How do I~we contribute to the development of new institutional epistemologies of educational knowledge for sustainable social practices?

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Jean McNiff, York St John University

Email jeanmcniff@mac.com

Website: http://www.jeanmcniff.com

Introduction

This paper is an account of my ongoing enquiry into my practice as I seek to show how and why I hold myself accountable for my work in higher education settings. I have discussed the idea of accountability elsewhere in this conference (McNiff 2009a, b and c), each time with an increasing sense of its significance for debates about social sustainability and world peace. My understanding is that personal and social accountability begins with the transformation of ontological values into epistemic accountability (Code 1987): how we act is informed by our logics (how we think) and our values (what we value). Therefore, because it becomes at bottom a question of knowledge, together with a sense of what is right, it becomes clear to me that accountability must be a priority for the academy, given that it is the task of academics to produce and test the validity of knowledge; and given also that higher education is one of the most influential sites for deciding what counts as knowledge and who counts as a knower. I am not speaking about a bureaucratic kind of accountability, as Ball (2003) does, but about explaining how and why we hold ourselves accountable for our actions in the world: accountability for accountability if you wish. And this form of social and political accountability is grounded in our readiness to explain how and why we hold ourselves accountable for what we know, and how and why we come to know it. Furthermore, given the violent nature of much of our contemporary world, as shown for example in the picture of a young Chinese woman about to be hanged (*Amnesty Magazine* 2007), it would appear that many people are committed to divisive and 'othering' epistemologies.

It therefore becomes the responsibility of higher education to engage vigorously in epistemological transformation, in relation with ontological values, in order to find ways of influencing the development of a more peaceful and productive social order. These are the key arguments I pursue throughout.

First, however, in order to situate the discussion in its proper setting, I need to outline my professional contexts.

My professional contexts

I am an independent educational researcher, but with several institutional positions in universities in different parts of the world – China, South Africa, Ireland, and the UK. My position in the UK is with York St John University, where I work with

academic staff in pursuing their doctoral programmes and refining their capacity for research and its publication.

Here are some photographs of some of the people I work with.

Colleagues at St Mary's University College, London

Colleagues in Khayelitsha, South Africa

Colleagues in Limerick, Ireland

Colleagues in Reykjavik, Iceland

Colleagues in Be'er Sheva, Israel

The reason I am showing these particular photographs is to explain that, although each group is located in a different geographical area in the world, they are linked by common ontological and epistemological bonds, with a common desire to use their knowledge to influence learning in their local contexts, and with the transformative intent of influencing wider socio-political contexts. This common ontological and epistemological intent is what I believe enables each of them to identify themselves as an educational community of practice with a global mission: to contribute to epistemological transformation (Whitehead 2009) for socio-cultural transformation.

Here is how it seems to happen.

The living processes of epistemological transformation

I very much enjoy my work, in York St John and elsewhere, not least because it brings me into contact with like-minded individuals whose purposes are to achieve high standards of research and scholarship within their chosen fields, and its transformation into educational action for social improvement. A key feature in this pursuit of excellence for all colleagues is an understanding of the epistemological base of social transformation; this manifests for all colleagues as an openness to new forms of research and scholarship, a desire to improve their knowledge through developing understanding of and capacity in new ways of knowing. They do this through engaging in action research enquiries (for example Adams 2008 in South Africa; Cahill 2009 in Ireland; and Wickham 2009 in the UK).

A key feature of this intent is an awareness of a need to explore our own thinking and develop the capacity for engaged critique: what Winter (1989) calls critical reflexivity (the capacity to critique one's own thinking) and dialectical reflexivity (the capacity to critique the historically and politically constituted contexts in which we work). We are all prepared to trouble our thinking, in the sense articulated by Butler (1999), that concepts and practices need 'troubling' in order not to become normative and settle themselves comfortably into fundamentalist ways of living. We do this so that we can demonstrate the ironic validity (Lather 1991) of our knowledge-creation, our capacity to stand outside ourselves and critically comment on our own epistemological processes, how we have improved our own understandings, and how we make judgements on whether or not those understandings have helped us improve ourselves, however we understand that concept in the reality of our lives. The video at
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYty6rsiOGA shows Tsepo Majake in South Africa engaging in this process (see also Majake 2008).

There is a collective attitude among us that nothing is taken for granted; any knowledge generated, any practice performed, is held lightly and seen as one possibility among others. This appreciation of the fragility and transitoriness of our practices has become possible, I believe, because of the solidity of our relationships; we can afford to hold our knowledge lightly because we are confident in who we are and how we are with one another; we maintain our singularities and share them as appropriate (Kristeva's views, as reported in Lechte and Margaroni 2004: 162). Issues of personal identity therefore do not obstruct the flow of the dismantling of established forms of knowledge and the co-creation of new forms. This confidence comes from several sources: mainly that people genuinely like one another and share common values, and are prepared to contribute to the development of a culture of critical collaboration. This kind of culture is further encouraged through the form of organisation of our professional meetings and the commitment to active listening to and valuing of what the other has to say, albeit informed by an awareness of the need to challenge and critique. The video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNIK7BUHyFo shows this in action.

Most importantly, it comes from our readiness to interrogate and transform our own epistemologies: our theories of what we know and how we come to know it. This understanding involves the deeper understanding that we can literally change our minds: we have the power to deconstruct and reconstruct our knowledge as we wish. The idea of deconstructing knowledge is however complex: and, to explain how I understand the process, here is a real-life example of the reconstruction of knowledge, a real-life account of how I personally have reconstructed my own knowledge. For me, it does not get any more dramatic than this.

Reconstructing knowledge

The video below was made in July 2009, during a visit to the National Zoological Gardens of South Africa. It shows me with Elizabeth, one of the animal keepers at the Zoo, who is holding a glass case containing a tarantula spider.

To appreciate the significance of this picture, it has to be understood that I was, at the time, and like many others, irrationally terrified of spiders. The context for the picture is that I was working with colleagues in the Zoo, especially with Robyn Ingle-Möller, whose responsibility is to encourage the educational enrichment of animals, staff and the public (see http://www.nzg.ac.za/newsletter/issues/10/06.php for the acknowledgement of the Director, Dr Clifford Nxomani, of the value of Robynn's work). Robynn is contributing to the development of a culture of educational enquiry in the Zoo through encouraging colleagues to undertake their action enquiries, and I

support her in the process (McNiff and Ingle-Möller in preparation). My hope during this visit was to talk with colleagues about how they were developing new understandings of their work through critical reflection.

Robynn arranged a meeting between me and Elizabeth, who is known throughout the Zoo community for her passion for scientific enquiry, especially in the field of spider welfare. She comments in the video that she cares for spiders as individual animals; each, she says, has its own personality. The spider I met in this video evidently likes to show off, says Elizabeth, as is demonstrated by its quick approach to me and active waving of four of its eight legs.

A telling feature of the history of the video, however, is that, on my first visit, I was entirely unprepared for what I was to encounter, and felt physically sick on entering the spider room. I was incredulous at the idea that here I was, in a quite small enclosed space, in the midst of about 500 spiders, some of which were large, brightly coloured, and hairy. All those succulent bodies and fleshy legs. Yet more important than the fear was my commitment to Elizabeth to hear her story. This commitment was prioritised when, on viewing the video, I found that a key part had not come out successfully, which meant I had to arrange to meet again with Elizabeth and do it all over. Amazingly, I found myself requesting to meet with Elizabeth, actively requesting to enter that room of spiders so that she and I could continue our work together. This happened, and the video you see is the visual record of the encounter – my encounter with Elizabeth, the spiders, and my own demons.

Yet this is a key significance of the encounter. Previously I had been overcome by my fear of the unknown. The knowledge I had was what I knew then of spiders, as horrible insects, and my knowledge that I was hysterically afraid of them. I learned from Elizabeth that spiders are in fact animals, that they have individual personalities, that they are utterly beautiful, and that they occupy a place on this planet that we share. The spider in the video engaged in an encounter with me, and I was touched by the experience (though not by the spider), and revised what I knew of the spider and of myself. I changed my mind; I changed my knowledge. I would not say that I would willingly handle a spider today, but I have visual evidence here that I am prepared to meet on equal terms, on an equal footing (though the spider perhaps has a better footing than mine to the power of four).

This is a living example of the transformation of personal knowledge, a shift from unthinking prejudice – my then state of knowledge – brought on by fear of the unknown grounded in ignorance, to a new state of knowledge where I now know a different reality. Once it becomes known at an explicit level, the fear can be engaged with, and a new form of knowledge achieved. What I know now about spiders and myself is different, and more truthful to my values from what I knew before.

So how do these concepts and practices travel to the epistemological transformation of the university?

The living processes of epistemological transformation into cultural-social transformation

I said earlier that I am independent, and choose to work in specific contexts in higher education. I do this with a special intent. The intent is to persuade academic practitioners of the potentials of their power for transforming the cultural-social order through transforming their epistemologies. This idea of the need to transform epistemologies is the driving energy.

Currently, the form of knowledge admired by much of the academy is propositional. This can, however, take the form of what Jansen calls '… the kinds of knowledge that [are] strange and distant, sometimes offensive. … the kind of science that accepted the world as given, fixed and knowable' (Jansen 2009: 20). It is this kind of abstract, conceptual knowledge that persuades people to see social realities also as abstractions, from which they are distanced by their lack of personal engagement with the issues they are speaking about. It enables people to carry out acts within the world without appreciating that their actions may have consequences for real people. In Polanyi's (1958) terms, they do not commit to their personal knowledge; they see things as abstractions, to be spoken about, but not to be experienced within their personal lives. Knowledge, in the dominant abstract mode, does not have a human face, is not a creation of the individual knower.

Here is an account of how Howard Zinn, world-famous philosopher and historian, came to the understanding that knowledge does indeed have a human face – his own.

> Yes, in December 1998, I received an e-mail from London. That month there was a particular intensity to the U.S. bombing of Iraq, and this e-mail came to me out of the blue from Dr. Al-Obaidi. I think he had read something that I had written, and he told me that he had left Iraq because Saddam Hussein had killed his father and his brother. He left Iraq and moved to London to take up his medical practice. He said he was writing to me because just a few days before, an American cruise missile had struck the home of his mother, who was living on the outskirts of Baghdad, and killed her and his sister-in-law, the widow of his brother who had been killed by Saddam Hussein, and their three kids. As he put it, Saddam Hussein and Bill Clinton had, together, wiped out his family[1].

> I sent that story out on the Internet to disseminate it as widely as I could because I thought it might have the same effect on other people it had on me. The abstract notion of the United States bombing Iraq really had very little meaning for me [Zinn had been a bombardier in the Second World War] until I read a human story of one person and one family. This is a fundamental problem that we have in reading the news and reading about bombing. When you see statistics about how many people died, the reality does not really strike us, until we see it presented in one or two human beings. (Zinn 2002: 89)

It is, in Zinn's terms, a fundamental problem of knowledge – what is known, and how it comes to be known. In South Africa, one of the places where I work, the dominant form of knowledge is knowledge of facts. The education system is built on a propositional view of knowledge. Teaching is undertaken from a commitment to an

outcomes based system, and tested through local and state examinations in relation to the ability to demonstrate competence in specific tests of objective knowledge (Maree and Fraser 2004). Gould (1997) gives a stringent critique of this view, explaining that it acts as the basis for the unwarranted categorisation of people into different so-called intellectual and hierarchies, the basis of the evil regimes of apartheid (Keegan 1996) and of the legitimation of evil practices such as child abuse (see the 2009 Ryan Report: *Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse*, 2009). These regimes are held in place through the legitimation of forms of knowledge that position people and the natural order into discrete categories, arranged as hierarchies, and that de-legitimise some people from the status of being human. Such people become unwanted and rejected, as shown, for example, in the work of Bayles (2000) and Bayles et al (2009), who offer accounts of modern-day slavery; or read any edition of *Amnesty Magazine* for horrendous stories of enforced imprisonment, torture and death. The fact that this kind of social situation exists, reinforced by dominant forms of epistemologies, is abhorrent to me, a case of the denial of my values in practice (Whitehead 1989), and a sense of moral outrage (Purpel 1999) that drives me to do whatever I can to take action to change the situation from within.

The action I take, as noted, is to work with academic practitioners, encouraging them to re-think their knowledge, and to produce warranted evidence to show how they have done so, and how they make judgements about the quality of their new knowledge. This is demonstrated in the video of Elsa Lombard, a colleague at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, about what she does and how she does it: see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jupEvMiTbY4&feature=channel_page

My current task is to collate the considerable data archive of videos of colleagues engaged in this kind of critical self-evaluation, gathered over several years from around the world, into a comprehensive evidence base that shows the processes I am speaking about here in action; and to link this with existing knowledge bases of colleagues who are doing the same (see Jack Whitehead's evidence base on his website http://www.actionresearch.com). This will keep me occupied for the next while, given that I am just now learning how to use multimedia technology, but I am determined to get there.

Testing the validity of my claims to knowledge

And now the question arises: do I demonstrate my awareness of my own need to test the validity of my knowledge claims that I am influencing the development of epistemological transformation in higher education in the interests of social transformation? I am sure there are gaps in my processes of demonstrating such validity, and I would be grateful for your help in explaining to me how I can address those gaps. However, let me make a start.

I test the validity of my knowledge claims in relation to specific criteria, in relation with my values. According to texts such as McNiff and Whitehead (2009) and Whitehead and McNiff (2006), this amounts to my process of personal validation. I check that my actions are in keeping with my values. I ask, do I show the realities of understanding the value of personal knowledge? Do I show the realities of forms of

knowledge that are grounded in relationships? Thayer-Bacon (2003) speaks of relational forms of knowledge as fragile, temporary, subject to change as the knower develops their knowledge through their experience of themselves with others, within a relational world. Do I show the relational nature of my epistemology through my encounter with a spider? Do I show that I work from a position of connectedness, that I do not see people and animals as separate from me, from an epistemological stance of abstraction, but see the human or animal face in the relationship? They say not to give a name to the chicken you will eat one day; how do I respond to the spider?

However, this process of personal evaluation could be construed as a form of self-serving self-satisfaction. The process of establishing personal validity must itself be subjected to a more objective process in order to establish social validity. This, suggests Whitehead (2006) can be done by working with Habermas's (1976) criteria of social validity, and involves asking oneself critical questions about the process of communicating knowledge claims:

- Do I show that I am truthful through the production of an authenticated evidence base? In my stories recounted here, do I show where the evidence may be found in relation to my knowledge claims?
- Do I show that I am comprehensible in the telling of my story? Does my narrative hold together, and demonstrate coherence through its main text and sub-texts?
- Do I demonstrate authenticity in the sense that I stay true to my values through sustained action? Will I jump in fear when I next see a spider? Will I respond harshly to a companion, failing to see them as real-life beings, with a heart?
- Do I demonstrate an understanding of the normative contexts of my practice? Do I appreciate that epistemologies are not changed overnight, that it takes time and compassion for others and self, in the same way as does engagement with that which one fears?

I am not sure about many things. I am not sure whether I have made a sufficiently strong case for my work as influencing the thinking of colleagues to realise their ontological values as epistemological standards of judgement, in order to contribute to a wider epistemological transformation.

I will know if and when you respond to me, through my email above, and let me know that perhaps you respond to what I am saying here. You and I are, at the moment, at a distance. Perhaps, through our connectedness, we can find ways of improving the quality of life for spiders and for people, in our attempts to create a more equitable social order than the one we have at present.

Thank you for reading this.

Jean McNiff

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