Researching Practice

A Discourse on Qualitative Methodologies

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Researching practice: A discourse on qualitative methodologies explores issues, strategies and challenges associated with researching practice. The authors bring a wealth of research practice wisdom and experience to this task. The book provides critical and creative input to the discourse on qualitative research methodologies. It is divided into four sections. The first section explores the issues that frame qualitative research on practice in the 21st century. Section Two is concerned with locating the questions, practices and issues of qualitative research on practice in researchers' journeys and presents three themes – connections, transformations and challenges. Section Three makes accessible a range of qualitative approaches commonly used to research practice. The final section explores future considerations in qualitative research discourse.
Researching Practice
PRACTICE, EDUCATION, WORK AND SOCIETY

Volume 2

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A Discourse on Qualitative Methodologies

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JOY HIGGS

SERIES INTRODUCTION

*Practice, Education, Work and Society*

This series examines research, theory and practice in the context of university education, professional practice, work and society. Rather than focusing on a single topic the series examines areas where two or more of these arenas come together. Themes that will be explored in the series include: university education of professions, society expectations of professional practice, professional practice workplaces and strategies for investigating each of these areas. There are many challenges facing researchers, educators, practitioners and students in today’s practice worlds. The authors in this series bring a wealth of practice wisdom and experience to examine these issues, share their practice knowledge, report research into strategies that address these challenges, share approaches to working and learning and raise yet more questions.

The conversations conducted in the series will contribute to expanding the discourse around the way people encounter and experience practice, education, work and society.

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FOREWARD

Practice as a lived phenomenon, is accessed through the individual and group perceptions of practitioners, practice partners and society, and requires relevant and credible research and writing strategies to contribute to the advancement of practice. Qualitative research is expected to generate insights, and deeper understanding of practice and to impact directly or indirectly on practice.

Research itself is a practice and like any other social activity, has an associated discourse. In this book we contribute to the discourse on qualitative research methodologies and reflect on research contexts, goals, communities and approaches. Each of these aspects of research is shaped by the culture of research communities. A key requirement of being a researcher within the qualitative tradition is to critically embrace the influence of different cultural contexts on the knowledge generated. This book examines various cultures and traditions of qualitative research.

This book is divided into four sections. The first section explores the issues that frame qualitative research on practice in the 21st century. Chapter 1 enters the discourse on researching practice. Researching the messy world of practice (or the white spaces) is the topic of Chapter 2. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explore the historical, philosophical and cultural contexts of qualitative and practice-based research respectively. Coherent and rigorous qualitative research is not a matter of following recipes or protocols but stems from judicious and informed choices about philosophical (Chapter 4) and theoretical frameworks (Chapter 7), the type of questions we wish to research (Chapter 6) and the lenses that we all bring to our research (Chapter 8).

Section Two is concerned with locating the questions, practices and issues of qualitative research on practice in researchers’ journeys and presents a number of themes – connections, transformations and challenges. Ethical research is a priority for all researchers (Chapter 9). The connections between researchers and the researched throughout the research journey is a dominant theme explored from different perspectives in Chapters 11 to 14. Through these connections, transformations can occur where the researcher grows as a person through the research practices (Chapter 10). Being critical and creative in qualitative research is the topic of Chapter 15. Reflexivity (awareness and sensitivity to self and others) is increasingly being advocated as a marker of quality; this and other criteria for interpreting quality in qualitative research are explored in Chapters 16 and 17. Finally in section two, the challenge of qualitative data analysis is ‘demystified’ and examined (Chapters 18 and 19).

Section Three makes accessible a range of qualitative approaches commonly used to research practice in which the themes of connections, transformations and challenges are further explored. These methods include: hermeneutics (Chapter 20), phenomenology (Chapter 21), arts-based research (Chapter 23), ethnomethodology (Chapter 24), action research (Chapter 25), critical inquiry (Chapter 26), collaborative inquiry (Chapter 27), poststructuralist research (Chapter 28) and feminist research.
FOREWORD

(Chapter 30). Other important strategies and issues are explored in this section including making creative thesis texts (Chapter 22), mixed methods research (Chapter 29) and researching in Indigenous spaces (Chapter 31). Common to all the qualitative research approaches presented in this section is the critical place of interpretation (Chapter 32).

The final section contains one chapter that explores future considerations in qualitative research and examines the positives and considerations of future research.

Joy Higgs and Rola Ajjawi

NOTES

JOY HIGGS

1. RESEARCHING PRACTICE:

Entering the practice discourse

To set the scene for this book three key elements are brought together in this chapter. The first is the purpose to focus on research that enhances practice through understanding, interpretation and change. The second relates to the artefacts of research, being knowledge and practice effects. Of particular interest here is the cyclical and ephemeral nature of both of these artefacts. Knowledge, of course, builds on existing knowing, enters into the field of knowledge – the discourse – and changes that discourse; then in turn this same knowledge is challenged and often changed by new waves of incoming knowledge. Practice, broadly speaking, is what we do, and more specifically what we as practitioners do in particular practice communities and how others engage with this practice; such practice is constantly evolving. And, paradoxically, practice needs to be known (our foreknowings and pre-judgements) before we can conceptualise and imagine the questions we want to ask of practice, before we can identify the dimensions we want to change in it, and before we can address the puzzles we want to solve about it. Third, there is the living and lived dimension of research. Practice is a lived phenomenon. It is accessed through perceptions and experience; it is understood through interpretation; it is framed and shared through language; and in turn it transforms those who seek to appreciate (understand and value) it. In the book we explore both the points of reference of the practitioners as well as the perspectives of researchers. In this chapter I focus mainly on the practice of research.

ENTERING THE PRACTICE DISCOURSE 1:
BRINGING IN THE INQUIRING SELF

The researcher as an inquiring self is the concept and phenomenon highlighted in this section. This concept includes being an inquirer about the topic or practice concerned, being awake (see Chapter 33) and receptive to what is being investigated in the world, and critically challenging self as person and researcher in this inquiry process. Each of us brings many dimensions of self to the inquiry process in relation to person, researcher and practitioner. And we are all variable and evolving in relation to these dimensions. The symbol for infinity, the lemniscate, is used to portray this endless variability in the images below.

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Researching Practice: A Discourse on Qualitative Methodologies, 1–8.
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In Figure 1.1 multiple lemniscates reflect how the researcher’s goals, interests, world view, ways of relating to others and practice background (etc.) are brought into each research episode.

![Figure 1.1. Multiple dimensions researchers bring to research.](image)

In Figure 1.2 the interaction of several individuals (both researchers and participants) is illustrated. Of particular importance in these interactions are the ways researchers engage with others and establish ethical partnerships as well as productive research-oriented relationships. The values, interests and stances adopted by researchers (see Figure 1.1) are integral to these interaction choices and patterns.

![Figure 1.2. Multiple researchers interacting.](image)
The encounters implied by these interactions can be virtual and real-time, remote and immediate, intellectual and emotional, easy and difficult. To do work together is always different from working alone, and if the work is meaningful it calls forth – sometimes demands – dialogues that are robust, challenging, enlivening and stretching. Arguably, the growth of individual and collective research practice depends on these encounters, encouraging those involved to crystallise implicit assumptions, to articulate them in ways that others can understand, to listen to others and to work out which practice issues really matter.

ENTERING THE PRACTICE DISCOURSE 2: WORKING IN RESEARCH COMMUNITIES

In Chapters 3 and 4 the importance of researching within philosophical frameworks and the impact of working within different research communities and cultures of inquiry are examined. Such communities may reflect overt aspects of interaction of researchers working on particular projects, or they may have more distant and even implicit frames of reference that influence research strategies, modes of engagement with the research participants (see Chapters 9, 11, 12).

There is an inevitable connection between the type of research questions we ask and our philosophical frames of reference (see Chapter 6). In turn, the methodologies selected for the research are influenced by individual interests as well as norms and practices of the research community. Figure 1.3 draws these various notions and practices together. This figure depicts the way that a research team, with the team members’ various individual and collective characteristics, goals and modes of engagement, operates within a research community. The culture and paradigm of the research community frames the team’s decisions around their philosophical and methodological frameworks (see Chapters 3 and 4).
ENTERING THE PRACTICE DISCOURSE 3: 
BEING PART OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

Professional knowledge is located within the wider history of ideas (see Berlin, 1979) and the broader knowledge of society. Knowledge which has evolved within a practice includes both the history of the ideas contained in the practice and the history of how people have shaped those ideas and shaped the practice. This knowledge can assist us to better contextualise our understanding of contemporary research and professional practices, and to work more effectively on developing future knowledge and practice. Understanding human practices requires an appreciation of the contribution of history to their development. We need historical knowledge of the nature of any professional practice if we are to recognise its imperatives, constraints and possibilities. Moreover, we need an understanding of the evolution of research practices (see Chapter 3) if we are to appreciate how to research credibly.

Figure 1.4 depicts the location of research projects and the associated research community in the world of ideas. This world is shaped by the history of ideas and is manifest in the literature of the relevant field. The term *discourse* recognises the way that language, themes, dominant messages and interpretations frame our ways of knowing, knowledge making and acting in the world.

*Figure 1.4. Being part of the history of ideas.*
The theoretical framework (see Chapter 7) of a research project is drawn from existing literature to highlight key knowledge pertinent to the project and identify the theoretical lenses (see Chapter 8) chosen to shape the research questions and interpret the research findings. Higgs and Andresen (2001) created a metaphor for knowing and knowledge: a picture of threads of understanding being woven into tapestries and carpets to illustrate, respectively, collective and individual knowledge bases. This imagery arose from a view of the historical evolution of knowledge as resembling a never-ending tapestry, a product of centuries of human thought, and seeing the theoretical framework for a research project as a virtual carpet. Students are encouraged to enact their research by dancing on this carpet.

Cherry\(^1\) provided the example of a student who was researching the question of whether mentoring is something that can be arranged or something that simply happens in ways that are hard to predict and manage. The student searched the business, nursing and education literature and found that this question had been asked many times. This literature provided the theoretical framework for the student’s research. It influenced the research strategy; data collected reflected the first-hand experience of people who had mentored or been mentored. The themes identified from the data collected were examined, suggesting ideas that had not been previously been pursued in the literature on mentoring. Further literature searching led the student to the psychoanalytic literature on unconscious interpersonal dependency, which resulted in revision of the theoretical framework and provided a valuable lens for reflecting on the research findings. In this example we see both the importance of creating a theoretical framework and the value of seeing such frameworks as evolving practices and scaffolds responding to the dynamic nature of research and knowledge creation.

**ENTERING THE PRACTICE DISCOURSE 4: FROM, IN AND FOR PRACTICE**

We focus in this book on researching practice. Research can generate empirical and theoretical knowledge. Such knowledge, it can be argued, emerges from practice and is created to explain, explore or extend practice. The concept of the primacy of practice is the recognition and contention that within the development of knowledge practice is what comes first, and theory is developed from it. This places practice at the centre of this debate.

So what is practice? Higgs, McAllister, and Whiteford (2009, p. 102) defined practice as “the enactment of the role of a profession or occupational group in serving or contributing to society”. To unbundle this seemingly straightforward notion it is useful to look at the categorisations of Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), who distinguished five different notions of practice based on different approaches to research into practice:

1. the behaviour of individual practitioners as perceived by outside observers
2. patterns of social interaction among practice participants as perceived by outside observers
3. the intentions, meanings and values which constitute practice as perceived subjectively by individual practitioners
4. the way the language, discourses and traditions of practice are perceived by communities of practitioners as they represent their practices to themselves and others
5. historically, the evolution of practice as a social form which is reflexively transformed and restructured over time.

From these ideas we see the complexity of practice as purposeful actions, a multifactorial form of occupation and role in society, a way of being and doing in the world within a frame of reference of a particular profession or occupation and a phenomenon that is variously viewed, experienced and owned by different groups of people including the practitioners, the clients or partners in this practice, and the community or society which recognises, allows and monitors this practice. Figure 1.5 is an image of this complex set of parameters. It portrays a fluid, dynamic arena comprising multiple players and dimensions engaging in periodic encounters, yet being consistently influenced by the interactive, evolving whole.

![Figure 1.5. Practice dimensions.](image)

To enter the discourse from within practice requires a practitioner’s perspective; thus it is the task of practitioners or researchers who take the time to become part of that practice discourse. This gives credibility to the goal of writing about, for, and from within practice.

In Figure 1.6 the acts and experiences of research are placed in this “living sea” of practice, becoming another process – inquiry – in the midst of practice that is transformed by the practice context as it (the inquiry process) seeks to know this practice and offer ways and ideas for practice transformation.

6
CONCLUSION

To enhance practice through understanding, interpretation and change, researchers are well served by entering the practice discourse as discussed in this chapter. In parallel the researcher is practising research through knowing self and bringing this inquiring self into the discourse, working in research communities with other researchers – alongside practitioners and practice partners – recognising the contributions and reciprocal influences that emerging knowledge and the history of ideas have on one another, and valuing the primacy of practice as source, purpose and influence of research. Throughout this chapter there are many such interchanges reflected in paired circular arrows, demonstrating the inter-connectedness in the various contexts, purposes and practices of research and professional practice. These themes are reflected in many chapters in this book.

NOTES

1 Personal communication.

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2. DOING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
IN THE WHITE SPACES

INTRODUCTION
This chapter explores the potential for qualitative researchers to contribute to productive engagement with the opportunities and challenges presented by living and working in the age of complexity (see Oliver, 2000). It describes the features of the practice challenges that reside in the white spaces of complexity – the spaces where data and know-how are either limited or ambiguous and conflicting – and suggests that these translate into some distinct opportunities for qualitative research. Building on the seminal contributions of Van de Ven and Johnson (2006), who suggested six broad strategies for engaged scholarship, and Weick and Roberts’ (1993) concept of decision-awareness, it explores a number of design features that can be helpful in pursuing these opportunities. It then suggests some of the protocols that can contribute technical and ethical rigour to a wide range of cultures of research inquiry.

THE WHITE SPACES
Freed (1992) has suggested that this a time of relentless innovation: a time in which human imagination and ingenuity have unparalleled access to global resources of all kinds. The opportunities, challenges and dilemmas associated with this era have, in turn, come to be described as the “age of complexity” (Oliver, 2000). Arguably, there are four dimensions of this era that are particularly striking.

The first is what David Perkins (2006) has called troublesome knowledge. This is knowledge that is potentially ground-breaking or transformative but brings with it enormous dilemmas as to how it is to be used wisely and ethically. An obvious example is the human genome project, and another is access to the means of euthanasia. The second dimension is the sheer speed and volume of knowledge creation, and the impact of continuous and rapid change, in all arenas of life and work. The third dimension is a paradoxical one. On the one hand, knowledge is characterised by very high levels of specialisation in research and knowledge, and with that, very divergent ways of dealing with some difficult issues (like the state of clinical depression).

At the same time, we see the collision and convergence of industries and disciplines, as is the case with many biotechnologies. This has led to such blurring of the boundaries that we can be said to be in the postdisciplinary age. The fourth
dimension of this age of innovation is that despite the plethora of knowledge, some problems and opportunities seem beyond obvious solutions or even rules for helpful engagement, beyond existing skills, and sometimes beyond even imagination and optimism.

Graphic designers draw attention to the white spaces\(^1\) that lie outside symbols and marks on a page. These white spaces start at the boundary of what we know or can express and so provide a powerful metaphor for the potential of the unknown. Emmett (1998) suggests that it is here that we can go searching among the absences. Elsewhere, the present writer offers an exploration of the possibilities of the white spaces for learning and practice development (Cherry, 2008).

Many of the issues that occupy the white spaces are what Conklin (2003) calls wicked problems, while other issues are what could be called juicy opportunities. Some of the distinctive qualities of wicked problems and juicy opportunities are that little data about them are available, or the data that do exist are ambiguous, even contradictory. They are often systemic, and the connections between causes and symptoms are not at all obvious, so that seemingly small events have enormous consequences, and individuals or groups can find it difficult to accept and sustain accountability for dealing with them. When such issues are perceived as threats, they can become the focus of power, politics and force, or subject to efforts to achieve quick closure, rather than sites for robust and sustained engagement and debate.

Engagement in these white spaces can come more readily to some people. Entrepreneurs, artists and philosophers find fulfilment in holding open difficult questions that would overwhelm others. For many people, however, engagement with the truly complex comes at a tremendous price, not the least of which is the great anxiety which comes with the uncertainty of not knowing what to do. Much of the implicit and explicit expectations of practitioners and researchers is that they reduce and manage uncertainty, not create or sustain it. Arguably it requires energy to deliberately lean into the white spaces, and hold the tension of “not-knowing”, plus the capacity to be buoyantly confused for significant periods of time.

In this zone of complex practice, where knowledge and skilful practice remain in the white spaces, the same compelling challenges that face practitioners also arise for researchers who are prepared to venture into the space. So how can we strengthen the capacity of qualitative research to impact on practice in the white spaces? How can qualitative research help us to acquire and use the knowledge, skill and confidence to engage with the white spaces?

Choices about what to do and how to do it in the zone of complexity are the result of processes of judgment made by individuals and groups who must cope with the emotional, ethical and spiritual – as well as the intellectual – dimensions of their choices and actions. Men and women not only engage with the particular, the specific situations of complexity, but over time, integrate knowledge with habit and skill to form their characteristic approaches to complex practice. These are the human challenges facing practitioners and those who contribute to complex practice through research.
THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

It has been argued that qualitative research has a particularly helpful role to play here, that it gives us the means to engage fully with the complete range of human experience and ambition, in a broad range of settings. One of the most influential and seminal writers about research, Gareth Morgan (1983) has said that the most significant research questions need to be lived, and that research itself can be understood as a practice journey. In research, he says, we meet ourselves.

All of this suggests that qualitative research has at least four great opportunities to impact on contemporary practice. The first and most obvious opportunity is to throw light on the substance of issues that reside in the white spaces, to study the dynamics and issues that are in play, and that are the focus of people’s energy and effort. The second opportunity is to offer – and perhaps to model – strategies and tools which are helpful in engaging with the human issues we seek to research. These include strategies to hold paradoxical or differing perspectives in creative tension; this is a skill which one could expect to be foremost in the tool-kit of researchers of any kind. The third opportunity is to explore how practice actually develops under conditions of complexity, for better or worse, and to examine how we might assist its development under those conditions. A fourth – and intriguing – opportunity is to throw light on what Weick and Roberts (1993) called decision-awareness.

This means bringing into sharp relief the moments or periods when decisions and choices are being made in practice situations, either implicitly or explicitly, and making them the subject of research. It means shining the light on decision making in the white spaces. These four areas offer critical and pressing opportunities for qualitative researchers. They are all examples of what Schön (1987) called indeterminate zones of practice, characterised by uncertainty, uniqueness, conflict and confusion, contrasting sharply with what he called the canons of technical rationality.

It can be argued, of course, that it is in the zone of complex practice that qualitative research has always made its mark. Qualitative researchers have been prepared to roll up their sleeves and engage with, rather than discount, lived experience, and they have helped practitioners construct theories of, and for, their practice. Qualitative researchers have also demanded what Law (2004, p. 4) called a broader and more generous sense of method: methods that are adapted to the study of the ephemeral, the infinite and the irregular. Qualitative researchers have developed and argued for a wide range of cultures of inquiry, with different but equally defensible truth claims (ontologies) and methods of knowledge creation (epistemologies).

However, qualitative research has also been seriously criticised for the sometimes limited quality of the work undertaken and for the limited effectiveness of its application.

Several special issues in leading academic journals have highlighted growing concerns that academic research has become less useful for solving practical problems and that the gulf between theory and practice in the professions is widening … There is also increasing criticism that findings from academic as well as consulting studies are not useful to practitioners and do not get implemented. … Academics are criticised for not adequately putting their
research into practice. … Practitioners are criticised for not being aware of relevant research and not doing enough to put their practice into theory. (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 802)

These are serious criticisms. It is not the intention here to dwell on the limitations of qualitative research, but rather to explore how qualitative research can rise to the challenges posed by practice in the white spaces.

DESIGNING STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WHITE SPACES

There has been no shortage of ideas about how to do research in the white spaces. Starting with Ernest Boyer (1990), many have called for a deeper form of research that involves active collaboration between researchers and practitioners who co-produce knowledge on important questions and issues, and learn together. This is rather different from viewing organisations simply as data collection sites and funding sources.

The idea of engaged scholarship has been helpfully elaborated by Van de Ven and Johnson (2006), in an attempt to deal with the criticisms previously noted. They first advise us to stay with the big questions or problems, ones that are fuzzy, messy and confusing. They suggest that a good indicator of a big question is that it gets both scholars and practitioners excited – or alarmed. Big questions ask us to stick with real life rather than proxies, to be immersed in experience, get our hands dirty, witness first hand the things that we propose to understand and influence.

Their second suggestion is to deliberately create robust collaborations between people with divergent experiences and perspectives. This means involving insiders and outsiders, people with different knowledge backgrounds, and stakeholders with different and conflicting interests. This contrasts strongly with the common practice of rounding up and interviewing panels of so-called experts who are often chosen for their similarity, convenience of access, or because they represent a particular viewpoint.

Van de Ven and Johnson’s third idea is to attempt more extended studies. This can be as basic as taking the time to build personal relationships over time with key players. It can mean gaining a much deeper appreciation of the genealogy and provenance of the framing of the problem or opportunity, and asking: who says it is an issue? why is it an issue now? and for whom? It can mean more longitudinal studies, contrasting with the many particular and disconnected cross-sectional studies that are more common.

Their fourth idea is to spend more time distilling the trends in the literature. They argue that more research needs to be aggregated to form practice-based wisdom through meta-analysis and that more journal space needs to be given to meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews. They point out that such regular consolidation happens in medicine and the law but is lagging behind in other fields. We can’t keep expecting PhD students to accomplish in their literature reviews what the disciplines can’t manage to do for themselves.

Their fifth idea is to employ what Harrison (1997) has called intellectual arbitrage. This is the idea of using dialectical methods of inquiry, where understanding of a problem is built by deliberately testing and contesting divergent ideas and
building robust alternative models of any problem or opportunity. Constructive conflict is intrinsic to this kind of inquiry, and, as the authors point out, is very different from detached and consensus dependent approaches. It means highlighting, valuing and learning from the lack of agreement about the phenomenon in question.

This idea of arbitrage might sound a bit idealistic but actually goes to the heart of robust scholarship. Arguably, good scholarship is about holding oppositional ideas in play: not just trying to decide that something is probably true or not, but asking “could it be like this? or like this? or like something completely different again?” Complex practice is full of paradoxical tensions, and holding opposite or different ideas in tension is key to engaging with it. As it happens, that is also what good scholarship is about.

Their last suggestion reprises Morgan’s (1983) advice to us from years ago, to focus on designing methodologies that are fit for purpose. In essence, this is about not letting the problems of practice get hijacked by single focus methodologies. And about resisting the temptation to squeeze the research problem into methodologies that don’t fit.

Similarly, McWilliam (2004) insisted that design needs to be customised, deeply appreciative of the particular question being framed, the needs (and power base) of end-users of the research, and the constraints of time, place and funding. Attention to research design means careful positioning of the research, asking: will it work here? is it worth it in this case? who does it privilege? who benefits? The present writer suggests that to create useful options for action we might need to design a portfolio of mixed methods, which between them are fit for the purpose. It could mean creating or adapting specific tools with defined and rigorous protocols. Building research approaches and tools is itself a focus for research, and graduate research students can be supported to make original contributions in this way.

In addition to these six ideas, engaged scholarship puts a high value on developing theories of practice, theories for practice and theories from practice. Qualitative research is often accused of being a theory-free zone, with a bias for description rather than explanation. Practitioners are said to be more interested in best practice that actually works, rather than being bothered by why it works.

Although some have taken up the challenge of connecting theory and practice, (Lynn, 1996), this remains a significant challenge. Engaged scholarship asks us to place competing and possible explanations and theoretical frameworks side by side and then compare them. Before we can do that, maybe we need to be more rigorous in asking some basic questions, like: where did that idea come from? why do I do what I do? what theories inform what I do? This requires serious attention to establishing the provenance of ideas: the minds and hands through which they have come into and passed through the world.

**ANOTHER IDEA**

But as well as the six ideas already mentioned, there is a seventh possibility that is in many respects the most interesting. This is the idea of focusing more qualitative research on that zone of potential decision-awareness to which Weick and Roberts (1993) have drawn attention. This is the point at which the practitioner
is making choices – which might be conscious or not – about what to do and how to do it. This is the point at which the attitudes, habits, beliefs, skills and knowledge of the practitioner, however acquired, come together to guide and shape action. Surgeons might need to be exquisitely aware of their decisions moment to moment – at least one hopes they are – but that kind of awareness (or mindfulness, as Weick and Roberts called it) might not be habitual for managers, educators and a vast range of other practitioners.

It is in the space of mindfulness that the opportunity is created to notice, or invent, or choose other options. It is the point at which we might acknowledge that we need to think again, allow ourselves to be buoyantly or optimistically confused in the best Socratic tradition, to enter a time of constructive not-knowing. It is the space of learning, in which new knowledge might be crafted, tested, discussed and disseminated. For researchers to authentically enter this space, they must themselves be mindful.

Different writers have found different words for this space, and some of them are very beautiful words: it is the space in which we are invited to “look again” (Bleakley, 1999) in which “the present becomes remarkable” (Travis, 2002), in which we “make the familiar strange” (Emmett, 1998); it is forgetting the name of the thing one sees (Wechsler, 1982), and it is problematising what we have previously taken for granted.

This space entails a challenge to tacit knowing: to make it explicit. Anne Cunliffe (2002) has studied how managers work and learn in uncertain environments. She suggests that between tacit knowing and explicit knowledge is an area of muddy water in which lurk possibilities for learning, and from which constructing new understanding may open up. She sees learning as a process in which we are “struck” by what is beyond ourselves, even rattled, and then moved to make sense of our experience in different ways. The moment in which we are struck often embodies a trigger for clearing the muddy water.

The writer of this chapter suggests that research has the potential to make it easier for us to recognise and profit from these striking moments. Going even further, research might also involve creating the potential for striking moments to happen. This is not an uncommon approach in action research, but might be something that could be considered by other cultures of inquiry as well, as a deliberate design strategy.

PROTOCOLS FOR RIGOUR IN ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

As we have seen, engaged scholarship offers some powerful design strategies for engaging with the wicked and powerful issues that occupy the white – and dark – spaces of knowledge and practice. Such strategies demand equal attention to the protocols that bring rigour to research. To speak of rigour is to go to the heart of many debates about the nature of knowledge and what counts as research. Most cultures of research inquiry have distinctive protocols that articulate (albeit with varying degrees of clarity and agreement) how the research is conducted and how it might be evaluated.
It is contended here that the design strategies of engaged scholarship demand that we revisit, re-examine and articulate what we believe are the sources of academic rigour in qualitative research. This might mean seriously questioning one’s own research practice. For this writer, that means transparency about our key assumptions and thinking process right though the research journey, not cleaning up the confusions and messes we encountered and made along the way. It means holding oppositional ideas in play, as already mentioned.

It means articulating our protocols at the start and then evaluating how well they worked and how much we held to them along the way. And it means contextualising our work in a helpful way, highlighting what triggered the researcher’s interest, the social context which framed the language and key constructs being used, and the genealogy of the issues. It also means establishing the connection between a particular phenomenon and other system dynamics in which it is embedded. This is the critical skill of being able to “zoom in” and “zoom out”, like the skilled weavers of tapestry who must work in fine detail in close-up and also walk away and view the entire work from a distance.

Engaged research also demands a deeply ethical stance, one that that goes deeper than just filling out the form for ethics approval. We need to live the question ethically, examine our values and particularly the value bases of what we think we “know” and how we come to know it. McWilliam (2004) noted that postmodernism has shifted the discussion from: what is the nature of reality? to: what is the nature of my interest in it? That’s a different framing of what it is to be objective. McWilliam also suggested that we need to accommodate both interest and disinterest in the one design. Disinterest can be helpful to us, allowing us to be untroubled by other people’s praise or blame or disturbance, rising above seeking to please.

This space of ethical and technical rigour has been claimed by ideas like reflexivity and critical subjectivity, the notion that despite our being socially constructed we can be capable of thinking and acting in ways that challenge particular or local constructions. In one of the great formulations of critical subjectivity, Bleakley (1999) asks us to develop an individual and collective consciousness about how we “are” in the world that is both critical and holistic; that is, reflexive (able to think against itself), ethical, aesthetic, worldly (rather than personal) and ecological or sensitive to difference. And as a result we can learn in richer ways how develop our culture and our private and public discourse.

IN CONCLUSION: THE RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Being able to engage with the unfamiliar, the complex and the frightening, in ways that are not dysfunctional, being able to learn from a position of not-knowing: these are demanding capabilities. To be creative and enjoy the space in the research process seems to be asking a lot. As suggested at the start of this chapter, this is the space in which we can regress as well as grow. It is a space that requires practice, experience and mental effort. In 1987, 20 years ago, Schein predicted that we would need to wait until a generation of practitioner/scholars had been trained in appropriate skills before we could hope to fully engage with the complex issues of change and practice.
The European Community’s expert group (see Knight & Page, 2007) looking at higher education and research has proposed that researchers should have a set of core competencies. These include reasoning, critical thinking, problem setting and problem solving of various kinds, creativity and curiosity, team-working and collaboration, information handling, working across subject boundaries, trans-disciplinary practices, leading and being entrepreneurial, ethical practices, and leading and facilitating conversation and communicating in diverse forums.

That list looks a lot like the skills of master practitioners in many domains of practice. If the qualities and tools needed for effective engagement with complex practice day-to-day, month-to-month and year-to-year are similar to the ones needed to research them, then it’s fair to ask: what can researchers learn from master practitioners? This stands in contrast to the more commonly asked question: what can researchers teach practitioners? Sustained and deep engagement with the juicy and wicked dilemmas and opportunities of the white spaces through qualitative research gives us the way to do justice to both questions.

NOTES

1 This usage of the term “white spaces” is not to be confused with the unused White Space spectrum between TV channels.

REFERENCES


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