

Chapter Three

The Business of Validity, Reliability and Authentic Need

Arts-based Approaches to Researching Practice

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All qualitative research, which is by definition the investigation of ideas, life features and phenomena surrounding issues that occur in natural settings, must align itself with notions of *quality* and especially *equality*. The qualitative research process that we will begin to explore here attempts to review the purposes for and reasons behind people's particular modes of engagement with the world. Qualitative research is that place where the researcher interprets and inquires of phenomena in terms of the meanings that the people with whom she or he engages bring to their world (Denzin 1994). It has at its ontological core an understanding that it is an appropriate method for discerning the multifaceted significances that the subject of the research attributes to the topic being investigated. So qualitative inquiry,¹ as an interpretive methodology, entails and emphasizes a naturalistic approach. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) define qualitative research as being:

[m]ultimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of our interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective,

¹ I will use the terms 'qualitative inquiry' and 'qualitative research' interchangeably throughout this chapter.

life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives.

The multifaceted nature of life itself means that there are a myriad of ways in which an analysis of 'life-worlds' can unfold. In this chapter, however, we shall emphasize the importance of *emancipatory practice* and *art* as vehicles for change.

Another leading scholar in the field John Creswell's definition of qualitative research—though a few years later (1997) emphasizes its social aspects. He noted that:

Qualitative research is an *inquiry* process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.

The researcher then addresses the 'field' or 'matter' under study and, in so doing, gives priority to how the data contributes to the critical research questions so as to deepen the sense of understanding around the prevailing information.

The Praxis of English Language Teaching and Learning

It Is So Diffuse—What Really Matters?

Within the fields of language studies, critical literacy and education generally, the evidence gained from qualitative research is wide-ranging and diffuse in nature. Qualitative research necessarily encompasses a range of beliefs, research designs and specific practices and findings, which will be examined as this chapter unfolds. The reader will be introduced to, and it is hoped, become familiar with a range of varied techniques for data collection. These include in-depth qualitative interviews; participant and non-participant observation; focus groups; document analyses; and a number of other methods.

Before reaching the point of learning more about the main ways of doing the work, we need to ask of ourselves, as researchers, two crucial questions that lie at the core of critical education and critical pedagogy: *Why do*

research in education? and *What is praxis?* In its *Qualitative Research in Educational Planning* series of publications, the international agency UNESCO (Postlethwaite, 2005, p. 29) asks us to pay attention to the political activity of education with the aim of always improving education and schooling in order to redress emergent ‘shortcomings’.

Each system of education has its political goals, its general educational goals, and its specific educational objectives. For example, some political goals stress equality of opportunity, others stress quality of education, and many stress both.

In every system of education changes are made by educational planners with the aim of improving the quality of education. These changes can include a revised curriculum, new methods of teacher training, increasing the amount of provisions to schools, changing the structure from a selective to a comprehensive system, reducing class size and many other changes. In some cases, innovations need to be tried out to identify their likely shortcomings, effects, and side effects before they are implemented. In other cases, student achievement over time in one or more subjects needs to be monitored, or where there are optional subjects the percentage of a grade or age group selecting such subjects needs to be known. Or, the attitudes and perceptions of students need to be assessed.

This is the purpose of this chapter—to examine the motivations underlying the critical and emancipatory capacities of research. Given the above notation and the intentions it assumes, how do we critically revise the world of the school so as to place stress on quality and equality? These two matters are at the heart of critical inquiry. The revision of curricula, the evaluation of teacher preparation, the provision of equal resources to schools and the undertaking of innovative methods to bring about an enhanced quality of education must reflect these aspects in our research efforts. The range of data types that critical inquiry that can and does use are as diverse as the methodologies, philosophies and theories that underlie the field of critical research (or critical inquiry), but it is these two key words—‘quality’ and ‘equality’—that must shape all research practice.

The eminent Australian researchers Allan Luke and Karen Dooley (2011) highlight the transformative power of language learning and we sense from their ideas that equity and quality are noted as central themes that contribute to change. They use the term ‘critical literacy’ to connote how language is used as a cultural, social and political practice to address ‘marginalized’ people:

Critical literacy is the use of texts to analyse and transform relations of cultural, social and political power. It is part of a longstanding normative educational project to address social, economic and cultural injustice and inequality. It aims towards the equitable development and acquisition of language and literacy by historically marginalized communities and students, and towards the use of texts in a range of communications media to analyse, critique, represent and alter inequitable knowledge structures and social relations of school and society.

This definition holds to the pioneering principles espoused by one of the leaders in critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire (1993, 1994), whose legacy in these matters stretches back nearly half a century. For Freire, teaching and learning (that is, pedagogy) are occasions for the addressing of, relating to and dealing with the structures and affairs of society through its governmental, political and cultural powers by recognising the essential material and social consequences and possibilities for learners and their communities. By building upon the theoretical positions of critical pedagogy (see McKenna & Cacciattolo, 2012) and on the work of Freire in particular, I can confidently assert that there is a greater likelihood for the development in individuals of a yearning for learning for its own sake *when the motivation for research is apparent* and that such motivation is central to *finding meaningful moments in the research*. There can be little doubt that this *is best realized when the researched community works in collaboration with the researcher*. The skillful, respectful and motivating researcher can *re-create* and *re-invent* the lived world alongside the learner-as-researcher. As I have noted elsewhere (McKenna & Cacciattolo, 2012, p. 60) the teacher or researcher

must not only recreate what is already apparent in the space of their teaching. Through 'action and reflection-on-action' (Schon, 1995), the student and teacher alike can have high aspirations as they co-create, collaborate and re-invent politically rich teaching and learning moments where private, public and professional Englishes intersect. Opportunities for strengthening notions of agency, civics and respectful citizenship can only emerge when students and teachers alike are actively involved in questioning, probing and critically evaluating the construction of learner identities and their place in the society in which they live.

Again, the emphasis here is on how equitable and available learning is to the students who might otherwise have been least advantaged (Connell, 1993). This is captured by Freire (1993, p. 83) who speaks of the need to

educate and research in order to promote a criticality that is void of passivity and numbness.

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. Although the dialectical relations of women and men with the world exist independently of how these relations are perceived (or whether or not they are perceived at all), it is also true that the form of action they adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world. Hence, the teacher-student and the students-teachers reflect simultaneously on themselves and the world without dichotomizing this reflection from action, and thus establish an authentic form of thought and action.

Research is 'critical' when it has significance for both the researcher and the researched. That is, both senses of the word should be apparent in the motivations behind and exercise of research: it should be 'critical' in that it seeks to question and discern, but also in that it should *matter*. The research itself should be decisive, vital and address important matters crucial to the heart of the field of inquiry. The ideal for inquiry is that the research is in and of itself so vital that it is indispensable. And so any research that we call critical inquiry and that is based on critical pedagogy is to be designed to address questions around the notions of freedom, of equality and, ultimately, of liberation. Teachers of languages other than English (and the assumption is that this group forms the core readership of a text such as this) know that reading, writing and work with the printed text and other forms of language are always culturally specific. And often the English language (be it American, British, Australian or Canadian English) is covertly and even tacitly privileged. When learning English through the lens of critical inquiry there is always a need to realize that all language is best taught within a context that is meaningful for the learner. Pedagogical research should ideally address and attempt to redress the sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit, 'colonization' of the cultural context in which English is being taught.

UNESCO captures this intention of critical inquiry when it asks the reader of its report, *Educational Research: Some Basic Concepts and Terminology* (Postlethwaite, 2005) to undertake an exercise. (This is actually something that any individual could and, I would say, should undertake.) The

exercise takes the form of an exploration that seeks to prioritize those areas of need for a particular country's education system. That is, to 'operationalize' research as a process in order to consider how the education system in that country performs (or does not perform).

The examination occurs through a series of practices that address specific phenomena. So, in an Australian context it might be as succinct as exploring how five general aims taken from a small policy publication—in this case, *Planning for Successful Schooling*, which was prepared by the Ministry of Education in the State of Victoria during 1990—have been actualized 25 years on. The UNESCO authors' aim at the imposition of general operational principles that have critical empowerment at their core to specific phenomena, so, paraphrasing UNESCO (Postlethwaite, 2005, p. 49), we would ask how Victorian schools now provide opportunities to:

1. Expand educational *opportunities* for all students?
2. Encourage *excellence in all areas of learning* and to assist *all students* to develop their full potential?
3. *Strengthen community* participation in and satisfaction with the state school system?
4. *Develop and improve the skills, potential and performance* of school principals, teachers, and administrative and support staff?
5. *Manage and control financial and physical resources* in ways, which maximize educational benefits for *all students*?

These five questions (with my italics added) are admittedly very broad, but each encapsulates those senses of equality, equity and quality of opportunity for learning as the goal for inquiry, that the researcher using the lens of critical pedagogy must undertake. The phenomena to be examined are, respectively, 'opportunities' 'excellence in all learning areas' 'assistance with development of full potential', 'strengthening community participation' and the consideration of satisfaction and improvement in the 'performance' of schools. And these issues are framed within their relevance to 'all students' as well as to their whole school communities. Financial and physical resources form the basis of the final and pivotal question to be deliberated upon. Still,

it is control over the school that lies at the centre of the shared quest as the UNESCO exercise below interrogates.

EXERCISE 1 (INDIVIDUAL WORK)

Select one of the five general aims above that you believe would probably receive a high priority in your country. For that general aim write five specific research questions. For each of these five research questions, prepare several operationalized research aims that focus on the performance of the education system in meeting these aims. Then, write down a broad outline of the sequence of activities that would need to be undertaken in order to assess the system's performance with respect to these aims.

How does the researcher then examine the knowledge produced by asking such a complex range of questions that impact of the interrogation of the field of inquiry whether in Australia or elsewhere in the world? Could these questions be asked in a worldwide context and in a way that would evoke new knowledge that will assist actions leading to emancipation? Ideally the answer to this essential question rests upon the fundamental work that is chosen by and with the community under study. In the Australian Council for Educational Research's Radford Memorial Lecture of 1987, New Zealand's former Minister of Education, Dr. Clarence Beeby (in Postlethwaite, 2005, p. 11), was obviously aware of this vital part of any policymaking process and launched a call to action to researchers that we would do well to remember.

I have suggested areas of research that seem to me to be of special importance. But not once have I asked a specific question to which I want an answer... I know enough about research to be aware that the formulation of the proper question may take as much skill and professional insight as the finding of an answer to it, and it may be a skill in which the administrator is not adept. So, the research workers must be involved in the asking of the questions, and must be prepared, in turn, to play a necessary, but secondary, part devising the policies that may follow from the research, where their expertise is limited.

Beeby's words are as relevant today as they were a quarter of a century ago. That it must be a sense of necessity that drives our questioning. For him it is the whole community of policy makers and research workers who must be engaged in the practice of inquiry. To this I would add the essential participation of *the researched community*. It is the collective totality of collaboration that drives the validity of the research. Luke and Dolley (2011) bring the matter of collective, collaborative and transformational research to the fore by challenging us to ask only those sorts of research questions that can be viewed in terms of the transformative effect they generate in their outcomes. That is, whether and how the research can generate new knowledge (Luke and Dolley's case, literacies) that have the capacity to alter

communities' critical analyses and action in the world and their material and social relations, individually and collectively, developmentally and longitudinally.

Qualitative research has 'validity' only inasmuch as transformative power, as much as is possible, belongs to and resides within the representatives of the community being questioned. *If the research doesn't matter to its subjects, then the research itself doesn't matter.* The purposes of any inquiry that research workers undertake, the transformative effect that it generates and the appropriateness of the processes involved, drive the extent to which any research can be seen as valid. What we do as researchers is ask questions so that data will be collected, collated, synthesise and reported *for action*.

The appropriateness of research to the phenomena investigated as summarised in the above discussion is based on principles I have articulated elsewhere (McKenna, 2012a). Researchers need to engage in reporting on and articulating the re/presentation of the lived experience of the people they study. I call this Transformative Artful Praxis and define the term as research that *sets out* to review and capture how places *are created* for learning (in schools in this instance—perhaps for learners of English as speakers of other languages) as experiential practice for all people whom the researcher encounters. The principle that I espouse and note above is that research should, indeed must, always be approached as an *opportunity for collaborative inquiry* and connectivity-through-engagement aimed at building respectful and collective knowing and knowledge. The making of meaning of the life-worlds

of any 'researched' community or individual requires that the principles of respect and collective ownership of the research occur. The researcher needs to engage in a process of reflective practice, which consists of a personal and critical interrogation of their own acculturated *and innate assumptions and beliefs* concerning the community of researched people. And I hold that we need to re/create stories and re/use personal narratives to explore notions of the community, identity and research question. Unlike quantitative inquiry qualitative inquiry can become an occasion in which we are permitted to 'speak' our own truths and so it becomes, in some sense, a form of relational knowledge creation.

The story-telling practice that I advocate holds at its essence the belief that psychosocial wellness dwells at the core of all identity. This means that many times the researcher, the researched and the question will generate the need to explore *tensions and anomalies* whilst simultaneously generating opportunities for the integration of the individual and collective identities being 'questioned'. The diagram on the following page illustrates the various components of this approach.

The Slice-of-Life Approach

As researchers we are obliged to consider that just as judgments of the *veracity* of Art works lie beyond the ken of postmodern critiques concerning absolute and 'documentary' truths (McKenna, 1999), so too, does Artful practice, and the praxis of Artful research explore the tensions and anomalies that are at the heart of evocative inquiry. Through the use of artworks we can, by building on a quality of 'relatedness' move beyond a mere development of a 'sociology of life' or the slice-of-life approach towards a deeper place of expression using the field of Art-making. In encouraging researchers to use anti-foundationalist approaches to Art forms to inform a deliberate use of Artful practice to undergird their research, I am encouraging colleagues to yearn for the unveiling of a depth of meaning by bringing that which is unique into the collective ever-unfolding story that their data reveals. This method of researching is not concerned with recognizing truths or with 'comprehending' existence in some absolute and limiting way, but is much more holistic. It is a call to return to a space where artists-as-researchers and

Artful Praxis in Relation to Other Ways of 'Researching' Our Meaning

Research perspective	Experimental	Naturalistic	Transformative	Artful Praxis
Application	Comprehension	Interpretation	Learning about self and others	Liberation through aesthetics and Art as practice and experiences
Means of expression	Prediction	Description	Collaboration	Connectivity through the ritual use of each Arts practice
Intention	Add credence	Uncover theories of meaning	Interrogate assumptions & beliefs	Creating the story using Art – to break the silences. To know our individual and collective (we-connectivity) truths. To especially make the from colonized notions of identity.
Viewpoint	The “I” is prioritied	The “I and You” are visible	The sense is “We” vulnerable	Us Community and Artists working to build respectful collective knowing.
Stance on knowledge	Fixed	Contextual	Relational	Emerging from unknown realms– unconscious material made ‘conscious’ in art products. Knowledge is process, co-creation and community-focused Knowledge is related to psychosocial wellness.
Procedures adopted	Test hypothesis	Multiple perspectives	Tensions & anomalies	Movement toward Integration Paratherapeutic knowing
Methodological stance	Innocent	Relative	Democratic	Social justice Equity Respect Mutuality
Pathway to understanding	Simplicity	Complexity	Reflexivity	Inter-reflexivity (exhibited as products) Intra-reflexivity (interior focused–felt as artistic ‘process’) Self-hood Lifeworlds

Role of research relative to schooling in our society	Cultural literacy	Cultural diversity	Morality	Critical pedagogical focused on deep knowing A 'gnosis' –new emerging ever changing Art forms and literacies with knowing of self and other in the myriad of lifeworlds through the Art form
How significance is determined	Individual makes meaning	Cooperative meanings	Collaborative meanings	Witnessing “connectivity” through arts works, community and intimacy of making a shared meaning as an audience to research
Consequences	Better or Cleaner Arguments	More complex explanations	Learning & new invitations to inquiry	Invitation to build community and co-create new ways of respectful engagements beyond those that already exist.
Product	Study	Thick description	Journey	Depth encounter with of ‘otherness’ as reparation of injustice.

I acknowledge the contribution made to this model of research by John Carroll, Jonathan Fox, Davina Woods and Edward Errington both in conversation and in past publications where this model has been presented in varied forms.

Table 3.1. Model of Artful Practice (McKenna & Woods, 2012)

researchers-as-artists can work together towards presenting a wholeness of understanding; it is a space already mapped out to some extent by the life-world practices of those who would seek to understand. And like any map it is a work-in-progress, a shifting, changing document (not documentary) that alters as new roads open and old avenues close, as fields become populated with new arrivals and once unassailable edifices are bulldozed to make way for progressive spaces of play and contemplation.

The ultimate unattainable goal of making wholly present the presence of those people being ‘researched’ on such maps cannot be overstated; its very unattainability should present as an active, welcome occasion for discussions *of social justice, equity, respect and mutuality. So the researcher needs to be a person who can use their own engagement with manifold fields of inquiry as an occasion for reflexive, self-knowing explorations of self-hood with respect to the life-worlds of everyone involved in the research in the quest to co-create ways for the respectful engagement with and building of the community to which we all belong.* In many ways it is the creation of a map which precedes the territory. The work is creative; always personal, in-depth and descriptive while at the same time cognizant of and attendant to the ever-changing societal aspects of our world.

The Practices

The terms and practice of phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, action research and case studies are all examined elsewhere and can be easily accessed by readers of this chapter. But as these are often vehicles which drive the researchers’ perspective we should take some time to describe what is at the heART of these modes of inquiry. These ways of examining and being ‘alongside’ the research question all generate stories; human stories especially. They provide cumulative sets of data and ‘findings’ that can form the bases for heartfelt (Ellis, 1999, pp. 669-683) analysis. And ideally these ‘findings’ echo the voices of the community of minds as they embody the knowledge that researchers explore in their practice of the research process. And, once again, these shared stories are the ‘supporting evidence’ that enable transformation to occur.

The process of qualitative inquiry is intrinsically democratic in that it can engage with the community through in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, document and policy content analysis, ethnographies, evaluation of open-ended survey responses, literature reviews, audio recordings, Art-making and the employment of other information technologies. The very diversity of processes available to the researcher is one of the major strengths of qualitative research. Although there is no mandatory fixed process for approaching a qualitative research project, there are some established approaches and phases that must necessarily be taken. If we were intent on exploring opinions towards a topic, for example, the use of interviews would be anticipated; the analysis of document or policy content could occur as a program evaluation in which interview and thematic analysis accompany observation. This would then require a form of literature review to support the researcher in the illustration and accumulation of academic authority and trustworthiness. Trustworthiness of data has become familiar to us as a way to validate a qualitative methodology. It is a notion increasingly being attended to by researchers to address the normalising effect of social, psychological and cultural discourses in research practice (Dokter, 2011) and is strongly aligned with the critical emancipatory research as mentioned earlier. The trustworthiness of the data is crucial to any field of inquiry. Ellis and Bochner (2003, p. 199) use the criteria of plausibility and trustworthiness rather than of reliability and validity to situate data gathered when working with people and they remind us that the “human communication is not an object, or a discipline studying objects”. The research space and the inquiry practice advocated here emphasizes that ethnographies—working with groups of people—are community-focused processes addressing human social interactions and the dynamic nature of human activity. When communicating the study of humans studying humans communicating, we are always inside what we are researching. The physical sciences tell us that the days of the uninvolved observer are past. The researcher and the researched are always personally and intimately involved in the communicative space they co-create—always using the world of reflexive praxis to address the notions of text-and-life or life-and-text—as an expression of their will to find new knowledge (McKenna & Cacciattolo, 2012). The trustworthiness required in such relationships leads us to consider ways to articulate

experience whilst reflecting and reflecting on a subject or theme by accepting its connection with the psychic and emotional life of the researched group. Qualitative research is an articulation of a level of emotionality, and emotionality, subjectivity and affect all come together, I contend, through this Artful method of examining life. And this method becomes emancipatory when it offers socially transformative possibilities. Research, through its manipulation and interpretation by the researcher and the researched as they work collaboratively with their data, can present the world-as-it-is-seen and to address a coherent, collective understanding of reality, so that its findings offer a depth of insight that might not be otherwise available to the researcher.

Conclusion

This leads us back to ponder *quality* and *equality*; back to where we started. Language teaching must, of course, redress the inequities faced by the marginalized and alienated communities we encounter. It must also assume an equivalence, an *equality*—an equality of humanity and existential relevance—between the academic and the actual, between the research and the researched. And so we are compelled to wonder on and come to realize that whatever ‘findings’ we arrive at are always *pluralized* and dependent on the society in which the research occurs—and that communities are formed through a variety of social and culturally specific activities unique to each community, including their own self-research. How, researchers must ask themselves, in this fast-moving globalized cultural field and with the interplay of economics as the key to success, might our research be truthful? How do we live in the world we are now familiar with and yet interrupt the presumption that there is only one way to be known in order to come to know the multitude of worlds? The internationalization of curriculum alongside the new demographic and cultural conditions occurring daily needs to work towards moving beyond the privileging of native English-speaking Western societies—especially as we now are more likely to have new arrivals as migrants and refugees.

Each of us, researcher and citizen alike, needs to ask ourselves which languages we tacitly privilege in our work with language learning and how

do we subvert the covert subjugation of such privileging? We need to listen to the stories that we tell each other with ears that generously and actively attend to the import of each other's narratives, rather than limiting ourselves to mere technicalities such as grammar and spelling. The democratic and inclusive *quality* of Art is just one, though an extremely effective and important way of appreciating that any research project worth doing must have as its goal the advancement of social justice for all people, everywhere. For if human research does not ultimately seek to provide the possibility that we all may live lives of quality and equality, we lose our humanity.

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