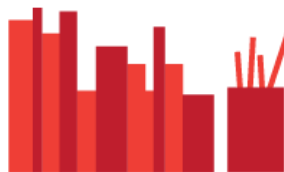


A JOURNEY OF CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTIVE INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT This article offers a selective account of the author's personal experience with critical self-reflective inquiry. These personal accounts are summarized into two critical moment vignettes where specific examples of critical self-reflection and reflexive processes were used to inform decision making, show insight and provide perspective. From a first-person perspective, this article illustrates aspects of the author's epistemological underpinnings, highlights the on-going nature of the research process, and makes allusion to the many challenges that been experienced during the research 'journey'. While in its brevity this article shows the cycles of reflective thinking and its practical uses for a new academic researcher. It advocates for the incorporation of critical self-reflective practice as means of conceptualizing, understanding and incorporating criticality and experiential knowledge into one's own research.

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest - Confucius

From my own experience incorporating reflexivity into my research process has been constructive yet not without its challenges. I will deliberately frame my PhD research as a 'journey', to indicate that, to me, it is equal parts *process* and *product*. By doing so I illustrate aspects of my epistemological underpinnings, highlight its on-going nature, and make allusion to the many unknown bends, curves, bumps and pit-stops that I have and will continue to encounter along the way. For the purposes of this article I have selected two critical instances where reflective inquiry was influential in informing my decisions, perspective or insights. By doing so I hope to illuminate part of my lived experience as a PhD candidate and share my perspective on this on-going process.

CRITICAL MOMENT ONE: VALUING "CRITICALLY REFLEXIVE" THINKING

Criticality in practice is aided by natural curiosity, but it is not without need of refinement and guiding (Morley, 2007; Beyer, 1984). As a naturally curious person I have channeled my natural propensity for the search of knowledge into an academic pursuit. Yet even as a 'natural' critical thinker, who is constantly pondering the world around her, I have had to consciously adopt critical thinking skills and techniques. This is because true criticality is more than just curiosity, it is in fact the ability to concurrently develop, understand and analyze experience by exploring social, political, educational and cultural contexts and exposing the assumptions that dictate response (Taylor, 2001; Ginsburg and Clift, 1990; Hatton and Smith, 1995). A key concept giving momentum to the idea of critical reflective practice involving both personal reflection and social critique is reflexivity. Reflexive practitioners engage in critical self-reflection; reflecting critically on the impact of their own

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background, assumptions, positioning, feelings, behavior while also attending to the impact of the wider organizational, discursive, ideological and political context (Taylor, 2001; Loughran, 1996). The terms reflection, critical reflection and *reflexivity* are often confused and wrongly assumed to be interchangeable. Finlay and Gough (2003) find it helpful to think of these concepts forming a continuum. At one end stands reflection, defined simply as 'thinking about' something after the event. At the other end stands reflexivity; a more immediate and dynamic process which involves continuing self-awareness. Critical reflection lies somewhere in between (Boud, 1998; Stephens and Reimer, 1993; Clark, 2004).

Like any skill reflection, critical reflective practice and reflexivity requires practice if it is to be truly understood and done well (Westley, Zimmerman and Patton, 2007). The process sounds simple but at its root challenges our learned patterns, underlying assumptions and long-established practices (Westley *et al*, 2007; Boud and Walker, 1998). Here 'critical' reflection refers to the ability for one to challenge their own beliefs and social structures in order to determine their impact on practice, to determine the social and cultural contexts that influence assumptions, to imagine alternatives, challenge ways of thinking, and question universal claims by suspending or temporarily rejecting previous knowledge (Brookfield, 1988; Clarke, 2004; McKay, 2008). When combined with reflexivity, one can constructively and critically examine and engage in transformative learning 'in the moment'. By deepening one's ability to engage in critical, more reflexive, reflection allows one to link the skills up with the critical analysis demanded when doing research.

While I can think of several instances throughout my PhD which could anecdotally exemplify this concept, I feel that the following personal vignette stands out above the rest. This is not only because I was new to the concept of reflection and reflexive thinking at the time, but because it is one moment when I became astutely conscious of my assumptions and how they could be impacting my thinking.

While attending an International student research conference I was struck by the overwhelming number of quantitative research studies. I was mostly perplexed by the disproportionate representation because I had assumed that research into concepts of 'citizenship', 'belonging' and 'identity' would favor a qualitative method. Until then I had never been directly asked 'why not use' a quantitative approach. While simplistic in nature, this question initially caught me off guard. I had become very comfortable explaining my research design but had never been asked to justify why my choices were better than other approaches. At the time, I had not fully entertained the idea of conducting a quantitative study nor had I fully considered adopting any quantitative aspects either. Yet in one quick moment I was flooded with questions and possibilities regarding this new notion. Is one method better than the other? Is quantitative wrong and qualitative right? Have I made the best choice? Are there benefits of quantitative research I have naively neglected? Did other researchers make a mistake? Have I made a mistake choosing a qualitative approach? And perhaps more interestingly, why was my 'gut reaction' to assume that their research design was flawed?

The context of a research conference provided the perfect opportunity for me to reflect upon my former assumptions and actions, as well as to critically and reflexively examine my thoughts as they came. As a result I was able to have a clearer and more concise understanding of my own methodological rationale than I had before. Up until that moment my research design choices had been more theoretical than tangible. But quickly I was able to constructively articulate and fully appreciate the research design choices I had made I realized for the first time that my methodological choices were bigger than simply

choosing constructivist versus positivist approach. In essence the answer I truly sought was as much connected to my epistemological underpinnings as it was to my method of choice.

Critically examining my conceptual perspective gave credence to my methodological choices. I was coming from the perspective that knowledge is representative of power, an on-going process and inseparable from a wider social context (Calderhead and Gates, 1993; Johns, 2006). I saw great value in incorporating a personal rather than detached engagement perspective (Maloy, 1994; Clark, 2004; Jarvis, 1999). I wanted to incorporate the lived experience of social contexts within education and gain an in-depth understanding, rather than to provide systematic statistical overview. While ultimately I came to the same conclusion, the process of critical reflexive self-evaluation provided a new framework from which I could appreciate my research journey. This transformative experience gave me a firmer understanding of my epistemological standpoint, confirmed my interest in investigating social phenomena and validated my qualitative methodological choice which has continued to inform my entire research journey (Schön, 1974; Taylor, 2001; Clark, 2004).

CRITICAL MOMENT TWO: UNDERSTANDING MY CRITICAL POSITIONING

At various stages throughout my PhD journey I have experienced critical and transformative moments. Sometime these moments can happen without warning, which can lead to immediate reflexive problematizing and discovery; while other moments slowly develop over time. The first critical moment I discussed was representative of the former. It was one quick moment in time, which led to a series of reflexive revelations. My second critical moment however, is representative of the latter. Rather than one short instance, this critical moment is more of a collaboration of occurrences which lead to a series of on-going critical reflections (Morley, 2007). Both passages represent influential milestones in the development and progression of my research journey.

Often researchers are asked to explain the background of their study; however this rarely, includes an in-depth discussion of the researchers own personal connection. Yet ironically a researcher's personal story is often translated into his/her research area and can directly result of life experiences, interests, circumstances and/or unique personal histories. Much in the way that one could argue that *objectivity* is an 'unachievable' myth and that no one person can ever truly separate themselves from the world around them; a similar argument could be made for the inseparability between a researcher's focus and his/her own lived experience (Dinkleman, 2000; Brookfield, 1988). That is to say that every researcher begins their journey with a set of (un)conscious ideas which have been subjectively formed throughout their lifetime. Reflection offers the opportunity for one to step outside their own subjectivity and examine the ways in which the world around them has influenced them and how identity and understanding are culturally and personally sculpted (Brookfield, 1995).

My research journey started long before I collected my first data or started as a PhD candidate, before the submission of my research proposal or acceptance into the doctoral program. In essence the true start of my research journey began years prior when my curiosity pushed me to seek deeper, more meaningful answers to questions I began to ask. In a short span of time I had lived, and taught in five and traveled through 20 countries, and studied at eight universities. For nearly a decade my wanderlust swept me around the world and provided me with a unique personal background, experiential knowledge and

perspective on the world, education and most profoundly changed how I saw myself. These experiences provide a unique context from which I am critically positioned. My experiences teaching, traveling and living abroad have combined with my curious nature and resulted in innumerable questions about the world around me. In the years that preceded my PhD's formal commencement I was filled with questions regarding how my identity was shaped by experience, culture, ethnicity, up-bringing, and nationality. In essence I was philosophically pondering who I was, why I was that way and what influence it had on my life ahead.

Reflecting upon my own identity construction eventually evolved into a wider inquisitiveness of the world. I began to wonder how identities were influenced by social contexts. Most importantly I had a strong interest in the specific role that national identity played. Having first-hand experience as an expat I was acutely aware of how self-perception could be influenced by a change in differing situations (Bern, 1972; Laird, 2007). However my lived experience of *'being more American when you are abroad'*, seemed to raise more questions than it answered. *Was this so? Why was this so? What else did this affect?*

These questions eventually combined with my pursuit to research teacher education and formed the starting point of my PhD study. However succinct and logical this culmination of interests seems in retrospect, the process of developing my research focus only evolved through the directed use of critical self-reflection. As part of an introductory exercise in the taught element of my PhD, I was advised by a professor to reflect upon 'the fire in my belly': colloquially, asking me to uncover my passion. In short, my burning questions centered on the concept of national identity formation and the influence of education in that process. Critically reflecting upon my own unique personal history provided a capacity to reflect on my interests while also acknowledging my strengths, weaknesses and enduring curiosity (Brookfield, 1995; Taylor, 2001).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While my PhD journey continues to progress I am consistently rewarded by the incorporation of critical self-reflective/reflexive practices. My appreciation, articulation and understanding of the multitude of interwoven elements necessary for such a sophisticated piece of research has been unequivocally shaped by the continued use of reflection. Engagement in objective pondering of both reason and emotion that is situated within a broader social context provides an opportunity to work through seemingly contradictory feelings, reactions and provides the ability to assess learning and practice (Taylor, 2001; Jarvis, 1999). In short, critical reflection simply asks for one to deconstruct his/her own potential narratives with a critical eye and reinterpret with a deeper meaning (Dewey, 1933; Valli, 1992; LaBoskey, 1994). In essence this self-developmental tool processes the 'unprocessed' self by bridging together internal and external observations and communications (Dewey, 1933; Brookfield, 1991). Thus laying claim to what Socrates himself states, 'life without enquiry is not worth living.'

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