REFLEXIVITY AND THE READER: AN ILLUMINATION

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Is reflexivity the condition of taking account of the personality and presence of the researcher within the investigation? Some argue that it is and it is necessary because self-examination is commonplace in society today. Improving and building are common goals and, within education, we are committed to questioning in order to examine, build, and improve our teaching, our curricula, and ourselves. However, is the educational researcher adding to current knowledge and skills by building onto what exists? Often the new constructions require significant reflexive awareness and are required to overcome inertia, existing structures and the established norms in order to attend to our reflexive self-development.

It was a memorable afternoon because it was the date of my planned doctoral thesis defense. I recall feeling physically good and mentally sharp. I was having an on-going conversation with myself. What unsettled me was thinking about possible questions from committee members and how I would offer a response to something that penetrated both my knowledge and confidence. I had several options when I needed to raise my defense. Some of my planned responses were ethical and some were not. As I began my doctoral thesis presentation I seemed to develop an awareness of myself that is only present when I am experiencing something truly episodic and emotive. I seem to be able to recall little of the actual process but I can remember the endpoints. For example, I concluded my research presentation with a firm voice and proceeded to sit down in front of my committee. As I looked around the table, I noticed how each committee member seemed to rise up in their seat as if to load a question into their minds. At that moment, I became somewhat unsure and confused as if I was on the wrong bus or in the wrong seat. You know when someone comes up to you and says AI think this is my seat@ and flashes you their tickets. I could sense this moment of being and asked myself to be calm.

I successfully battled through several questions and then came a question that seemed to paralyze my being. I was asked; AThom, tell us about the reflexive nature of your role within this research@. I wanted to respond but the words, and even my voice was not there. In fact, I struggled to define reflexive. I could see the word in my mind and I believe I even spelled it a few times in my mind. I never did recover from that question but I did successfully defend my thesis. The word reflexive is a trigger for me today. Reflexiveness, I have discovered, is both intriguing and ubiquitous (Heartz, 1997) and this is why I am writing about this term. I want to help others understand and grapple with the term while pointing out that it can upset even the most prepared student, teacher, and researcher.

Many have tried to define the term reflexivity and yet some of these definitions only lead us into more questions. For instance, Nightingale and Cromby (1999) suggest,

> reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity then, urges us to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research. (p.228)

In other words, reflexivity is the condition of taking account of the personality and presence of the researcher within the investigation. May (1998) adds,

> The concepts of reflexivity may be a way of bringing qualitative methods to account for themselves in a way that goes some way to satisfy the demands of scientific method. This is generally a matter of questioning how the processes of research and analysis have an effect on research outcomes. This whole process of self-examination has become known as 'reflexivity'. (p. 22)

Self-examination is commonplace in society today. Improving and building are common goals and within education we are committed to questioning in order to examine, build, and improve our teaching, our curricula, and ourselves. The educational researcher is adding to current knowledge and skills by building onto what exists. Often the new constructions require significant modifications of what exists. To overcome inertia, existing structures and the established norms in education we need to attend to our reflexive self. Hence the educator/researcher like the,

> social constructionists are always faced with the problem of having to 'parenthesize' their substantive claims (e.g. about the nature and functions of the self) as 'not true', and 'not real', in order to foreground the anti-objectivism of their claims (that any account is 'local' and value-laden, rather than universal and morally neutral). But such an 'outsider stance' is an enormously powerful critical tool--it enables people to question 'what their doings are doing'. . . . It is this reflective and reflexive ability which allows for social and personal change, and which has been captured in most theories of the self, though especially attended to in developmental theories. (Lewis, 2003, p. 231)

Causing an educator to reconsider, change, and adapt requires inner forces. For instance, an educator moving through a research project is both excited and worried as s/he reflexively questions their actions and thoughts. The researcher records the experience and yet, are they accurate and objective data or are they limited by a bias, perception, and their current level or quality of knowledge, skills and attitudes? The goal may be to capture the experience. However, Αidentity and reality reflect one anotherΥ. the observer and the observed are inextricably tied together in a reflection@ (*Journal of Neoscience*, 2003, p.1). The educational constructionists have a major task within their reflexive critique and that would be to present a thorough and clear account of their position, vantage point, situated-ness, local-ness and value perspective from which their momentary substantive claims are made.

Reflexivity can be an embrace of a process that requires Αdetach[ing] ourselves from the situation that was the object of our initial inquiry to study Υ the approach we adopted Υ our biases Υ the contingency of our descriptionsΥand assumptions we tacitly espouse@ (Antonacopoulou, 2002, p. 3). I can now see it as others do: for example, reflexivity is an acknowledgement of the role and influence of the researcher on the research project. The role of the researcher is subject to the same critical analysis and scrutiny as the research itself (Carolan, 2003, p. 6). Reflexivity attempts to address concerns about validity of knowledge claims (Antonacopoulou, 2002), and in a way, it is parallel with and perhaps part of the meta-evaluation (Mertens, 1998), as it contributes to researcher credibility.

The task herein is to clarify and simplify and yet it is a recursive task as more questions are realized. For instance, the thought that reflexivity is the condition of taking account of the personality or presence of the researcher on what is being investigated leads us to ask, as a researcher how do I know when I am reflexive? Indeed,

> the concept of a relational self-of-selves is one that, it is argued, emerges from dialogic processes--processes that draw upon these metaphors of embodiment and generate high orders of reflexivity. Thus, social constructionist yields a sophisticated account of self-hood, agency and responsibility (Lewis, 2003, p.225).

The researcher within a role needs to be reflexive (internal conversation) and develop a body of data that demonstrates necessary levels and degrees of reflexivity. In doing so, the researcher recognizes the integral part of the social world being studied. Yet the,

> degree of reflexivity made possible with the realization that our worlds are jointly negotiated allows us to conceive of our moral roles differently. Moreover, far from being a threat to personal responsibility, social constructionism enhances the possibilities for us to be aware of what our utterances and actions achieve. (Lewis, 2003, p. 234)

This highlights the dilemma reflexivity may pose for researchers (social constructionists). To believe that nothing is objective in the sense that "any account is 'local' and value-laden, rather than universal" and then to go through a reflexive process of trying to achieve an "outsider stance" to "question 'what their doings are doing' " (Lewis, 2003, p. 231), poses somewhat of a contradiction.

Nonetheless, the term itself, reflexivity, when defined as a method that takes account of itself, seems logical and rational. For example, while developing narratives we, as researchers, play a role in creating that narrative, because either our role is to capture our experience via our story or our presence before the narrator influences the telling of the story, or because we, as listeners, interpret the story in a particular manner. The narrator, on the one hand, may confirm that we understood correctly, what was being said, yet, on the other, we may have been once again influenced by our recounting of his or her story and agreed with it without any intentional motive to stray from his or her perspective. We can never be entirely sure how much impact we have had in the final account whether we are writing or listening to experiences. This folding back on oneself is problematic and yet without it we, as researchers have not accounted for the element of >self= within the research. Each researcher has a moral duty to look within and communicate publicly what is there. Further, Nightingale and Cromby, (1999) explain,

> there are two types of reflexivity: personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity >Personal reflexivity= involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers.

> >Epistemological reflexivity= requires us to engage with questions such as: How has the research question defined and limited what can be 'found?' Thus, epistemological reflexivity encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings. How has the design of the study and the method of analysis 'constructed' the data and the findings? How could the research question have been investigated differently? To what extent would

this have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? (p. 228)

In both cases reflexivity can be traced back to its roots that stretch across disciplines and sink deep into history. Reflexivity, ᴀthis self-questioning reminds the qualitative inquirer that making perspectives and assumptions explicit serves to inform, not undermine a study=s credibility@ (Schram, 2003, p. 8). Within research, self questioning of the researcher=s active engagement (i.e., biases, motivation, behaviour) within the research project serves to support assertions, claims, and findings. The reflexive nature of a project can be associated with

> postmodernism, denoting the constant mutuality that is maintained in all social interaction, and particularly in the relationship between fieldworker and informant. In the methods debate, reflexivity is important because it underscores that the fieldworker's positioning in the field influences the data that he/she acquires. (Nielsen, 2003, p. 11)

Still the researcher and the degree of reflexivity is a personal journey, an awakening for many researchers both new and experienced. Often my role within group action research has become that of a facilitator, associate and consultant in order to support and collaborate. Metaphorically, the role can be likened to that of a leg of a chair, where each one can be shaped differently yet the function is that of support, and together these legs of equal length fulfil a role. Indeed, each action research project is unique. So, the appropriate role for all participants including a facilitator\collaborator is determined by the group's composition and by the inherent tasks.

Communicative action is reflexive since reflexivity is a semantic quality attached to all words, terms, and phrases used as a language. The words of a language have meaning as long as the receiver understands the stance of the group. If so, the receiver can interpret and ascribe meaning to the words that the sender uses. Yet, the sender needs to have sufficient knowledge and experience to assign meaning to the words selected and used. Winter (1996) adds:

> The thesis of reflexivity. . . argues that most statements rely on complex, interpersonally negotiated processes of interpretation. Individual words only have effective meaning because of the vast array of knowledge of other words and their meanings, brought to bear by speaker and listener. (p.18-19)

As a result, researcher reflexivity is crucial even when all participants share a common background. For instance, when group members are in the school system, subject to the similar experiences and develop a common framework of understanding (and a language in which to express it) concern for researcher reflexivity should be magnified. Since it is the inner understandings (personal voice) that needs to surface, it is only then that complete understanding may be possible. When individual or group reflexivity is not attended to, communicative problems arise. In fact, there may be significant chunks of implicit meaning to which there is no access for the group or the individual action researcher.

In sum, the reflexive act can change and colour research, the researcher, and some would argue that the actions and statements within any field could only be fully understood from within the context that they were produced.

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