

## **In Pursuit of Counterpoint: an Educational Journey.**

By Professor Moira Laidlaw, Ningxia Teachers University, Guyuan 756000, Ningxia Province,  
P.R. China

A paper for EJOLTS, September, 2007.

**Rationale:** In writing for this first edition of EJOLTS I want to account for my own educational development in order to show readers what I have done and what my values look like. If, in our rubric at <http://www.ejolts.net> we say: *We are particularly interested in publishing explanations that connect a flow of life-affirming energy with living values such as love, freedom, justice, compassion, courage, care and democratic evaluation*, then it is important that the review board also shows how they are accounting for these values in their actions. The following is my account of my educational development. I hope you enjoy reading it.

### **Foreword:**

I want to start by explaining some terms in this paper with my current understanding of what synthesises the different aspects of my educational development.

Counterpoint is a musical term denoting the fusion of different voices into a harmonious whole. 'Voice' is the 'technical' term given to single strands of melody in a composition in which, with counterpoint, no voice is subsumed within the whole, but each one is necessary to the whole and the whole is necessary to the individual voice. Counterpoint is the musical equivalent of holding the one and the many together (Socrates) in his exposition about what constitutes the art of a dialectician. With Bach's fugues I know I am in the presence of a god, because the counterpoint weaves the voices together into a height of aesthetic wholeness which has, for me, the perfection of the art of Creation itself. Bach's counterpoint resonates for me in a way that moments of oneness with the universe resonate. In pursuing counterpoint in my own educational life, I am employing the art of the dialectician in holding the one and the many together in the pursuit of improvements in acting well in the world for myself and for others. I seek to show the validity of my claim to enable a counterpoint in my educational development from 1978 to the present day.

It isn't possible to represent in words what values mean: I believe they have to be shown over time in practice. For the purposes of this paper, though, I want to point your attention to the following educational values, by which I believe this paper represents a claim to describe and explain processes of educational development. I hope that these values can be seen to be emerging in this paper. Putting them here will hopefully emphasise their significance more and render the paper more comprehensible to you, the reader.

These standards of judgement are:

- 1) the enabling of individual and collective voices,
- 2) improving practice and theorising, and
- 3) helping teachers develop greater understanding of their social and epistemological contexts in order to fulfil both personal and social values.

I will therefore show my students and colleagues speaking for themselves as part of my explanation of my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the

learning of the social formations. In contributing to this first issue of EJOLT I want to offer readers an original contribution to the conversation started by Donald Schon about the need for a new epistemology (Schon, 1995). In my doctoral thesis (Laidlaw 1996) I originated the idea of living and developmental standards of judgment in the generation of living theories. As my research evolved in China I came to understand that action research with Chinese characteristics involved the kind of receptive and responsive standards of judgment used by Rayner to distinguish his work on inclusionality (Rayner 2005). In explaining my educational influences as my living educational theory I am also aware of needing a living logic to distinguish my rationality, or the sense I make of my human existence. I am thinking of logic in the way I developed in a paper I wrote (2004) for the Bath Action Research Group (at <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira/mllogic.htm>) In short I describe and explain my logic as stemming from a belief that:

*My life has a purpose. It's for something. I chose education as the principle articulation of my life's focus a long time ago... I see myself as acting in the name of education and being in the loving service of humanity... The distillation of the above in language is fairness and in the form of my sense-making in mind and thought is logic and in motivation and actions is love. (p.3)*

In the story of my educational journey I will therefore present the living standards of judgment and logic as I ask, research and answer my continuing question, 'How can I live the most worthwhile form of life?'

### **Background:**

I have been engaged in education all my life. I grew up in a middle-class family, went to several 'good' schools and then to university to study English and German. I gained a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE), and in 1978 I went into my first job at a comprehensive school in Shropshire, which, in 1976 had been extolled by the HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectorate) as one of 'Ten Good Schools' in England and Wales. Its reputation was founded on the headteacher's and senior staff's open style of leadership, in which they facilitated democratic forms of policy and curricula processes with staff. The headteacher in particular always bore in mind the axioms that teaching is for learning and we were there for the children and not just for the sake of earning money. In this school of over 800 children, Mr. Richards knew every child. He knew their parents and their circumstances. His management style was easy-going but astute. He knew what was happening in his school, but he used his knowledge to enable, not to control. Teachers would collaborate to find ways of improving innovation and continuity without any systemic pressure. We loved the kids and we loved Mr. Richards. He was a genius, and I was lucky to have him as a role model for the first ten years of my career. I also want to pay tribute to Brenda Pogson, the senior mistress for the first few years of my stay in Much Wenlock whose professionalism and personal kindnesses to me inspired me (see [http://www.virtual-shropshire.co.uk/gallery/much\\_wenlock](http://www.virtual-shropshire.co.uk/gallery/much_wenlock)). From both of them I learnt about keeping my eye on the whole picture rather than the moment. I learnt about the importance of respecting individuals as a way of harmonising relationships on a wider scale and paying attention to details.

After ten years I came to Bath, on secondment to do an M.Ed.. Afterwards I didn't want to go back but stayed in Bath as a part-time tutor in the University's education department. I began my Living Educational Theory Ph.D. with Jack Whitehead, graduating in 1996. During this former period at the university, I engaged with 28 PGCE students on action research cycles on teaching

practice who wrote up their findings <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/preserve.shtml> Many case-studies were concerned with how they might enable their own students to improve their practice, which tended to encompass ideas around freedom of speech and learning how to take responsibility for their own learning. This mirroring of tutor's and students' and *their* students' own enquiries focused me on the importance of mutuality in an enquiry. I came to understand that the students' liberation and my own were indissolubly linked at profound levels, and that any account of my educational development would necessarily focus on those aspects of mutuality (Laidlaw, 1996).

In 1994 I administered the third World Congress on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management in Bath (see ed. Laidlaw et al, 1994). The theme of the congress was 'Accounting for Ourselves', a theme which seems to run through most of our collective work as living educational theorists. In 1995 I became an English teacher in a local girls' comprehensive school where I was able to work on my doctoral and postdoctoral research, increasingly beginning to focus on equalising opportunities. This came more and more to mean nurturing people to speak in their own voices about issues which concerned them (Foucault, 1980). I didn't teach English I taught children, and English for me was a tool whereby I might enable the girls to learn to speak in their own voices and to express themselves in meaningful ways to help them learn and enable them to take responsibility for their own learning. I believe responsibility for learning and accounting for oneself are cornerstones of good learning (Laidlaw, 1994). A pathway to that is embedding democratic processes within the learning and accounting processes. I believe if responsible self-expression is an aim of my teaching, its processes are necessarily democratic and should highlight the significance of individual voices and group-harmony. By harmony I am meaning counterpoint again, which enables differences of opinion rather than conformity and can be related to McIntyre's (1991) 'constrained disagreement'. There exists a tautness between different voices, but this should be characterised by critical thinking and tolerance, as well as a sense of responsibility for knowing where one stands and why.

It may be related to Rayner's idea of inclusionality (see Introduction), in which all things are organically related, yet have their own individual characteristics; a free flow between them, in an osmotic way, suggests health in a process. In this account I want to show the voices and the search for the expression of those voices as the criteria by which I would want this account of my educational life to be judged. I am not looking for affirmation of my own processes from others, but rather evidence that I have influenced them to speak on their own behalf about those issues which concern them (Foucault, 1980).

### **What have I done?**

My first ten years are scant on evidence of any educational influence on my students, other than some intermittent correspondence saying that I had allowed them to be themselves in the classroom. It was to take me until my time at Bath to realise the importance of becoming accountable for my work in any claims to have influenced the learning of anyone. I believe it was often highly successful, but that's not enough. They were a grounding. Given the personal and professional freedom to develop through that whole school system with Mr. Richards, I put my heart and soul into the school. I left the school in 1988 with a great sense of hope that I would be able to continue with something of value in Bath.

**Tutoring:**

From 1990-1993 I tutored part-time at Bath University. In 1991 I decided to do an AR Ph.D. with Jack Whitehead. I had a passion for being a teacher and was completely alive and connected to life in the classroom. I wanted my students to have a chance to be the best they could be. I helped my tutorial students to formulate their own standards of judgement by which they would want their own voices to be heard and judged. Those standards still stood inside the social and systemic standards expected of students in the schooling and university-systems. Enhancing the experiential and educational value of the work was this search for developing standards of judgement. Accounting for ourselves became our byword (Laidlaw, 1997; 1998; 2000; 2001; 2001b).

After this point in the aforementioned school I worked with a Year Eight class (Laidlaw, 2001), for example with Hayley (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmM4QiXUtU>). In the clip I hope you can see someone drawing her own conclusions from what she is learning, with a sense of what those learning means for her own development. I set up a unit of work according to the English National Curriculum, but after a few lessons of direct teaching, I acted as facilitator. The students chose groups to work on aspects of what we had been doing together. They then had to represent their learning to the class and include self-appointed standards of judgement whereby the students could judge themselves and be judged. I sought consciously not to influence the direction of their work but was always available for discussion.

After one unit of work Hayley said: *Working in this way was new. You didn't tell us what to do. You helped us see what the whole thing was like, but then we had to work out for ourselves how to present our learning to the class. It was really difficult. There were times when I just wanted you to tell me what to do, but you wouldn't. But now, when I look back, I feel so proud. (Pause) This is MY work, you see. I did it. It's mine.*

Moira: *Yeah, that's right. And how does that feel?*

Hayley: *(laughs). Can I swear?*

Moira: *(shrugs shoulders)*

Hayley: *I feel fantastic! I never felt about my work like this! It was exciting and as the weeks went on I wanted to do it more and more. It was so good. So good. My dad used to tell me off in the evenings because I was spending time working all the time instead of going to bed and getting some sleep, but I wanted it to be perfect. For me. My work. My ideas. I don't want this time to end.*

Visitors came and many remarked that they could not tell this was a mixed attainment class. I believe that freedom and speaking for oneself aren't mixed-attainment issues at all, but natural potentials of all humans in a conducive environment. I learnt in Shropshire that a school can mean dissension, critical thinking and aspiration towards individuality and wholeness. I also exercised my tacit belief in the potential of children to rise above what they are into what they can become. Hayley's comments show a certain trust, a sense of well-being, and a decided opinion about the worthwhileness of the processes she has been through.

In 2001 I went to rural China as a volunteer with VSO. Originally the contract was to last for two years, but I stretched it to five years in Guyuan. (See <http://travel.webshots.com/photo/1451161742076060483rHCGIf> for a picture of the front of the University by a colleague.) My reasons for choosing to leave my comfortable job in Bath for a

volunteer's life in rural China are detailed elsewhere (Laidlaw, 2001b). Suffice it here to say that I wanted a broader challenge. Apart from a language barrier (admirably overcome by my colleagues and students by speaking English, rather than by any of my paltry attempts to master Mandarin) there were cultural, historical, ethnic, systemic, philosophical and material differences to overcome in my new environment. Descriptions and explanations of my claims for educational development during these five years can be found at [www.actionresearch.net/moira.shtml](http://www.actionresearch.net/moira.shtml) under the 'Moira Laidlaw's papers and writings' section. These writings deal with the ways in which I attempted to facilitate students and colleagues' own voices as they underwent the processes to improve practice.

### **Bringing in the Social Context of my work:**

There was always in my practice a gap to do with the links between my social context and the work I did. Mr. Richards brought it to my attention. In December 2006, an educational colleague wrote the following to me in response to a paper:

*...Your living theory could carry an enhanced analytical quality by extending through the unquestionable authenticity of the first-person consciousness of your writing into a third-person discussion of the material and structural context in which the first-person consciousness is being mediated (and both will be, of course, in flux and transformation I suspect...*

I didn't disagree but felt that I was doing more to bring my work into the public arena of accountability, and taken on board the epistemological significance. I replied:

*...Much of the validity of what I believe and do rests on the results of collaborating with others over time on issues that concern us...*

But to be fair, I haven't rigorously contextualised my accounts through the economic and political factors that hegemonise the condition that directly affect my work in China. There are several reasons:

- a) I was in a privileged but precarious position of trust. As a volunteer, I was a guest. Going public on specific human rights issues would be metaphorical suicide. I would simply be thrown out of the country and nothing would improve. It's not an excuse, it's pragmatism.
- b) My understanding of China remains fairly limited. Five years no way makes me an expert. I am a foreigner looking in and do not believe I would ever be able to become a full insider. (Laidlaw, 2004b, 2005). My understanding of contexts is limited.
- c) I am slow to recognise historical, political and social influences. I naively regard the people I work with - child or adult, Chinese or English, Black or white - as having common characteristics beyond mere social, cultural, ethnic, geographical, religious, gender, and historical boundaries. These are to do with the desire to speak in their own voices about their own issues. I tend to concentrate on those. I accept that criticism of my writing. I am not sure how much this specific focus diminishes my practice.

There is a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989) as long as I am not addressing these aspects of my practice and the significance of the work I am doing by my writing. I hope the rest of this paper meets the challenge of those limitations. I feel my involvement with eJOLT shows a greater willingness to play a role in the socialising of our educational discourse.

In China the work with colleagues thrived more than working with class-students on their teaching methodology. By thrived I am meaning that the work became more self-sustaining and achieved more social validity. Colleagues were eager to tell my students were gaining more jobs after graduation because there were classes in 'Western' teaching methodology.

With colleagues it was the work with practitioners that breathed new life into processes, and enabled people to take more responsibility for their own learning and teaching, and empowered individuals and groups to speak in their own voices about the issues that concern them. See [www.actionresearch.net/moira.shtml](http://www.actionresearch.net/moira.shtml) for details.

It is difficult to distinguish at times whose influences effected what outcomes. Educational processes aren't linear. I have learnt that for something to be educational, processes cannot follow a pre-determined route. Educational Action Research is a dialectical process whereby individuals and groups can come to know their practice better in order to improve it *and to transform the contexts in which they find themselves for the good of all involved*. I see Living Educational Theory Action Research as placing more emphasis on the ontological and epistemological development of processes and people individually and together finding ways uniquely suited to their needs. These must be in dialectical and developmental relationship to the contexts in which the practices are undergone. As T.S. Eliot wrote:

*'The End is not the End you figured  
And is altered in fulfilment.'*

Living Educational Theories are ever-increasing series of cycles of understanding, action, reflection, development, evaluation and aspiration. If I am to extrapolate my social influence in this deeper dimension of counterpoint in my educational practice in any meaningful way, I have first to say something of the contexts and the people with whom I was working.

Until I went to China my work was preoccupied with my own educational development, and written about as if it were possible to abstract the 'I' from the setting in which the 'I' locates its identity. In China, this has become harder to do in relation to my professional life. (See website case-studies at <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira.shtml>.)

During my placement Dean Tian and I with experienced colleagues Li Peidong and Liu Xia, built up an action research group in the department. We started with five members in February 2002, and by July 2006, we had nearly forty. We also worked with a local Moslem school (see Ma Yangui, 2006). We built up a network of teachers improving their practice, and held several workshops about action research the New Curriculum (NC) for the teaching of English in China. This curriculum has carried the weight of law since September 2005. The NC advocates critical thinking, peer and self-evaluation, teaching as learning, and partnerships in the learning process. This is not the traditional Confucian way, in which classrooms were run on military discipline-lines. The New Curriculum and Action Research share the view that knowledge can also be dialectical and that there is a relationship between the growth of a human being and the growth of knowledge (VSO, 2004).

In December 2003, Dean Tian with officials from Ningxia Province's Education Bureau, the College President, and Professor Jean McNiff from Great Britain, opened China's Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching (CECEARFLT). In 2005, the Centre was given official status from the Education Bureau in Beijing, a necessary step

in the legitimisation process in China. Our Centre is the first of its kind in the world. In China this is seen as a great coup (Perrement's 2005).

Our work then became increasingly focused on how we might help schools and our own colleagues and students to embrace the values of the New Curriculum in practical ways. Tian Fengjun and I edited a book of case-studies by Tian & Laidlaw (2006). In 2004 I was awarded the State Friendship Award. Given annually to a few dozen people, the award is a state acknowledgement of individual foreigners' work in education, business and social administration, finance, import-export, and medicine. For six months, Dean Tian gathered information about me from colleagues, the local constabulary, VSO, and students. He submitted his application on my behalf to Beijing, where there is a full-time committee working on this annual event. I wrote in an email to Jack (5.6.07):

*I had always accounted the social context as being the classroom before, if I'm honest, rather than looking at the contexts - political, social and cultural - that help to sculpt the art of practice and the significance of outcomes and even values to an extent.*

The State Friendship Award was conferred as a social validation of the work that had been done collaboratively with me simply as a symbol of something new and hopeful in a poor and remote rural town in northwestern China. (See [http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira/mlawardphoto2.rtf/Photo\\_03.jpg](http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira/mlawardphoto2.rtf/Photo_03.jpg) I am sitting in the front row with a blue dress on. Premier Wen Jiabao is four people to the left of the picture.) I am not diminishing my creative and original contribution, but I know without the inspirational leadership of Dean Tian and warm collaboration with colleagues, as well as the co-operation of the Ningxia Education Board and our own president of the University, such an award could not have been orchestrated.

This conclusion is not a cynical one, for the process and outcome work well. The college was immensely proud, not just of me, but of nurturing this particular event. Dean Tian, a politician as well as friend, saw the potential of the work of collaboration. It was a mark of his professional respect for my work that inspired him but this award raised Guyuan's visibility to Beijing. It was a huge event. There was also a letter from the Vice Principal of Ningxia's government to the college extolling our work, as well as a documentary on television about my life and work there. Such visibility as Guyuan gained from our work in was a spin-off I had not planned for, but Dean Tian was astute enough to maximise all opportunities. These events energised the hope in the college (Tian, 2005; Sun, 2006; Wang, 2004; Liu Hui, 2006).

All the events existed within a context that managed to accord individuals a sense of well-being and deserving, but also to embed our achievements within a social framework that acknowledged the contributions of all and focused on a collective harmony.

My work shows increasing understanding over this period with the importance of collaboration within a social context (Laidlaw, 2004a, 2005, 2006). It isn't that I now denigrate the individual. The individual is still central to me. However, in China I learnt more about the counterpoint of human realities. I learnt more about the one and the many. Existentially and educationally now, I stand within the paradoxes of being myself and being one of a crowd, of being responsible and being a recipient, of even the reality that I don't exist as either at one point but both at the same time and all exigencies in between. I exist in a quantum reality (Zohar, 1998).

I now turn to the practical steps my colleagues and I took. Li Peidong and I wrote a joint article (Li & Laidlaw, 2006) and had a conversation in October 2005 that highlighted some stark differences in assumptions made between Chinese and some Western educational philosophies:

Li Peidong: *You seem to be assuming [in individually-oriented action research] that if someone learns something better that is enough to make the research valid. We don't see it that way at all. To be valid the research has to show that it connected usefully to the society in which we live. What impact does the research have at a social level?*

Moira: *I'm not sure it's a western philosophy, I think it is descriptive of my interpretation of some of western thinking. What accords to my own assumptions perhaps.*

Li Peidong: *Perhaps yes, but my reading of western philosophy does place the insights of individuals at the centre, rather than the observances of a whole society. You value the single voice. We value the group voice.*

Moira: *Then what we need, perhaps, in our AR work here at the Centre is some kind of dialectic between those two stances. Maybe that's AR with Chinese characteristics.*

In another instance of our work's social impact, Matt Perrement, a writer for China Development Brief, one of China's foremost independent journals, came to Guyuan for a few days to find out what the Centre was doing (Perrement, 2005). See <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/china/cdbmay05>). 'China Development Brief' is a bi-monthly journal with articles about issues of interest in China in terms of culture, education, social interest, politics and economics. Its headquarters are in Beijing. The article details the educational and social value of the project to the college and the area, and what the author sees as the potential for the project to be extended into other areas of China in the future. He reveals the group-nature of the success of the project and the way in which action research has become a way of helping teachers to implement the New Curriculum through the advocacy of critical thinking and pro-active learning techniques.

In conclusion he writes:

*The appeal of action research in Guyuan is undeniable and will doubtless outlast the presence of any individual. As teacher Li said: 'Action research is beyond education. It is about human beings and social development.' I always felt that, when analysing the differences in educational approaches, but have never seen it in action so clearly.*

In Guyuan we wanted to enable greater consistency between espoused and lived values in the classroom with students, who would become teachers. I spent time working with individual colleagues in pursuit of their action research enquiries (see website for details of classroom observations and follow-up ideas) in pursuit of living contradictions (Whitehead, 1989). Dean Tian, Li Peidong and I encouraged colleagues to write up their findings and we held validation meetings to enhance the educational value of the texts. Ma Xiaoxia (2006) wrote this about her conclusions about the purposes and value of the work she was achieving in her own educational development:

*The New Curriculum in China, in making performance more important than competence, shows a respect for [a] dialectical form of knowledge, because it accords students as well as teachers the right to find different ways of understanding the world.... The most important dilemma... in matters of educational values, is whether people are enlightened with, or entitled to, certain freedoms to think and behave. As for static knowledge and dynamic knowledge, they are actually not completely in contradiction to each other, and thus can collaborate with each other. That is, students should be enlightened with manifold freedoms to develop their own thinking patterns, and given the right and the responsibility to speak and create opportunities for mutual collaboration. (p.15/16)*

In 2005 Jack came to Guyuan. He took some footage of the ending of a lesson with a hundred Teaching Methodology students, in which I was saying goodbye to them at the end of the lesson

(see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1jEOhxDGno>) He saw a value in what was transpiring. The significance of these moments was discussed at length between us and then Jack (Whitehead, 2007) wrote this:

*We are agreed that what we are seeing in the video-clip can be described as a loving flow-form of life-affirming energy in educational relationships* (email correspondence).

There seem to me to be two intimately related significant aspects here. First is the way in which the capturing of this moment enables insights to be derived that might not be possible without such technology; attendant on this are the possibilities for educational development because of this refinement of visibility. The second aspect is that Jack and I were able to discuss such a moment and agree on something together about its educational and ontological value, which can carry through to our subsequent practice and theorising. It's not a template or a model for anything, but rather moments that enable us to focus more clearly on the values we wish to bring more fully into the world through our educational work. When we say that we are working in the service of education, what we are really saying is that the values we both recognise in the video of my work with Miss Tian embody those we identify with and seek to distil through practice over time. That's what it means to be in the service of education as we are improving our practice. (See Whitehead, 2006).

At Bath University the political, social and economic factors impinging on the future lives of my students didn't influence me much because their relative affluence gave them a higher degree of choice and self-determination about their lives. I assumed I came from similar backgrounds and expectations to my students, so never problematised the contexts. In Guyuan the contrasts of poverty in my surroundings and the harsh circumstances of my students' lives were amply demonstrated by their lifestyles, their continuing worries over money, their responsibilities to their families' futures, their dedication to studying in order to justify their families' faith in them, and the low level of medical care available to them and their families. Extended families often pooled their collective resources in order to send one child to college, eventually to provide support for the family financially. This nearness to poverty and lack of choice in individual lives were vividly visible to me in ways I had not encountered before. I could no longer separate the work I was doing in the classroom with the lives my students were leading outside it.

With Hayley I had worked through issues to do with empowerment and democratic forms of educational processes through the inauguration of developmental educational standards of judgement *in the classroom* as the video and her own words in my journal bear witness. In the video clip with Miss Tian I show in microcosm, I believe, what I am meaning in this paper by counterpoint. We exist all together within a particular space and at a particular moment within which no one person is more significant than another. We are existing in harmony with the institution in whole name the educational development is being carried out through relational ties of experience, a common purpose, memory and significance. Counterpointing juxtaposes the respect for individuals and the whole group, together with the wider society with a particular focus (in this particular instance) on one student, whose own learning needs were such that I needed to single her out. I did not want to break the values of caring and openly showing that caring for all my students.

I wanted to praise her and single her out to herself for her unusual courage at volunteering information in a class at the same time as showing respect and affection for all my students. I felt her actions that day in class were a turning but I had a responsibility to the whole as well as the individuals that go to make up that whole. Standing at the door welcoming and waving off

students was part and parcel of founding good relationships with them, for me the foundation of worthwhile learning. As the students flowed round me, I established contact with Miss Tian without losing contact with the other students, and in this way could help her recognise her specialness without rejecting the other individuals in the class.

As the crowd of students diminished Miss Tian and I were brought into relief relationships then simplified into dialogue. Her voice had so rarely been heard in class if I could only capitalise on it by affirming her courage and initiative, she might be able to sustain that necessary step in her own educational development. It seems she subsequently did this by becoming more communicative in class. On the last day she took my hand and said how much she loved my lessons and was looking forward to becoming a teacher. I felt if she could not believe in herself sufficiently to make her voice heard, she would not survive in the competitive world that China is becoming. She would not be able to act as a role model for students growing up into a more complex world than their parents and grandparents perhaps could have known about in their own youth (Consulate General for P.R. China in Houston, 2004).

It is a weakness of this account that I have only verbal evidence from Miss Tian. She said she was exhilarated and frightened at being singled out, but she felt pride and achievement: her friend remarked that Miss Tian often alluded to the significance of this lesson. It is significant that she applied for and was awarded her first teaching post shortly before the end of the college-course. She returned to her home-town as many graduates do, in order to offer support for rural development. In 2004 at the State Banquet on October 1<sup>st</sup> (Labour Day) to commemorate the 55<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of The People's Republic of China, Premier Wen called to the people to unite in China's development programme, and particularly singled out the role of rural China in the country's economic revival (Wen, 2004).

In conclusion it is in the pursuit of AR with Chinese characteristics in our AR Centre that seems to me to constitute the highest form of counterpoint in the work undertaken in Guyuan. It is my belief that over five years we developed standards of judgement such as the enabling of individual and collective voices, improving practice and theorising, and helping teachers develop greater understanding of their social and epistemological contexts in order to fulfil both personal and social values. Pursuing AR with Chinese characteristics necessarily opened up channels of enquiry which challenged hitherto accepted norms of a Confucian hegemony, by expecting individuals to speak in their own voices about what they were trying to do with their own classrooms. Similarly, *AR with Chinese characteristics* was conceived of as more than a sop to pacify detractors, but a genuine desire to see how to find new ways that suited the particular social, economic, political, interpersonal and professional needs of the people we were working with. Chinese characteristics in our AR would, we hoped, diminish the chance of western imperialist imposition on indigenous cultural norms and might enable the Chinese people themselves to develop something they wanted to develop for their own perceived needs. (See Li & Laidlaw, 2006 for more detail about these ideas.)

My educational journey is not over, but for the time being I am ending my account there. I am eager to find out what you think/feel about this paper and I am happy to hear from you about it. By sharing our ideas and collaborating, we can improve the quality of our educational discourse, practices and theorising. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

**Bibliography:**

- Eliot, T.S., (1964), 'Four Quartets,' Harvest Books, London.
- General Consulate of the People's Republic of China, (2004), Chinese society in an accelerated restructuring period at: <http://houston.china-consulate.org/eng/nv/t93560.htm>
- Laidlaw, M., (2006), How Might We Enhance the Educational Value of our Research-base at the New University in Guyuan? Researching Stories for the Social Good. Inaugural Professorial Lecture at Ningxia Teachers University, 13 June 2006.
- Laidlaw, M., (2004b), How can I help to promote educational sustainability at our AR Centre and beyond? A draft interim-report by Dr. Moira Laidlaw, December 2004. China's Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching, Guyuan Teachers College, Guyuan 756000, Ningxia Province, P.R. China.
- Laidlaw, M., (2004a), 'A Description of my Logic', paper at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira/mllogic.htm>
- Foucault, Michel. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Laidlaw, M., (2001b), 'What has the Holocaust got to do with Education anyway?' Accounting for my value of 'responsibility' as a developmental standard of judgement in the process of helping to improve the quality of my educational influence with students over thirteen years, at <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira.shtml>
- Laidlaw, M., (2001a), 'In the last months of my employment at Oldfield School, how can I help 8X to enhance their sense of community, as I assist them in improving the quality of their learning about English?', paper at <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira.shtml>
- Laidlaw, M., (2000), 'How can I continue to improve the quality of my provision of some equal opportunities values in my teaching of English to a Year Eight Group?' paper at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira.shtml>
- Laidlaw, M., (1998), 'Accounting for an improvement in the quality of my provision for some equal opportunities in my teaching from 1997-1998', paper at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira.shtml>
- Laidlaw, M., (1997), 'In Loco Parentis with Sally: a matter of fairness and love,' paper at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/MOIRAPHD/Kaylab.htm>
- Laidlaw, M., (1996), 'How can I create my own living educational theory as I account for my own educational development?' School of Education, University of Bath, U.K., and at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira2.shtml> - last retrieved 25th August, 2007)
- Laidlaw, M., (1994), 'The democratising potential of dialogical focus in an action research enquiry', in *Educational Action Research: an International Journal*, Vol. 2, no. 3, pp 223-242.
- Li, P., & Laidlaw, M., (2006), 'Educational Change in rural China,' in *Action Researcher: an International Journal*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp 333 -350.
- Liu, H., (2006), How can I help my students become more active in class? Paper at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira/Liu%20Hui.htm>

- Lomax, P., Whitehead, J., & Laidlaw, M., (eds), (2004), 'Accounting for ourselves: Papers for the third World Congress on Action Research, Action Learning, and Process Management, Bath University.
- Ma, X., (2006), 'How can I balance my methodologies in the class in order to promote the learners' autonomy?' Ningxia Teachers University, CECEARFLT, June 2006, paper at: <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/china/maxiaoxia.htm>
- Ma, Y., (2006), 'How can I improve my students' writing?' paper at: <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/china/MaYanguiar.htm>
- MacIntyre, A., (1991), 'Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry', University of Notre Dame Press, France.
- Perrement, M., (2005), 'Action Research Revolutionises the Classroom,' *China Development Brief*, May Issue; at <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/china/cdbmay05>
- Rayner, A. (2003) Inclusionality and the Role of Place, Space and Dynamic Boundaries in Evolutionary Processes. *Philosophica* 73 pp. 52-70, 2006
- Schon, D. (1995) Knowing-in-action: The new scholarship requires a new epistemology, *Change*, November–December: 27–34.
- Sun Weimin (2006), 'How can I create a more relaxed atmosphere in my College English class in order to improve learning?' paper at: <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/china/sunweimin.htm>
- Tian, F., (2005), 'How can I help my colleagues to become more collaborative and thus promote sustainable educational development?' paper at: <http://www.jackwhitehead.com/monday/tfarrep0605.pdf> and published in Whitehead, J., & McNiff, J., (2006), 'Action Research: Living Theory', Sage Publications, CA.
- Tian, F., & Laidlaw., M., (2006), 'Action Research and the New Curriculum in China: Case-studies and Reports in the teaching of English,' Shanxi Tourism Press, Xi'an, P.R. China.
- Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO), 'What's New about the New Curriculum?' VSO Beijing, P.R. China.
- Wang, S., (2004), 'How can I Help the Students to Improve their Speaking Ability Through the Speaking and Listening Part in the Class of Integrated Skills of English?' paper at: <http://people.bath.ac.uk/edsajw/moira/wangshuqin.htm>
- Wen, J., (2004), 'Speech to the People's Congress,' 55<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Great Hall of the People, Beijing, 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2004.
- Whitehead, J., (2006), Living Inclusional Values in Educational Standards of Practice and Judgment, Ontario Action Researcher, Vol. 8.2.1. Retrieved on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2007 from [http://www.nipissingu.ca/oar/new\\_issue-V821E.htm](http://www.nipissingu.ca/oar/new_issue-V821E.htm)
- Whitehead, J., (1989), Creating a Living Educational Theory from Questions of the Kind: 'How do I Improve my Practice?' *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19, no 1, pp 41 – 52.
- Zohar, D., (1998), 'The Quantum Self,' Harper Perennial Publishers, New York.