

## **Co-convening the Network of Educational Action Research Ireland (NEARI)**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores my role as co-convenor of the Network for Educational Action Research in Ireland (NEARI). NEARI is a network where action researchers convene and engage in critical reflection and dialogue around their practice. They examine how they might enhance their practice and, in doing so, seek a way in which they might improve their world.

The paper outlines how I, too, might enhance my work with NEARI, as I develop my living theory. It is inspired by my values of social justice, care and inclusion. I outline how I draw on the work of Whitehead (2018) as I ask questions like “How do I enhance what I am doing?” and “How do I live my values as fully as I can in the process?” I claim that in NEARI, I work towards creating and maintaining a network as an environment in which people feel supported and cared for and where they can become active agents in their own learning process. Within that learning process, I also encourage people to embrace Living Theory and self-study action research for themselves. The paper depicts how I value myself as a knowledge-creator as I offer descriptions and explanations for my educational influences in learning.

The paper begins with a background to NEARI and how it came into being. It then offers descriptions and explanations around NEARI meetings, their structure, the importance of short presentations at meetings and why NEARI is a safe space for NEARI participants. The paper concludes with issues and literature about my own educational influence on NEARI as well as some final critical reflection on my work in the network.

**Keywords:** Living Theory; community; NEARI; Knowledge-creation

## Introduction

In this paper I claim that in my work with, and participation in, the Network for Educational Action Research (NEARI), I strive to live in the direction of values that are life-enhancing in the sense that they give meaning and purpose to my life. Whitehead explains:

“The values at the heart of...Living Theory research are the life-enhancing values that are relational and ontological, in the sense that they give meaning and purpose to the lives of individuals and groups. They are values that carry hope for the future of humanity, such as love, freedom, justice, compassion, courage, care and democracy.” EJOLTS (n.d.)

Therefore, my work with NEARI and the writing of this paper are informed by Living Theory. As I explore my living-theory, I draw on my ontological and epistemological values as they lie at the heart of Living Theory research, and I outline my claim to strive to live my values in my work with NEARI in this paper. I share many of my values with my network co-conveners Caitriona McDonagh, Mary Roche and Bernie Sullivan, who are my colleagues and friends. We consider ourselves to be conveners because we not only arrange NEARI meetings (NEARIMeets) but we also like to “forge new learning partnerships”, and we aim towards opening “new avenues for learning” (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 99). We locate our thinking and our work with NEARI in our shared values of social justice, care, fairness, inclusion, democracy and collaboration. We draw on the work of Bernie Sullivan (2006), to remind ourselves that our sense of social justice reflects an ethos of equality of respect for all. We are aware of the importance of education as a lifelong process that has “the capacity to confer on participants liberatory and life-enhancing experiences” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 1).

NEARI is a network for action researchers who are new to action research, as well as those who are life-long action researchers. It is an independent, unfunded and non-affiliated network for practitioners at all levels of education and it aims towards developing action research scholarship and practice. It encourages people to look to the educational values that underpin their practice and to work towards living these values in their practice so as to enhance it. Our work with NEARI seeks to circumvent the lack of opportunities that seem to exist for practitioner researchers to engage in genuine critical reflection and dialogue around practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2016) by creating a supportive environment for critical reflection and dialogue. We organise face-to-face meetings for network members three times a year (NEARIMeets) and engage in online conversations for all participants in the intervening times. NEARIMeets are an opportunity for people who are interested in practitioner research to come together; to explore their practice with a view to generating theory from it; to engage in critical conversations and share stories of their learning.

My colleagues and I believe that our work with NEARI is an enactment or a living external expression of the values we hold. These umbrella-values incorporate my own values of care and support for life-long learning, which I will explain below.

I embrace my living theory in terms of Whitehead's 2018 thinking:

"...as an individual's explanation of their educational influences in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations that influence practice and understanding. It grounds the generation of a living-educational-theory in asking, researching and answering questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?', where the practice is an educational practice." (Whitehead, 2018, p. 7)

It is this understanding of living theory that forms the basis of this paper. As a practitioner who espouses Living Theory and self-study action research, not only as an approach to educational research but as a way of life now, I draw on Whitehead's work from 1989 to the present day as I generate my living theory by re-interpreting Whitehead's words and asking myself questions like "How do I enhance what I am doing?" and "How do I live my values as fully as I can in the process?"

I perceive myself as a life-long learner and I recall Whitehead's words: "A living-educational-theory involves learning with values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity" (Whitehead, 2018, p.7) as I also learn through values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity. I look to my values both as the foundation on which I live my life and as the overarching principles towards which I aspire. It forms a heartbeat to my life and how I live it. I try, in my every action and interaction, to live up to my values and to work towards making the world a better place.

I am convinced that engaging in Living Theory not only enhances my practice as a teacher and network convener but that it enables me to make a contribution towards the development of a more just society. This is why I, along with my NEARI co-conveners, work tirelessly to establish groups of practitioners, with whom we can share our enthusiasm around Living Theory and offer them a sustainable and transformative way of reflecting on their lives so to enhance them; to clarify their values in the process of their research and to change their world for the better. This effort has been outlined in detail in Glenn et al. (2012 and 2017) and has now culminated in our continued work with NEARI.

I draw on Whitehead's words above as I explain how our desire to share our ideas around Living Theory with others is deeply embedded in Living Theory itself, as we overtly share our learning and our educational influence in our learning and the learning of others at NEARI. As a network-convener, I value myself as a knowledge-creator as I have offered descriptions of, and explanations (see Glenn et al., 2017 and McDonagh et al., 2020) for the examples of my educational influences in learning. I draw on one of the basic underpinning principles of Living Theory, i.e. that people draw on their values and clarify them as standards of judgement on the veracity of their claim:

"In the course of the enquiry ... values are expressed, clarified and evolved as explanatory principles in explanations of educational influences in learning." (Whitehead, 2018, p.12)

I hope that, in this paper, I show how this is the case with my work with NEARI. I have drawn on these values as explanatory principles and I use these principles to check the honesty and validity of my claim. I articulate these explanatory principles as questions that I ask myself in order to check that I am, in fact,

generating a living-theory that is educational in terms of being for the flourishing of humanity:

1. Am I creating an environment in which people feel supported and cared for, and where they can become active agents in the learning process and become lifelong learners?
2. Am I encouraging NEARI members to embrace Living Theory and self-study action research for themselves?

I have shared this paper with my NEARI co-conveners to ensure that I have not misrepresented their thinking. I draw on Huxtable and Whitehead's (2006) understanding of i~we connections:

"the ~ denotes an inclusional space between the i and the we – a space that is relationally dynamic, a space where there is a productive chaotic flow, a space in which there is our relational dynamic and responsive practice" (Huxtable and Whitehead, 2006, p. 4),

because this statement describes the I-we manner in which we co-convene NEARI.

I requested the views of my co-conveners as I sought their validation of my claim. I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable, constructive critique I received from Stephen Bigger, Pip Bruce Ferguson and David Wright in the review process for this paper. I embrace my living-theory in a firm, but tentative manner – always ready to adjust my thinking in light of new learning. I also embrace my living theory in what I hope is a critical and questioning way – always seeking to unearth any hidden assumptions I may make.

On embarking on this paper, I knew at a personal and intuitive level (Polanyi, 1958) that NEARI is an inspirational network, not only in terms of a 'feel-good' factor, but also in terms of people trying to engage seriously with their practice so as to enhance it, to learn more about it and to make the world a better place in the process. Attendees always seem stimulated and energised when they have been to a NEARIMeet. One attendee commented: "It's a great group of people with change and action on their minds" (feedback comments, September 2018).

As I try to capture that sense of transformation and action, I will begin by giving some background to this paper and then I will offer descriptions and explanations of my educational influence in my own learning and the learning of others in my work with NEARI and how NEARIMeets are structured. I believe that, in offering descriptions from and explanations about my practice (as a convener of NEARI), as a valid account of my educational development, I am generating a living theory from my practice (Whitehead, 2018). I will conclude with a critically reflective look at my claim. The paper is presented in the following manner:

- i. Background to this paper
- ii. Background to NEARI
- iii. Descriptions and explanations around NEARIMeets and their structure
- iv. Round-Robin presentations
- v. NEARI as a safe space

- vi. My educational influence
- vii. Critical thoughts on NEARI

## Background to this paper

The writing of this paper emerged in a serendipitous manner. I had been working on another paper and had a Skype conversation with Jackie Delong, a colleague from the EJOLTs community, and sought her help around the direction of the paper. She suggested that what people would really like to read about in the paper was an insight into NEARI and what makes it so engaging.



**Video 1:** Skype conversation with Jackie Delong  
<https://youtu.be/sipTWTWwI08>

In video 1 Jackie suggested that I should capture more clearly what makes NEARI such a dynamic and active group of practitioner researchers. It is clear from my own reaction that I am surprised by the idea but, as a result of my reflections on this conversation, I placed my original paper to one side and this paper came into being instead.

As I write this paper I am keenly aware of my own continuing reluctance to articulate the ‘magic’ of NEARI. I re-iterate what I said to Jackie in the video clip above: “You have to be there to experience the magic”. On one level, I am inclined to resist an articulation of a sense of collaboration, trust, support, the thirst for learning and the desire to make our world a little better that are now deep-rooted in NEARI. I have a fear that, in my articulation of what lies at the heart of NEARI, I might lose its essence or, worse still, do something to diminish it.

O’Donohue draws on the work of Stafford, saying that, “...these things which dwell out of reach, beyond words, are the things that make the soul rich” (O’Donohue, 2003, p. 54). I do believe that NEARI makes the soul rich and I fear its essence is beyond words and, even in this final iteration of this paper, I am still quite reluctant to put the ‘magic’ of NEARI under a microscope.

On another level, I know I need to explore the spirit of NEARI because of the importance of sharing theory generated from practice in the field of educational research. I am also aware of the importance of making new knowledge public as outlined by Hiebert et al. (2002). The sharing of my account and offering it to readers for public validation are also important to promote progress in my own research, learning and insights into NEARI. I believe that, by trying to articulate and explore the spirit of NEARI, I am extending the professional community of NEARI and making a contribution to the field of Living Theory. I am also aware of the importance of

offering descriptions and explanations around my work with NEARI, in order to establish that I am, in fact, generating a living-theory that is educational, in terms of being for the flourishing of humanity.

JOC, a NEARI attendee, seems to echo my thoughts around the unwritten and unsaid essence of NEARI. She says:

“[At NEARIMeets] I seek to feed back constructively to others. I feel it imperative (it is a choice I happily make) as I know I have benefitted from both comments of encouragement as well as more specific feedback .... I seek to help others in the same way I have been encouraged. I think that spirit is there (at NEARIMeets) in an unwritten, unsaid way.” JOC (email, 20 December 2019)

I hope that I honour AOM’s faith in NEARI as I use her words as a springboard for this paper.

## Background to NEARI

### My living-educational-theory

I am aware that I am in a process of engaging in interdependent spirals of meta-reflection and new understanding and action, not only as I work with NEARI, but also as I write this paper. I am writing about how my emergent living-theory, in terms of the descriptions and explanations I provide here, generates new understandings that are dependent on my enquiry into my process of engaging with Living Theory itself. I am also aware that, as I strive to live in the direction of my ontological values and engage in a Living Theory process, I encourage people to engage with the process of Living Theory themselves.

As I generate my living-theory, I perceive myself as always learning and seeking to learn, not only for my own growth as a human being but also to work towards enhancing the flourishing of others. Whitehead reminds us:

“In creating their own living-theory methodology, an individual includes the unique constellation of values that they use to give meaning and purpose to their existence ... The values flow with a life-affirming energy and are expressed in the relational dynamics of educational relationships.” (Whitehead, 2018, p. 82)

My lived reality is therefore in a state of ebb and flow as I move from the living-theory or the ‘knowing’ of my doctoral work, through new learning and towards new knowing. In my doctoral research, I stated that my ontological values of love and care had transformed into my living, critical, epistemological standards of judgement. I claimed that I developed a living epistemology of practice that was grounded in dialogical, holistic and creative ways of knowing. This came from my belief that each individual is capable of developing their potential for learning and knowledge-creation. I came to see the interconnectedness of people and their environments as a locus of learning, which could be embraced through technology (Glenn, 2006). In the intervening time since I completed my doctoral studies, my epistemology of practice has changed little in its articulation. However, I no longer teach in a primary school and my practice is now located in tutoring in self-study action research and Living Theory at third-level institutions, and convening the NEARI network. My work with



NEARI, which is the focus of this paper, is inspired by and drawn from my ontological values around care and social justice. And, similarly, these ontological values inspire my epistemological stance, wherein I perceive myself as one who can create an environment for learning for practitioners who are capable of developing their potential as active agents in their own learning. I see NEARI as an experience or an environment that might stimulate people to be active agents in their own learning.

Stephen Bigger, in his reviewing comments reminded me that:

“Never before has social justice become more problematic, rejected by enough people to vote the uncaring into power. Social justice includes discussion of the causes of poverty, the massive gap between rich and poor, south and north, first world and third world”. (<https://ejolts.org/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=238>)

I agree with these ideas, and at NEARIMeets we always welcome such discussions. I also believe that social justice begins in one's own mind and heart and can be seen in the everyday dealings and relationships people have with one another (Martinez, 2012). As a Living Theorist, I work towards living my values concerning social justice not only in the conversations I support at NEARIMeets but also in my most minute actions and interactions with everyone involved in NEARI.

More than a decade on from my doctoral research, I continue to embrace Living Theory. I subscribe to the original understandings of Living Theory as outlined by Whitehead (1989) while developing new understandings of the evolution of Living Theory in the intervening time (Whitehead, 2019). Whitehead argues that experiencing oneself as a living contradiction continues to be a key element of generating living-theory (2019). He explains the concept as “the experience of holding together one's values and their negation” (Whitehead, 2019, p. 5). I experience myself as a living contradiction in the following manner: I see injustice in the silencing of practitioner researchers, especially teacher researchers, because they are given few opportunities to think carefully about their practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2016) or to discuss it with others. They are not given time to reflect on their identity as practitioners; to become familiar with the values they hold; to identify the significance of their role in the world; nor to engage in dialogue with others about it. When practitioners *do* get time to reflect critically on their practice, to engage in research on it and to generate theory in that process, new forms of social injustice can arise. The use of a distorted configuration of action research (Wood *et al.*, 2019) as a form of performativity (Ball, 2012) to generate preconceived expected outcomes for unseen elites is one such newer form of social injustice that I perceive. It is in the space of this contradiction between the lack of recognition of the importance of practitioners engaging in meaningful and sustainable research in their practice and my own values concerning people becoming active agents in their own learning, that my passion for convening NEARI is ignited.

#### Conveners' context

NEARI grew initially out of the sense of listlessness that I, and my colleagues Bernie, Caitriona and Mary, experienced on the completion of our doctorates in 2007. As doctoral students, we had created a collegiate and critically dialogical community for ourselves in our engagement with Living Theory and self-study action research. Once our studies were completed, we found ourselves to be a little adrift

intellectually. We missed that 'delicious sense of exploring the unknown through dialogue' as we outlined in Glenn *et al.* (2017, p. 38) as well as our collaboration and our interrogation of Living Theory and self-study action research. Almost intuitively, we began to engage in various activities so as to re-engage with educational research, which led us to trying to encourage others to engage with Living Theory and self-study action research for themselves.

As I reflect on that time, I now know that our desire to share our enthusiasm about the power of Living Theory and self-study action research was enkindled by our values around social justice, care and inclusion. There are few, if any, mechanisms for practitioner researchers to come together to talk and engage in dialogue with others about their work. I am not thinking about the mandated or box-ticking exercises that some institutions demand. Instead, I am thinking about events where people choose to come together so as to develop their own professional (and perhaps personal) sense of identity and to enhance their practice. Our desire to establish a community for educational critical reflection and dialogue was motivated by our sense of this injustice.

We were also aware that the voice of the practitioner is sometimes not as clearly heard in educational settings as perhaps it should be. We aimed to include the voices of all workers, regardless of status or volume of voice as we worked on sharing our enthusiasm around Living Theory and self-study action research. We could see how our values of care were expressed in how we perceived care as a basic human right, and this permeated our connections with others at that time. Our value of care still continues to influence our interactions with the people we meet on our Living Theory journey. Our most recent thinking on care links ideas of promoting well-being with one's engagement with Living Theory and self-study action research (McDonagh *et al.*, 2020).

As part of our efforts to share our enthusiasm about Living Theory with others, we established professional learning groups, an online professional development programme, we wrote books (Sullivan *et al.* 2016; Glenn *et al.* 2017; and McDonagh *et al.*, 2020) and created a blog, among other projects. These actions were inspired by our values and our desire to live our lives for the social good. The blog helped us establish a space to write about our thoughts around Living Theory but did little to encourage others to talk with us.

And then Pip Bruce Ferguson entered the picture. Jack Whitehead knew Pip and fortuitously introduced us to one another. She was on a work placement in Ireland from New Zealand, and she too felt that sense of needing to engage in dialogue with people and strengthen her own interrogation of Living Theory and self-study action research. Pip has outlined how her experiences with New Zealand Action Research Network (NZARN) shaped her understanding around networks and how they might work (Ferguson, 2012). Pip describes herself as a 'compulsive networker' and within hours of meeting her, we had established ourselves as the Network for Educational Action Research in Ireland (NEARI) and had put plans in place for our first NEARI meeting for the 25 April 2015. These actions were inspired by our values around social justice, care and inclusion in terms of creating an environment in which people can become active agents in the learning process and develop new knowledge through Living Theory. Our aim was to bring action



researchers of all levels of experience together to engage in dialogue; to encourage them to adopt an action researcherly disposition (Sullivan *et al.*, 2016) and explore how they might improve their world.

## **Descriptions and explanations around NEARIMeets and their structure**

In its current format, Bernie, Caitriona, Mary and myself convene the NEARI meetings; monitor and sometimes stimulate the discussion forum; negotiate with venues for NEARI meetings (NEARIMeets); and organise membership of NEARI. Unfortunately for NEARI, Pip has returned to New Zealand and, although she lives a world away, she keeps a sharp eye on proceedings from there and is an active participant *via* email and in the discussion forum. Pip has expressed satisfaction that NEARI has continued two of the key ideas from her work with NZARN – the free access to resources, video-clips and papers pertaining to NEARI, as well as the moving from site to site for meets to accommodate people from all parts of the island of Ireland.

### **NEARIMeets**

NEARIMeets usually take place three times a year, rotating between the capital city, Dublin, and other venues around Ireland. They are aimed at people who are interested in investigating and researching their practice or who have a curiosity around practitioner research, action research, Living Theory, or self-study action research. They also embrace the idea of taking a break or a pause from hectic schedules and reflecting and scrutinising our work, as suggested by Greene (1984). There are about 100 people in the network, of whom about 20 to 30 attend each NEARIMeet. NEARIMeets are generally described by participants as being warm, energising, joyous, friendly and critically engaging meetings. On seeking words to describe NEARI, one NEARI member says:

“I have some words which spring to mind when I think about NEARI: togetherness/community; acceptance; warmth/care; 'a constellation of caring encounters' (Noddings on education); a non-judgmental space; encouragement; the power of practitioner research; empowerment and self-efficacy for teachers; bottom up activism; democracy/ dialogue (Freire) and 'I-thou' encounters (Buber)” (email from DdP 14 November 2019)

CS similarly stated:

“NEARI opened my eyes and my heart to the possibility and reality of developing my own living theory and writing about it in a way which enabled me to express the passion I felt. I came to realise too there is so much depth to action research.” (email 14 November 2019)

Another NEARI member says:

“When I get going to a NEARIMeet I usually say I'm going 'to give my brain a joyride'. The group are mostly strangers who turn out to be kindred spirits.” (SH, email, 15 November 2019)

Others describe their connectedness at NEARIMeets: “It’s about the personal connection, the collaborative, supportive nature of the community; the friends...” says MC (email 14 November 2019), while another comments: “NEARIMeets are nourishment for the soul” (feedback from NEARIMeet, January 2018). This sense of joy and fulfilment seems to lie at the heart of each NEARIMeet and we conveners also experience it as deeply as our NEARI colleagues.

Because NEARI is not funded, and because Bernie, Catriona, Mary and I co-convene the meetings in a voluntary capacity, we are therefore dependent on the generosity of people who work in the universities and educational institutions around Ireland to donate the use of a room with teas and coffees for NEARIMeets – with some hosts even doing some home-baking for the event. The hosts are usually people who are either involved in practitioner research themselves, or who have an interest in it and/or support it. This nearly-unseen act of generosity seems to form a basis for the day’s interactions. That spirit of generosity and kindness permeates the proceedings of the meetings from the opening moments of the day as people greet one another.

As I reflect on this ambience of kindness, I can only draw on my own intuition to support this claim. I perceive it as the ripple-like effect of the generous nature of hosts extending to touch everyone who attends. I have no hard data to support this claim, as yet. However, I am clear that without the generosity of spirit of our hosts, NEARI would not be able to survive. I am also clear that it is embedded in what Whitehead calls “the flow of life-affirming energy” (2018, p. 84) that lies at the heart of NEARIMeets.

We conveners usually spend some time in the weeks prior to a NEARIMeet negotiating the practicalities with the hosts: organising a schedule; parking; advertising; drafting and issuing meeting notifications; beverages and snacks; signage and the usual preparations for hosting meetings. We actively work towards embedding critical reflection and dialogue as key features of NEARIMeets as we perceive critical reflection and dialogue as key elements of Living Theory and self-study action research. We encourage participants to share ideas from their practice/research in terms of the values they hold, and we invite conversation and critically reflective thinking about them. These ideas help to form the structure of each meeting.

### The structure of NEARIMeets

(Until April 2020, all NEARIMeets were face-to-face. Our experimentation with moving NEARIMeets to an online platform as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, will be the topic of a future paper.)

We try to organise NEARIMeets so that they have a warm, relaxed, supportive, non-hierarchical ambience. The meeting always begins with a coffee and informal conversation and greetings. This informal atmosphere permeates the whole day, where dialogue and interaction are key. Even though Bernie, Catriona, Mary and I embrace Living Theory research, we welcome practitioner researchers from all fields of action research-oriented, practitioner study to NEARIMeets.

We nominate a chairperson (often from the host institution) to keep our

meeting on track and have a pre-prepared schedule for the day (see a sample schedule in Appendix 2). The day usually runs from 10.30 am to 2.30 pm with a half-hour snack break. We structure NEARIMeets so that they begin with the articulation of the NEARI code of conduct. This is important and I will discuss it in greater detail below. We seek permission for photographs for use on the NEARI website and for Twitter. We then have a short, thought-provoking reading often from the fields of Living Theory or self-study action research to set the tone for the day. The reading is followed by an input from a keynote presenter, who generally gives a longer presentation or workshop-style input.

The keynote presenter is often an invited guest or perhaps one of the co-conveners. We also have three or four shorter inputs, which we call 'Round-Robins', in which participants give a 10-minute presentation on their research, or on their thinking about their practice, which is followed by a 15-minute period of discussion. These periods of discussion are kernel to the NEARIMeet. Presentations are usually video-recorded (with the presenters' permission) so that they can be shared with others on the NEARI web page. The day is broken up by an all-important coffee-break when dialogue and educational conversations are key. The concluding sections of the day address upcoming events of interest to practitioner researchers, the updating of the resources section of the website and plans and themes for future NEARIMeets. At all stages, our fellow NEARI participants are invited to contribute and advise on the running of and the improvement of NEARI and are invited to give written feedback on their views of the NEARIMeet (see a sample Feedback sheet at Appendix 1). A report on each NEARIMeet, including permitted presentations and video clips, is subsequently published on the NEARI website. The publication has three main purposes: i) it gives NEARI people and others who are unable to attend an opportunity to get a flavour of the NEARIMeet; ii) it is a living record of the journey of NEARI and iii) it allows presenters to track the changes in their own learning over time. We do not record the subsequent dialogue in order to ensure the privacy of our fellow NEARI participants. Conversations that begin at NEARIMeets are often continued in our online discussion space.

The current NEARIMeet structure for the day is not haphazard – it has emerged from careful and critical reflection on each NEARIMeet from 2015. It has evolved and continues to evolve as a result of conversations between Bernie, Caitriona and Mary and myself as well as inputs from our fellow NEARI participants. It has also evolved in cognisance of the values my colleagues and I hold. I believe a 'good' NEARIMeet is one where there is a balance between its constituent elements. There should be a balance between formal input and discussion; engagement with practitioner research in general and Living Theory; the seeking of advice and giving it; theory and practice; and formal dialogue and informal chat, as well as myriad other elements.

Participants frequently tell us in their feedback sheets, if we need to improve aspects of NEARIMeets in terms of timings, emphases and amount of input. We are deeply aware that keeping a balance between these various aspects of the day and ensuring that we have pleasant tea/coffee breaks are key to creating an environment in which people feel supported and cared for. We believe that for some, the coffee is a welcome break from the intense levels of discourse that arise at many of the NEARIMeets, while for others, the coffee break is an opportunity to listen to and add

to the educational conversations that whirl informally around the room.

I'd like to draw on Bohm's understanding of dialogue as a "stream of meaning flowing among us and through us and between us." (2004, p. 7). He explains that this flow of meaning may generate a new understanding that is creative and "this shared meaning is the 'glue' or 'cement' that holds people and societies together" (2004, p.7). He outlines how in dialogue no-one is trying to win or gain points. I perceive that Bohm's understanding of dialogue underpins the dialogue at NEARIMeets. I have written elsewhere (Glenn et al., 2017) that, when a community of learners convene to engage in dialogue in a mutually respectful way, dialogue can not only enhance and transform one's own thinking and professional learning but it can enhance and transform the thinking of others as well. I also see dialogue as an opportunity for healing and well-being as people share difficult stories from their practice.

Many NEARI attendees seem to think similarly. MA says:

"The cycle of reflection and sharing with peers, fostered by Máirín Glenn, Mary Roche, Caitriona McDonagh and Bernie Sullivan has been a terrific motivational and developmental scaffold for me moving onwards on the doctoral research journey.

The interest taken by each attendee at a NEARImeet in each other's research is a positive force, the atmosphere is collegiate and familial. Success and progress are shared and celebrated. One can turn up with a conundrum or a request for advice, and it will be given freely and with good will." (email, 14 November 2019)

As a co-convenor of NEARI, I know that through dialogue, examining the assumptions that inform our thinking and our practice, may unearth inherent hegemonies or instances of power imbalances. Power and privilege permeate many relationships in education. In order to work towards solutions to such issues, Brydon-Miller and Maguire (2008) suggest that educators and students must be encouraged to examine the interface between practitioner inquiry and their values and world views. They also suggest that people should "consider how their identities, shaped by personal histories and life experiences, are also mediated by race, gender, class, and other power dynamics," (Brydon-Miller and Maguire, 2008, p. 84).

Brookfield (2017) suggests that the purpose of critical reflection is to realise instances of power imbalances and hegemony in our lives. I understand that critical reflection and the dialogue that occurs at NEARI and the subsequent uncovering of hegemony and unequal power relations are nearly inherent parts of the process of self-study action research and Living Theory. If we are to undertake Living Theory research to enhance our practice as well as to work towards a better world, then uncovering hegemony and unfair power dynamics become an important aspect of that process.

NEARIMeets embrace the principle that, as Living Theorists and educational action researchers, we can take action and do something about the injustices we encounter in our critical reflections and dialogue around our work. Ledwith (2017, p. 56) reminds us appropriately, that "Educational action research is an approach to research committed to change for social and environmental justice", and NEARI incorporates that idea in terms of learning with a life-affirming energy and values that carry hope for the flourishing of humanity (Whitehead, 2018). One of the areas at

NEARIMeets in which we see evidence of a desire for change and hope is in the Round-Robin section of the meeting.

## Round-Robin presentations

Round-Robins are short presentations in which our fellow NEARI participants generally share a dilemma or a story of the learning from their research. They self-nominate to do Round-Robin presentations, but sometimes we as conveners encourage and invite attendees to do them. We usually have three or four Round-Robins at each NEARIMeet. As part of our preparation for NEARIMeets, I send an email to the presenters to clarify the structure of the Round-Robin with them. I explain how the Round-Robin is usually a 10-minute input followed by a 15-minute discussion, in which the emphasis is clearly on a balance between semi-formal input and dialogue. As we work towards deepening participants' awareness of, and interest in, self-study action research and Living Theory, the email also includes the following questions:

"We would also be very appreciative if, in your Round-Robin, you could address one or two or more of the following questions in your presentation, please:

- What are my values?
- Why are these values important to me?
- How do I see them enacted in my practice?
- How might I enhance my practice or develop a deeper understanding of it?
- Are there assumptions I make about my work that I accept unquestioningly?

(or any other key issue from the field of self-study action research and Living Theory)." (email, NEARI conveners to Round-Robin presenters)

I believe that, in the wording of this email, I can see my values of supporting participants to become active agents in their own learning process while encouraging them to embrace Living Theory and self-study action research. I believe that engaging with the underpinning principles of Living Theory and seeking to generate one's own living-theory not only helps people to enhance their practice, but can also help them to engage actively in improving their world. Like Whitehead (2019, p.14), I believe that:

"professional educators should engage in intellectual and scholarly discourse, with values of human flourishing ... [and that] deepening and extending such discourses have a humanising influence in the world".

Interestingly, the occasions when people articulate their values or see them as being embedded in their practice or research are not as common as we conveners might like. We link this with our awareness that, while there are many action research programmes both at academic and continuing professional development levels, many of them engage with a form of action research that operates solely as an intervention in practice or as 'action research lite' (Glenn, 2020).

I acknowledge that many practitioner researchers are under severe time constraints and many have difficulties in researching with children for ethical reasons. I also acknowledge that, while any effort to enhance practice is, of course, beneficial, participants miss out on the richness of the process of learning that comes with the



interrogation of values, the critical reflection and dialogue that is inherent in more in-depth approaches to action research, such as Living Theory.

Participants at NEARI can see that our Living Theory approach to action research is substantially different to 'action research lite' programmes that seem currently to be prevalent in many institutions. We as conveners draw on Living Theory as we try to live and act in the direction of our values; we show by our actions and our interactions with others, that our values are relational and ontological, in the sense that they give meaning and purpose to our own lives and the lives of NEARI colleagues. We, like Whitehead (2018), perceive that our values carry hope for the future of humanity. The effect of this is that we encourage NEARI participants to engage with the underpinning principles of Living Theory in their interactions with us and with one another at NEARIMeets.

In email conversations with presenters prior to NEARIMeets, I actively encourage presenters to be relaxed so they can avoid what Ball calls performativity in which, "we are required to spend increasing amounts of our time in making ourselves accountable, reporting on what we do rather than doing it" (2012, p.18).

Ball is also critical of placing undue emphasis on polished presentations. He says:

"There are new sets of skills to be acquired here – skills of presentation and of inflation, making the most of ourselves, making a spectacle of ourselves. As a consequence, we become transparent but empty, unrecognisable to ourselves – 'I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself' (Butler, 2004, p. 15)". Ball (2012, p. 18)

At NEARIMeets, authenticity and honesty form the essence of the dialogue between us. Our emphasis is, therefore, not on performance, voice-projection, dramatic or digital skills but on honest, intelligible and meaningful communication instead. I am aware that, in inviting people to make a presentation to others about their thinking about their practice, their research or both, they are under some pressure to have input prepared to a certain extent. I try to be aware of the power-constituted nature of the role I hold as a convener as I aim to live in the direction of my values of inclusion, care and social justice. I seek to be invitational and to avoid coercion in my enthusiasm to encourage Round-Robin presenters.

The balance between giving formal input to people and engaging in meaningful dialogue draws on our ontological and epistemological commitments. As conveners, we do not perceive ourselves as being separate from our NEARI colleagues in any way; not as holding the 'right way' of doing things and not as holders of knowledge. Instead, we see NEARI as a platform for everyone to learn together and help everyone else in that endeavour. We see this as crucial to giving people space and encouraging them to become active agents in their own learning. As conveners and NEARIMeet chairpersons, this balance can be difficult to achieve as even the most reticent speaker has a natural temptation to expound at length on topics they love. On the other hand, many NEARI participants are delighted to have an opportunity to present their ideas in the welcoming supportive semi-formal environment of a NEARIMeet. For many who want to present, it is a first opportunity to share stories of their learning. While some are a little nervous, they feel that they are supported by their fellow attendees, who understand their nervousness and who

want to learn from them. Many NEARI people like the opportunity to present. JOC says:

“the opportunity to present a Round-Robin is very valuable too – whether you are working on something (in my case a part-time PhD), or on a school-based project, a work-based initiative etc. It could also be a theoretical concept in an area of action research you want to share with the group to open discussion ...The Round-Robin offers presenters an opportunity to question and seek opinion for those ongoing questions one has in relation to one’s project/practice or both....” (JOC, email, 20 December 2019)

One attendee who did a Round-Robin presentation said, “I especially liked the opportunity to present, as the critical feedback was invaluable” (feedback NEARIMeet September 2018), while others like to listen and respond: “I enjoyed responding to the Round-Robin presentations” (feedback, April 2019).

For some, it can be a non-threatening practice run for an upcoming viva. As I look at the video clips from the various Round-Robins since 2015 on the [NEARI web site](#), it is interesting to trace the changes and the insights people have gained over time when they have presented a number of Round-Robins. Many NEARI participants like to listen and learn quietly as well as engage in dialogue. SH says:

“I wouldn’t be great for speaking in a group, but I thoroughly enjoy the speakers and the discussions they ignite. NEARI renews my faith in my path as an educator at times” (email 14 November 2019).

I believe that our organising of the Round-Robin presentations goes some way showing how we express our values around social justice and care as co-conveners of NEARI. Our constant interrogation of our organising skills is indicative of how we constantly try to enhance our practice as conveners as we work towards living those values more fully in our work.

### NEARI as a safe-space

While my co-conveners and I have little control over what people say or do at NEARIMeets, I believe that our articulation of our shared values and our ethical code at the beginning of the day encourages us all to remember that we need to be both trustworthy and trusting in all our engagements with one another at NEARIMeets. At each NEARIMeet, we begin the day with a reminder of our code of ethics as seen in the link below. This statement is read aloud in an effort to prompt us to be mutually respectful of one another.



**Video 2:** Reading NEARI's Ethical Code, Articulating NEARI's Ethical Code at the Winter NEARIMeet January 2020, <https://youtu.be/yZcjbqDD6o?t=89>

We remind ourselves and those present that NEARI is grounded in values such as social justice, fairness, inclusion, democracy and collaboration. Our standards are embedded in these ethical values, therefore NEARI participants are expected to commit to:

- “engaging in a respectful manner with one another, and in all references to NEARIMeets and discussion
- abiding by all child protection guidelines
- protecting the identity of people/institutions, mentioned in dialogue at NEARI meets or online (if these people and institutions so desire)
- ensuring a safe environment where people feel free to express their thoughts and ideas in an open manner”. (NEARI Ethical Statement, n.d.)

While many of our conversations at NEARI are inspirational and energising, some reflect the vulnerabilities people experience in their practice and their research – and this too is part of the process of critical reflection. Many conversations embrace issues pertaining to social justice in terms of poverty, racism and unheard voices. Brookfield (2017) warns us how critical reflection on practice, that while hugely worthwhile and professionally important, can also be risky and involve people developing and sharing feelings of unhappiness and professional challenge, which are very difficult for them. Many practitioners who critically reflect on their practice have experienced this. Therefore, in order to embrace and protect the professionalism and vulnerability of NEARI participants, my co-conveners and I do all we can to ensure that the NEARIMeet is a safe space and that everyone is mutually respectful of the other.

As I ask myself if I am creating an environment where people feel supported and cared for, I am aware that there is a kind of sacredness in the quality of the safe space established at NEARIMeets. When I listen to the stories of raw and sometimes heart-wrenching accounts from practice that are shared at our NEARIMeets, I know by the honesty and openness of their articulation that participants are aware that they are in a safe space. Participants at NEARIMeet somehow feel safe and are comfortable enough to share their innermost thoughts and ideas – even if it makes them vulnerable.

This sharing includes stories of successes, of deep self-questioning and sometimes of perceived failure. SH says:

“There's no feeling that I am out of place or an inconvenience in the group. Any time I've managed to get there I've felt like I am among friends.” (SH, email, 13 November 2019)

Somehow, a sense of trust is established, and people know they will neither be ridiculed nor their stories told outside of the NEARIMeet. I wonder if, in part, there is an aspect of this vulnerability that makes the dialogue so valuable. As co-conveners of NEARI, our awareness of this sense of trust is embedded in the underpinning principles of Living Theory as the life-enhancing values around care, fairness and inclusion that we hold and which give meaning and purpose to the lives

of individuals and groups

As I write, I check to establish if I am, in fact, developing a process of living out my values in my practice work as convener of NEARI. I ask myself if I am working adequately towards creating an environment where people feel supported and cared for. I believe that drafting an ethical statement, and articulating it at each NEARIMeet, is both a comfort and safeguard for many participants and it helps them to feel supported and cared for. One participant (MA) said:

“I am very taken with the way the NEARI meets always start with an outline of the ethics and protocols. I have suggested this to another occasional group I join, the Irish meeting of IPA researchers”.

MA has shown that not only does she appreciate the efforts made to create a safe and supportive space for discussion at NEARI, she has publicly encouraged others to take note of NEARI's protocols and imitate them. My understanding is that this is evidence to support my living-theory as my explanation of my educational influence not only in my own learning, but in the learning of others and in the learning of social formations, as outlined by Whitehead (2018).

#### Conviviality and humour

While dialogue, critical reflection and care are central to NEARI, so too are conviviality and humour. The following ‘snippet’ encapsulates much of the essence of NEARI. Video 3 shows Tom Cosgrove presenting his ideas about his doctoral research in the Dept. of Engineering in the University of Limerick. His presentation combines a mixture of deep, critical reflection with a desire for feedback and discussion with other participants. However, he uses more than a sprinkling of humour, wit and creativity to help communicate his difficulties as an engineer engaging in self-study action research. He introduces his presentation with an exercise in inviting people to share negative comments made to them about their research. In the first few minutes of the video-clip, you can hear the laughter as people begin to join in the activity. The laughter continues on throughout most of his presentation (see <https://youtu.be/H8FJPK9jpTU> for the full video-clip) as Tom uses humour to convey his frustrations in communicating the essence of his research.



**Video 3:** Tom Cosgrove presenting at NEARI <https://youtu.be/gzgemDG4KFI>).

While Tom's humour makes those in attendance laugh, it does not diminish the underlying message around his exasperation and disappointment with the difficulties he encounters. Perhaps, the laughter makes it even more poignant. Tom

is one of many of our fellow NEARI-participants who likes humour. When you look through the various video-clips from both keynote and Round-Robin presenters at the NEARI web page, you will see many of them are enriched with funny comments, amusing anecdotes and a lot of laughter. Wenger (1998) suggests that laughter, shared stories and jokes are part of the way a community of practice defines itself.

I believe that in NEARI, laughter and humour indicate a sense of that “aliveness” that seems to be a hallmark of NEARI. The humour can be self-deprecating, ironic or comic but sometimes it just needs to be there to lighten spirits and deflect sad truths about life. I believe that humour, while clearly not a formal aspect of NEARIMeets, enriches the meeting and goes some way in helping everyone to relax, to be trusting and trustful of one another. Laughter enables people to feel relaxed and supported. Laughter is also embedded in my claim around creating and sustaining a network that is drawn from my values of social justice, care and inclusion. I value creating spaces for people to feel supported and cared for in their learning and I believe that laughter plays an important role in that process. I believe that my desires (along with those of my colleagues Bernie, Catriona and Mary) to keep NEARI as a safe space for sharing learning is an articulation of this claim.

### **My educational influence in NEARI**

I have said elsewhere (Glenn *et al.*, 2017), that we allowed the nature of the NEARI community to develop by itself, without having a heavy hand on the tiller. Baker and Beames (2016) think similarly and suggest that a good community of practice is not management-driven nor should it have specific leadership roles. I am aware, at a humble level, that much of what makes NEARI what it is comes from our (conveners') influence on it. NEARI members seem to think so too. MC said:

“The depth of knowledge of the ladies leading NEARI is invaluable, the fact that they are or were practicing teachers and have a voice of expertise and experience provide true insight and guidance” (MC, email, 14 November 2019).

And SH said:

“The NEARI gang are so passionate and really 'get the point'. You and the other founding women are such great examples of what educators should be” (SH, email, 15 November 2019).

Our values, and indeed our interrogation of our values, guide our organisational processes. I am aware of the importance of interrogating, clarifying, sharing and being accountable to the unique values we use to give meaning and purpose to our lives. I know I learn best when knowledge and new ideas are shared in an encouraging, invitational manner. I like to bring that sense of encouragement to our knowledge-sharing and knowledge-generating at NEARI.

I also bring an awareness of the power-constituted nature of knowledge sharing to NEARIMeets. I try to avoid or circumvent situations if I have an impression of knowledge being presented with a sense of power-wielding and arrogance. I believe that much of the learning that takes place for people at NEARIMeets is of a productive and life-affirming nature because of the relaxed, convivial, non-



hierarchical nature of the meeting. Feedback from an attendee September 2018 stated, “It’s about intergenerational and interdisciplinary institutional sharing” (feedback comments from September 2018).

I also believe that NEARI and NEARIMeets embrace what Vaughan and Delong (2019) call a “culture of inquiry”, a term to describe the safe, supportive spaces where practitioner-researchers are enabled to engage in dialogue so as to share their values and their learning around their values. They outline how cultures of inquiry can arise in macro (group) or micro (one-to-one) situations, as sustained (long-term) or spontaneous situations. I believe that NEARI is a culture of inquiry and embraces all these forms of enquiry in its meetings.

Because NEARI encourages participation from practitioners from all levels of education, we have participants who are undergraduate students, as well as participants who are graduates, Masters students, Ph.D. candidates, lecturers, department heads and post-doctoral students. Many are studying at some level, but not all. Potentially hierarchical titles such as “Dr.” or “Prof.” are generally avoided and from the morning coffee for people who arrive early, my colleagues and I work towards generating an atmosphere of “we are all in this together” in terms of everyone being there to share their learning and to help everyone else engage in theirs.



**Image 1.** NEARIMeet at University College Dublin, September 2017

As I interrogate my values, I ask myself if my practice reflects my values around generating an environment where people can become active agents in the learning process and develop a passion for lifelong learning. As I seek evidence to support my claim, I believe the image above (Figure 4) goes some way in capturing the relaxed, dynamic nature of the early-morning prior to a NEARIMeet. You can see people sipping coffee, chatting, some people knowing one another, while others are meeting for the first time. Some are experienced action researchers, some are Heads of Departments, some are undergraduates and some are attending merely from a sense of curiosity. This relaxed informality encourages people to share their own stories of their learning with greater ease. MC thinks similarly:

“The practice-based teacher is encouraged to attend and participate, as much as those university-based teachers, and the group doesn’t differentiate. The non-competitive, encouraging environment is what makes it special” (MC, email, 15 November 2019).

I claim that I actively work towards my values around social justice, inclusion and care by maintaining and enhancing a network as an environment where people

feel supported and cared for, and where they can become active agents in their own learning process, when I think about and organise NEARIMeets.

## Critical thoughts on NEARI

At NEARIMeets – even though we welcome all practitioner researchers – we try to mirror many of the processes that are embodied in Living Theory research. I perceive critical reflection and dialogue as twin pillars to support those processes. I perceive that critical reflection begins quietly in one's own thinking and, once ideas begin to form, they can be shared and clarified through dialogue. Whitehead reminds us of the importance of critical discussion as an aspect of strengthening the validity of one's explanations of educational influences in learning (2018). The power of dialogue to clarify thinking and to express critical reflection cannot be underestimated. My experience is that it adds to my own personal learning and I know I contribute to the learning of others through dialogue too. Participation in dialogue to support Living Theory research is a form of mutual respect and my NEARI co-conveners and I perceive that it can add to our sense of well-being and creativity too (see Glenn *et al.*, 2017). Delong (2019), quite rightly in my opinion, equates conversation and dialogue to a research method in itself. She states, "The ontological importance of conversation and dialogue in my relationships informs this approach to educational conversations as a research method" (p. 3). Dialogue lies at the heart of all our engagement with Living Educational Theory research.

While Bernie, Caitriona, Mary and I encourage NEARI people to engage in critical reflection and dialogue, we also engage in it ourselves. My own areas of concern pertain to (i) my fear around NEARIMeets becoming conferences and (ii) my fear around being overly persuasive around Living Theory. I will explore these concerns here:

"Despite the overwhelmingly positive feedback that is always given at NEARIMeets, very often I have a concern that sometimes our meetings can slip more towards a conference-style gathering, with more of an emphasis on presentation-mode sharing than on the educational dialogue that lies at the heart of NEARI. While NEARIMeets are never planned as a 'conference' and more as a 'colloquium', I concur with Zuber-Skerritt who critiques the "hierarchical knowledge transmission system" that characterise most conferences and is critical of "presenters presenting prepared speeches to ...passive listeners" (2017, 2).

I always strive (as do my NEARI colleagues) to ensure that NEARIMeets are of a dialogic and constructivist nature. However, as I bear this in mind, I also need to be mindful that participants have indicated that they like the opportunity to have an audience and to be part of an audience too. This is a dilemma for which I have no specific answer but which is always at the forefront of my awareness around my work as a NEARI convener.

I am also aware that the values I hold around NEARI might be contradictory in themselves. I work towards creating an environment in which people feel supported and cared for, where they can become active agents in their own learning process. Within that claim, I also encourage people to experiment with Living Theory and self-study action research for themselves. I need to be careful that my desire to

encourage people to engage in Living Theory is not coercive or overpowering and does nothing to diminish my development of an environment to support people to become active agents in their own learning process. While most NEARI members are interested in practitioner research, not all are as passionate about Living Theory and self-study action research as I am. For me, the tension between what might be the competing nature of my values, gives me much food for thought. As I write, this tension is unresolved.

I think NEARIMeets will always embrace presentations and listening, but will emphasise dialogue, support and critical debate as part of its *modus operandi*. I also think that the principles of Living Theory will always underpin our meetings. My own current thinking is that NEARI is about people sharing the stories of their learning and the conversations and the questions that subsequently arise. I will try to ensure that I live to my values and create an environment where people feel supported and cared for, and where they can become active agents in the learning process.

## Conclusion

I have shown here how I value myself as a knowledge-creator as I have offered descriptions and explanations for my educational influences in learning. I have outlined in my claim that I have shown how, in NEARI, I have generated my living theory as I work towards my values of inclusion, social justice and care in creating and maintaining a network in an environment in which people feel supported and cared for and where they can become active agents in their own learning process. Within that claim, I also encourage people to embrace Living Theory and self-study action research for themselves. In order to establish the veracity of this claim, I have drawn on my values as explanatory principles, as is the norm for Living Theory accounts (Whitehead, 2018), and I have used and continue to use these principles to check the honesty and veracity of my claim.

As always in NEARI, the conversation continues. Drawing on Schön's (1995, p.7) "the proper test of a round of inquiry is not only 'Have I solved this problem?' but 'Do I like the new problems I've created?'" I invite you, the reader, to contact me to add your views to this paper and to strengthen the validity of this paper.

As I look to the future, I hope that we can continue our influence in learning. In April 2020, in conjunction with the *Educational Studies Association of Ireland* (ESAI), we (NEARI conveners along with Dr. Cornelia Connolly, NUI Galway) launched our new SIG (Special Interest Group) – called Values Based Practitioner Action Research (VPAR) (see <http://esai.ie/sigs-2020/>), which is an extension of NEARI. The SIG is a forum for action researchers and those who teach action research, recognising, supporting and promoting action research grounded in the researcher's values. In our VPAR SIG we encourage those interested in practitioner research to engage in dialogue and help each other to demonstrate the rigour, validity and authenticity of their research. Please go to <http://eari.ie> to learn more about this SIG.

I believe it is fitting to allow Pip Bruce Ferguson, our network's original instigator, to have the final words here:

"It may be fanciful, but I see NEARI as similar to the small traditional music group I participated in while I worked in Dublin. People of all levels of experience come

together to share practice, rejoice in the sharing, and hopefully enrich the wider society. I hope NEARI goes from strength to strength!" (Bruce Ferguson, email 14 November 2019)

I believe that our 'music' will be recognised as not just an expression of, but also as a consequence of, the depth of the enquiry processes that are key to Living Theory and which I hope are reflected in my account of my living-theory in this paper. I perceive that this account is rich in personal and professional learning and that it makes a worthwhile and valid contribution to Living Theory. I also believe that this paper offers my explanation of my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations that influence practice and understanding. I therefore offer a valid and robust account of my living theory, as outlined by Whitehead (2018). I hope the music we make at NEARI will always flow with life-affirming energy (*ibid.*) and with values as explanatory principles as we generate narratives of educational influences in learning.

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