

Conceptual Territory IV: Inquiry Essay

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In education, inquiries and questions are essential for progress and exploration of knowledge. For educational practitioners in teaching, leadership, and activism, taking inquiry as a stance as elaborated by scholar Campano (2007) indicates a type of “spatial orientation”, in that it makes room for the individual learners to “more fully develop and articulate their own experiences” and for educators to question our own assumptions (p. 117). Inquiry has a corrective machinery for absoluteness in knowledge and in instruction (Campano, 2020), in that it encourages the questioning of absolute knowledge and the delving into issues of inequality in larger sociopolitical contexts. As educators, inquiry as a stance is what we are encouraged to take on to foster a democratic spirit of classroom, to pave ways toward discussions of inequalities and social justice, and to bring inspirations to students who can participate in a sustaining inquiry-based learning atmosphere.

Inquiry goes beyond pedagogy and is widely concerned in the teacher-learner relationship. According to scholar Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle from the University of Pennsylvania, such metaphoric stance for inquiry describes the “positions teachers/others who work together in inquiry communities take” toward knowledge and practice; in other words, “stance” suggests orientational and positional ideas (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999), and is a long-term, sustaining pedagogical concern. Inquiry of “practitioner inquiry”, used interchangeably according to Cochran-Smith and Lytle in their 2009 book, encompasses multiple genres and forms of action research and self-study, in which the practitioner is simultaneously a research who engages in inquiry aiming at “enriching students’ learning and life chances” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). This suggests, therefore, that in practitioner’s instruction and research a wide range of tools are leveraged to provide more inquiry-based materials and

inquiry-driven approaches to learning. In addition, the University of Toronto scholar Rob Simon elaborated on “communities of inquiry” as to how inquiry can support pre-service and in-service teachers, and that inquiry can advocate the critical literacy and learning in the initial teacher training process and across the teacher’s professional lifespan (Simon, 2015). Besides, a study about the technique of reading aloud as an inquiry instruction showed that through it with the nonfiction material, constituting much of adult reading and writing, students became more responsive and driven, and young readers can then raise high-level questions (Stead, 2014).

Alongside inquiry stance, scholar Heathcote (1984) pioneered “dramatic inquiry” and stressed the ubiquitous and simple dramatic events; the process of dramatic inquiry begins when adult learners participate in collaborative activities which overlap young learners’ spaces, and it extends and deepens students’ inquiries (Beach et al., 2010). Cole (1996) suggested that dramatic inquiry is a “tool of tools” for education, in that it allows the usage of multiple intersecting tools to transform classrooms into spaces for literacy teaching and learning; it not only creates opportunities for regular literacy activities, such as writing and interpreting texts, but also fosters students’ agency, and participants usually had authentic experiences (Cole, 1996).

The inquiry stance is an ultimate avenue to democracy in our classrooms. When the teacher takes an inquiry-based approach in directing the classroom dialogue, even if it sometimes means being a little “semantic”, the questions will portray a rational landscape for the learning environment. A “democratic classroom” can mean a learning environment with contrasting ideas, debates, and empirical conversations, and it aims at “extending and perfecting democracy, as a way of life” (Raywid, 1986). At the collegiate level, the democratic teaching suggested by McKernan (2007) uses an action research pedagogy for graduate or undergraduate seminar. Since historically most teaching are “more autocratic and authoritarian than democratic”, the use

of action inquiry seminar is typical of democratizing the learning environment by providing students with research experience and letting their voice be regarded as equals (McKernan, 2007). In the long term, the democratic spirit of inquiry encourages the construction of knowledge as if they “bubble up” from discussions. Teacher researchers taking an inquiry stance design better, thought-provoking questions and curricula and build inspiring atmosphere for students, who are driven by inquiry and questions as guides. The classroom will become more democratic as students get inspired, struggle through inquiries, and are ultimately more self-driven and reflective of their own learning processes.

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