MASTERCLASS

Reflexivity: The New Reflective Practice

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Abstract

This brief paper seeks to expose contemporary thinking behind the notion of researcher reflexivity in order to draw out its usefulness for practice-based learning research and for a renewed perspective on reflective practice. Discussion includes social constructionist perspectives, questions of positionality, experiential affinity, the place of scholarship, language and the provenance of our explanatory frameworks. I conclude with a series of questions that can support a reflexive approach to practice-based learning and related research.

Keywords: reflexivity, social constructionism, explanatory frameworks

Introduction

The notion of reflexivity in qualitative inquiry has become an increasingly popular means of supporting claims of reliability and trustworthiness (Rolfe 2006). However, in my experience of working with academic colleagues undertaking practice-based professional doctorates in health or education, there is often a lack of clarity about how and why reflexive accounts can support such claims in their own qualitative inquiries. The aim of this paper is to discuss the purpose of reflexive accounts in order to assess their usefulness for practice-based learning research.

There is no single settled perspective on reflexivity (see Dowling's (2006) excellent survey of different perspectives) though what follows echoes the most common understanding of reflexivity as broadly a social constructionist concept. Social constructionism takes the view that our understanding of reality is the product of our negotiated constructions of it. This position is often contrasted with what is held to be the positivist assumption: that we can read reality from our observations in relatively unproblematic and disinterested ways. Thus for social constructionists research is always a work of interpretation and the researcher is always in the thick of the research process rather than distanced from it. I will return to these issues below (see Burr's (2003) extremely helpful introduction to social constructionism for a detailed explanation).

Reflexivity and reflective practice

Sometimes reflexivity is treated as a synonym for 'reflective practice' with the result that its distinctive attention to positionality and knowledge construction is neglected or simplified.

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While it is true that Schon (1987), the most prominent theorist of reflective practice, did not overlook this question, his notion of 'reflection on action' is read often as precisely that: a reflection on what the practitioner has done. Take, for instance, the following definition from the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (2013):

> "Reflective practice is a process by which you: stop and think about your practice, consciously analyse your decision making and draw on theory and relate it to what you do in practice".

This is fine up to a point but the lens is on 'your practice' whereas reflexivity includes a concern for positionality. Thus, as I elaborate below, 'stopping and thinking' involves questions such as: how do I view myself as, say, a 'professional', 'black professional', 'middle-class' practitioner? And how do I see patients (needy, ill-informed, female, old, etc)? The idea is to understand what kind of gaze on self and others you bring to the professional judgements you make about practice. Positionality, writes Macbeth (2001, p35), is about the "examination of place, biography, self and other to understand how they shape the analytic exercise".

The underpinning epistemological position is that what we see is shaped by how and where we have learned to look. Before elaborating on positionality I want to stress that reflexive accounts should not be simply confessional, relating to the limitations of your perspective. Some reflective accounts centre on such a confessional and this has something to do with misconceptions about the question of subjectivity.

Reflexivity and subjectivity

Reflexivity is not simply a safeguard against subjective bias. Thus reflexive narratives are not about 'owning up' to one's contaminating effects. When this kind of narrative is offered, it slips into a post-positivist concern for objectivity. When applied to practice-based learning, it is helpful to think about what baggage you might bring to your understandings, but a reflexive approach requires that you think about where these understandings come from.

Reflexivity is not a striving for objectivity. Nor is it a runaway subjectivism. The social constructionist framework within which much of the commitment to reflexivity sits is sometimes thought to license any interpretation as valid. A key problem here is the assumption that the individual researcher is doing the interpreting on their own, but the purpose of reflexivity is to address a more complex social reality.

Those reflexive accounts that centre on a defence of personal interpretations, declaring their subjectivity to be one among many subjectivities, neglect the *social* character of social constructionism. First, each of us brings to the research table a repertoire of explanations, which shape our interpretation of what is going on. Second, this repertoire is the outcome of social processes and interactions. Meaning making is a social activity even when we are doing it on our own. Moreover, the research encounter is also a social event that needs addressing in reflexive accounts. We need to ask: how were meanings negotiated in such an event? As Schostak (2006, p1) writes of interviews: 'the interview is not a simple tool with which to mine information. It is a place where views may clash, deceive, seduce, enchant'. Similarly, Holstein & Gubrium (2003, p114) write that 'meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter'. This notion, that meanings are assembled, is key to how we see the positioning of the researcher. The methodological debate in practitioner research has shifted from how to minimise subjectivity to that of thinking more about how to bring oneself into the research process self-consciously. This involves an acknowledgement that the self is the research tool in the inquiry rather than a

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threat to its objectivity. This human tool does not, and indeed cannot, dispassionately conduct empirical inquiries. When we sense-make we draw on the explanatory frames available to us; questioning as well as valuing these is part of the analytical exercise. Rather than focusing on whether we are being objective or subjective, we need to focus on the purpose of our inquiry.

Modes of inquiry associated with a scientific method could be said to pursue *explanations* of and *predictions* about human behaviour, while those associated with qualitative, reflexive accounts aspire to generate *understandings and insights* in contexts that are held to be inherently too unstable for reliable predictions to be made (see e.g. Bentz & Shapiro 1998, Shank 2002, Cousin 2009). Such *understandings and insights* need to come from empirically careful and intellectually informed research. A very relevant question here concerns how we address positional reflexivity to achieve this.

Positional reflexivity

A common way in which positional reflexivity is explored is through categories such as 'race, ethnicity, class, gender, disablement and sexuality. It is often argued that a shared category membership with the researched, will facilitate trust and disclosure or, in the absence of this, disclosure will be problematic' (Hurst 2008). There may be truth in this proposition, particularly where the 'researched' feels part of a vulnerable minority and thus nervous around someone who represents the apparently non-vulnerable majority, but we should not assume that this is necessarily the case. As I have argued elsewhere (Cousin 2010), experiential affinity is not enough or a substitute for a scholarly positionality and an open mind that considers rival explanations. Experience sometimes limits what we see because we are too immersed in it. And a researcher who cannot claim experiential affinity may be good at building a research relationship through other means. These issues apply equally to practice-based learning. Empathy comes from many sources. What we bring to the research table or to our professional relations is context sensitive, mobile and interactionally determined. We do not have to freeze our positionality into one dimension of our self. Research and professional encounters vary enormously and social positionality is one element among many that shape them. Quite banal factors such as the time of day and level of heating can be as facilitative or inhibitive of disclosure as are the specific biographies (e.g. our sex, ethnicity) in the room. We are also formed out of singular experiences. In particular, our biography includes what we have read, seen, touched and heard in terms of cultural experiences (books, films, museums, concerts, etc.). These are in the mix of what we bring to our interpretations. Another layer of complexity in this mix is in the making of claims to knowledge through the language we use.

Reflexivity and knowledge

Since the key idea underpinning researcher reflexivity is the social constructionist one, that the meanings we generate are an outcome of negotiation, it can leave new researchers falling for an extreme form of relativism in which all knowledge claims are thought to be equally valid. But reflexivity is a quality checking move; it helps us to sift through claims by pursuing a concern for the circumstances, context and parties to them. For example, if the UK royal family led a reflexive research project on social class they would want to examine factors such as their own naturalised positional advantages alongside the evidence base or scholarship they need to address to go beyond their own experiences. They would also want to think about the language they are accustomed to use to sense-make about class. For instance, they may have learnt to frame class according to the view that all societies need 'hewers of wood and drawers of water'. There is a level at which our language dictates our thinking stemming as it does from this kind of premise.

PBLH, Vol 1, Issue 2 (October 2013)
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We have to use the social tool of language to make knowledge claims and this requires us to think about the implications of this process. Once we name something, we have created a cultural layer to it; we have assigned to it a signifier. When Shakespeare said 'a rose is a rose by any other name', he meant that the thing (signified) is constant but our name for it (rose) is the outcome of human agreement and it could have equally been called 'spog' (he implied this last bit – Shakespeare never actually talked of 'spogs'). Social constructionists extrapolate this insight to an inquiry into what leads us to settle on particular terms. 'Rose' is more than an arbitrary name, it is an invented horticultural category and it is the process and consequence of this invention that are interesting for social constructionism.

Language is not a neutral, stable medium by which we can identify social phenomena; rather, it is part of the act of interpretation and generative of a way of seeing and talking about something. An obvious example might be naming humanity through the male; it took a long time for researchers to accept that this linguistic erasure of the female was not a neutral language move but one loaded with symbolic meaning. Another example can be found in scientific genres, where the 'passive' is deployed for a more scientific air; it is a language move to construct' objectivity'. Shank (2002, p10) invites us to consider the difference between *these effects were observed* and *I observed these effects*. This simple contrast exposes the rhetorical function of language. It is not just a naming system, it is a system of interpretation and thinking about the terms we use is part of reflexivity.

Writing reflexivity

It needs to be acknowledged, then, that we not only *find* findings, we *make* findings. One reason for this is that we can only *represent* reality, we can never mirror it and the act of representation is always going to be adrift from the event. Crudely put, my trip to Prague and my narrative about it are always going to be two different things, however much I try to be faithful to the experience. The textual 're-presentation' of life is what the researcher does and s/he does it within certain limits. I can only re-present life out of the values, linguistic and explanatory frameworks (discourses) available to me. My account of my visit to Prague will be delineated by these factors. And those who read my account will bring their own mix of insight and baggage to their interpretation. This does not mean that research reports are hopelessly distant from reality; rather that 'reality' is understood to have something to do with us making it as much as we might see it. Nor does this mean that meaning making is arbitrary. A reflexive analysis presents and discusses the evidence against claims made like any other analysis, but it also remains mindful of the perspectival nature of any inquiry. This allows an acknowledgement that our inquiry rarely offers the full story. Research – any research – is always perspectival. Reflexivity is about offering a thoughtful perspective. There is an acceptance that an exhaustive journey to the truth is unlikely to be possible, but that extending our understandings of the subject of our inquiry is a worthy ambition.

Conclusion

To conclude, what does all this mean for practice-based learning research? It means that 'stopping and thinking' about the effects of practice-based learning includes a concern for what may be framing the thinking. What categories and assumptions are we adopting? What frameworks, paradigms and discourses shape these? Do they shut off other possible ways of thinking? What particular experiences do we bring to our interpretations of practice-based learning? Do they support insightfulness or limit it? Has a useful way of seeing been generated? Have understandings been extended? Is the inquiry invitational to others to add to the perspective offered? These kinds of prompts to be reflexive are equally helpful to practice-based learning as they are to research into it. As my title indicates, reflexivity is the new reflective practice both for public and personal inquiry.

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