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“New basics” and literacies: Deepening reflexivity in qualitative research

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Abstract

Purpose: With particular reference to insider/outsider qualitative research, the purpose of this paper is to present new understandings about the concepts of literacy and reflexivity, which go against the grain of technical approaches currently privileged under neo-liberal education systems.

Design/methodology/approach : The paper draws on theoretical considerations and empirical data from a qualitative study in literacy education to examine the concept of researcher reflexivity. With multiple methods such as focus groups, on-line discussions, shared literacy experiences, and researcher’s reflections, the qualitative approach was appropriate to unveil thick descriptions of phenomena.

Findings: Information from the literature, theoretical framework and transcript analysis is synthesized to present an innovative way of approaching reflexivity in qualitative research, to acknowledge: theory, power, discomfort; and personal, historical, political and sociocultural influences.

Research limitations/implications: Given the small number of participants involved in the case study, results are not representative of the general population.

Practical Implications: Deepening researchers’ approaches to reflexivity can lead to cross disciplinary collaboration in professional fields such as teaching, engineering and nursing.

Originality/value: An innovative approach to reflexivity, particularly after the completion of a study, can rupture the comfortableness of qualitative researchers’ reflexive processes. A rigorous concept of reflexivity can be useful to scaffold pre-service teachers during professional internships in schools.

Keywords Literacy: Qualitative research, Communities of practice, Reflexivity, “New basics”, Multiliteracies, Discomfort

Paper type: Research paper
Introduction

As Prime Minister Gillard rallies to improve Australian students’ standardized academic results, the My School web site allows for largely statistical comparisons of approximately 10,000 Australian schools (www.myschool.edu.au/). In this outcomes-oriented environment, “teaching to the test” to increase students’ scores is not uncommon and “good” educational research is associated with upgrading teacher and student skills. Not surprisingly, the fascination with academic performance obscures the qualitative aspects of Australian schools (Tuinamuana, 2011) and may result in negative consequences for students, teachers and pre-service teachers. The current world-wide obsession with teaching and learning standards, for example, encourages the preparation of a technical teaching force, with little consideration of socio-political and theoretical aspects (Down and Smyth, 2012).

The pressure to return to “back-to-basics” for improving standards also contrasts dramatically with a post-modern reality of deepening sociocultural diversity, necessitating a complex approach to learning, teaching and researching literacies (see Cumming-Potvin, 2012). From this perspective, new basics of literacies require that learners ultimately critique texts to reshape an increasingly diverse and complex world (Luke, 2012; The New London Group, 1996, 2000). While the Australian political landscape interlocks with performance, literacy education translates to the quest for superior results in the Programme for International Student Assessment and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In parallel, literacy educators often face popular and narrowly defined positivist views about research, suggesting that empirically sound results are generally derived through tests and measurement (Tillman, 2009). Although many researchers have attempted to resist the public discourse of a literacy crisis, caused by so-called decreasing teaching standards, Australia’s print media have generally highlighted neo-liberal viewpoints (Durrant, 2012).
Immersed in a post-industrialized landscape which privileges measurement and experimental design, literacy researchers have increasingly felt the need to establish parameters of rigour for qualitative inquiry. As a tool of validity, reflexivity has often been at the forefront of these discussions. In this chapter, I explore ways of deepening understanding about reflexivity to acknowledge the complexity and uncomfortableness of the qualitative research process. These issues have often been under-researched, yet are important to many educational researchers (Hamdan, 2009; Mercer, 2007). I first describe the political backdrop of a qualitative literacy project (Study A), prior to reviewing the study’s design, recruitment and data collection. I contemplate the advantages and disadvantages of insider and outsider research prior to unveiling a discussion about researcher reflexivity. Using extracts from data gathered during Study A, I offer reflections about the concept of reflexivity as it relates to theoretical considerations in qualitative research. Drawing on the work of diverse post-modern authors, I synthesize my ponderings about the discomforting nature of reflexivity. I conclude with remarks pertaining to the implications of this work for university-based teaching and research.

Literacy education against the grain: context and design of a qualitative study

Directing public scrutiny to the quality of pre-service teachers, recent Commonwealth initiatives such as the National Inquiry into Literacy Teaching (Nelson Inquiry, Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005) and the inquiry into teacher education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007) have re-ignited literacy “wars” across Australia. The largely neo-liberal focus of such documents has encouraged the reduction of literacy to a discrete set of skills, such as children sounding out words and filling in the blanks (Cross, 2009). Despite the plea for new literacies to embrace an increasingly globalized and socially diverse world (The New London Group, 1996, 2000), in the race for improved academic performance, The Nelson Inquiry stipulated that teachers should use direct phonics’ instruction for children to master foundational
reading (Cross, 2009). More recently, The Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010), which is currently being implemented across the nation, suggests a “one size” fits all approach to literacy learning, describing important understandings, skills and capabilities for all Australian students (see www.australiancurriculum.edu.au).

In addition, whilst the National Professional Standards for Teachers may contain elements of good practice, the broader agenda involves national regulation which risks teachers becoming deliverers of goods, with little consideration to the social or theoretical aspects of school communities (Down, 2012).

Against the grain of high-stakes testing and moral panic about perceived falling literacy standards, I undertook a small qualitative project (Study A), to explore teaching and learning literacies in pre-service teacher education (The New London Group, 2000, 1996). My work is inspired by the call for resistance to “gold standards” research (Lather, 2004), which is marketed through positivism (Tobin, 2012) and experimental design. This struggle resounds against the argument that “good” educational research is often defined through method rather than the well-being of students, teachers and communities (Hostetler, 2005; Yates, 2002). Kincheloe and Steinberg (2007) also highlighted the importance of challenging educational discourse which privileges research methods over ethics and correlates academic outcomes with teacher accountability and test-driven curricula.

Emphasizing words, rather than numbers, a qualitative approach was appropriate to present layered descriptions of relationships between people, space and objects (Geertz, 1973). With a holistic picture, qualitative inquiry also offered me flexibility to explore complementary pathways during data collection (Ary et al., 2006; Patton, 2002). I adopted a largely constructivist research design, whereby I remained sensitive to the context, did not seek one specific truth and aimed to interpret social interaction from actors’ viewpoints in the natural world (Crabtree and Miller, 1992; Marshall and
Rossman, 1999). As a researcher and teacher educator, I integrated processes involving multiliteracies (The New London Group, 2000) to transform pre-service teachers’ understandings of literacy education. I privileged a case study by employing multiple qualitative strategies, such as: researcher’s reflections, face-to-face focus groups, on-line discussions and home shared literacy experiences.

I completed Study A in a West Australian university community. The study focused on a group of three adult female pre-service teachers, who were enrolled in a literacy education course and were afforded informal learning opportunities integrating theory and practice. These tertiary students’ four children, aged between four and seven years old, also participated in the study. I recruited participants through a process of open invitation and voluntary written consent. Whilst I hoped to provide balance in gender across the pre-service teacher cohort, the absence of males is reflective of the predominantly female composition of Australian university initial teacher education programs. In 2008, for example, only 19 per cent of the total number of students enrolled in courses for initial teacher education training in West Australia was male (Council of Australian University Librarians, 2008, www.caul.edu.au/caul-programs/caul-statistics/auststats)

Acknowledging qualitative uncertainties: advantages and disadvantages of insider/outsider research

Early in the inquiry process, a major uncertainty for many qualitative researchers is the challenge related to gate keeping. Bruni (2002) stated that beginning and experienced researchers identify the most formidable gate keeper as the ethics’ committee, which highlights safety through observance of administrative procedures.

To facilitate smooth field entry, data collection and analysis, I dutifully complied with all institutional requirements relating to the ethics’ application for Study A. But, as an insider researcher and teacher educator, I needed to carefully apply the conditions imposed by the Human Research Ethics’ Committee. Due to dependency
issues, the committee stipulated that an external party explain the project to my pre-service teachers. Because children were being recruited, the committee raised the issue of dual dependency. So during recruitment, I needed to explain to pre-service teachers that it was considered unethical and in self-interest, to coerce their child(ren) or dependants to participate in the study.

Arguing for researchers to go beyond administrative compliance, White et al. (2012) called for more explicit acknowledgement of ethical uncertainties characterizing all stages of qualitative inquiry. During the data collection of Study A, for example, I was faced with the dilemma of whether to allow the participation of a very young sibling in one family. After reflecting with the parent and my research assistant, I decided that it would be appropriate for the toddler to engage informally, so that they were not excluded from the shared literacy experiences. But, to minimize any perceived pressure about reading performance, I did not officially gather data about this child.

With the study now completed, subsequent reflections have led me to re-consider the complexities of insider qualitative research. To foreshadow the discussion, I describe notions of insider research, prior to reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of insider and outsider research.

The literature generally characterizes insider research as being conducted by a researcher who is part of a case study, group or organization for a period of time (Edwards, 2002). Historically, white anthropologists such as Mead (1929) studied indigenous societies in exotic locations, making obvious distinctions between insider and outsider (Mercer, 2007). “Insiderness” evolved in the second half of the twentieth century as anthropologists observed familiar practices in their own societies. These new conceptions were influenced by Merton’s, (1972) depiction of insiders as members of specific groups or collectivities, which may involve social status (Mercer, 2007). Outsiders were considered non-members who did not have access to privileged or intimate information of the group under study (Griffith, 1998; Merton, 1972).
More recently, many authors have discussed the advantages and disadvantages of insider and outsider research, while highlighting the challenges of distinguishing boundaries between these approaches (Butler, 2004; Hellawell, 2006; Humphrey, 2012; Paechter, 2013). Edwards (2002) suggested that the insider researcher possesses deeply embedded historical knowledge of the organization or group under study. The insider researcher thus is advantaged by often being aware of personal relations, which may make possible the discovery of privileged information. Edwards also argued that a shared history of the humour and lingua franca in an organization can lead to meaningful insights. More generally, Kim (2012) contended that the advantage of insider research lies in the researcher being more likely to understand sensitive and covert issues.

Whilst greater access to and stronger rapport with participants is characteristically attributed to insider research, it has been termed a double-edged sword (Mercer, 2007). The outsider researcher can be perceived by organizations to be more impartial (Kim, 2012), while the insider researcher may be criticized for not being sufficiently distant (Sikes and Potts, 2008). Thus, despite its strengths, insider research can be riddled with limitations. For example, Edwards argued that an insider researcher who is well versed with the body language of a group may overlook familiar practices; they may also experience anxiety about revealing unpalatable information. Finally, dissociating the research from the inside researcher’s personal life may be challenging (Mercer, 2007; Scott, 1985).

Kim (2012) concluded that the concept of insider depends on many factors, such as the age of participants, the time of interaction and the social interactions surrounding the research. Mercer (2007) conferred with Mullings (1999) that no absolutes exist with regard to insider/outsider research; because humans cannot be classified according to a single status, such concepts should be viewed in a pluralistic
way. To support insider researchers in analysing their own position, Mercer suggested that concepts such as “insiderness” and “outsiderness” be represented as continua rather than dichotomies. More recently, as individuals’ identities are interpreted as situational, the distinctions between insider and outsider research have been increasingly blurred (Anderson and Jones, 2000; Labaree, 2002; Mercer, 2007) Ideally, argued Hellawell (2006), the researcher should be located inside and outside the perceptions of the participants.

In the post-script to Study A, as I reflect on the uncertainties of qualitative inquiry, I am able to more explicitly position myself as a researcher/teacher who possesses insider and outsider characteristics. Early in the inquiry, due to official ethical protocols and dependency issues, my immediate focus as a researcher was on reducing risk and protecting adult and, more particularly, child participants. Given the unfeasibility and undesirability of eliminating all risk, Humphrey (2012) suggested that qualitative researchers should be risk-aware, rather than risk-averse, as they seek rich data within themselves and their communities. Whilst my general aim was to be an empathetically professional researcher/literacy educator, I now understand that my multiple and sometimes conflicting insider-outsider roles fluctuated depending on context. On one level, I shared with my participants a common interest in literacy and a background as a user of English as a first language. On another level, the adult participants and I were immersed in a university environment, albeit with contrasting roles: the participants as undergraduate students and me as teacher educator and employee. Finally, as an adult educator my position was shaped by the need to protect the children, but I also sought to promote enjoyable literacy experiences between parents (guardians) and their young children.

Evolving reflexivity in qualitative research: muddy bogs and discomfort

As discussions evolve about notions of insider/outsider research, commentary about the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research has also proliferated. In the current
back-to-basics environment, where experimental research is often viewed as a panacea for improving student literacy outcomes, justifying the validity of qualitative research has intensified. Notwithstanding, Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p. 415) proffered that while we conduct research there may be a limit to how reflexive we can be and how much we understand what shapes our research. These factors may only become deeply explicit once a study is “done and dusted” and researchers move on with their lives. In hindsight, after completing Study A, I present in this section, a discussion about reflexivity, including challenges related to its implementation. I am guided by the wisdom of Davies et al. (2004) who described the reflexive process as elusive, exhausting and disruptive, but necessary to create meaning.

Generally defined as self-questioning and self-understanding, reflexivity reminds the qualitative researcher to engage with the moment, while being conscious of their cultural, linguistic, political and ideological origins, and those they are studying (Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 1997). Almost a decade ago, Lather (2004) highlighted the necessity of reflexivity in establishing rigor for qualitative research, calling for researchers to acknowledge their biases and subjectivity. Despite reflexivity being increasingly accepted over the past two decades as a means of validating qualitative research methods, Patai (1994) argued that the proliferation of reflexivity risks becoming a narcissistic fad. Pillow (2003) concurred that talking about oneself does not necessarily improve one’s research, but asserted that silencing researchers is not a solution for effectively using reflexivity. Clearly, the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research is no longer contested, but the difficulties and practicalities about being reflexive have rarely been addressed (Henderson et al., 2012; Finlay, 2002; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

Searching for new ways of applying reflexivity to expose its ambiguities and difficulties in qualitative research, Pillow (2003) critiqued four popular metaphors which cast reflexivity as a methodological tool: recognition of self, recognition of other,
truth and transcendence. These metaphors are linked to researchers’ catharsis and confessions (see Foucault, 1994), with an assumption that they cure issues of validity. Pillow viewed reflexivity as know thyself as alluding to a unified and essential self, based on Cartesian thought. Knowing thyself is also wrought with assumptions that if the researcher exposes their subjectivity and learns about themself during the research process, they can write uninhibitedly. Second, Pillow argued that reflexivity defined as recognizing the other assumes that the researcher is able to know and describe the other (see also Trinh, 1991). Third, Pillow characterized the metaphor of reflexivity as “truth” as assuming that the researcher can tell the ‘truth. At the heart of this assumption is the researcher’s engagement in a series of reflexive exercises will produce truth through a “science” of reflexivity. Webster (2008) also critiqued as essentialist the notion that reflexivity can uncover truth via the researcher’s introspection. Finally, the metaphor of transcendence assumes that the researcher can transcend their subjectivity and cultural context through reflexivity.

Critiquing all four reflexive metaphors as riddled with limitations, Pillow (2003) called for deeper explorations of reflexivity which interrupt the notion of comfortableness to disclose relations of power and ideology. Such an approach to reflexivity acknowledges discomfort and goes beyond the researcher’s narrative catharsis (Choi, 2006; Tierney, 2002). Finlay (2002) concurred that from a post-structural perspective, reflexive analysis is continually problematic. He depicted qualitative researchers as wading through a bog of self-analysis; the journey can easily be marred by excessive self-analysis bordering on narcissism. Because there are few guidelines for actually going about being a reflexive researcher, Lather (1993) suggested that the messiness of deep reflexivity should be acknowledged. In enacting the discomfort of reflexivity (Britzman, 1995), Pillow suggested a new term: rigorously self-aware. This involves uncomfortable reflexivity that seeks knowledge, but envisages it as tenuous.
In search of deeper and more complex ways of depicting reflexivity, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) argued that epistemology, ontology and research practice are inseparable. Focusing on data analysis, the authors suggested that most methods are presented as a series of neutral and technical exercises, with an assumption that the researcher, method and data are independent. They explored how reflexivity can be operationalized in relation to social, institutional and interpersonal contexts and ontological and epistemological concepts of subjects and subjectivities. In the next section, with the benefit of hindsight and drawing on the (2003) work of Mauthner and Doucet and other theorists, I re-visit my initial analysis of selected transcriptions from Study A. In doing so, I offer expanded understandings about reflexivity and the influences that shaped my insider/outsider research.

Reflexivity revisited in data analysis: literacy and pre-service teacher education

During Study A’s focus groups, online discussions and shared literacy experiences, the adult participants (Sally, Dale and Eva) were enrolled in the university’s compulsory literacy course for pre-service teachers. As the first on-campus focus group unfolded, in my immediate role of researcher, I asked: how would you define literacy? In Transcript 1 below, Eva’s response “That’s a big one” (Turn 2) could be interpreted as a “loaded” or “challenging” question. Although the focus group took place outside of class hours, the atmosphere was informal and the question was open-ended, I remarked Eva’s slight discomfort towards the beginning of the focus group. Initially reviewing the transcripts, I explained Eva’s reaction as generally related to my dual position as researcher/teacher educator or to a perceived unequal status between the researcher and participants (see Kim, 2012).

Transcript 1:

1 Wendy (W) Anyway, so our first question is about literacy as I said and it’s really just an open ended question how would you define literacy?
2 Eva That’s a big one.

3 W It is a big one isn’t it?

4 Grace Well I sort of think, we always used to think it was books, or reading, but probably even through this unit it’s not just reading a book its reading everything, like you know visual things, reading advertisements books, reading like the media all that sort of thing so to me I think literacy is a lot more than I ever defined it as.

5 W Ok. So do you see it as, in multiple, multiple literacies?

6 Grace Yeah I think so.

7 W Mmmm.

8 Grace And especially like for the children. I think like to them it’s not just that book, it’s about the whole thing from the computer, CD ROMs that they’re doing, it, to sort of right through.

9 W Mmmmm.

10 Eva And added to that, I think it’s more, what I’ve got out of the course that it’s more, it’s also making sense of it in a real holistic, I like to use the word holistic sense, that you’re being critical, that you, that you see where writers are coming from and why they’ve written the way they’ve written. Why newspaper articles are read, you know, portrayed the way they are and that sort of thing too. So I mean, I was never taught that at school, that was something that was definitely not there.

In hindsight, Mauthner and Doucet’s (2003) category of academic biography allows for deeper reflection which links to my role as an insider/outsider researcher. Specifically, the verb “define” is associated with my academic role as a course coordinator. Designing curricula for literacy courses over many years, I have presented various operational definitions of literacy terms. In the compulsory pre-service teacher literacy course, I often commence the first lecture by asking how we define literacy. As a former
postgraduate and undergraduate student, I have also been shaped over many years by tertiary courses and assignments, which include academic definitions. In reviewing Transcript 1, I feel perplexed by questions such as: Why did not I frame my question in a less academic manner? Whose definitions are presented? Why do I systematically use definitions when designing tertiary learning materials? Could my language and practice be related to western society’s obsession with providing clear-cut definitions that thrive in (post)modern scientific discourse? (Tsekeris and Katrivesis, 2009).

Mauthner and Doucet’s (2003) category of social location and emotional responses is helpful to tease out alternative understandings in Transcript 1’s remaining utterances. In Turns 4-9, I listened to and acknowledged Grace’s definition of literacy. Although Grace referred to the academic course in question, she also explored ideas about broadening literacy to include “media”, “computers”, “visual things” and more than “books”. In Turn 5, as I posed a question, I provided Grace with additional conversational space. Not until Turn 10 did Eva speak again. Although Eva integrated the terms “critical” and “holistic” in the discussion, she began her utterance with “And added to that [y]”, suggesting that she was influenced by the voices of Dale and me (see Bakhtin, 1986). Whilst there is no technical recipe for being reflexive (Lather, 1993), in hindsight, I speculate about how the discussion may have evolved differently if my earlier exchanges with Eva had been more profound. As a reflexive researcher re-engaging with the moment, I am forced to ask difficult questions, such as Why did not I ask Eva to elaborate on her meaning of: “That’s a big one”; whose story is being told? (Gertsl-Pepin and Patrizio, 2009).

In Transcript 2 below, a shift occurred in the focus group discussion as I asked participants how they developed their definitions of literacy (Turn 21). Grouped under the category emotional responses (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003), Eva’s reply “From the readings” (Turn 22), foreshadowed an awkwardness, which appears linked to my dual positioning as a research/teacher educator.
Transcript 2:

21W Ok. Sure. And so how would you say you’ve developed your definitions of literacy?

22 Eva From the readings. (Laughter from participants and researcher).

23 W Good answer (chuckles.) From the readings. Ok

24 Sally And I’ve also found, ‘cause I’m doing sort of three units, like all the curriculum, and I just find the connections between this unit and like, especially the S&E unit, are quite interesting, quite a lot of overlap.

25 W Mmm, mmm, mmm.

26 Sally Into some of the critical literacy and all that, and I think both units have helped broaden my definition of literacy.

Eva’s response “From the readings”, it could be argued, referred directly to the texts I selected for weekly readings in the compulsory pre-service teacher literacy course.

With regards paralinguistic devices, I originally viewed the ensuing laughter on the part of the participants and me as a release of tension, due to initial social awkwardness. I preferred to focus my analysis on participants’ extended utterances characterized by emerging literacy themes. For example in Turn 65 of the discussion, in her role as a parent, Eva described what she viewed to be important for teaching and learning literacy. Through extensive comments, Eva alluded to themes such as “visual literacy”, “stereotypes” and “critical literacy”:

65 Eva: I also think that children also need to understand too that when they’re watching television that they do understand what television and the adverts are doing to them and things like that. I mean I sit there and it annoys the heck out of my children about stereotypes that happen and all that sort of stuff, I think that’s really important too. Ahm, and ahm, with a wider context too ahm, just being able to read messages, see things why things are like they are and, and you know what does the billboard everything around them trying to make sense of it and talking to them about it and getting them to be aware of what’s around [y].

Retrospectively, whilst I understand that participants’ extended statements are
noteworthy, I have also come to believe that uncomfortable moments in interviews or focus group discussions should be explicitly acknowledged and highlighted during analysis. In this case, the participants’ uncomfortableness at the beginning of the focus group may have been attributed to a desire, as tertiary students, to respond appropriately within expected norms. As such, when I replied “Good answer”, chuckled and repeated Eva’s utterance, it could be argued that the uncomfortableness was sustained (Turn 23). From a position of reflexivity, these awkward turns can be likened to wading through muddied bogs (see Finlay, 2002). Despite the informality of the encounter on a physical level (meeting over afternoon tea and nibbles), the interpersonal relationships appeared bound up in an institutional context of power and authority (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). In Turns 24 and 26, for example, although Sally freely expressed her viewpoint, she peppered her statements with references to the impact of the pre-service teacher program’s curriculum on her learning.

Deepening reflexivity in qualitative research: theoretical considerations, truth and power

In a reflexive process of acknowledging bias, the qualitative researcher’s theoretical stance and the influence of the socio-historical location must be considered (McCabe and Holmes, 2009; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). So, to better understand the research process, deepening the notion of reflexivity necessitates embedding it within a theoretical framework, which is linked to the production of knowledge. As a qualitative insider/outsider researcher, I must apply reflexivity without controlling or eliminating social factors, but to identify the impact of these factors. Through Study A, I aimed to transform pre-service teachers understandings of literacies to celebrate new literacy landscapes with heightened sociocultural diversity and modes of communication in educational settings. Underpinned by a sociocultural perspective, the study’s theoretical framework drew on a pedagogy of multiliteracies (The New London
To counter the back-to-basics movement in literacy learning and empower students as informed and engaged citizens for the new millennium, The New London Group (2000) designed a pedagogy of multiliteracies. Assuming that knowledge is produced in social, cultural and material contexts, The New London Group explicated four interrelated aspects of a pedagogy of multiliteracies. Situated practice refers to learners’ experiences in a community of learners. Overt instruction includes the teacher’s or expert’s interventions for scaffolding or supporting learning (Bruner, 1983; Cumming-Potvin, 2009), allowing the learner to augment their consciousness about learning. Critical framing highlights the importance of learners interpreting the cultural, political, historical and ideological contexts of learning. Transformed practice consists of implementing new understandings with reflective practice in new contexts.

From a broader perspective of learning, in designing Study A, I integrated Lave and Wenger’s (1999) situated theory and the metaphor of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1999; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). Here, learning is explained as transpiring through informal groups of people sharing passion or concern about a topic. Members are viewed as negotiating their actions through relationships across multiple communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). As I revisit Study A’s design, I aim to acknowledge discomfort vis-a`-vis the theoretical framework, which unveils reflexivity as confounding and disruptive practices (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Lather, 1986; Pillow, 2003). In this vein, I acknowledge that truth does not exist within theory. For example, although Lave and Wenger (1999) acknowledge diversity in communities of practice, numerous researchers have criticized the metaphor, particularly in relation to inadequate explanations of power distribution (Handley et al., 2006; Roberts, 2006). Li et al. (2009) also argued that tension can surface amongst learners who are expected to collaborate, but are often assessed individually and competitively; mastering new knowledge in such contexts may be considered uncomfortable, thus leading to limited
engagement in a community of practice.

As my post-script to Study A continues and I search to illuminate the process of acknowledging discomfort within reflexivity and theory, I have found the work of many qualitative researchers to be helpful. Reflecting on their study “No Outsiders”, which aimed to disrupt heteronormative practices in UK primary schools, DePalma and Teague (2009) questioned the possibility of creating and maintaining a democratic community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1999). DePalma and Teague analysed the complex and difficult process of building an international research community involving diverse sectors such as universities and primary schools. Drawing on Foucault, the authors cite the importance of disciplinary power, where some practices become normalized as truth, making some institutional discourses more dominant than others. McCabe and Holmes (2009) also draw on Foucault’s concept of ubiquitous power to shift reflexivity from a technical tool in qualitative research to a new way of being leading to empowerment. For Foucault (1977), “What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (p. 119).

As a literacy researcher and educator aiming to transform the status quo, I am mindful that institutional regimes of truth are linked to power and status in society (Foucault, 1977). More specifically, I ask myself: whose community and whose practice am I researching? (Lave and Wenger, 1999; DePalma and Teague, 2009). How can participants transform literacy practices in new settings (The New London Group, 2000)? So as an insider/outsider qualitative researcher aiming for deeper reflexive explorations which acknowledge uncomfortableness in theory, I ask myself how and why multiple discourses are constructed. Davies et al. (2004) described this form of reflexivity as critical literacy. The image drawn is of the questioning researcher who turns the reflexive gaze on: themselves, discourses, language and the world.
In Figure 1, which is inspired by my reflections on Study A and the work of multiple post-modern researchers and theorists, I illustrate my ponderings to integrate the discomforting practices of reflexivity with theoretical considerations of qualitative inquiry. Insert Figure 1 about here.

The outer rectangle represents Mauthner and Doucet’s (2003) and Foucault’s (1977) allusions to the personal, sociocultural, historical and political influences on reflexivity in qualitative inquiry. The second rectangle represents the theory of situated practice, with particular reference to the metaphor of community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1999; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). Here, DePalma and Teague’s work suggests possibilities and constraints in building communities of practice, which are characterized by uneven notions of democracy. The third rectangle represents the pedagogy of multiliteracies (The New London Group, 1996, 2000), which aims to broaden literacy practices to meet the needs of an increasingly globalized, multicultural and technological world. Embedded in the centre is the rectangle of reflexivity. Referring to the work of Foucault (1977); Pillow (2003) and Lather (1986, 2004), this inner rectangle is divided into sub-components of: discomfort, truths and power. These uncomfortable sub-components are at the heart of qualitative inquiry, which should acknowledge that reflexivity in practice is “perilous, full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails” (Finlay, 2002, p. 212).

Concluding remarks

Over many years, as a teacher educator, I have engaged in subtle resistance to a technical approach to literacy education, which essentializes literacy as reading and writing for the purpose of standardized testing and academic performance. This simplification dismisses the plurality and complexity of ever-evolving literacies, which are linked to civic engagement and sociocultural, historical and political spheres (see New London Group, 2000). Indeed, Cross (2009) contended that if individuals’ acceptance in society is reduced to a basic, manageable and testable model of literacy,
one wonders if such a model is of value. More broadly, as neo-liberal policies are implemented across Australia, the dominant ideology in education continues to embrace positivism, often assuming that good teaching means effective student management and quiet classrooms (Tobin, 2012).

As a qualitative researcher, I have simultaneously resisted the dominant ideology of positivism, which sets the standards for good research as based on narrowly defined scientific evidence (Lather, 2004). In a post-industrialized climate of neo-liberalism, the struggle for qualitative researchers has often turned towards establishing validity through reflexivity. In the quest for validity, there has been an alluring temptation for qualitative researchers to reduce reflexivity to either a “tick the box” set of mechanical exercises or a narcissistic fad (Patai, 1994; Pillow, 2003). Having re-visited moments of my initial analysis from Study A, I have argued that deepening reflexivity and exposing its difficulties in qualitative research involves viewing phenomena through a nuanced lens of self-awareness and social, political and cultural consciousness (see Patton, 2002). This retrospective reflexivity has taken me on a winding journey, “[y] where solid ground can all too easily give way to swamp and mire” (Finlay, 2002, p. 212).

In negotiating this challenging journey, to share my explorations for shifting towards a “new basics” of reflexivity, I have synthesized my reflections in schematic form (Figure 1). This representation highlights broader theoretical frameworks, such as communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1999; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) which are adjusted to account for shifting notions of power and democracy (DePalma and Teague, 2009). The essence consists of the concept of reflexivity, with all its discomfort and ambiguities. Here, The New London Group’s (1996, 2000) pedagogy of multiliteracies offers insights into the reflexive process. Through overt instruction, the researcher turns their gaze inwards to become conscious of the micro-aspects of learning, such as language and semiotics. Through critical framing, the researcher...
broadens their gaze to critique texts, aiming to better understand cultural, political, historical and ideological relationships. In this sense, divisions between insider and outsider research are rendered complex and problematic; even if the researcher engages in mutual activities with their participants, the truths privileged are based initially on situating the researcher’s need for truth. From these simultaneous inward and outward gazes, Pillow’s (2003) new term of “rigorously self-aware” is helpful to contemplate reflexivity as an instrument which produces contending discourses of truth related to power. Particularly salient is Foucault’s (2000) image of cracks and tremors in institutions or relationships:

It was always because I thought I identified cracks, silent tremors, and dysfunctions in things I saw, institutions I was dealing with, or my relations with others, that I set out to do a piece of work, and each time was partly a fragment of autobiography (p. 458).

Along my journey as an insider/outsider qualitative researcher and literacy educator, the tremors have resulted in cracks which have implications for university-based research and teaching in neo-liberal times. First, in seeking validity for qualitative research, it is vital for university researchers to engage with the concept of reflexivity in a deep and uncomfortable manner, which links theory and practice. Moving beyond traditional basics, a pedagogy of multiliteracies (The New London Group, 1996, 2000) could be particularly useful in scaffolding researchers to represent reflexive processes in innovative ways (e.g. digital, visual, aural, multimodal). Second, it is important throughout the research process, that tertiary educators scaffold their research students to understand the complexities, ambiguities and difficulties related to reflexivity. Third, it is critical for university researchers to recognize that retrospective reflexivity can impact significantly on rigorous self-awareness, especially in relation to personal and professional ethics.

Finally, to scaffold connections between theory and practice, a more rigorous concept of reflexivity could be integrated in pre-service teacher programs. This
methodology could be particularly useful during professional internships in school settings when pre-service teachers often encounter contending and related discourses of power (Foucault, 2000), which may be at odds with ideologies privileged in universities. More broadly, collaboration between communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1999) in the field of education and other professional disciplines, especially those associated with robust traditions of positivism, such as applied sciences, can facilitate new ways of thinking and doing reflexivity to scaffold new graduates entering the work force.
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