AUTHENTIC INQUIRY RESEARCH

Researching our practice is an opportunity to learn. Unlike positivistic-type research that is done to prove or disprove a hypothesis, authentic inquiry is about learning, changing, developing, and implementing practices that contribute to learning and teaching of the researcher and all others involved. Teacher researchers approach such inquiry as learners willing to be transformed by the experience, perhaps not even knowing what questions they will investigate until sometime after the research commences. Being personally involved and being responsible for findings grounded in actual teaching practice makes the research more authentic, as well as more useful and rewarding. Such research alters teaching and learning practices, but is also framed and mediated by these practices.

Authentic inquiry, like design studies, action research and ethnographic studies, situates the researcher inside the research, not outside. Action researchers (especially those doing critical action research) also focus on real-life issues in their place of practice. They often have an orientation toward doing meaningful and socially responsible research by positioning themselves as part of the research rather than being removed from it. They are committed to social change through the use of inquiry to transform social practices (praxis). Building on design studies theory, researchers work with participants to define and cogenerate research questions, findings, and interpretations and to fashion strategies and interventions. These aspects are incorporated into authentic inquiry.

As a research framework, authentic inquiry is dynamic, dialectic, recursive, reflexive, and continuous. Authentic inquiry infuses systematic, purposeful, empirical studies with an active commitment to authenticity criteria and interventions to improve the lives of all stakeholders. It includes a hermeneutic approach to research, attention to difference, an emphasis on reflexivity and on becoming aware of the unaware. Authentic inquiry unites the essence of seeming opposites, like theory and practice, teaching and doing research, and teaching and learning. Because of its dynamic nature, some may find authentic inquiry to be more complex and thus more difficult than conventional methodologies. At the same time, because it is so fluid and changes as our needs and interests change, doing this type of inquiry feels more organic and adapts more easily to researching the dynamic interrelationships and interactions that take place in teaching and learning.

In our research squad’s work, heuristics became reflexive tool kits designed as interventions to raise awareness to a particular set of characteristics (Powietrzynska,
Tobin, & Alexakos, 2015). It only makes sense, then, to produce a heuristic for authentic inquiry research. Though by no means a final draft (neither the criteria for heuristic nor authentic inquiry allow for such a “finality”), this heuristic can be adapted as a reflexive instrument for doing teacher research with the expectation that the heuristic too will change as new knowledge emerges in the process of using it, and underlying theories are redefined or rethought.

Unfortunately, whether because teachers are thought of as technicians who just need to do what they are told by their “betters,” or because of flaws in teacher education programs, not many teachers have had the necessary preparation to conduct research on their own practices. To address this need, this chapter examines features and characteristics that could be part of authentic inquiry research and the authenticity criteria in particular, as well as heuristics and their role in authentic inquiry. This chapter concludes with a heuristic we (Alexakos & Tobin, 2015) have developed for doing authentic inquiry that interested researchers can adapt for their own work.

If interested teachers hold mainstream beliefs, it is not a problem. To some extent, we all do. In my experience good teachers become teachers because they care about their students and value learning. The heuristic addresses such interests and values, and provides a framework and the means for inquiry and change. Interested teacher researchers can take what they like and what they are interested in and adapt it to their own work. The uses of the heuristic shift as the inquiry shifts and as the teacher researcher transforms and is transformed by her or his inquiry.

HEURISTICS

Heuristics are tools that help us explore, focus, and raise awareness. They are reflexive in that, through doing them, we become aware of the unaware. They can be used in teacher research to afford participants’ awareness of characteristics that we as teacher researchers are interested in investigating, or that we would like our students to reflect on as important in their learning.

While a heuristic may look like a survey, it takes on very different roles. Unlike a “positivistic” survey, a heuristic can be used in sociocultural research, both as a tool for investigation and as an intervention. As a tool for investigation, it can be used to explore what the landscape is with respect to questions of interest and how strongly participants feel about them, quantitatively and qualitatively document any claims of changes (pre and post) in the participants that may result from participating in our inquiry, as well as to solicit further explanations.

As an intervention, a heuristic can be used as a reflexive tool for becoming aware of the unaware, and can provide ideas on how to change when and as change becomes desirable. This aspect is probably the hardest for those new to heuristics to wrap their heads around. Too often, we are unaware not only of our environment and of others, but of ourselves – how we feel, how we express our