

Reflecting in the Woods: Can it Help to Enhance the Formulation of (our) Research Questions?

Charles Odilichukwu R. Okpala

Nowadays, reflecting and reflective practice are being incorporated into undergraduate and postgraduate learning across disciplines, and thus, both can be seen as prerequisite(s) to achieving effective research activity. On the other hand, trees represent organisms characterized by a perennial lifestyle to produce a majority of terrestrial biomass. Trees, when put together as a group, take on the identity as “the woods”, which can be seen in many parts of the globe. In science, the choice and use of research questions has been considered as very useful in the definition, collection and reporting of (relevant) information. But, can reflecting in the woods enhance the formulation of (our) research questions? In this editorial, an attempt is made to respond to this question, to show that the woods has promising potential to provide a positive atmosphere for effective reflective activity for any (scientific) researcher.

Keywords: Researcher; Woods; Reflection; Research questions

Contact information: Educare and Skills Training Network, Middlesex HA8 8EJ, United Kingdom;
Email: charlesokpala@gmail.com

Reflection and Reflective Practice: A Few Basics

In the context of this editorial, ‘reflecting’ refers to thinking either carefully and/or deeply about somebody, something, somewhere, and so on. Strong synonyms include ‘cerebrate’, ‘cogitate’, ‘consider’, ‘contemplate’, ‘deliberate’, ‘meditate’, ‘ponder’, and so on. Beyond definition, ‘reflecting’, according to Mezirow (1990), indicates examining the justification for one’s belief that primarily guides action and reassesses the efficacy of strategies and procedures used in a problem solving approach. ‘Reflecting’ can therefore be made more effective when it is supported by those committed to achieving reflective strategies (Thorpe 2000; Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005). Mann *et al.* (2009) further reiterated that a reflective capacity constitutes essential characteristics of professional competence. These authors added that activities to promote reflection are being incorporated into undergraduate and postgraduate curricula across disciplines. Hence, applicable to any given discipline, reflecting/reflective practice remains an integral part of learning. In addition to the abovementioned, affective and intellectual activities help individuals to engage and explore their experiences, which would lead to improvements in both appreciation and understanding. Moreover, reflecting/reflective practice can be seen from the levels and process viewpoints.

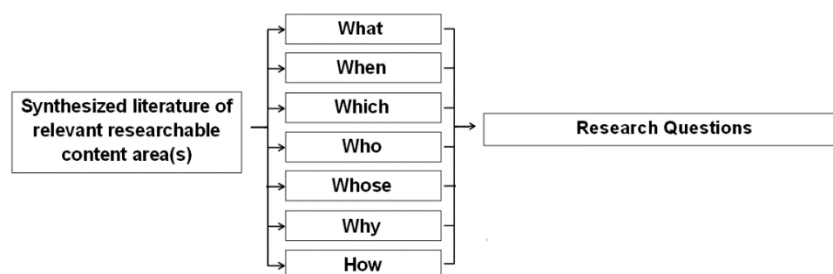
The process viewpoint, also known as iterative, can involve knowing-in-action, surprise, experimentation, returning to experience, attending to feelings, reevaluation of experience, and outcome/resolution. On the other hand, the levels viewpoint can involve contexts of content/process reflection, association, validation, description, making meaning/sense, and transformative learning (Mann *et al.* 2009).

A Few Facts about 'Woods'

Woods can refer to dense growths of trees/vegetation with ample sunlight, typically bigger than a grove but smaller than a forest. According to the US National Vegetation System, trees with overlapping crowns constitute 25 to 60% of woodlands (www.reference.com/science/difference-between-forest-wood-ac702/Accessed 23/02/17). Woods are made up of woody plants of mostly nine to 30 or so feet tall with closed crowns with 71 to 100% canopy cover, with midstory usually lacking (McMahan *et al.* 1984). Trees represent much of the terrestrial biomass production for the forest industry, with the latter serving as a useful resource for advances in timber, pulp, and paper technology (Bhalerao *et al.* 2003). Whilst trees have a perennial lifestyle to produce the majority of terrestrial biomass, trees in combination constitute the woods, which we see in many parts of the globe. Actually, each tree we see is a consolidation of cells, tissues, up to the systems shown outwardly and visibly by leaves, bark, branches, and so on. Indeed, wood formation involves well-defined developmental events initiated in vascular cambium (Bhalerao *et al.* 2003). As the public tends to support preserving the beauty in natural environments, the traditional quality of woodland scenery has to be regarded as a natural by-product of well-managed forestry (Ribe 1989). An example of conserved woods is the Palmer Woods, which was preserved in 2016, operating under forest reserve of Leelanau County, Leland in Michigan, USA. At a glance, its 707 acreage features birding, challenging terrain, as well as uphill climbs. The hardwood forest stretches over 2 miles north to south. The Leelanau conservancy, by protecting the Northern Hardwood Forest, is able to manage the large, healthy, intact forest of Palmer Woods (www.leelanauconservancy.org/blog/naturalarea/palmer-woods-forest-reserve/Accessed 23/02/17).

Formulating Research Questions

Regardless of key research paradigms, the manner in which research questions are either chosen and/or utilized is largely understood to determine how information (synthesized from relevant literature) becomes defined, collected and reported. The development of a theoretical research framework has largely been underpinned by paradigms, which are well known to be dual-faceted, involving normative and interpretive aspects. Normative involves behavior that uses rules with explanations that can be deductive, whereas interpretive involves theoretical systems that can consider behavior as emergent/formative process with explanations generally inductive compared with deductive. All the abovementioned can be considered when relevant writings of any given content area of research are to be synthesized. And through such synthesis, gaps can then be established as bases for future research. Following this path can help to build up the introduction of justification/rationale of future/recommended studies. Based on these established gaps, questions can then arise. The 'WH' questions coming from synthesized literature of relevant researchable content area(s) towards achieving fully



developed research questions, is shown at left.

Through robust synthesis of relevant literature, researchers are able to identify and use specific

questions leading them to actualizing (their) specific (researchable) objectives. Such objectives can then be consolidated to build up an overall aim. Regardless of existent research paradigms, the construct of research questions, according to Sandberg and Alvesson (2011), helps to promote the development of interesting and influential theories. Further, these authors indicated that spotting ‘gaps’ in literature synthesis could certainly help in formulating specific research questions, which directly helps in challenging assumptions that underline existing literature. It is through this way that researchers are able to synthesize existing literature, which allows them to construct their research questions, even though how the latter is arrived at has remained somewhat complex. Why is this so? Because it has involved a variety of influencing elements and interacting processes, which can include chance, timing, actively seeking exposure of diverse views, and being immersed in literature and socio-cultural conditions (Campbell *et al.* 1982; Frost and Stablein 1992; Smith and Hitt 2005; Sandberg and Alvesson 2011).

Reflecting in the Woods: A Way Out for (our) Research Questions?

The author of this editorial recently came across a more than century old piece of literature written by John R. Wise, titled ‘The New Forest: Its History and its Scenery’. In it, there was a historical documentation of forests that were found between Southampton Waters and Avon of Great Britain. Also in it, key locations/places such as Calshot Castle, Beaulieu Abbey, up to Christchurch were highlighted. Also, there was mention of issues that emanated from folklore and Provincialisms, the Barrows, Roma, and Romano-British Potteries, as well as information documented in Parish Registries and Churchwardens Banks. The fascinating aspects of this old book is that in the appendices, there were a ‘Glossary of Provincialisms’, ‘List of flowering plants’, ‘List of birds’, and ‘List of Lepidoptera’. The author urged that everyone who came to those forests (at that time) ‘must see not only the awesome scenery with the least love for Nature must feel their beauty, but also the quietness of the heart of great woods, where (few) people find leisure, and some not the strength to go – quiet brooks flowing down deep valleys, and



woodland paths trod only by the cattle and Forest workmen’. A hand-drawn scenery view in Bushey Brately Forest (that existed at that time), is shown in the figure. Over the accounted years devoted in this book, the love for natural scenery was shown so dearly and passionately. It will be remiss not to mention that there was praise for Epping Forest, which at that time had been purchased as a ‘park for the people of London’ (Wise 1895).

With the abovementioned in mind, research itself and regardless of discipline(s) remains a journey and process. It constitutes/ possesses clearly defined stages. Hence, the doing of each research endeavor, according to Trochim (2002), requires adequate and robust visualization for the reason that, as anticipated, stops would be encountered at certain points of the journey or process. In this context, there would always be a need to make choices as well as decisions to sustain the progress at such/various critical (research) stages. And such choices require a clear frame of calm and positive mind that allows for productive reflective activity.

Imagine a researcher sitting down in the quiet woods with a calm and positive mind attending only to the music of the tree leaves. Reflective activities in such a mind would likely make use of a wide range of key words that possibly stimulate the formulation of research questions (see figure below). These words give some description of what the woods can potentially offer, which should be very promising for a researcher of any discipline. Obviously, how these words are either used and or aid in the reflective activity will differ from one researcher to another, or would differ from one discipline to another. But let us imagine a researcher who has read so much relevant literature and is still pondering upon how to synthesize the existent body of knowledge and establish the state-of-the-art. Before such researcher starts to apply the ‘WH’ questions, do we not think that there would an important need for an atmosphere that would be championed by those stimulating words? The author of this editorial strongly believes that such can be championed. Whilst many of these words may be synonymous with another and that many (researchers) would certainly differ in thinking and reasoning, such words may well help to facilitate the development of required atmosphere, which would allow for an improved (scientific) reflective activity. In view that all researchers are continuously searching for ways to formulate formidable research questions, reflective activity in the



woods can play a great role in making such quest, not only a reality but more so, very fruitful, meaningful and worthwhile. Thus and optimistically, the woods have promising potential to provide a positive atmosphere for effective reflective activity for any (scientific) researcher. Thus, the quieter the woods, the better the reflection. However, it is for scientists to visit any conserved woods and give it a try.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Dott. Giacomo Sardo for his help with the figure dealing with “WH” questions.

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