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Humanization through Action Research as Methodology

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research study was to critically examine the use of action research as a mechanism to enhance graduate students' development as emerging qualitative researchers. Although action research has been recognized as an effective means of transforming teaching practices, studies examining its use among graduate students learning to become qualitative researchers are lacking. Participants profiled in this study include two graduate students and one teacher educator. The context of the study was a graduate level course on action research where all three participants identified starting points, employed distinct action strategies, engaged in sustained, critical reflection, and developed metaphors representing their living educational theories of their practice. Results from this study indicate that each participant gained a deeper self-awareness and understanding of enacting qualitative research and furthermore, recognized action research as a powerful humanizing agent.

Keywords

Action Research Methodology, Humanization, Qualitative Research

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Acknowledgements

Humanization through Action Research as a Methodology

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The purpose of this action research study was to critically examine the use of action research as a mechanism to enhance graduate students' development as emerging qualitative researchers. Although action research has been recognized as an effective means of transforming teaching practices, studies examining its use among graduate students learning to become qualitative researchers are lacking. Participants profiled in this study include two graduate students and one teacher educator. The context of the study was a graduate level course on action research where all three participants identified starting points, employed distinct action strategies, engaged in sustained, critical reflection, and developed metaphors representing their living educational theories of their practice. Results from this study indicate that each participant gained a deeper self-awareness and understanding of enacting qualitative research and furthermore, recognized action research as a powerful humanizing agent. Keywords: Action Research Methodology, Humanization, Qualitative Research

Qualitative research at the graduate level is commonly taught through a sequence of courses that entail a survey of literature, classroom discussion, instruction on methodology, and reviews of qualitative case studies. While these courses are intended to favor a constructivist approach, graduate students' voices pertaining to *what, why,* and *for whom* curricular materials are being implemented are missing. In other words, while graduate students may be engaging in purposeful course exercises such as mock interviews, observations, or analysis, authentic practice-based experiences are often lacking. Unless graduate students hold a research assistantship, little time, in advance of their independent thesis work, is allotted to immersing graduate students fully in the practice of conducting qualitative research, and more importantly, reflecting on their development as emerging qualitative researchers. Instead, more time is spent reading about and discussing qualitative research - merely *existing in* the world of qualitative research. In other words, educators still often dictate what curricular material is presented to students rather than working with students to engage with curriculum (Freire, 1993).

One research methodology that lends itself to breaking this status quo of traditional qualitative research programs is action research. A social movement that is fundamentally about emergent meanings of both action and research, as well as the relationship between them (Noffke, 1997), action research positions knowledge as connected to practice (Noffke, 2009). Its aim is individual and social transformation (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; McTaggart, 1994) by improving practice, understanding of practice, and the conditions of practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 2009). For graduate students, transitioning from learners of the discipline to practicing qualitative researchers, this means more than simply improving the rationality and justice of their own practice; it also involves the transformation of their own patterns of saying, doing, relating, and participation in decision making and taking action (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 2009). The result is personal as well as professional development which is, in effect, multidimensional transformation. For teacher researchers and educators, this transformation entails continued personal and professional development as they commit to facilitating such multidimensional transformation in graduate students.

In this study, we positioned action research as a driving mechanism for both informing and enhancing our development as emerging qualitative researchers and practicing teacher educators. We utilized action research as a plausible and productive *methodology* to investigate this phenomenon. Specifically, the current action research study was both undertaken and written by two graduate students of qualitative research and one teacher educator from a large, research-intensive university.

Underpinning our action research was the aim to transform our practice and development as qualitative researchers. Here, we describe the steps we took and the lessons we learned using action research, ultimately uncovering its role as a humanizing agent. In other words, we purposefully acted and critically reflected on what it means to become a qualitative researcher. As a result, we contend that action research serves as a key mechanism for not only learning to become a qualitative researcher but more importantly, to become more fully human.

In the following section, we provide a brief synthesis of literature in two signature areas: (1) humanization and (2) action research. We feel it is important to first define and describe these constructs and then operationalize them for the purpose of our study. By doing so, we start to demonstrate how these constructs can interact to aid in the process of humanization, a novel discovery uncovered through the process of our study.

Understanding Humanization

Becoming more human or more *fully* human is, for all intents and purposes, the process of humanization. Yet, humanization is deeply subjective, rooted in human diversity, plurality, and distinctness (Ericson, 1991). Literature suggests it can be only understood by understanding its opposite, dehumanization, which he describes as "the denial of the dignity of the individual…" (p. 31). Freire (1978) labels such dehumanization as oppression and proclaims that humanization must work to restore the humanity of those that have been oppressed as well as the oppressors because they dehumanize others. Furthermore, although dignity is a critical element of humanization, we believe that humanization is more than ensuring the dignity of others; it must also involve a lifelong journey toward "becoming everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). Therefore, we offer, not a definition, but a two-fold *conceptualization* of humanization based on the works of Maslow and Freire.

In our conceptualization, thoroughly discussed here so that the reader can fully appreciate our results, humanization exists simultaneously in two dimensions: individual and collective. Individual humanization is based on Maslow's theory of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943, 1968, 1979). Self-actualization is defined "as ongoing actualization of potentials, capacities, and talents, as fulfillment of mission…, as a fuller knowledge of, and acceptance of, the person's own intrinsic nature, as an unceasing trend toward unity, integration or synergy within the person" (Maslow, 2013, p. 418). Embedded in this idea of self-actualization is growth toward "full-humanness," identity, awareness, self-understanding, self-acceptance, a personal system of values, and a personal way of life (Maslow, 1968, 1979). This individual humanization can be demonstrated by ongoing growth and development in all dimensions of a person's life (e.g., intellectual, emotional, spiritual, personal, professional).

Collective humanization is based on Freire's (1978) critical pedagogy. Individually and collectively the ontological vocation of every person is to be more fully human. This involves becoming critically conscious of the way one exists in the world and choosing to act on the world with which and in which they find themselves in order to transform it (Freire, 1978). Humanization is a mutual process which can only be carried out in community and unity. This collective humanization is manifested by empowering individuals to participate in decision making and taking action.

In our work together we wanted to examine the extent to which action research could facilitate not only our emerging understandings of qualitative research, but, more importantly, enable us to become critically conscious of what and how we could transform ourselves in the process of becoming competent qualitative researchers.

Understanding Action Research

Since its inception, action research in education has been conceptualized in many ways and used for many outcomes (Kemmis, 1981; Noffke, 1997; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). Often used by teachers to research and transform their classroom practices (Altrichter, et al., 2013), action research is a "form of systematic, self-reflective inquiry undertaken by teachers to improve their own practices and understanding of these practices" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Capobianco, Horowitz, Canuel-Browne, & Trimarchi, 2004; Feldman, 1999). Action research is concerned with translating findings from social scientific research to practical action (Carr, 2006) to address social issues using social action (Collier, 1945; Lewin, 1946). In other words, it problematizes social practices for individual and social transformation (McTaggart, 1994). It is also commonly used by teacher researchers (qualitative researchers) aiming to help educators transform their practice.

Although frequently used by teacher researchers to collaboratively improve their educational situations, action research has not been used as often as a means of problematizing researchers' own qualitative practices. However, action research literature defines many possible positive outcomes to doing so. For example, Altrichter and colleagues (2013) suggest resultant novel understandings being created through action research. In other words, by engaging in the iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, the original problem or issue may be (re)conceptualized or give rise to new issues. Calhoun (1993) discusses a resulting "progress in professionalization," as well as the development of "a professional problem-solving ethos" (p. 8). These both arise by engaging in cycle(s) of action research. Holly (1989) suggests action research, through reflection, will lead to increased mindfulness and an increased understanding of an educators' local teaching culture. Hence, we contend that action research in our study mobilized us as qualitative researchers to critically explore the different dimensions of qualitative research and furthermore, and how we situate ourselves within our educational situations.

Context of our Work

The context of our collective work was a graduate level course entitled Action Research in Science Education. The goals of the course included: (1) the development of professional community of practitioner researchers; (2) the enlightenment of curriculum reform and professional empowerment; and (3) graduate students' recognition of their own expertise.

Course topics and activities included the following: (a) critical review of literature on various conceptions of and models for action research; (b) an analysis of collaborative and spectator forms of research (i.e., pre-service and in-service science teacher education; professional development programs; and independent projects); and (c) ways to identify problems to investigate, select appropriate research methods, collect and analyze data, and draw conclusions from the research. A signature part of the course was the graduate students' immersion in an action research study of their choice. Graduate students purposefully and systematically planned and conducted an action research study within their respective educational situations. Graduate students who participated in the course included practicing teachers and graduate teaching assistants in science education. Their educational situations – classrooms and labs – provided a friendly venue for them to conduct an action research study.

However, in the study we present in this article, the graduate students in this study were *not* teaching assistants *nor* had access to an educational situation that merited a classroom-like context. Interestingly, Jeff and Cole were doctoral students simultaneously learning about qualitative research methodologies through a traditional qualitative research course sequence and wanted to translate their formative understandings into practice. Cole, a third-year doctoral student in the engineering education, used the course as a means for learning about action research methodologies. For his dissertation research, Cole proposed to conduct a qualitative study using collaborative action research to both humanize a sophomore level mechanical engineering course as well as help the instructor of the engineering course to transform and enhance her practice. Jeff, a second-year doctoral student in science education, elected to take the course to complete a core requirement in his doctoral program. Jeff was simultaneously attending a qualitative data analysis course and quickly recognized the utility of action research as a way of putting his knowledge of qualitative research into practice.

In addition to reviewing and discussing a survey of literature in action research and associated methodologies, Brenda employed four main recurring pedagogical strategies: (1) dialogic conversation; (2) critical friendship; (3) reflection and (4) use of metaphors. Brenda's focus was to ground the course in action research despite our different developmental stages and intentions for the course. As the course instructor, Brenda utilized the course to examine the effect of re-positioning her curriculum and instructional approaches on the graduate students' action research.

Methodology

According to Feldman (1999), action research is often utilized to seek improved understanding of an educational situation so that one can become part of the knowledge base of teaching and learning. From this operational definition, action research is recognized as a methodology, a paradigm within which research is done, rather than a specific set of research methods. It is characterized by the focus and the goals of the research. In our study, it is the instructor teaching and the graduate students learning to conduct action research for the primary purpose of learning to become informed qualitative researchers.

First- and Second-Order Action Research

Embedded in this study is the construct of first- and second-order action research (Elliott, 1991; Stenhouse, 1975). In his book, *Action Research for Educational Change* (Elliott, 1991), Elliott states:

> The attempt of the Humanities project team to facilitate reflective practice in schools generated an important conceptual distinction between the 'research' role of the outsider in relation to the 'research' role of the insider practitioner (see Elliott 1976, 1977). Stenhouse (1975) contrasted the *first order inquiry* of the teachers with the *second order inquiry* of the central team. The teachers' inquiry was focused on the problems of developing pedagogical strategies consistent with educational aims and principles. The team's inquiry was focused on the problems of facilitating teachers' reflective capacities. (Elliott, 1991, pp. 26-27)

In the same book, Elliott (1991) talks of a "second order process of action research...a process of reflectively analyzing his experience as an action-research facilitator" (p. 13). For the graduate students in this study, their research "object" was their own inquires of becoming

qualitative researchers (first order inquiry). For the outside researcher (the course instructor), it was her strategies for facilitating the development and interpretation of the students' reflective capacities (second order inquiry). This distinction between first- and second-order action research was particularly important in the context of this study.

It questioned the location of ownership, as research primarily belonged to the graduate students. In this study, it was up to the graduate students to establish objectives and strategies to achieve them. For the most part, the instructor's contributions were only one of support and facilitation of the action research process. Hence, first-order action research was driven and directed by the graduate students in the context of our action research course while second-order action research was facilitated by the instructor and her interpretation and analysis of the students' reflective experiences of becoming qualitative researchers.

Data Collection

There were two separate components to our model for action research. The first component consisted of the graduate students conducting action research. The second component consisted of the course instructor examining the graduate students and how they engaged in action research. This required the graduate students to employ their own methods for gathering data, including journaling, instructor feedback on assignments, and pre- and post-surveys. The course instructor gathered data through the context of her course instruction. She took copious notes of our weekly class discussions and review of in-class assignments. In-class assignments weekly reflections, starting point speech for action research projects, data collection plans, and final action research papers. Brenda also employed the use of metaphors as a way of helping the graduate students visually conceptualize their work and identify the nature of their personal and professional inquires (Altrichter et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

Data analysis entailed an intricate cylce of reading, selecting, presenting, and interpreting the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each member of the group sorted, grouped, and separated each respective data source. Individually we read and re-read all the data sources, paying particular attention to how we could make meaning of what we were learning about becoming qualitative researchers. At the same time, we read about processes such as inductive data coding and writing theoretical notes and analytical memos which allowed us to apply these procedures to our data analysis. We identified and characterized recurring trends in the data and confirmed these emerging patterns in the context of weekly class discussions.

To further enhance our analysis of the data, we created metaphors of our individual action research projects. Strauss (1990) suggests qualitative analysis draws on metaphors. According to Altrichter et al. (2013), identifying, constructing, and analyzing metaphors can help action researchers in different ways. Metaphors allow researchers to strengthen their understanding of their educational situations. Metaphors provide an alternative approach to representing what is happening, thereby making what was once implicit, explicit (Gibbs & Franks, 2002; Larkin et al., 2007). Metaphors also allow researchers to communicate complex ideas using very little information. Lastly, metaphors allow researchers, specifically action researchers, to become receptive to new action strategies. Strategies of action often seem normal and obvious only from the point of view of the generative metaphor they are based upon. As soon as the metaphor changes new strategies of action become relevant. Understanding the generative character of metaphors can also help action researchers to distance themselves from the apparent obviousness of daily routines. Hence, we utilized metaphors to stimulate our data analysis and enrich the research and development process.

Our Findings

Below are reflective accounts of our experiences in becoming researchers of our own practice. In these narratives, we present: (1) our starting points; (2) the action stratgies we put into place; (3) dilemmas we encountered; and (4) our metaphors. We present these findings in a progressive manner such that our starting points represent first impressions of our work. Our action strategies depict the purposeful steps we put into place to ignite some kind of change in an effort to improve our practice. The dilemmas represent contradictory and unavoidable aspects of our respective educational situations. Lastly, we share our metaphors that not only help us to understand our new situations and roles, but also how we see the world.

Starting Points

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) define a starting point as "a springboard for new thought and new work" (p. viii). In action research, this is essentially a snapshot of a researcher's current situation including but not limited to the time; place; participants; issues; and the context. It is from here that researchers initially conceptualize and implement the action research process (Altrichter et al., 2013). Below we describe our action research starting points.

Brenda - Making discrepancies explicit. One of the first exercises I encourage graduate students to complete is what is called "The Gap" (Altrichter et al., 2013, p. 51). The "gap" is between how you would like to see yourself as a practitioner and the way you actually are. Using an index card, students write down a description of their current educational situation. Graduate students who are practicing teachers often describe how they teach or problems they are having with students' lack of engagement or motivation. On the other side of the index card, students describe what they envision their practice to look like four or six months from now. Here, teachers often depict their classroom practice as more hands on, student-driven, and high engagement. Hence, "the gap" is the space between what your practice looks like now and what it could look like months from now.

My goal for this activity is to jump start students starting points for their action research. According to Altrichter et al. (2013), action research can originate from discrepancies in one's practice. Often these discrepancies are tacit and therefore, need to be brought to the surface or made explicit. Once students share their gaps with their critical friends, I encourage students to return to these gaps throughout the semester to help remind students of their initial intentions for action research as well as observe their growth in understanding over time. What I would position as my initial starting point actually became my action strategy for the entire course. I focused on making explicit the discrepancies my students observed in their practice and professional development as qualitative researchers and leveraged their uncertainities as a source of generative knowledge. Interestingly, my students helped me begin to see how this small step in combination with my instructional strategies of dialogic conversation, critical friendship and reflection, was a way of humanizing the nature of qualitative research.

Cole - Living educational theory. For my gap exercise, I initially described my practice as somewhat narrow and perhaps incomplete when it came to knowing what action research was and how to study action research as a methodology for my prospective dissertation study. I described features of qualitative research that I was quite familiar with including elements such as naturalistic, interpretative, descriptive, and inductive. Yet, I grappled with articulating what action research was, how to situate action research within my current schema of qualitative research, and how to integrate action research within my current practice. I reflected on several articles I read regarding action research but admittedly felt that I lacked knowledge of the historical, philosophical, and methodological aspects of action research. In addition, I expressed deep concern about how best to communicate my ideas about

action research as a methodology to members of my doctoral committee who were comprised of predominantly engineering and engineering education faculty. Engineering faculty may have a limited scope of understanding qualitative research and furthermore, they may question the utility of action research for my proposed work.

By the time I completed the action research course, I envisioned myself knowing exactly what action research was and was not; its historical roots; and moreover, how to appropriately use action research as a methodology. For me to fill this gap, I needed to read about different types of action research, identify and select the most appropriate model of action research for my research, and articulate a comprehensive methodology for action research. More importantly, I needed to be able to explain what action research is to others in order to justify (1) *why* it is a legitimate methodology for academic research; (2) *why* a particular model for action research was appropriate for my proposed research context; and (3) *why* the data collection and analysis methods were the most appropriate for answering my research question(s).

Jeff - Harnessing my unrest. As a second-year graduate student in my doctoral program, I was anxious to learn more about how to become a proficient qualitative researcher. Considering I had completed an introductory course in qualitative research and additional courses that focused on applications of qualitative research, the connection between novice and expert was not yet salient to me. While I had spent a lot of time scouring over seminal literature and engaging in conversations with various qualitative scholars, I could not picture myself becoming a proficient researcher in the two, short years I had left in my doctoral program. Furthermore, when I asked other researchers how they had become proficient, all of them told vastly different stories!

What I was learning was that there was a large disconnect between my assigned readings, course activities, class interactions, and my own development. Specifically, the more qualitative content and practices I learned about, the further away I felt from becoming the expert I was trying to become.

When the action research class started, I was also conducting my first independent qualitative research project as a graduate research assistant – essentially authentic inquiry into learning more about qualitative research. After engaging in the "gap" activity, it became evident that my course and practical research experiences would be a great opportunity to problematize my own practices. Hence, my starting point for action research was grounded in the notion that I could conduct action research on my learning of qualitative research – perhaps these feelings of unrest and questioning would lead to major growth.

Our Action Strategies

Action strategies are activities designed and utilized to "improve the situation or its context" (Altrichter et al., 2013, p. 69). They are generally both connected to the researcher's starting point, and arise through immersion in an action research cycle. Here we draw out our action strategies.

Cole – Writing, presenting, reflecting. To learn about the various types, uses, and applications of action research, I elected to conduct a synthesis of literature on action research starting with the course readings, then expanding my synthesis to action research studies in engineering education and other disciplines. To effectively communicate the research, I decided to submit sections of my dissertation proposal to my graduate committee for review and solicit feedback, guidance, etc. I chronicled my progress by maintaining daily descriptive journal entries of my research-related meetings and writing reflections about my personal thoughts, feelings, and ideas throughout the experience.

Jeff – Surveying, sharing, reflecting. I decided to perform action research on my engagement in my research assistantship and assignments in the advanced qualitative research course. To do so, I generated a series of action strategies to elicit continuous, constructive feedback on my progress as an emerging qualitative researcher. I developed short feedback forms that the course instructor of the advanced qualitative research course and my advisor for the research assistantship completed on a regular basis. I asked questions such as: "How is Jeff developing as a qualitative researcher? Please elaborate." These forms were collected in conjunction with my own critical reflections on my interactions with faculty members and peers, or what McNiff (2010) refers to as "critical friends," in the action research class. I shared my tentative thoughts, feelings, and understandings of what I was learning about qualitative research, as well as what I was learning about myself as a qualitative researcher.

Brenda – Training, re-distributing, reflecting. When deciding upon my purposeful action strategies, I immediately considered who my students were and their respective starting points. Jeff and Cole presented an interesting dynamic that I quickly recognized as an opportunity to re-position my role as the instructor to trainer. Both Jeff and Cole wanted to learn how best to employ qualitative research strategies and furthermore, embody these practices more fully. I determined that I would re-distribute my power as the instructor and encourage Jeff and Cole to serve as instructors of their own practice. This meant tailoring the course to their needs while simultaneously letting go and allowing for the students to help one another through reflection and open dialogue. I established a course routine where the students, upon entering the class, would "check in" with one another, share reflections, and ask critical questions about the progress of their action research and synthesis of readings determined by the class. I took copious notes, recording their ideas, questions, and reflections and later reviewed and reflected on my notes. I used my notes, graded assignments, final action research reports and presentations, and this manuscript to chronicle not only my students' development, but my own development as a teacher educator and researcher.

Our Dilemmas

According to Altrichter et al. (2013), a dilemma is a situation where a person must choose one of two or more alternatives. Researchers and practitioners alike face dilemmas on a regular basis. Teachers, for example, might consider adopting new curriculum that is conceptually challenging for an accelerated group of students and soon find themselves in a dillemma with their other students who could likely benefit from the curriculm but unable to take the course. There are; however, other dilemmas that are not as major that are inherent in the work of a researcher and can be made explicit through action research. Here we describe several dilemmas we faced and the tensions and decision points we reached along the way.

Jeff - Bias in qualitative research. A significant dilemma that arose during my action research pertained to bias. As I reflected on how I was physically moving back and forth between classes and research settings, simultaneously reading and reflecting on qualitative literature, I started becoming cognizant of my positionality, or role as researcher as a tool (Evans, 1988). I began to ask the following questions in my qualitative research methods course: "How would positionality affect my research? To what extent could my own lived experiences inform, if not influence, how I collect and interpret data? Would scholars reading my work understand and validate my research perspective?" I decided to share these reflections with my critical friends.

With the help of long and serious conversations (Feldman, 1999) I was able to understand that my unique set of experiences may not hinder, but, in effect, make my research richer. Perhaps my set of lived experiences with conducting research would help inform others and lead to even deeper insight into phenomena. In the end, being an informed researcher

requires taking into account all voices and perspectives, not just one. While learning to accept positionality as an essential element of qualitative research was my dilemma, it ultimately became a critical turning point in my development as a qualitative researcher. Thus, my individual or unique perspective may serve as the impetus for others to understand my research. As Lather (2006) writes, it is often more valuable to explore and live in our "gray areas" – we do not have to "fit" perfectly into previously defined spaces.

Cole – Conceptualization of action research. My initial dilemma related primarily to my working conceptions of action research. Some authors position action research as a form of practitioner-based research whereby teachers (practitioners) identify a problem in their practice and want to make changes to address this problem and eventually improve their practice. I did not have an educational situation where I would be teaching and could enact this approach to practitioner-based action research. Other authors characterize action research as a process whereby the research is co-constructed by the researcher and the research participants. I did not have research participants, per se and had to rely solely on my existance as a promising doctoral student preparing a thesis proposal grounded in action research. According to these working conceptions, practitioner-based action research did not immediately appear as an appropriate methodology for my research proposal. Yet, I was convinced that action research would be a better fit for my research proposal than other methodologies that I had considered (i.e., case study and phenmenography).

My dilemma presented two obvious choices. I was to either use a methodology other than action research or change my research to fit neatly into one of the two conceptions of action research. Still, my desire to conduct action research would not acquiesce. With the support and encouragement of Brenda, an accomplished action researcher, I chose, to move forward with my research proposal as an action research study. I began to explore my proposed research by challenging my conceptions of action research through course readings, in-class discussions, and literature on action research from other disciplines. Feedback from my critical friends provided reassurance that I was moving in the right direction and that my knowledge of action resarch was expanding and aligning with the objectives to my proposed work. As I reflected on these experiences and interactions with my critical friends and the related literature, I realized that my conceptions were not wrong, they were incomplete. By taking advantage of the safe place to explore my tentative thoughts and fragmented understandings, I was able to overcome my dilemma by deepening my understanding of action research.

Brenda – Teaching action research. I encountered two dilemmas in my practice. Initially, I grappled with how best to inform the graduate students about what action research is, its historical roots, and theorectical perspectives. Moreover, I wanted to encourage the graduate students to consider action research as a plausible methodology. Underpinning this dilemma was the fact that the graduate students were from science and engineering. For scientists and engineers, research is often postioned as empirically-bound, systematic, and data-driven. I had to convince the graduate students that action research was a legitimate and meaningful form of research.

To confront and address this dilemma I decided to reinforce the importance of dialogue and reflection. We spent the first part of the course characterizing what research is and what it is not. Then we discussed the parallels between the course readings on action research and their existing conceptions of research. Through dialogue, the graduate students exchanged ideas, points, and arguments and consequently, described their own participation in action research as a key mechanism for building a foundation and further extending their understandings of research, in general. This platform for investigation and practical action seemed to help bridge the divide between scientific research as subjective to action research as highly participatory, socially-influenced, and complex.

The second dilemma I faced occurred during the preparation of this respective manuscript. A central tenet of action research is the interplay between one's reflections and practical actions. This suggests that the researcher becomes instrumental in authoring his/her own action research. Yet, how do you determine authorship of a manuscript that profiles action research studies of multiple researchers? For me, this was quite simple. Both Jeff and Cole shared with me their keen interest in the process of humanization. I attempted to implement elements of this process in my teaching through dialogue and reflection. Moreover, I thought it was equally important that I enact these tenets by purposefully and mindfully positioning myself as the third and last author. For my students to become fully human in the process of becoming qualitative researchers, I felt it was critically important they serve as first and second authors. To embody this experience is to fully engage in every aspect of the process, including the conceptualization of the manuscript, editting multiple drafts, and focusing on the main tenets of our storied experience.

Our Metaphors

Wildy (2003) suggested metaphors as "an honest account" of a "methodological journey" (p. 112). Munby (1990) argued that humans "see" the world metaphorically, and that metaphors "bring a richness of vocabulary to describing" our experiences (p. 2). Using metaphors to describe the action research process allowed us to "see" and (re)conceptualize our own worlds and our transformation as developing qualitative researchers. Below, we present our metaphors created to help reflect on the action research process.

Jeff - Becoming an expert painter. Engaging in action research to both become aware of, and hone my development as a qualitative researcher was analogous to becoming an expert painter. Just like an artist studying well-known artwork, I read about and discussed different perspectives on qualitative research in my methods course. Like learning and practicing different methods of painting, I was gradually developing the skills necessary to engage in discourse about qualitative research. Yet, it was not until I engaged in action research on learning about becoming a qualitative researcher, stepping back to view my paintings thus far, that I then began to hone my skills and purposefully use the tools necessary to understand qualitative research. The more I read and practiced, the more I began to realize my place among the other great artists. Whereas I doubted the value of my background and trajectory, my unique perspective and sociocultural boundedness had become the source of my creativity and worth. The way to create great work grew more salient. It was time to begin creating my life's work.

Cole - Navigating unchartered waters. The action research process for me is much like going on a journey into unexplored places. I began with a destination in mind. I wanted to propose a research study using action research as my methodology. Exploring the literature was much like looking at maps. I plotted multiple pathways while noting the terrain, landmarks, and variable distances. Once I started synthesizing the literature, I realized that there could be multiple routes to my desired destination. Sometimes a route or pathway is determined for you (e.g., by sea or by land) based on your starting point and your desired destination. For example, participating in a traditional research program and following a well-established curriculum. Other times the course may be unknown. If you begin with an existing path, you may also determine your own way to finish the journey. That is what I did. Early on I grappled with how to embark on my journey and from where should I start. I had to acknowledge my own shortcomings and insecurities with organizing my thoughts and interpretation of the literature on action research as a methodology. In the end I embraced my fears and doubts, charting a course by putting my thoughts down on paper and took that first steps in becoming a qualitative researcher.

Brenda - Getting my hands dirty. For me, teaching action research is much like the process of gardening. With any good garden, there is a starting point, conception and lots of planning. Attention must be given to existing soil conditions, the types of seeds, and amount of space. Like gardening, you need to get the right conditions for growth among action researchers. For me, it was important that I understood clearly Jeff and Cole's existing educational situations so that I could provide them the support necessary for them to develop new knowledge about what it means to conduct research, specifically action research, but also the impact this process can make on them personally and professionally. How I prepare the soil is an apt description of laying the foundation for prospective qualitative researchers. Exercises such as developing a starting point, mapping out action strategies, and continual reflection allowed me to observe exactly how Jeff and Cole were developing their understandings as well as how they were making meaning of what they were learning. Tilling speaks strongly to how I frequently monitored and adjusted my practice to accommodate their emerging talent as qualitative researchers and the questions they generated along the way. In some cases, this meant deviating from my initial course syllabus and peppering my lessons with readings and long and serious conversations about issues such as research bias, positionality, and ethical considerations.

Gardening and teaching action research are both lessons in diligence and humility. Our jobs as gardeners and researchers are to prepare our graduate students appropriately, follow our best practices, be as diligent as we can be and at some point, trust our graduate students will grow and flourish. We cannot make a graduate student rise up, any more than we can make a tomato appear.

Discussion

Freire (1993) defined humanization as "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it." This directly suggested a connection between humanization with action research through *the use of* action and reflection as *drivers* in transforming practitioners' (our) worlds (p. 79).

For qualitative researchers, our unique worlds are largely comprised of immersing ourselves in qualitative literature and practices to answer and solve questions and problems that interest or bother us (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). To be fully human, then, means actively engaging with this world and set of processes, or likewise (if we are in positions of oppression) redistributing our power to help others more fully interact with it (Freire, 1993). It also entails reflecting on our engagement with the qualitative world, all which we did through our research.

Here, this engagement was summarized through our starting points, action plans, dilemmas, and metaphors – fully understood by carefully viewing the intentions and outcomes surrounding qualitative research that each researcher discusses (Capobianco & Feldman, 2006). Although we each had different reasons for engaging in action research, we openly discussed the impact this experience had on our individual and collective development as qualitative researchers. We also described dilemmas that arose through problematizing our own practices, as well as expanding on new conceptualizations of qualitative research using metaphors. The results were shared outcomes that included: (i) a more focused awareness and enactment of our development and (ii) an uncovering of action research as a powerful humanizing agent. Overall, our findings aligned with humanization literature. As a result, action research was uncovered as a humanizing agent when implemented towards the development of emerging qualitative researchers.

For Jeff, engaging in action research helped him fill in details surrounding qualitative knowledge and practices he had not previously had, as well as form the connections between

them. As discussed, it also helped him more fully conceptualize what it is to be a proficient qualitative researcher, and likewise more fully human - an expert painter possessing a variety of tools and skills. It was at the beginning of his action research that he faced his dilemma that was the realization he did not know what a proficient qualitative researcher was, or how to become one. Enacting the tenets of critical action research, it was through action and reflection both in- and on- those actions that helped him transform.

For Cole, actually beginning the journey was most helpful for charting a course to the desired destination. The need to submit a research proposal compelled him to act on his plans and begin writing. However, it was the action research process that allowed him the freedom to engage in such an exploration. This provided the context for his empowerment, actualization, and transformation throughout the process which, in turn, allowed Cole to become more human.

For Brenda, re-distributing instructional power re-affirmed for her the omnipresent need for instructors to listen carefully to their students, nurture their passions, and scaffold their learning through critical reflection and dialogue. Her engagement in action research rekindled a passion for living her own educational theory of practice and telling her and her students' stories of how they have taken mindful actions to improve their educational situations as well as improve their own learning. Brenda's story is about how she has exercised her educational influence so that her students could express their originality and critical engagement and furthermore, make public their own personal storied experiences with action research.

Despite our shared outcomes, however, we each used action research towards different goals. Interestingly, the only connections we had were limited to being in the same class, only meeting once a week.

Implications

We suggest two key aspects of our experience with action research that allowed for our similar outcomes: (a) that participating in action research was grounded in our shared desires to be more proficient action researchers—more human, and (b) that engagement in action research was supported by critical pedagogical strategies.

For example, Brenda (the teacher researcher) tailored the class to the graduate students' needs from the first day of the course. While she had her own intentions and classroom objectives, this allowed all voices to be present throughout the whole sixteen weeks—not only through weekly dialogic conversation, but throughout the course itself (Rodriguez, 1998). For example, pieces of weekly literature were changed periodically throughout the semester to better align with student desires as well.

With transformative teaching in mind, Brenda also helped build the whole class around the problematizing of qualitative research practices. Through reflection, a survey of critical action research literature, and critical friendship, Jeff and Cole were able to perceive their development within current oppressive power structures—status quo, teacher-centered education in which students are given objects in the world to merely interact with (e.g., prescribed literature, writing assignments). Action and reflection were both instrumental components of action research that led to this awareness. They helped us become more aware of our development within the world of qualitative research.

As a result of the critical strategies utilized in our class, we were ultimately able to enact and reflect on changes to our development. This was most evident through the conceptualization of qualitative research through creating metaphors. Metaphor creation allowed for reflection on, and internalization of conceptualizations of "qualitative research" as it applied to our semester-long projects. We all described our development into qualitative

researchers as a type of ongoing process—building, exploring, gardening. These represented humanizing activities.

Metaphors also suggested different positionality to qualitative research, raised through our increased awareness of qualitative research. Jeff and Cole appeared to be emerging as proficient researchers, finding their places in the world (Cole; exploring), while Brenda was more established and worked on fine-tuning or cultivating her work.

This positionality was in turn reflective of our unique starting points and dilemmas. Jeff used the metaphor of painter while engaging in a qualitative research project. Cole wrote about exploring in relation to working on his preliminary exam literature review and first draft. Brenda discussed gardening in relation to pruning her often-utilized qualitative practices.

Our results suggest an effective way of utilizing action research, towards helping emerging qualitative researchers hone their development and enactment of qualitative research. In trying to become qualitative experts by completing a series of teacher-centered graduate courses, this is a potentially impactful finding. Considering action research is a systematic process, it also represents a practical way helping students develop into proficient qualitative researchers.

However, educators must be willing to work collaboratively with students towards this end. Critical pedagogy played an instrumental role in contextualizing our engagement with action research, including the teacher's willingness to redistribute power towards enhancing graduate student learning via more relevant pedagogy. Yet through working together throughout the semester, only once a week, we all were able to work towards and perceive major transformative change in ourselves.

Conclusions

Overall, the humanizing and transformative aspects of action research were made accessible through action and reflection, both central components of the action research cycle. As researchers, we became more human by gaining a deeper awareness of how to enact qualitative research. Similarly, by helping Jeff and Cole to problematize their practices through student-centered activities and critical friendship, Brenda was able to redistribute her power as the course instructor and furthermore, leveling the playing field by repositioning herself as the learner, teacher, and researcher. This ensured all voices were heard and responded to, by not only the instructor, but also critical friends within the course.

Thus, we were all able to (re)conceptualize qualitative research. This was evidenced through the creation of our metaphors, a practice often used by action researchers to reflect on and conceptualize their problems. Often metaphors lead to a fuller understanding of the problem (Altrichter et al., 2013).

We were also able to gain a raised awareness of problems not present before our action research study. This started with the initial problematizing of our qualitative practices and asking ourselves simply what we wished to improve on as developing qualitative researchers. As critical friends, we kept ourselves accountable throughout our research. Finally, we gained self-acceptance. This was accomplished through continuous reflections on who we were throughout our study versus our newly understood capacities as researchers gained throughout our individual and collective research.

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