

# Reflection-on-action in qualitative research processes: Deconstructing research and developing an honest critical self-appraisal rubric.

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## **Reflection-on-action in qualitative research processes: Deconstructing research and developing an honest critical self-appraisal rubric**

### Abstract

In this paper, four critical friends meet to discuss qualitative research practices. Together they put one of their own case studies under the knife and deconstruct it to investigate the possibilities that knowledge work is complicated not only by the dynamics of socially constructed enterprises and the actors involved therein, but by the positioning of the researcher. The case describes an evaluative study of a university programme where students engaged in directed experiential learning in group integrated learning settings. The researcher was also the course lead-tutor and this gave rise to some concern, on later reflection and in discussions among critical friends, when issues of researcher positioning were considered. Together, through questioning the topic, the literature, the research experience and the role of the researcher, we developed a reflection-on-action rubric. In a research arena where subjective, interpretative and messy examples abound, as they should, this paper offers an example of our own work, an honest self-appraisal, a rubric for readers' consideration and a discussion that adds to the perpetual flux of knowledge work.

Keywords: educational research; qualitative research; reflection on action; self-appraisal; researcher standpoint

### **Introduction**

We commenced our journey as one initial researcher and three critical friends. The initial researcher conducted a case study while previously employed in a UK university and he is referred to as the 'course leader' and 'interviewer' in the paper. Together, with the assistance of three fellow researchers, all currently working in Irish universities and with specific interests in qualitative inquiry, the group decided to revisit the original case study. The case involved an evaluation of university students' experiences in Directed Experiential Learning (DEL) programmes and our questioning of this case led us to question certain aspects of qualitative research practices both specifically and generally. We reviewed the case's merits and shortcomings in a self-reflective learning exercise and through a thematic deconstruction, described below, we brought significant practical and ideological questions into a new light. Patterns emerged and we reformed these into a questioning framework or reflection-on-action rubric with a view to enabling us, and others perhaps, to improve our practices in future encounters. The intention behind the use of the rubric in our research was similar to the intentionality behind the deployment of a conceptual framework in Smyth's (2004) educational study on educational change management. It was stated that it assisted in scaffolding the research and in supporting the researcher to make meanings of subsequent findings (Smyth, 2004).

The article is intended therefore to add to conversations about qualitative research, to describe the thematic deconstruction of the case study and to explore the potential of a reflection-on-action rubric for critical self-appraisal, based upon a model adapted from Schön (1983) and Moon (2006). It is not intended that the contents of this paper are generalised as a rule-of-thumb, but the possibilities of naturalistic generalisation (Stake,

1995; Melrose, 2010) lead us to believe, at least in qualitative terms, that our observations about aspects of our own work from our own native point of view (Migliore, 2010) may be of benefit to others.

### **Where we began**

This article derives from collaborative researcher reflections on the process and final report of a case study, designed and implemented for pedagogical purposes at a university in the North of England. Those involved were students on Directed Experiential Learning (DEL) modules of a BA (Hons) course in Education Studies (BAHES). The BAHES course prepared students to work with children and young people in the broad field of education, a field subsequently referred to here as the children and young people's workforce. Following graduation, the majority of the student cohort pursued a post-graduate qualification in primary school teacher education. Post-graduate qualifications in the area of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and in the field of social work were popular choices also.

#### Directed Experiential Learning

The Directed Experiential Learning (DEL) approach was inspired by Freire's (1996) understanding of co-operative learning processes in the interaction between teachers and students. It acknowledged that the teacher was not merely the one who taught others, but was one who was taught in turn in a dialogue with students. Those being taught also have the potential to teach. A practical aim of such an approach on the BAHES course was the preparation of students to step into the children and young people's workforce and to engage as competent professionals in multi-disciplinary teams. Accordingly, the BAHES students were invited to take a central role in shaping their potential learning experiences. Individually, students selected their own research topics and organised their own placements. In groups, they initiated inquiry teams to prepare for the assessed Group Integrated Learning Project (GILP). Each integrated learning team was comprised of students who had committed to work together based on a recognition that each member's research had something to offer to the whole. It was intended that by offering the students an opportunity to experience this way of working that they themselves would begin to develop the skills and capacities that are essential toward working in a multi-professional capacity. It was also intended that these student-initiated aspects of the programmes could provide opportunities for a dialogic approach, one where knowing emerged from collaborative and participatory interactions and where teachers and students shared the benefits of learning encounters.

The approach was also underpinned by the philosophies of John Dewey (1938) and in particular by the significance that he accorded to the experiential in education. The foregrounding of the experiential bridges the gap that exists between theory and practice and intentionally invites students to make connections between the learning that occurs in classroom contexts and that which occurs in the wider community (DfES, 2006).

#### Multi-agency partnership

Multi-agency partnership and multi-professional practice have been well established in the UK since the implementation of the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) policy agenda in England and Wales (DfES, 2003a) and the equivalent *Getting it Right for Every Child* policy in Scotland (2012). Designed to have significant impacts on children's health, safety and wellbeing, the programmes targeted the community, societal and economic development of young people throughout the UK (Barker, 2009; Oliver & Pitt, 2011; Simon & Ward, 2010). Broadhead and Martin (2009) contended that front-line personnel working with children and young persons would be required to develop new co-operative practices and Walker (2008) noted that the educators of the future would no longer only stand in classrooms and teach, but would liaise with a range of other workers who offer educational and other services to children. BAHES students encountered a DEL pedagogical approach therefore that aimed to equip them with the requisite skills to engage in multi-agency partnership and in multi-professional practices. Course content was supplemented with modules on Educational Developments & Initiatives (EDI) and on Effective Educational Placements (EEPs).

### **Warning! Emergent researchers at work**

The initial planning for a qualitative evaluation of the DEL programme acknowledged generally held assumptions that “research derives from the social interaction of the researcher with the researched” and that “the nature of the social world and of power relations is therefore unavoidably implicated” (Dunne, Pryor, & Yates, 2005, p.5). During the preliminary phases of the process however, a somewhat unconscious conflict of interest arose, most likely due to the fact that the researcher was also involved with the participants as lead-tutor on the DEL inspired modules, EDI and EEPs. Co-ordinating students' leaning experiences while at the same time formulating an evaluative case study gave rise to a perceived concern over implied power relationships and this led the researcher to create a distance and to attempt almost instinctively to airbrush himself out of the research process. At the time, he believed that this constituted the high-water mark for good research. The need for it, in his view, was accentuated due to the fact that he was researching his own practice. It was only later, reflecting on the researcher's archived work that the implications of such a perspective came to light.

### Developing self-awareness

It appears to us now, having the opportunity to engage in a critical dialogue with the researcher's case study report on DEL, that researcher positioning, namely that of accentuating the distance or gap between researcher and participants, aligned more with a scientific model of seeking facts. Initially, it had been intended that an interpretative exploration would seek some element of the truth about students' experiences of the DEL programmes. Attempting to remain objective and calibrating a sense of order and regularity in the natural world actually limited the quality of the qualitative exploration and was essentially a flaw. It appears on reflection that while some opportunity was missed during the original process, our questioning now provided us with a starting point in a plan from which own self-awareness as researchers could be developed. All was not lost it appeared

The initial perception that the robustness of qualitative research findings could be contingent on the degree to which the researcher could be erased from the process was at odds with Schostak's contention (2010) that researchers employ their own values, interests and desires to determine what is relevant in qualitative enquiry. We set about sketching a reflection-on-action plan at this point to evaluate other short-comings within the same project, or see if any existed. We commenced with a review of the process of collecting data to thresh and winnow the harvest of literature and then progressed to an appreciation of the approaches and methods that researchers use to gain access to the worlds of others. As with the nature of knowledge, that shifts and develops over time (Bakker, 2010), we considered that the ontic value of our work must develop and move us forward also.

### Researching the DEL experience

In researching the DEL experience, reality was arguably influenced by the researcher's presumption that pre-existing social relationships within the university could be invested in controlling the outcomes of investigations and that the findings in turn could somehow be false and lack a coherent and consistent story. This was accentuated by the fact that the researcher was also the module leader and tutor for the two modules, EPI and EEPs, that formed part of the case study. Further questions in our embryonic rubric began to form. We realised that a more coherent story about DEL could have emerged had the research been better attuned to Finlay's insight that "the process and outcomes of data collection depend fundamentally on how the research relationship evolves" (2002, p.539). His comments that "reflexivity" is part of the research process are also noteworthy: "Only by bringing our implicit frameworks into relief do we stand a chance of becoming relatively independent of them" he adds (2002, p.537). This approach offers a counterpoint to the incorrect assumption that researchers must erase themselves from qualitative research processes, visually, orally and literally.

### The issue of reciprocity

The idea that an "interpersonal dynamic" could legitimately exist within a research space (Warin, Solomon, & Yates, 2007, p.129) is similar to the construct of "reciprocity" as developed by Harrison, MacGibbon and Morton (2001, p.323). The latter contend that a correlation exists between the degree of reciprocity present in their research and the extent to which they, as knowledge workers, can engage in critical dialogue with participants about descriptions and meanings. A third phase of our method-on-action questioning began to emerge from the morass as we pondered such curiosities, particularly when we became alerted to the absence of reciprocity in the "dialogic space" (Braathe & Solomon, 2013, p.6) of the DEL investigation. More importantly, we noted a consequent limitation of the extent to which there could be any evidence of a critical dialogue in the outcome and findings. The researcher's design of the interview questions invited a positive response from the interviewees. For example, one of the questions inquired about how engagement with the EEP placement opportunity helped to underpin/develop their thinking on aspects of education that they were engaging with from their readings and seminars? It was no great surprise that the responses supported the view that the placement had a beneficial impact. One of the interviewees noted the "disjunct between research and actual practices on the ground", becoming "more aware of the degree of translation that can occur." The other interviewee, who spent time at two different locations as part of her placement, drew

attention to the fact that they were similar yet different, “similar, to the extent that there was a policy disjunct between theory and practice.” In orienting the interviews toward a likely response, the researcher was in effect limiting the extent to which a conception of “dialogic space” as outlined by Braathe and Solomon (2013) above could emerge.

Braathe and Solomon cite one clear example, worthy of note, that illustrates the point. Hedvig, a student on a M.Ed. degree course, chose to pursue Mathematics as part of her studies and she did so despite the fact that she felt anxious about the subject. Initially, the researchers brought a priori assumptions of gender and family discourse to their investigation of possible reasons for the student’s apparent anxiety. Hedvig’s responses proved interesting in unexpected ways and invited the researchers to reflect on their own implicit assumptions about Mathematics. While they worked initially from the stand point of Mathematics being masculine, Hedvig was somewhat reluctant, if not resistant to co-construct her story with respect to gender and instead asserted her own sense of agency “within her narrative of choice” (Braathe & Solomon, 2013, p. 10).

### Researcher positioning

Having self-evaluated the merits and improvement opportunities within the DEL case study with particular emphasis on researcher visibility, objective distancing, reciprocity and interpersonal dynamic, we turned our attention to the “mutual positioning” of the researcher and the participants (Warin, Solomon, & Yates, 2007). When interviewing for example, researchers are positioned mostly by default in the role of the interviewer while others accept the roles of interviewees. The humanity of ego, rapport and empathy are readily acknowledged in exchanges (Gubrium & Holstein, 1992). During the course of an interview, an understanding of expectation is assumed natural in interdependent dialogic processes. In well-crafted interviews and in well-conducted exchanges, we demand more than “characterless quantities of data” (Gillham, 2005, p.8). What we seek instead is a heavily nuanced construction of meaning. When considered as more than a stimulus and response data-gathering tool, an interview, like life, can be an interactional accomplishment (Mishler, 1986).

When we re-visited the DEL evaluation case study once more, our questioning of the research fieldwork drew our attention to two areas of concern. The structure and form of the interviews themselves limited the potential for student dialogue and for exchanging “inter-views” during conversations (Barbour & Schostak, 2007, p.43). This effectively censored a narrative of choice and smothered any sense of agency that interviewees could bring to the evidence. Worse still, when we used the rubric to question the interviewer, it became apparent that students had been chosen who stood apart from their peers in the sense that collectively they obtained the highest grades. We suspect on reflection, that either consciously or unconsciously, the rationale for choosing particular participants was to stack the cards in favour of research outcomes that would accentuate the positive aspects of the DEL inspired aspects of the BAHES course at the UK University.

### Inclusivity as part of the research process

The importance of fully engaging with the world-view of all participants, not simply those whose responses may be considered desirable for the data, is exemplified in an ethnographic study conducted by Schostak (2012) in a secondary school in England.

“Jacko”, a principal character of the study, is described as a provocative male student with challenging behaviours and one who competes for dominance in a conflict-ridden environment. The research sought to interpret and understand his behaviour in the light of the traditional power contests between teachers and pupils. In classing Jacko’s fly-off-the-handle behaviours as deviant and in assuming that school structures and the behaviours of more compliant students are an established norm, a researcher chooses one particular and entirely legitimate route of enquiry. Shifting the ethnographic lens to Jacko though, engaging in inter-view with him and recognising that the locus of control lies most likely within his own power structures and not within those of the school, enables an altogether different investigation that provides a more useful set of conclusions. In questioning the case of a single student with deviant behaviour, Schostak arrived at an understanding that would not have been possible had he opted instead to question the case among groups of students who were more attuned to school rules and authority. In contemplating this consideration in our reflection-on-action rubric, Schostak’s example leads us to wonder about the possibilities of findings that may have been unearthed had one opted instead to focus on DEL students who were struggling to achieve their intended learning outcomes, rather than selecting high achievers who ensured a favourable outcome.

### **Rubric alert!**

As four critical friends therefore, meeting to discuss research practices, we considered the details of the DEL evaluation and how the topic and the corpus of available literature were handled. Consistently, our questioning directed our close attention to the “I”, the “my” and the “me” perspective of our researcher colleague. The pivotal nature of subjectivity was also questioned as we discussed the research experience and the fieldwork together. Our discussions and our questioning processes literally seemed to take us in circles and in our note keeping, patterns of thought emerged similarly. The significant issue, that which holds key import for all researchers emerged as “did my analysis answer my own questions?” and “how was I part of the evidence?”

We pictured a reflection-on-action rubric from our sketching, one we adapted from Schön’s (1983) model for reflective practitioners. In qualitative research terms we propose this rubric to develop forms of reflection via verbalised and non-verbalised thought; those that may occur after the theorising, action and writing phases are well underway or fully completed. We built on the intellectualising in Moon’s model also, one that proposed a “concept that is retrospective and has a role in learning, in informing action and in theory building” (2006, p. 45). Our rubric also reflects Wellington’s (2016) assertions that researchers’ systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry contributes to the advancement of knowledge.

The four key elements of our rubric are designed to heighten an awareness of the “I”, the “me” and the “my” in the questioning dialogue. At no point do we at all suggest a generalisation that influences or alters subjective perspectivity in any way. Our discussions are intended simply to highlight and to assert one’s positioning. An acute awareness of such a positioning, we contend, may yield a more defensible outcome.

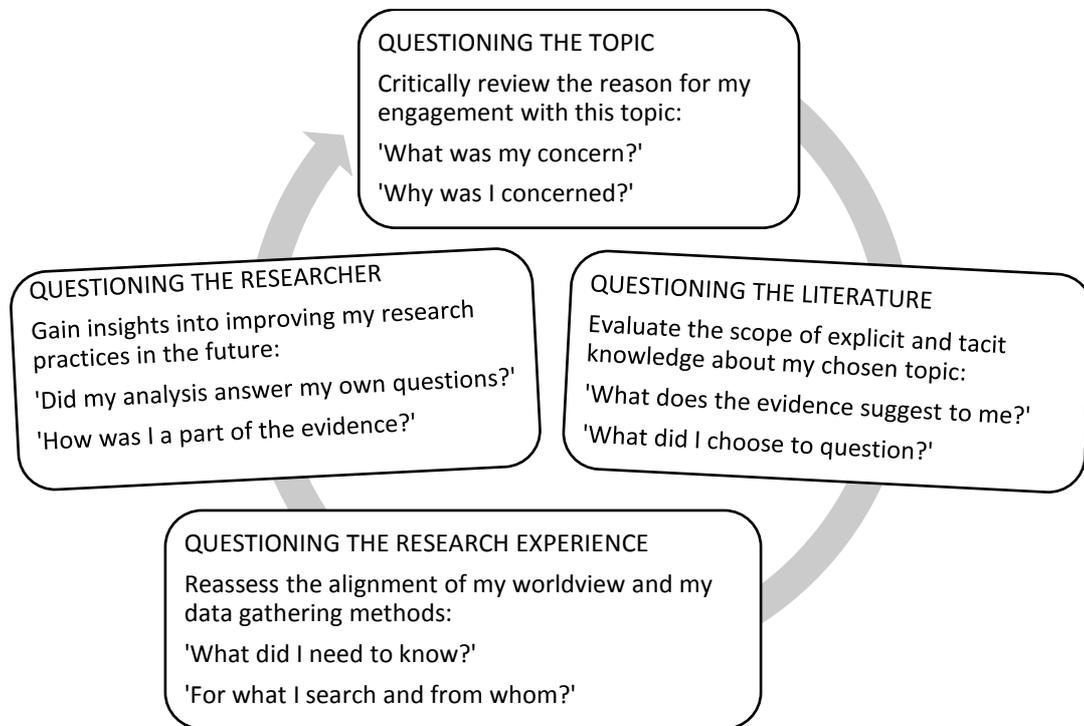


Fig. 1. Reflection-on-action rubric.

As qualitative researchers, our studies are necessarily selective and therefore our processes of self-evaluating them must be too. In this paper, we employ the rubric to demonstrate how aspects of our own research fit into a self-appraisal framework. We are cognisant that the emergent findings, in other words the shortcomings and learning points that we highlight from the DEL case study and which we intend to use to grow and develop our practice as researchers, are undoubtedly most meaningful to us, the writers. For others though, we offer the template above and note that the elements are not intended as stand-alone entities but as prompts in a continual cyclical process that engage, question and hopefully develop a critical response.

#### Issue of generalisation

We are therefore required to address the issue of generalisation in our proposition. Explicated or propositional generalisations are those most commonly held in societies because they are considered more tangible and straightforward. Essentially they are considered as explanations, arrived at through personal engagement in life's affairs; events that typically happen to others but for various reasons, mostly related to the retelling of events, we feel that they could apply equally to us. Naturalistic generalisation (Stake, 1995) is more complex, involves theories of hermeneutics and relies more on a sense of *Verstehen* or understanding than it does on simple but well-phrased explanation. Emanating essentially from the reading-writing paradigm where dialogue

is purposeful and irreducible, naturalistic generalisation proposes an understanding of something with deeper meaning, something that is somehow intangible and personal (Ricoeur, 1981; Moriceau, 2010). We offer the possibility therefore that some of the content of this paper, including the self-critique of the DEL study, its comparison to other more cogent studies or the reflection-on-action rubric, will resonate with other researchers, particularly those who may be in the early stages of their research careers.

### Applying the rubric

When we turn to questioning the topic of DEL further, our attention is drawn to circumstances between 2008 and 2013, namely the increasing complexity and demands brought about by policy changes in the children and young people's workforce. Students and tutors explored together the extent to which the various placement experiences, chosen by the students, had developed or deepened their understanding of the particular educational issues and processes.

In applying the rubric and asking, "What did I need to know?" and "For what did I search and from whom?" we allow ourselves to focus on the engagement with participants in our evaluation of the DEL research. The necessity of gaining access to their thoughts and perceptions, thereby enabling them to explain their own social reality, might appear a reasonable consideration. Separating students' perspectives from conceptions within the literature might be another (Basit, 2010). Although interviewing is regarded as a "main road" to such "multiple realities" (Stake, 1995, p.64), it was decided at the time not to interview all of the students individually (N=40) but to undertake a semi-structured interview-type worksheet instead. Thirty-two students (N=32) completed the exercise that addressed the main focus of the enquiry. Participants were asked if or how their placement opportunities further developed or deepened their understanding of their chosen topic of study. They were also asked if or how their experiences developed their thinking about what it means to be an educator. All of the responses were handwritten.

Two students agreed to engage in oral semi-structured interviews that would assist in embedding of written data (Basit, 2010). Both had completed the EDI and EEP modules and both were high achievers academically. The oral interviews took place in the course leader's office and were conducted in a conversational style. This approach was designed to offset 'the presumed power, status and knowledge of the researcher that may be used to manipulate the interview' (Barbour & Schostak, 2007, p.43). Only key words and phrases were noted during the casual interchange but concise and purposefully distilled notes were made immediately on conclusion. Documentary case evidence in the form of student reflection logs and experience diaries from the final EDI and EEP modules supplemented the data.

### Questioning the research experience

Our reflection-on-action rubric prompts us to question the research experience and to raise issues about field enquiry. Our attention was drawn to the design of the questionnaire. It was evident that the questions were constructed too narrowly, in the sense that they could have invited a yes/no-type response, quite the opposite of what should have been the case. As a researcher, who was supposedly committed to a truly engaging and constructivist approach, then, surely, he could have been more careful so

as to design questions that would have been much more non-directive and which would have invited the students to represent their views in a more open and transparent way. We question the reticence to interview more students individually or in focus groups, not necessarily to provide a weight of evidence but instead to reflect the richness, value and experience that every individual offers to the complexity of collegial learning circumstances. Aside from the differing perspectives on employing digital recording devices, we are struck by one key element of our reflection-on-action rubric, that of questioning the topic.

### Questioning the topic

If the DEL process was intended as a means of optimum empowerment and if the case was intended to reflect this dimension in its process and product, why then were only two of the top-performing students chosen for oral interviewing? Guided by the ‘reflection-on-action rubric’, the researcher, who conducted the original case study on DEL, acknowledged that the reason why he selected the top-performing students to interview was to maximise the potential of developing a positive narrative about it from the research data. This acknowledgement however alerted the researcher to the value of engaging with a wider variety of participants in order to arrive at a more comprehensive narrative about DEL. It was envisaged that such a narrative might also embrace voices that were not so optimistic about the pedagogical processes underpinning DEL. It was also recognised that this could have led to a fuller and in a sense “truer” story.

### Strength of self-evaluation

Such critical self-appraisal, we contend, is directed principally for the development of the self of the researcher. We return to Freire’s (1993) oft-cited comment that those who authentically commit themselves must re-examine themselves constantly in a conversion so radical as not to allow for ambivalent behaviour. We ponder where such philosophising sits in a research space apparently dominated by performativity and efficiencies in education, among those driven by measurement of output and achievement. In their analysis of world economics, Mirowski (2013) and Peters (2015) contend that the influences of global marketisation and neo-liberalist trends have transformed everyday life but go largely unrecognised. In a research space and a world arguably riddled with problems (O’Leary, 2005), the purpose of self-evaluation, and of self-evaluation in education in particular we contend, is not necessarily to improve ourselves to solve all ills, but to explore them and to ‘attempt to balance subjectivities in a manner that ensures the integrity, validity and authenticity of any potential knowledge produced’ (ibid, p.62).

### **And then we did this**

Returning to the evaluation of the DEL case study once more, it became clear to us that commonalities and patterns in the evidence indicated that students did engage extensively with their academic literature to inform their thinking about their chosen topics and that this provided them in turn with an informed lens through which they could interpret their placement experiences. Our reflection-on-action rubric allowed us to assert therefore that the case study enquiry appeared to hold answers to the questioning of the topic but more importantly, the rubric allows us to ascertain the

points from which the data of optimum quality emerged. In this case, the data mother load was discovered in the documentary evidence of the students' own reflective journals. The intended student empowerment of journal keeping, of self-expression and of self-evaluated learning proved ultimately to empower the research and to fuel some of its more significant findings.

The interviews, while admittedly limited in scope, proved of value in their own right also and possibly due to the flexible nature of conversation, they allowed for unintended asides. For example, one of the two students who had been interviewed for the case study had chosen to focus on emotional and behavioural difficulties in general and on the difference in procedure between secondary schools and further education in particular. Following case study observation at her work placement, she reported that she would then be able "to focus on Aincow's (1995) and Cline and Frederickson's (2002) research and investigate if their findings were complemented by (her) own research." However this was not typically the case and when we revisited the full range of responses, especially in the written questionnaires, we noted that the evidence also spoke to students' experiences of a "disjunct" between theories of research in university life and their actual placement experiences.

One student described first-hand and in-depth insights gained into the policies and practices of inclusion, when meeting the challenges and opportunities posed by children with emotional and behavioural disorders in mainstream classrooms. Other students described engagement with bullying incidents and with minority and ethnic issues in education. Events such as these, those close to the heart and to the engine of human life offer opportunities in our rubric to question the researcher, to urge the researcher to conduct follow-up studies, to unearth more findings and to grow further food for thought; if for no other reason than the fact that the ground is fertile and the crop appears willing.

### Appraising the findings

Our interpretation of the findings in the case study outlined above would appear to indicate that the directed experiential learning (DEL) approach, incorporating the paired EDI and EEP modules, did provide opportunities for the development of critical thinking skills in the students. Furthermore, the evidence suggested that the same students developed a deepened understanding of the project of educating. It appeared like a job well done until we assessed our efforts through the lens of our reflection-on-action rubric and by then, closer scrutiny of the research processes cast a fly in the ointment of some apparently optimistic findings.

Questioning the initial reason for engagement in the case caused us to reflect once more on researcher standpoint. There was an evident air of social justice and constructivism to it, one that reflected the influence of Dewey and Freire in its design and development but it became clear on critical self-appraisal that the standpoint adopted in the fieldwork actually violated one of the cardinal principles of the Freirean ideal. Freire believed it was critically important not to impose a worldview upon others. His approach was committed to inviting those with whom he engaged to name their own realities and in the process, to potentially transform them (Freire, 1996). The application of our rubric to evaluate the investigation of DEL pointed us undoubtedly to the realisation that the

researcher had determined the shortcomings of students a priori. Consequently, their perceived potential for self-actualisation lay not in a sense of their own empowerment but in the degree to which they could respond to this specified deficit; the scale of which, in a non-Freirean sense, the researcher has already named for them.

Applying the rubric allows us to appreciate now that the students were being studied and portrayed from an apparently more empowered vantage point. The process considered the students and their status in a deficit light. We were prompted then to map a number of similar but remarkably different questioning standpoints: Had the case studied the participants in the DEL programme, had it studied the programme with the assistance of the participants, had it studied participants' experiences or had it studied all of this? Not only had some subtle shifts in the fieldwork produced radically different outcomes but also significantly in a social justice sense, they prevented participants from realising an equal personhood in an educational and research encounter.

### **Finally**

We offer by way of a final section, a number of concluding remarks that are intended less as an admission of guilt on our part and more as an honest acknowledgement of the limitations of a seriously well-intentioned piece of work. We do this with two aims in mind. We wish to draw attention to potential pit-falls in order that other qualitative researchers might avoid a similar fate and we offer a simple reflection-on-action rubric to provide guidance.

We propose that the rubric may be utilised in either of two ways. As a reflection-on-action rubric, we designed it to be implemented after the literature is reviewed, after a question is raised and after the fieldwork is completed. At this point, we suggest that emergent researchers can employ the questioning framework to ensure that the building of the final edifice is as intended. The simple self-appraisal and questioning process inherent in the rubric's four stages allow for a self-evaluation of not only the methods employed, but also the underpinning philosophical framework and lens. Its intended utility evidenced some similarities with Berman's (2013) "conceptual framework" which she developed as part of her doctoral research to both reflect on and to articulate the research process with which she engaged. She contended that "the development of an explicit conceptual framework had major implications for the process of the study as well as for the structure and presentation of the research" (2013, p.15).

An alternative use is to consider the rubric for the personal self-appraisal of fully completed project work. In our own case, we readily accept as a self-appraisal outcome, that the evidence in the DEL case study succumbed to a version of the "halo effect" (Cohen, Mannion, & Morrison, 2003, p.157) and was given the rose-tinted glasses treatment. A natural desire to paint the DEL programme in its best light limited the extent to which a fuller and more complete narrative about DEL could have been achieved. It also curtailed the extent to which the methodological potential of both Dewey and Freire, as part of the research process, could have impacted on the said narrative.

As qualitative researchers, we acknowledge and applaud Pollow's point that the arena would benefit from more messy examples (2003, p.193). As we agreed, disagreed,

pondered, sketched and developed the final outlines for our reflection-on-action rubric, we considered, as critically reflective research colleagues, the messiness of our DEL case study and of other research also. The consistent and self-critical use of the “I”, the “my” and the “me” in all aspects of the rubric’s genesis and final make up highlights the responsibilities of the researcher operating at the core of all such knowledge-making. In acknowledging the uniqueness of the self in constructivist identity-making, we “come out” in a sense as researchers, as Finlay describes it (2002), admitting in relativist terms that we may never find the truth.

We go further however and acknowledge that even if we do find the truth, we may never be able to adequately explain it, given the complexities of sign systems and the dichotomy that exists between the signifier and the signified in our own qualitative work and in that of others (Culler, 1976). As we have attempted to demonstrate above also, how factors such as time and circumstance and the very communities of practice within which we operate all impact contextually and significantly on interpretive processes of understanding. We accept that many think otherwise, but in research in education, a domain that arguably appears subjugated by canons of quantitative performativity at times, we propose that the value to educators in the delivery of qualitative inquiry lies not only in the exploration of lived experiences but in the honest effacement of one’s own intellectual positioning as researcher. Like a fantasy of shearing bees for bumble-wool, the honest critical self-appraisal of our own past work requires creative and sometimes awkward handling. The results however, may prove interesting.

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