

Quality of Educational Research: The Need for Reflective Practice

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at unpacking a recent deep concern about the issues and challenges of becoming a discerning consumer of research in education (Perry & Nichols, 2015). With the avalanche of educational research because of the critical career pressures to publish and present at various fora, many in academia have become either, or both, casual producers and consumers of research. The paper will show that in our efforts to benchmark quality in research, it is imperative to engage in reflective practice – to become discerning in two senses: penetrating and discriminating. It will be argued that embracing reflective practice in research is the nurturing of discernment by going beyond the surface, penetrating deeper for a better understanding of the link between theory and practice. To become discerning is to be able to be discriminating through reflective practice, using the knowledge, skills and experience gained to evaluate what is strong or weak research. Examples from actual researches and presentations will be used to illustrate the key principles highlighted in the paper.

Introduction

In a commentary piece entitled “We Must Stop the Avalanche of Low-Quality Research” in the Chronicle of Higher Education (2010), Bauerlein and fellow co-writers highlighted the problematic state of affairs we find ourselves in today. Although everyone accepts that scientific research and in the context of this paper, educational research is clearly critical to any nation’s progress and development, the elephant in the room many tend to ignore is: how much of the research generated and published meets the criteria of academic rigor and has any practical use or value? Mark Bauerlein is a professor of English at Emory University; Mohamed Gad-el-Hak is a professor of mechanical engineering at Virginia Commonwealth University; Wayne Grody, Bill McKelvey, and Stanley W. Trimble, respectively, are professors of medicine, management, and geography at the University of California at Los Angeles. These eminent scholars are in consensus that,

“While brilliant and progressive research continues apace here and there, the amount of *redundant, inconsequential, and outright poor research* has swelled in recent decades, filling countless pages in journals and monographs.” (p.1, emphasis added)

These remarks together with another event has inspired the writing of this position paper on the need to embrace reflective practice when addressing the issues and challenges of quality or academic rigor in educational research. In 2017, I attended the 8th Hatyai National and International Conference and sat through the series of paper presentations on the Social Sciences. These papers and others from other journals such as the Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts (JSSHA, Silpakorn University), and The Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction (MJLI, Universiti Utara Malaysia) have further underscored, in my view the critical importance of becoming a discerning consumer of research.

Instead of stopping the avalanche of poor quality research, I think for someone who has been a reflective practitioner of writing up research and freelance editor of academic manuscripts, and a copy editor for a Scopus-indexed journal (MJLI), we should perhaps encourage more research, at least in our part of the academic world. It is perhaps timely at this juncture to emphatically stress that there is an urgent need to provide apprenticeship in the scholarship of educational research, guidance on how to nurture academic rigor and embrace research quality. In this endeavor, I would like to suggest, and as has been proposed by Perry & Nichols (2015), one must become a discerning consumer and producer of research. To ensure academic rigor and research quality, every researcher must go back to the basics and reflect on one’s practice of doing and writing up research. Who then is a discerning consumer and producer of research?

Casual Versus Discerning

In business parlance, the consumer is the customer – the one who buys and uses a product or service. In the context of educational research, the consumer of research is the one who will buy into the research claims and uses its findings for some specific purposes. Conversely, the producer of research is the one who is trying to *sell* the research product, and hopefully to a non-casual but discerning consumer of research. However, with the avalanche of research

confronting the respective fields, one needs to differentiate oneself from being a casual consumer or producer of research to becoming a discerning one.

Perry & Nichols (2015, p.5) characterizes the *casual* consumer of research as someone who is a passive reader of selective pieces of a research article and s/he does so out of curiosity, just like the typical casual window shopper in a mall – someone who looks but does not buy. The discerning consumer of research on the other hand, is someone who wants to understand the value of the research and seeks to assess its practical utility. To do that s/he will want to go through the research in detail, from the beginning till the end, appreciating the purpose of the research, its research objectives and questions, its significance and limitations, getting immersed in the literature review and proposed methodology, tracking the discussion of the findings and finally, evaluating the conclusion and recommendations.

The *discerning* consumer of educational research must be both *penetrating* and *discriminating* (Perry & Nichols, 2015, p.5). To penetrate research one must “have the necessary tools to probe beyond the superficial aspects and to access the rationale behind the research design, methodology and interpretations or claims made. To be discriminating, the discerning consumer of educational research must be able to exercise value judgements, to be able to evaluate a research and gauge its strengths and weaknesses, and possess the confidence to make an informed decision as to its practical value in context. To unpack the foregoing characterization of what constitutes a discerning consumer of educational research, it is worth highlighting again that to be penetrating and discriminating, one must have/do the following:

1. the necessary research tools
2. go beyond the surface, look for the big picture
3. understand the rationale for certain steps and processes
4. evaluate strengths and weaknesses of all components of the research enterprise
5. confidence building in understanding and evaluating
6. informed decision-making, due diligence

To be sure, to be discerning, as has also been cautioned by Perry and Nichols (2015), one must NOT be hypercritical, faultfinding and cynical. It is about being a reflective

practitioner in educational research, mindful of the need to practice reflective learning and to always link theory to practice.

Reflective Practice in Research: Linking Theory and Practice

Reflective Practice is Reflective Learning

In this section I will try to explain the essence of the term ‘reflective practice’ as it is used in the context of this paper. As pointed out by Moon (2004), the term was coined by Schön in 1983 and has “emphasized the use of reflection in professional or other complex activities as a means of coping with situations that are ill-structured and/or unpredictable. The idea of reflective practice was developed initially in nursing and teacher education and is increasingly being applied across the professions.” (Moon, 2004, p.80). She however, uses the term reflection, reflective practice and reflective learning interchangeably.

In this paper, when talking about the need for reflective practice by a discerning consumer of educational research, it is directing our focus on the practice of thinking meta-cognitively and hopefully practicing learning in Moon’s sense. This is because the crux of the matter is that when ‘reflection’ is seen as a process, it “seems to lie somewhere around the notion of learning and thinking. We reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting – so ‘reflective learning’ as a term, simply emphasizes the intention to learn as a result of reflection.” (Moon, 2004, p.80). Weber (2018, p.1) best sums up what it takes to become a reflective practitioner, it is the:

“ability to observe their behavior, feelings, thoughts, skills, attitudes, biases and professional conduct from an objective viewpoint. Being reflective allows a practitioner to be exposed to a variety of perspectives, which in turn can lead to different ways of understanding situations or completing a course of action.”



Examples of Research Papers and Presentations to Illustrate the Principles Discussed in the Paper

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