

Writing the narratives of social transformation: how do I enable others to speak for themselves?

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INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE AND FRAMING THE PICTURE

This paper is about how I try to enable people to do and write their action research, within a range of different contexts, as they ask questions of the kind, ‘How do I improve my practice?’ (Whitehead, 1989) and ‘How do I explain how I hold myself accountable for what I am doing?’ Because it is written within the genre of self-study action research, it becomes an account of how I have developed my own epistemology of practice as a professional educator and as a writer.

First I need to explain why I am writing the paper, in terms of my reasons and purposes; and also explain why I am doing so, i.e. give reasons why I am giving reasons. This is because I agree with Polanyi (1958) that, if I am to ‘understand the world from my point of view, as a person claiming originality and exercising [her] personal judgement responsibly with universal intent, I must now develop a conceptual framework which both recognises the existence of other such persons and envisages the fact that they have come into existence by evolution from primordial inanimate beginnings’ (p. 327). This statement speaks to my interests, for my overall project is about how I hold myself accountable for what I do; and this commitment is located within a view of the generative transformational nature of evolutionary processes. These ideas form the broad conceptual framework I adopt here. In making this conceptual framework explicit, I hope I show how I recognize and respect my readers also as persons claiming originality and exercising their personal judgement responsibly and with universal intent, who are able to make judgements about the quality of what I am saying. So my task now is to produce a report that will be judged as good quality from within these perspectives; and this is what I set out to do.

My aims are quite far-reaching. I need both to offer the reasons and purposes for writing the paper, and also for doing the research which is the subject matter of the paper. The two are distinct practices, though interrelated; and I explain why this distinction is necessary, and what its significance may be for the field of educational action research. And in fulfilling my epistemological and methodological commitments, I trust I am demonstrating moral accountability to others and myself as peer researchers.

So here are my reasons.

The first, utilitarian reason for writing the paper is that it gives me an opportunity to work out and refine some ideas for a new book, *Writing for Publication in Action Research* (McNiff, 2011). The book deals with how to write up one’s work as an action researcher, how to demonstrate its validity in the eyes of peers, and how to get it legitimated in the public domain. There are good reasons for writing the book, too, as I explain below.

The second reason is that I wish to communicate my understandings of action research as a practice, within methodological frameworks informed by underpinning philosophies; not simply as a method to be applied to practice, as too many texts maintain, or as a remedy for problem situations that need an intervention. Even from its earliest historical beginnings, action research was conceived of as a practice undertaken by people who wish to improve what they are doing for personal and social transformation. MacIntyre’s (1984) definition of what constitutes a practice is helpful here: a practice is, he says,

... any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partly definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and

human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended (MacIntyre 1984: 187)

I especially like the emphasis on the idea of standards used to judge the quality of human and social goods, which is a deep commitment for me too. A key question is therefore foregrounded: How do we judge quality in action research and its outcomes? Later in this paper, the same question arises in relation to writing: How do we judge quality in writing action research and its outcomes? And even more new questions arise: What counts as writing? What counts as texts? If we are to make judgements about their quality, how do we conceptualise the goods we are making judgements about?

Third, writing the paper enables me to extend the framing ideas articulated above, about unbounded interconnectivities and generative transformational processes: see also Rayner's (2010) work on inclusionality; see also Whitehead (2010). In my philosophy, all things in the universe are interconnected, and all are in a relationship of emergence with one another. These ideas are communicated through the literatures of process philosophies of emergence (Browning & Myers, 1998): and here is how I locate action research within them.

First I draw on ideas from a range of process philosophers, including: from Heraclitus, who maintained that it was impossible to step into the same river twice; from Goethe, whose ideas about emergent property went on to inform larger scientific and intellectual movements (see Bertoft, 1996), including those of chaos and complexity theory (Kauffman, 1995; Lewin, 1993); and from Vico (1999), whose radically revisionist work about the nature of human enquiry influenced a massive literature concerning the relationships between rhetoric, culture and history (see for example Foucault, 1977; Todorov, 1995). These and others have influenced work in the fields of generative semantics, environmental literacy, human potential movements, and many more.

I see action research as the practical realisation of this literary and intellectual tradition. Engaging in their action enquiries enables people to celebrate their infinite capacity for creating and recreating their lives in ways that will act as their contributions towards human flourishing and planetary wellbeing. In this paper I explain how I have tried to encourage them to do this, and to make their enquiries public so that others may learn with and from them. Herein lies the nub of my third reason: if people have something important to say, they need to know what to say and how to say it well, how to write well, so that others will listen to what they are saying, and take them seriously to the extent that they will act on what they hear.

So I write the paper as an account of my action enquiries. Having set the scene and framed the picture, I now continue the story as two action-reflection cycles; the first focuses on my practices over the last twenty years of enabling practitioners to study their work and generate their living educational theories (Whitehead, 1989); the second focuses on the concurrent practice of writing my accounts of practice and enabling others to do the same. Thus I shift from researching my practices as a professional educator to researching my practices as a writer. This last has become a major theme in my current research (see McNiff & Whitehead, 2009), and one that I explore here. I deliberately present the work now as two action-reflection cycles, because I continually want to emphasise that writing action research is about both substantive issues and communication; and I need to be explicit about the literary strategies I am adopting in order to feel that I am communicating clearly.

From now on, therefore, my account takes the form of a set of critically reflexive questions, as developed by Whitehead (1989). The questions stand as the section headings I use to organise the story of my enquiry.

ACTION-REFLECTION CYCLE 1

What is my concern?

I am a teacher, my chosen profession. Throughout my professional life I have encouraged others to engage with their own learning as they have learned about substantive issues. By this I mean I have encouraged them to research – find out more about and offer explanations for – their attitudes towards their subject matters. This in turn means enquiring into their practices, as thinkers and doers, and so come to appreciate the interrelationships between the two practices of thinking and doing. I also see writing as a form of teaching. In any text, a writer engages a reader, even if only themselves. It is this invitation, and its accompanying stance, to engage with one's own thinking that, for me, defines teaching.

My teaching contexts have changed over the years. In earlier times I taught young people in secondary schools. My main subject matters were languages, but, more to the point, I taught the children and others how to interrogate their assumptions about who they were and how they were as people (see also Pring, 1984). Initially this was within the broad framework of the then new curriculum area 'Personal and Social Education', a story that I wrote up as my PhD thesis (McNiff, 1989). Later, my contexts became those of teacher professional education, initially in Ireland (McNiff & Collins, 1994) and later in a range of countries, including South Africa (McNiff, 2008: see also <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/items.asp?id=1> and <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/kayelitsha.asp>) and Qatar (Tribal / McNiff 2010: see http://www.jeanmcniff.com/userfiles/file/qatar/Qatar_Action_Research_booklet_email.pdf). These contexts changed again to the professional education of academic staff, in higher education institutions around the world, and especially in the UK, South Africa, Ireland, and Israel/Palestine (see for example <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsbelPVpUC8&feature=related> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jupEvMiTbY4>). The focus of my work throughout has been to encourage others in all sectors and contexts to see that they have vital contributions to make to improving the world. This means developing confidence about some key issues, especially the following:

- their ability to make their original contribution, as Polanyi says (1958) (see above);
- their understanding that they are special in themselves and occupy their unique place on earth, as Arendt says (1958);
- that they can, and should, speak for themselves, realising Foucault's (2001) idea of *parrhesia*, the capacity and responsibility to speak for oneself.

Yet here lurk contradictions.

Why am I concerned?

Here are the reasons for my concerns.

Strong links continue to be made throughout the literatures of the dominant intellectual traditions between the capacity of people to generate certain kinds of knowledge, and their worth as people. The kind of knowledge most prized in the technologised world tends to be objective knowledge, the kind that speaks of facts and figures, and that insists on 'either-or' forms and the search for final answers and an immutable truth. This kind of knowledge is often valorised at the expense of personal process forms of knowledge. Objectivist forms of knowledge require a person to distance themselves from their own capacity for self-knowledge. Polanyi (1958: 381) speaks of the 'crippling mutilations' that can happen when objectivist forms of knowledge are taken as the exclusive basis for social practices. Gould's (1997) *The Mismeasure of Man* is one of the best for communicating these experiences: the destruction of lives through uncritical belief in the supremacy of propositional, objectivist and exclusional knowledge. An especially serious effect is that people are then not allowed to celebrate the values articulated above, of making their original contributions to human and planetary flourishing, from their own appreciation of themselves as occupying their God-given place on earth, and their capacity to speak for themselves.

An overriding concern that has emerged for me recently is the lack of dialogue between people who commit exclusively to the different kinds of knowledge. The different kinds of knowledge are frequently polarised: I too have adopted a polarised position in the past, and in the very committing I commit the same sin of contradiction that I rail against. Some notable theorists such as MacIntyre (1984), Bernstein (1991) and Polanyi (1958, 1961) have worked consistently to bridge the gap; and I now ally myself with them. I do this from the grounds that, if I am to stay true to myself, and to my own ways of thinking that see connections in everything, I also have to understand and celebrate the relationship between propositional and personal kinds of knowledge; or, more to the point, between people who commit to propositional and personal kinds of knowledge. Thus it becomes possible, as Geras (1995) says, to form a dialogue of humankind with itself and with the living world of which it is a part.

I actually think I have been doing this for some time without explicitly recognising this shift in my own values and practices as it has happened. Let me explain.

How do I show the situation as it is and as it develops?

I would like to tell you about two main contexts where I have researched my practices in company with others who have researched theirs. These contexts are in Ireland and South Africa, with many similarities between the two. In Ireland, since 1992, I have worked with teachers on professional education programmes, and have supported many for their higher degrees. Sixty-five teachers have been awarded their masters degrees, and eight have achieved their doctorates. In South Africa I have taught many professional education programmes, including a masters programme for teachers in Khayelitsha, a more than a million-strong township (see McNiff, 2008). Ten of those teachers have been awarded their masters degrees, and three are going on for their doctoral studies. I continue to be involved in this work in both contexts.

What is significant about the work is that all the people involved have been marginalised at micro and macro levels, because of their lack of knowledge, of the propositional objectivist kind; more to the point, because of the lack of validation and legitimisation of their knowledge in the form of official certification. Also, and in parallel, they have been working within social and education systems whose practices are grounded in propositional forms of knowledge, so they have been automatically disadvantaged, as follows.

- First, they have been subject to oppression by foreign nationalist forces, and have suffered the imposition of alien ways of being. Oppression in all its forms is legitimised by faith in 'either-or' forms and commitments to a final answer. So on this view, colonisation is justified by being grounded in an appropriate form of logic (see Burleigh, 2007); exemplary texts for the situation in Ireland are O'Brien (1999) and Mallie & McKittrick (2001); and for South Africa, MacDonald (2006) and Pottinger (2008).
- Second, at the levels of formal education provision, they have been marginalised through denial of access to higher degree programmes: at the time of developing the masters work in Ireland, most of the teachers I worked with could not gain access because of exclusional controls around entry; similarly in South Africa, where teachers needed a fourth year honours degree for access. Given that all the teachers were black, and therefore almost by default poor, and so had to earn a living fast after initial graduation, they were effectively denied access. In Ireland, given that many participants were women primary teachers who had undertaken their studies in the days when a certificate was awarded rather than a degree, they did not have the necessary paperwork for entry to programmes. In both contexts, I negotiated with British universities to deliver programmes that would provide flexible access routes to continuing and higher education.
- Third, any available programmes in those countries focused on the acquisition of propositional subject knowledges, from a disciplines perspective, a situation familiar to myself when searching for a university to support my own doctoral studies. Most offered courses in the disciplines, while I was looking for support in studying my practices. The

masters and doctoral courses I later went on to develop were of a kind that enabled the teachers to study how to improve their practices, regardless of discipline, in order to improve the quality of learning in schools and colleges.

So, what to do?

What can I do? What will I do?

My response to the recurrent situation has always been to find ways of acting strategically and with educational intent, to support people in achieving their higher degrees. This has involved considerable learning on my part, beginning with a most uncomfortable process of interrogating my understanding of my identity, values and purposes in relation to others' perceptions of themselves in relation to me. I had to engage with issues of why I was really there: did I want to 'do good', to do things and take responsibility for others? Coetzee critiques this view vehemently in his *Elizabeth Costello* (2003); and so does Calderisi (2007), seeing it as a main source of continuing insidious oppression, when practical help is handed out without creating the infrastructures whereby people can learn what they need to do in order to develop their own capabilities (Sen, 1999). I worked hard to develop these kinds of infrastructures, so that the people I worked with took control of their own lives, and I was delighted to get out of their way as they did so. These practices have been fully vindicated, in spite of the frequent obstacles that were deliberately put in the way to contribute to their failure. These included the development of a discourse of derision (see Ball, 1990) about the content and form of provision I developed ('Yes, but this is not a *real* doctorate'), yet those same epistemological foundations and support structures today form the basis of new guided and professional doctoral and masters programmes, both in the universities where I have been active, and in other universities within the countries in question.

How do I check that any conclusions I come to are reasonably fair and accurate?

I said at the beginning of the paper that, in the interests of demonstrating authenticity and sincerity, I have to show how I am identifying criteria and standards by which I judge the quality of my practices. I begin with my values, as these emerge in their living form in practice, and, echoing MacIntyre's views of practices as goods, as the realisation of those personal and social goods that I hold dear. However, I also have to identify more objective criteria, and I draw on a range of theorists to help me, including Habermas (1976) who speaks of the need to demonstrate comprehensibility in communication; authenticity and sincerity; and an understanding of normative contexts. I hope I am achieving these criteria: I hope my account is comprehensible, and I hope I have already demonstrated my respect for the cultures and mores of the countries where I have been working.

I now need to focus on demonstrating the authenticity of my account, and my sincerity in telling the story, and this I do through grounding my stories in a robust evidence base. This also gives the steer to the second action reflection cycle, for it is in the making public of practitioners' stories, and their testimonies of how this has influenced their own thinking and practices, that the vindication and significance of our collective work are to be found.

Evidence exists that shows the value of the work in relation to enabling people to realise their capacity for infinite creativity, especially in relation to how they recreate themselves, often within contexts of profound and destabilising change: like the South Africans in Anjtie Krog's (2003) *A Change of Tongue*, who had to deal with the double whammy of coping with rapid external change as their society changed from day to day, as well as recreating themselves to live with minimal personal dissonance within this brave new world. The data show how those same people I worked with have come to appreciate themselves as agents of the wider change of which they are a part; and how they appreciate the tensions involved as they have tried to position themselves as contributing to policy formation, not only as implementers of bureaucratically-driven policies that are often divorced from real-life practices. Here is an example of one person's insights of how our work together has strengthened him in doing so; a letter (whose language is slightly

edited, since English is the third language for the writer), written in response to my request to participants to explain whether and how their involvement in their studies had influenced their further thinking and practices.

First, the fact that now I am capable of conducting various kinds of research is something very big to me. This is a lifetime achievement. Although our research methodology focused on our own actions and practices to improve the latter, the unpacking of the way this is done, and the knowledge engaged in acquiring the skills I currently possess, were vast. They were vast in a sense that we were exposed to both action research methods and to other kinds of research methods. During these endeavours a lot of skills were acquired when digging for information concerning methodological issues from the works of previous and current researchers. We sometimes confused one research method with the others until we refined our focus, not knowing that in the process we were skilling ourselves with the ability to conduct all kinds of research.

The degree and the skills acquired through doing it made things easier for my practice. As a manager it equipped me with skills to manage bigger and smaller groups of people, and equipped me with skills to communicate my expertise to middle managers to manage their own constituencies. The action reflection engagement helped me to appreciate that before looking far afield when dealing with an issue, I should look at myself first and then involve others when trying to solve a problem. I now know that not everything is perfected the first time you deal with it – the cyclical method of doing things. I now know that to be anxious is a natural phenomenon, but can be controlled if one knows what one is doing. A person should start small when doing something and engage in an action-reflection way of working, and then things will fall into place gradually as one moves towards perfection.

(personal e-mail correspondence, 1 October 2010)

Among my greatest sources of pride are photographs to show the teachers and myself on the occasion of their graduations, first at the University of Limerick, in 2006 and 2007 (see photograph 1); teachers from Ireland through the University of Glamorgan in 2008 (photograph 2); and also with South African teachers who were awarded their masters degrees at St Patrick's Cathedral in Cape Town, July 2009 (photograph 3).



photograph 1



photograph 2



photograph 3

How do I explain the significance of my work?

The greatest significance of this work is, in my view, that I am enabling people to speak for themselves; to realise their capacity for independent thinking and decision making; to take control of their lives and to create their identities as they wish them to be, not as others over the centuries have tried to enforce through the imposition of foreign identities and cultures. At a more theoretical level I can show in practice how to engage with Sen's (1999) call for a move from an economics of human capital to an economics of human capability, in which personal knowledge becomes the main currency. I locate all these ideas within an overarching framework of generative transformational processes and unbounded ways of knowing. And this moves me into new ways of being and new ways of thinking, as follows.

How do I modify my ideas and practices in light of my evaluation?

I now return to a previously articulated concern, that, if people are to speak for themselves, to exercise their capacity for *parrhesia*, they need to know how to speak well, so that others will listen and heed what they say. So the focus of my enquiry shifts to ensuring that people can write well, so that their work is judged appropriately, and legitimated in the public domain.

This brings me to my second action-reflection cycle, to do with writing and making public.

ACTION-REFLECTION CYCLE 2

What is my concern?

My concern is that often action researchers do not know what goes into writing good quality scholarly texts (the 'what' of writing, to do with knowledge of content) or how to write for publication in a way that will engage the attention of a reader or book or journal editor (the 'how' of writing, to do with knowledge of skills). Consequently many higher degree dissertations and theses are referred for rewriting to some degree by examiners who work to specific criteria and standards of judgement. It is also not so much a matter of learning literary conventions, although these are central and must be attended to with care, but of knowing how to write good copy for a reader, how to weave an action research story together with academic issues such as engaging with the literatures, and how to integrate self-critique and literary critique both as substantive and methodological issues – see McNiff (2007). Writing for publication is a matter of knowing both what to write and how to write it, and what sells as a publication (Horberry, 2009). So this now

becomes the focus of my enquiry. My first action-reflection cycle was to do with enabling people to do action research; this now shifts to enabling them to write what they know in a way that will meet the expectations of critical readers, and be legitimised in the public domain.

The matter is further complicated because new forms of research and writing are becoming increasingly legitimised (Donmoyer, 1996), as are new forms of multimedia representations (see Claudia Mitchell, who speaks about the democratisation of research through participatory visual methods at <http://www.methodspace.com/video/sage-methodspace-claudia>; see also Jack Whitehead's homepage at www.actionresearch.net, specifically Whitehead, 2010, at <http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/bera10/jwbera10individual310810.pdf>). In this, the genre of self study action research often leads the way. Also, the rapid spread of internet access and its uses is changing life forever, and new forms of language are in use that were not recognised even a few years ago. Carr (2010), for example, explains how the internet is changing the very way we speak, read and think; and Collins (2010) speaks of the multiple new forms that texts can take. And while traditionalist writers such as Orwell may complain about what he considers careless forms of expression (Orwell, 2004) (a position that I also tend to adopt), the fact remains that these new forms are here, likely to stay, and will probably increase exponentially with increased access to the internet. We are in a new age of *Modern Times* where, strive to resist it as much as traditionalists like, change is here to stay.

Yet these new forms are still resisted, especially by many mainstream journals. And this is as much the fault of authors as of the editors; for if an author really wants to get their work published, they will make a case for it, and show that the work fits the case. Good authors always reckon with a reader: they tell the reader what the reader should know, and then they supply the copy. This is a famous technique in advertising: Steve Jobs is a past master at it. He builds up anticipation for a new Apple product to generate a want, and then produces it to supply the want. The interesting shift is from 'need' to 'want'. So if editors are resistant to new methodological forms or forms of representation, it is the task of the authors to find ways to show to them and the general public that the need is there, turn it into a want, and then supply the product. And editors also need to reckon with readers; if readers want new forms of texts and technology and new forms of representation, then it is the responsibility of editors to listen and respond appropriately. And, at the end of it all, everyone wants good quality writing that will encourage a reader to engage and buy, whether they are buying ideas, texts or Kindles.

Why am I concerned?

I am concerned about this matter because, if people don't know what to write or how to write it, they cannot get their work published, and so it is not validated, and neither are they as researchers. In spite of any commitments to *parrhesia*, or any amount of encouragement to speak for themselves, they are silenced. This is an especially serious matter for action researchers because, given that writing action research is a new literary genre within an existing educational research canon that espouses (1) mainly propositional forms of knowledge, and (2) a view that a dissertation or thesis should comply with a specific format, any writing in a new genre is going to get a slow hearing. The world of publishing is general deeply power-constituted; and editors of traditional journals are extremely powerful. Poor writing from an author in a new genre will simply add to their weaponry to maintain a closed shop and keep strangers out (see Bourdieu's 1988 stinging critique of the difficulties of meeting the expectations of a traditionalist Academy).

Furthermore, practitioner-researchers often act as their own worst enemies. In the same way as they come to believe the subtle and sometimes not so subtle messages, communicated through the literatures and other media, that they cannot think for themselves and so cannot do research, so they are also persuaded that they cannot write: a kind of false consciousness that prevents them from speaking for themselves through any medium. This view is strengthened if you add into the mix the popular image of the writer, working away in the garret, inspired by their genius and dashing off books at the rate of knots – a lovely fantasy and a hard act to follow. Nothing could be further from the truth in the majority of cases. Emerson made the point (cited in O'Reilly, 1994) that good writing, like most practices, takes a small amount of talent and a lot of

hard work. And this hard work means moving out of familiar territory, and seeing the production of a text as about communication, a pedagogical practice, as much as about a specific content or a subject matter.

How do I show the situation as it is?

Like other supervisors and examiners, I have read a number of dissertations and theses. I know what I am looking for, and specific institutional criteria guide my judgements. I also act as a journal editor, and write texts myself; and over time I have come to understand some of the key principles of good quality academic writing.

First I attend to the criteria stipulated by an accrediting body, or by a journal. Usually the criteria are to do with the following:

- The work contains a claim to knowledge and makes a contribution to knowledge of the field
- It demonstrates critical, original and balanced engagement
- It shows understanding of the research context
- It shows improvement in the practice described, and if not, explains why not
- It is written in an appropriate form
- It contains material worthy of peer-reviewed publishable merit
- It is error-free and technically accurate with a full bibliography and references

(McNiff & Whitehead, 2009: 70)

So what makes a successful text, no matter what form of representation? Here are some of the things I look for:

- I want to see explanations as well as descriptions. Too many texts read like activities lists rather than explanatory accounts.
- I am looking for a story that runs through the work. I want the writer to keep reminding me where I am in the story.
- I look for scholarly engagement. This means I hope to see references to the literatures, and for some critique to be offered, to ground the story in an academic frame.
- I hope to see the writer reflecting on their practice, and also on the practice of writing.
- I do not want to see any errors of any kind.
- I look for enthusiasm, passion and engagement, for the writer to be present in the writing, and not to write it in a soulless manner. It is rather like listening to a person reading a text: you can tell if they are present or not.
- Most importantly, I hope to see a high level of deconstruction and self-critique. This means that I hope the author appreciates the need to produce evidence to ground their claims, and makes a case for why the reader should believe them.

These are some of the things I am looking for. Sadly they are not always present and this brings dissonance, because it need not be this way. Researchers can learn how to produce a high quality text, can write an appropriate content and communicate their message well. So how to do this?

What can I do? What will I do?

I take action in a range of ways. In supervision practices I focus on helping people to appreciate what it takes to write a quality research document, i.e. an explanatory account, and to communicate well. I emphasise the need for practitioners to research their practice as a writer as well as improve issues within a social context. This means writing myself, and also running writing workshops, which means I make myself vulnerable as a writer and a researcher, because I do not always get things right. I produce texts that offer common-sense advice about what to do, and share whatever expertise I have built up over the years (see McNiff, 2010 and 2011).

I also focus on offering the right kind of support while people are writing. This means that I do not pressure people into producing writing of a certain kind within a specified time, because producing a high quality text takes time and often goes through different phases. Preparing to write tends to be rather like shooting at night: you have to sort of aim off (see <http://www.go4awalk.com/hill-skills-and-navigation/navigation-skills/aiming-off.php>), to look at the target but use peripheral vision, looking to the left and to the right, but not full on. I believe this physical practice draws on a different part of the mind-brain, encouraging tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1983) to emerge. But when the text begins to emerge and take shape you need to change the tempo, to begin to work actively with the text and not let go of it. Writing knowledge always takes time. I let the writer know that I have faith in them, and they should have faith in themselves. Their story will emerge over time, in a way that is right for them. I have many strategies, all directed at encouraging the practitioner-writer to believe in themselves, that they can produce a high quality text that will do the job it is meant to do.

How do I ensure that any conclusions I come to are reasonably fair and accurate?

I believe the strategies I have adopted over time have paid off. I have my own body of published work (see <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/books.asp>); and have supervised a range of masters dissertations and doctoral theses to completion, as follows (see also <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/theses.asp>):

Margaret Cahill (2006). *My Living Educational Theory of Inclusional Practice*. PhD thesis, University of Limerick. Retrieved 9 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/margaretcahill/index.html>

Chris Glavey (2008) *Helping Eagles Fly – A Living Theory Approach to Student and Young Adult Leadership Development*. PhD thesis, University of Glamorgan. Retrieved 8 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/theses/glavey.html>

Caitríona McDonagh (2007) *My living theory of learning to teach for social justice: How do I enable primary school children with specific learning disability (dyslexia) and myself as their teacher to realise our learning potentials?* PhD thesis, University of Limerick. Retrieved 9 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/mcdonaghabstract.html>

Máirín Glenn (2006) *Working with collaborative projects: my living theory of a holistic educational practice*. PhD thesis, University of Limerick. Retrieved 9 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/glennabstract.html>

Ray O'Neill (2008) *ICT as Political Action*. PhD thesis, University of Glamorgan. Retrieved 8 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/theses/oneill.html>

Mary Roche (2007) *Towards a living theory of caring pedagogy: interrogating my practice to nurture a critical, emancipatory and just community of enquiry*. PhD thesis, University of Limerick. Retrieved 9 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/MaryRoche/index.html>

Bernie Sullivan (2006) *A living theory of a practice of social justice: realising the right of Traveller children to educational equality*. PhD thesis, University of Limerick. Retrieved 9 September 2009 from <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/bernieabstract.html>

This list of successes, I believe, stands as evidence to show that practitioner researchers can set the highest standards of academic and communicative excellence. Through the production of their texts they can set new standards within new genres that will stand as major contributions to the field of educational enquiry.

How do I explain the significance of my action and my research?

The significance of the practice of researching writing and developing new forms of academic literacy is considerable. Todorov (1995) speaks of the need to understand a text within its own terms. This has to be the case with action research texts. And action research itself has to extend its remit; for if research is a systematic enquiry made public, as Stenhouse said (1983), then as much attention needs to be paid to the ‘making public’ aspect as the ‘systematic enquiry’ aspect. Also, action researchers need always to say why they are carrying out their research and making it public: they need to offer their reasons and purposes. Given that action research is always to do with personal and social change, the reasons and purposes will also exist in these terms.

But the real significance of the practice is to be found in the lives of real people. Books, papers and other texts have little meaning if divorced from the lives of their authors. Knowledge cannot exist without a knower; texts cannot exist without a writer. It is the people themselves who find ways of transforming their own situations, and then let the world know what they have done, so that others can learn with and from them. Writing, in this sense, becomes a means of disseminating good work; and forms of publishing, such as online journals such as the one you are reading are brilliant for disseminating the work so that it is immediately accessible to anyone anywhere, given, of course, that they have access to the internet; which is another important issue regarding access but one that I will write about later.

As far as I am concerned, I am delighted to have the opportunity to celebrate the good work going on in a range of places. I take an activist role in this too: I have set up a publishing house to disseminate the work of the people I support, as well as my own. It is in its infancy, but growing. I have learned from business, from people like Steve Jobs and Richard Branson, of how it is possible to turn the ‘need’ into the ‘want’, and this is what I am doing. It is my contribution to processes of social transformation, by providing opportunities for people to shine in their own way, to make their voices heard, but always from the grounds that these must be good quality works, as critically assessed in the author’s eyes and in mine.

How do I modify my ideas and practices in light of my evaluation?

So this now turns into a new action enquiry that asks the question, ‘How do I build up a publishing firm that will provide opportunities for people to write and communicate their stories of personal and social transformation? How do I ensure that the stories told are top quality, so that they will do credit to their authors as practitioner-researchers and as writers, and me as publisher, and to contribute to the education of their various social formations? How do I ensure that authors produce texts that give reasons for what they are doing, and explain how their texts are their stories of how they show their public accountability?’

My response at the moment is, ‘Watch this space’, and the space is now available at <http://www.september-books.com>. The space exists for you and me, to develop and publish our work and let our voices be heard in our efforts to make the world a better place for all. Let’s see if we can do something about it.

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