

Linking accountability with professional identity: how do I develop my living theory of educationally responsible practice?

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This paper is a report of my ongoing action research into my own learning as I continue to understand my work as I engage with questions such as 'How do I understand and develop an epistemology of educational accountability? (Renowden 2009)' and in doing so may ask the question 'How does this improve my practice?' Through the writing of this paper and the symposium at BERA I am holding myself to account through an explanation of my educational values (Whitehead, 2009) by taking educational responsibility through research.

Background to the research

Most of my working life has been spent as a primary teacher in West London. I taught children aged five through to eleven and I moved into a management role as Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator and acting Deputy Head. I was fully engaged with my practice in the classroom, and participated in a range of government-led initiatives such as the Literacy and Numeracy hours, which were introduced to improve the way children learnt. Through all this the focus of my practice was the school I worked in and the classroom and children. One of the most important things for me throughout my career was that I supported and encouraged children's learning and contributed to their sense of well being and happiness.

During the five years I have been at St Mary's University College I have been afforded the opportunity to consider what my practice involved. This time allows me to reflect on my past practice and interrogate the assumptions underpinning everything I do. This has come largely through studying in the first instance for my MA (Renowden, 2006) and then onto my doctoral studies. I have become increasingly engaged with my own capacity to learn as I challenge myself and have been challenged by others as part of what Wenger (1998) would call a community of practice, and this has led me to consider the part I play in the learning of others.

Looking back to my time in schools I considered the teacher as 'one who knows'. I knew what to teach, when to teach it and how to teach it. I knew what children, parents and management needed so I was judged by those in a position to do so, as successful. I was also confident around my own needs in the workplace. I needed job satisfaction, which I got in abundance, the company of a friendly staff, the opportunity to grow professionally and, if I am honest the confidence that came with being the 'knower'. This position conferred a certain status. My life was task orientated and I was busy doing things, which meant that this idea of 'myself as teacher' remained largely unexplored.

My role as teacher was very much about children learning and I understood the conditions that were needed to facilitate learning. I exercised the autonomy that teachers have, and experience taught me how to adapt and manipulate the requirements to suit what I considered to be good practice educationally. I had become a practitioner, who was reflecting-in-action. Schon (1983) considers '...reflection on knowing-in-action goes together with reflection on the stuff at hand. There is some puzzling, or troubling, or interesting phenomenon with which the individual is trying to deal. As he tries to make sense of it, he also reflects on the understandings which have been implicit in his action, understandings which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action' (Schon, 1983: 50). This meant that I could make the necessary changes based on Schon's idea of knowledge-in-action and so I did not reach the stage of seeing myself as a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989).

Focus of the enquiry

The focus of my enquiry is my practice as a higher education tutor. This change in 2004 from a primary school setting to a University College changed the way I teach. I now work alongside very large groups of student teachers in lecture halls. As I now experience myself as a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989) it seems obvious to me that I need to understand my own values, practices and actions. This need to be able to say what I know and how I come to know it is grounded in Polanyi's ideas about personal knowledge (1958). Polanyi states that there is personal involvement in understanding by the knower. This idea underpins my understanding that I am uniquely placed to know and account for my own practice.

Research Methods

I am using a self-study action research approach as I enquire into my practice as I seek to transform my own understandings and the understandings of the students I work alongside. For the benefit of this paper I will report on my research using an action research cycle.

1. What is my concern?

My concern is that I am not living out my values in my practice. As I continue my research I am becoming more of a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989), not less. As I explore my practice and hold myself to account for my actions against these values, I realise that I am not holding others to account in such a way as to allow them to develop their own values. I am saying one thing and doing another. As an example of my concern I will explore two of the key values I hold and explain how they are linked.

1.1 My practice must be educational

For a practice to be educational it should enable others to think for themselves and engage in well thought out acts (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009). As someone engaged in education I ask myself what I am hoping to achieve. Certain aims are important to me as a teacher educator. I want to be able to participate in my own learning and support students to be motivated to do the same. It is important that students can manage their own learning through self-expression, thus encouraging self-determination. I have always valued one of my roles as a mentor of students as it has the potential to develop mutually supportive relationships that can support learning through dialogue and increased confidence. Through my role as Special Needs advocate I support those students who struggle to organise themselves and articulate their embodied knowledge (Polanyi, 1958).

For practice to be educational it needs to move away from what Chomsky calls 'productive mechanism' (Chomsky, 2003: 165). This is training in skills and habits to fit the learner for places of work. Teacher education could be seen to be doing just this. It could be seen as a vocational model designed to enable students to manage a classroom, plan lessons, assess attainment and support learning. It has a reflective element, however even this is presented in a mechanistic way using criteria and tick lists.

As Brookfield (1995) says, there is a danger that 'reflection' will become a buzz-word denuded of real meaning. If all I am doing is supporting students to match criteria to their practice then I do not consider this as educational. I would like students to develop a sense of their own voice through which they can express their own creativity. I want to create an 'educational space' (Whitehead, 2009) where students can interrogate and critique normative assumptions, of which there are many in the world of education. I have come to value this space in my own learning and my MA dissertation is a product of this. My practice is part of what I do in my everyday life. Freire (1973) talks about liberatory practice. He considers that educational activity should be situated in the living experiences of the individual and this leads to different ways to approach practice. Fenstermacher (1986) goes further by saying teachers seek to liberate the mind of their students.

1.2 My practice must be accountable

The word 'accountable' means to be liable to give account, explanation or reason for action. It is to be responsible and explicable. If one is to be held accountable for what one says and does there is implied in this a set of questions.

- Who am I accountable to?
- How do I demonstrate my accountability?
- How are judgements made about my accountability? What standards of judgement are applied to my accounts?
- Where do the judges of my accountability derive their power to make the decisions and how should they be held to account?
- What happens when I am accountable?

Who am I accountable to?

This begs the question as to whom one gives such an explanation or account? Throughout my working life I have been accountable on a very practical level to a range of people and bodies. As a classroom teacher I was expected to account for my teaching practices to the parents, senior staff, governors and such government led bodies as the Local Education Authority and Ofsted. Sometimes this was made explicit within such paperwork as my job description or contract and at other times it was not so clearly stated.

An example of less clearly defined accountability was that expected by parents or colleagues. I gave accounts of my practice through report writing and at parents' evenings and

the more informal times I met with parents. Colleagues had expectations around my accountability, for example when I introduced new ideas or wanted to change something. I was also accountable to myself for what I did and I will explore this later in the paper.

Within the context in which I currently work, accountability is less immediate and explicit than in a school context. I am accountable to senior management in the same way as before and there are expectations that I am accountable for what I teach. I am accountable to colleagues and of course the students. After the introduction of student fees there is a greater understanding of the student as stakeholder and the dynamic of value for money has been introduced. Students are potentially incurring large debts to be able to do the courses so of course they will be more desirous of value. This is evidenced by the recently much publicised online criticisms of certain university provision.

(http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/article6736054.ece)

This is problematic, however, as there is often a mismatch between what students want and how tutors go about their teaching. The idea that in some way students can measure this value for money is interesting and implies as with any accountability that they are making decisions about my work with them, based on potentially problematic criteria. I can see a mismatch between what I might consider the way to engage them in their education and their expectations.

The element of accountability that has changed the most for me is the personal one. This has come with my increased understanding of my own learning and the potential I have to influence the learning of others, as I seek to understand my personal knowledge, as described by Polanyi (1958). I am struck by the potential within myself, and how I may impact on the development of the potential of others. I need to explain this.

How do I demonstrate my accountability?

On a practical level I am accountable in a number of ways. I give accounts of what I do in both verbal and written reports to managers and colleagues. I answer queries and engage in dialogue around my day-to-day practice. The need I feel for personal accountability has undergone a dramatic change over the last two years and this is because of my understanding of the ability and the responsibility I have to explain what I do. I have come to realise that I am able to articulate what I know in a way that is both scholarly and of value to both myself and potentially my colleagues and students. Through my MA dissertation (Renowden, 2006) and my doctoral thesis I have and will be offering accounts and explanations of what I do and why I do it.

I also realise that I have a responsibility to explain or be accountable for what I do. As an educator in a Higher Education setting I am an academic and as such, the institution expects me to be involved in doctoral study. There is an expectation that I seek publication of my work.

How are judgements made about my accountability? What standards of judgement are applied to my accounts?

Judgements are passed on my account of practice by the people or bodies I submit them to. Colleagues, students and managers etc make decisions about whether I have demonstrated sufficient accountability for my actions and justified what I have done. The standards of judgement used to do this can be formal such as Ofsted check-lists, which have been predetermined by anonymous groups of people, or standards such as those laid down by the Institution for ways of judging their staff's actions. These standards are applied in such a way that they perpetuate a particular view of the world based on an Aristotelian form of logic which is very 'either or'. In life, situations etc are either one thing or another so you are either doing the correct thing or you are not, as judged through these standards. The value system on which they are based is not always obvious and the non-compliance with the standards, manifested as a lack of accountability or the correct type of accountability, is considered to be a demonstration that a set of values are not being upheld. For example, if I am offering up explanations that are not possible to be judged using the traditional or pre-determined standards then I am not being seen as accountable in a worthwhile way. This is then seen as denying the values of the Institution or Government body.

To be accountable in the 'correct' way also requires an understanding of what Bourdieu (1977) calls 'habitus'. Dominant ideas are perpetuated within the habitus through its structures and these are legitimated and perpetuated by those in the social system. Education is involved in this reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970.) There is a language within the habitus that needs to be understood for those people within it to be able to communicate and understand the workings of the structures.

Many of these standards have been determined with a singular lack of input by practitioners and so they are often perceived as detached from the realities of every day practice. Very rarely have I been involved in setting my own standards of judgement in a way that is accepted by those in positions of power. Always in my practice, I had personal standards of judgement that I applied to my work. These standards were and indeed are grounded in my values of equality, justice, integrity and freedom. Often these values seemed to be a long way

from what I shall call external standards that were applied to my practice. In fact they often came into direct conflict with them and I then become a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989.) As a teacher of a Year 6 class I was judged by the number of children reaching a Level 4 in their end of year tests. I valued this however I also valued as much the progress made by the children with additional needs who did not meet those standards.

Where do the judges of my accountability derive their power to make the decisions and how should they be held to account?

The external judges of the rightness of my accounts or explanations for what I do, derive that power by virtue of the fact that they are perceived within the world of education to know what is 'good' educational practice. This power is fiercely guarded and in fact there are a number of systems put in place by those in power to protect their position. Research can be a very powerful tool when used in this way and in fact much of the research done into education has been inaccessible to those working directly with learners. The language of research into education can be extremely obscure and this means that only those with a particular grasp of the knowledge around forms of language can access the ideas. This research often underpins government policy, which is then implemented by teachers. This use of language to exclude and perpetuate power can be seen within some higher education institutions where there is a real divide between theory and practice. Researchers and academics distance themselves from practitioners and in all my years in a primary classroom I did not have the opportunity to engage on any level with the drivers of policy.

Those who use knowledge as power create structures around themselves to perpetuate the situation. Teaching is a very good example of this and teacher accountability is one such structure. Over the last ten years teachers have been more and more held to account for what they do. The structure of accountability is in some cases falsely premised on research done into what makes teachers effective in the classroom. This has been developed into check lists and criteria. A plethora of instructional paperwork has been sent out to 'help' teachers meet these criteria and under the guise of school improvement and raising standards this has been sold as a good thing to the general public. Unless teachers are accountable for their practice standards will not go up! No real notice has been taken of the very real and very demanding personal standards already in place in many classrooms.

Teachers themselves have been partially responsible for the perpetuation of the power which is being used to oppress them (Friere, 1973). We have colluded in the erosion of our professionalism and allowed our voice to be suppressed. We have been content to allow others to speak for us and we have hidden behind the practitioner title. This has not entirely been the fault of teachers who have been so busy and involved with the initiatives and changes that have flowed from successive governments over the last twenty years. We have been content with participating in decision making through the consultation processes that I would argue have been what Friere (ibid) would call 'false generosity'. We have not held up our own standards of accountability and articulated our own knowledge around practice. In fact had we done so, and as we do so now, we are accused of not having the 'right' kind of knowledge and being story-tellers. This attack on accounts of practice is an attempt to hold onto power.

Those in power should be held to account by those they seek to hold power over. One way of doing this is to take on the language of the habitus by engaging in research, and in fact the presentation of my thesis will be my challenge to those who think they know what my practice should look like and how it should be accountable. I will develop my own theories of accountability and practice that will stand alongside all the others. However it will not be used to tell others how to practise, as that is not commensurate with my ontological or epistemological values. I will not fall into the position of using my own theories to become powerful as the holder of the knowledge, which Freire said the oppressed need to guard against in order to free themselves from oppression, but I will, through my account, influence others to find their voice.

What happens when I am accountable?

The answer to this question depends on the type of accountability and to whom. When it is an external accountability as discussed above I am involved in the power systems discussed above. For much of my working life this was the case and I was perfectly accepting of the situation because it felt detached from the reality of my day-to-day practice. I was ticking boxes. When I am accountable in this way I was able to progress and get the rewards available. I was and am using the systems of accountability for my own ends. This however is not satisfactory on a less superficial level and does not contribute to a sense of well-being. This has developed as I have articulated my personal sense of accountability and begun to recognise the worth of my own accounts of practice.

2. Why am I concerned?

I am concerned because I am aware of the potential I have to influence the students I work with. The job that I do involves me in the current Higher Education assessment processes and as a tutor visiting students in school I am holding them to account for their actions in a formal way as they work towards the meeting of the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) Standards. These are very prescribed and comprehensive and students have to demonstrate that they have met all 33 before they can achieve Qualified Teacher Status. In holding students to account in this way I am engaging in practices that perpetuate a view of teaching as something that can be measured in a tick box technical rational way. This can be very supportive to students as they can see what needs to be done however it is important that they get a sense of perspective and are able to develop their own standards of judgement of their practice. My concern is that I am not enabling this to happen as I am focusing on standards driven assessments.

3. What can I do?

I have become convinced that the most important thing that I can do is engage in a self-study action enquiry that will enable me to do the following:

3.1 Improve my practice

My ongoing doctoral study is deepening my understanding of what my practice involves and it is to enabling me to explore what the students are learning from me. I will be able to show what I have learnt, what the students are learning and how I have influenced to learning of the social formations in which I work.

3.2 Give an account of my actions

Through engaging with debates such as the one between Hargreaves (1996) and Hammersley (1997) I have developed an overwhelming sense of the importance of teachers not only being held to account for what they do in the classroom but taking responsibility for the production of these accounts in such a way as to influence the practice of others. I am engaged in giving accounts of my practice in different ways, for example through my MA thesis (Renowden, 2006) and presentations such as the one at BERA..

http://www.youtube.com/results?search_type=&search_query=jane+renowden&aq=f



College seminar –see <http://www.youtube.com/renowdej1>



I am trying to say what I know and how I come to know it through these acts of accountability.

My research would need to allow me to speak for myself and be accountable for my actions.

3.3 Put myself at the centre of the enquiry

I see myself as both the researcher and the researched. At the heart of my research questions has been this sense of needing to improve my own actions, to understand my own learning and fulfil my own potential and in so doing be able to support others in doing the same. The only way I could do this to be commensurate with my values is to model it. By holding myself to account I could influence others to do the same. How could I hold students to account for their actions if I was not visibly doing the same? Why should they see the value of becoming reflective practitioners if I was not engaged in reflection? Very often I am involved in holding students to account for their actions in the classroom and yet I was not engaged in the same process. It seems to be logical to put myself at the centre of the enquiry.

3.4 Generate my own living theories of practice

I understand that the type of knowledge that I want to construct, is underpinned by my theoretical perspectives, which in turn, are influenced by my epistemological stance This then determines my methodological choices. The type of theory that I want to generate is congruent with my epistemological understanding. This is the philosophical background for deciding what kinds of knowledge are legitimate and adequate.

Generating my own theories of practice has become increasingly important to me. I joined the School of Education in 2004 and I was employed because of my perceived expertise as a primary school practitioner. It was not because of my academic record, which at the time was non-existent. However as I familiarised myself with the expectations I became increasingly aware of the need to change my perception of myself.

3.5 Take action based on the theories I generate

The importance and value of what I do lie in the practice itself. This practice involves actions and I am seeking improvement in the quality of the actions I am taking. I am also looking to understand what constitutes valid knowledge of human action through asking the question 'What is my action?' As I reflect on my actions I will construct my own knowledge.

3.6 Influence the learning of others

Influence the way students hold themselves to account for their practice and to have this recognised through the development of an epistemology of accountability. This idea will be developed through my ongoing doctoral research.

4. How will I gather data?

I will systematically monitor my own practice and learning and gather data to show the processes involved, as I seek to influence the learning and practices of the students. I will be gathering data from other people's accounts of their practices that show the developing influence of my practice and its educational influence on my own learning and that of others. This will involve keeping a personal learning journal, conducting group and individual interviews with students, inviting testimonials from students I work alongside, videoing my practice and student records of achievement. These data will provide the source of evidence of my educational influence. I will generate evidence from the data to test, in relation to my identified criteria and standards of judgement, the claim that I understand my practice and how it can be understood as inclusional and transformational. I will show how I transform my values, as articulated above, into my living standards of practice and judgement, so that I will be able to show how my practice is defined by a values-based stance that can act as the basis of a good social order.

I will generate evidence from the data to test, in relation to my identified criteria and standards of judgement, the claim that I understand my practice and how it might be

understood as educational and transformational. As a practitioner-researcher I will set my own criteria and standards of judgement by which I would like my work to be judged. These will be linked to the values I have articulated. The identification of standards of judgement is essential to establish the rigour (Winter 1989), validity and quality of the research. The standards of judgement I will put forward are aligned with those suggested by Whitehead (1989) as the kind of critical questions he asks when judging the validity of a claim to knowledge. These questions will be:

- Was the enquiry carried out in a systematic way?

- Are the values used to distinguish the claim to knowledge as educational knowledge clearly shown and justified?

- Does the claim contain evidence of a critical accommodation of propositional contributions from the traditional disciplines of education?

- Are the assertions made in the claim clearly justified?

- Is there evidence of an enquiring and critical approach to an educational problem? (Whitehead, 1989: 41-52)

I will seek critical feedback from my validation groups about the validity of my claims to knowledge. These are my colleagues at St Mary's University College, the students I work alongside and those I submit my writing to. This will be done through the submission of my writing and the convening of regular meetings where critical feedback will be sought.

Conclusion

This paper has taken the form of a report into my ongoing research into my practice. It has outlined the progress I have made so far in my doctoral research as I seek answers to questions that will improve my practice as a Senior Lecturer in Education at St Mary's University College. It is an important act of accountability on my behalf as I seek to develop my claim that I am developing an epistemology of accountability. As such I would welcome feedback on the ideas I have expressed. My email address is;

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