives of others? The importance of stressing the idea of a ‘contribution’ to the lives of others is to acknowledge that whatever I do, with the intention of helping others to improve their lives’ is going to be mediated by the creative response of the other to what I do. In other words I do not believe that I have a ‘causal’ influence in the lives of others of the kind, ‘If I do this, then that will happen’. I believe that I have an intentional relationship in which what I do must be mediated by the creative response of the other for me to recognize any learning as ‘educational’.

My vocation commitment to education between 1967 when I began teaching and the present (December 2012) has focused on educational enquiries of the kind, ‘How do I improve my practice?’ in the context of my professional practice with pupils in secondary schools and students in higher education. I understand my practice as an educator to be concerned with a form of enquiry learning in which individual’s accept some responsibility, as knowledge-creators, for their own learning, and I accept a responsibility to ensure as far as I can that my students pass the courses on which they are registered. For the time of my work at the University of Bath between 1973-2012 this has included my tutoring of masters degree programmes and my supervision of doctoral research programmes.

My contributions to improving the lives of others have focused on supporting others in creating their own living educational theories in which they explain their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations in which we live and work. My understanding of the values that distinguish learning as educational is that these include the ontological values that individuals use to give meaning and purpose to their lives and learning. I focus on these values as carrying hope for the future of humanity. When I write about values I am meaning the embodied, energy-flowing values that individuals use as explanatory principles to explain why they do what they do. Whilst we can talk and write about these values as if our words on their own can communicate our meaning, I work with the assumption that the meanings of our embodied expressions of our energy-flowing values require visual data from our practice to adequately communicate their meanings.

There are three main sources of data I use in evidence-based explanations of my educational influence in the lives and learning of others. The first source is the living theory section of <http://www.actionresearch.net/living/living.shtml> with some 32 doctoral theses I have supervised to completion between 1995-2012. Each researcher acknowledges the educational influence I have had in their learning and each doctoral thesis makes use of ideas from my own research.

The second source is the masters programme section of <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/mastermod.shtml> in which my tutoring has focused on enabling individual practitioners to live their educational values as fully as possible. I think that my influence can be clearly seen in the data in that many of the titles include the practitioner’s ‘I’ in enquiries of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ Some may question the value of including ‘I’ within a researcher’s question. It certainly took me several years to move beyond some limitations of my own school and university experiences where teachers and tutors insisted that the personal pronoun ‘I’ was removed from a research account. It took me until 1971, some four years into my teaching and three years into my studies of educational theory for an Academic Diploma in the philosophy and psychology of education and for a Masters Degree in Education, to have the confidence to insist that the practical question, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ was a legitimate question to explore in my practitioner-research into improving practice and generating knowledge.

I believe that I have contributed to improving the lives of others by helping them to do what Michael Polanyi advocated in his work on Personal Knowledge and that is to strip away the crippling mutilations of centuries of objectivist thought in taking a decision to understand the world from their own point of view as a person claiming originality and exercising personal judgment, responsibly with universal intent. (Polanyi, 1958, p. 327)

Another way that I believe that I have contributed to the lives of others is by emphasizing the importance of submitting one’s beliefs and claims to knowledge to public evaluation/criticism in a validation group of peers. A validation group usually consists of between 3-8 peers who are asked to include in their responses, to an evidence-based explanation of educational influence from the researcher, responses to questions from the practitioner derived from the ideas of Habermas (1976, pp 2-3):

How could I improve the comprehensibility of my explanation?

How could I strengthen the evidence I use to justify the assertions I made?

How could I deepen and extend my explicit engagement with the sociohistorical and sociocultural influences that influence what I do, think and write?

How could I enhance the authenticity of my explanation to show over time and interaction that I am truly committed to the values I claim to hold.

The third source of data I use for evidence of my contributions to the lives of others is the book, Jack Whitehead Validations, edited by Robyn Pound, Moira Laidlaw and Marie Huxtable (see - <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jackvalidationsb.htm>), given as a gift to me on my 65th Birthday on the 29/08/09 and to mark the end of my tenured contract with the University of Bath (1973-2009) on the 31/08/09. In many ways this provides the most convincing evidence of my educational influence in the lives of others as the contributors all speak with their own voices in relation to their experience of my influence.

In concluding this brief contribution I also want to acknowledge the significance of the influence of others in the growth of my educational knowledge. In this living citizenship website Mark Potts stresses the importance of Ubuntu in improving the lives of others. I have been influenced by Ubuntu ways of being in my own practice and you can access a video-clip of me talking about the importance of Ubuntu at a workshop in the University of the Free State, South Africa on the 28th February 2006 at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkKyeT0osz8>

It was also a privilege to accept an invitation to give the inaugural Mandela Day Lecture at Durban University of Technology on the 18th July 2011. You can access my notes for, and video of, this presentation at:

<http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jwmandeladay2011.pdf>

Here is the section at the beginning of the notes where I stress the importance of accepting a responsibility towards the well-being of others.

Mandela Day is also a call for action to take responsibility for our individual influences in the world:

*“Mandela* ***Day 2011***

*Mandela Day is a call to action for people everywhere to take responsibility for making the world a better place, one small step at a time, just as Nelson Mandela did.*

*Nelson Mandela spent more than 67 years serving his community, his country, and the world at large. On Mandela Day people are called to devote just 67 minutes of their time to changing the world for the better, in a small gesture of solidarity with humanity, and in a small step towards a continuous, global movement for good.”*

http://www.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/foundation/mandela-­‐ day/category/mandela\_day\_2010/

My 67 minutes today are focused on the lives of individuals who are making such contributions in practice. They are exploring the implications of accepting a responsibility towards the well-­being of others in enquiries of the kind, ‘How do I improve what I am doing?’ They are also sharing explanations for their learning, as a gift to others, as they enquire into making the world a better place to be.

References

Habermas, J. (1976) Communication and the evolution of society. London : Heinemann

Polanyi, M. (1958) Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy. London; Routledge and Kegan Paul.