Existential Approaches to Action Research
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Introduction
In this paper I present an existential approach to action research. This approach has arisen out of my research over the past ten years that has focused on the need to come to a better understanding of what it means to be a teacher and to teach if we are going to be able to effect significant changes in the practice of teachers. My research has uncovered increasing amounts of data that suggest that teachers' actions, intentions, and beliefs are manifestations of their ways of being teachers (Feldman, 2000; 1997; 1996a; Feldman & Rearick, 1998).

In order to understand what I mean by way of being it is first necessary to acknowledge that it is an existential concept. What this means is that it is not a teacher characteristic, such as teachers' knowledge or reasoning skills. It is the person being in the situation in a way that is defined and informed by what was and is for the teacher, and his or her intentions for what could be. The teacher's way of being a teacher is essentially the way that that person is a teacher where "teacher" is one of the many ways that that person is and can be.

From this existential perspective, for teachers to change means for them to change their ways of being teachers. Because others do not have access to a person's way of being, we, as teacher educators, attempt to have an effect on it by affecting particular aspects of the teacher. Where this becomes problematic is that the particular aspects of the teacher (knowledge, skills, beliefs, and so on) do not add up to the teacher, in the same way that the blind men's parts of the elephant (the trunk is like a snake, the tail like a piece of rope, the legs like tree trunks) do not add to the elephant (Feldman, 1997). To extend this metaphor, what if the blind men wanted to teach the elephant a new trick? What could be done to the different aspects of the elephant as defined by the blind men to get the elephant to stand on its hind legs? People are not elephants, but our understanding of what makes a person a teacher is as fragmented and metaphorical as the blind men's vision of the elephant. Fortunately, people are not elephants, and we are instead, as Heidegger defined us, "the beings who are aware of their own being (Heidegger, 1962)."

My existential approach to action research has also arisen from my work in the field of action research over the past 10 years. During that time I have facilitated teachers' action research as part of funded research and evaluation projects (Feldman, 1995), as district-based professional development, and as an activity independent of outsiders (Feldman, 1993a; 1993b; 1993c; 1996b; Feldman & Atkin, 1995). In addition, I have been teaching the course Action Research in Schools since 1994 (Feldman, 1998; Feldman et al., 1998; Feldman, Rearick, & Weiss, 2001). I have engaged in on-going action research and self-study of my own practice as a facilitator and teacher of action research, which has led me to the development and adoption of research and instructional methods that have an existential turn.

The remainder of this paper is divided into two parts. The first is an overview of existentialism using the work of Maxine Greene. I turn to action research and what it means to have an existential approach to AR. I then use a heuristic for understanding
action research developed by Mary Rearick and myself (Rearick & Feldman, 1999) to locate existential action research in the field of action research.

**Existentialism**

David Denton began his 1971 essay on existentialism and teaching with the following assertion:

> I am suggesting this, for after fifty years or so of empirical and experimental research in education, we are still bemoaning the obvious fact that classroom teachers do not heed, make use of, very much of the research conducted. (Denton, 1971, 163)

Nearly 30 years later I find myself asking a question that feels the reverberation from Denton:

> Why is it that although there has been an effort for the past 15 years to encourage teachers to be reflective practitioners and to engage in action research, we see so little change in the way that teachers teach?

My response to this question also echoes Denton. In his 1971 essay he suggested that we acknowledge that there is validity in the collective wisdom of teachers and that "perhaps we haven't been studying the world of the teacher at all" (163). Denton then went on to argue for the use of an existential perspective to understand teachers and teaching. What I suggest here is that although teachers are reflecting about their practice and are engaged in inquiry into their teaching, the way that they attend to their reflection and inquiry reinforces the status quo rather than transforming it. Two metaphors illustrate what I mean. We can imagine the reflective teacher to be one of the people in Plato's cave. Because all that she perceives is a shadow of the world, all reflection or inquiry is of those shadows. The result is that the teacher's new knowledge, understanding or insight is flawed because it is based on a distortion of the world. Or more simply, when one reflects, how do we know that what we see in the mirror is accurate, and not the distorted view provided by a funhouse mirror? In this section I will use the work of Maxine Greene (Greene, 1967; 1973; 1989) to argue that an existential approach to teaching can help teachers to gain an authentic image of themselves as practitioners. In addition, teaching and teachers can be transformed by taking an existential approach to action research.

Basing her argument on the work of Arendt, Dewey, Sartre and others, Greene has provided us with the characteristics of an existential approach to teaching. This approach begins with the recognition that the teacher is a person who is being a teacher. As a result, we can talk first about the existential characteristics of personhood, and then apply them to being a teacher. The existential characteristics are:

- The person is always situated. Everyone exists in a web of relationships that spread through time and space (Feldman, 1997; Greene, 1973).
- The self emerges through experience (Greene, 1967; 1973; 1989; Dewey; 1916).
- People are free to choose, but freedom is finite (Greene, 1973; 1989; Arendt; 1958).

I examine each of these in turn in relation to teachers and teaching.

**People are situated**

It is important for me to make clear what Greene and other existentialists mean by situation and being situated. It differs from the situated of situated cognition, for example,
which is equivalent to what most people mean by context. Situation is more than the context within which people act. The context is their setting -- the backdrops in front of which they act. To speak of context conjures up an image of people as separate entities, distinct from their surroundings, and affected or acted upon by those other entities that make up the context. Those entities include all the people with whom they interact, and all the inanimate objects that surround them. Instead, people find themselves thrown into a situation constituted by all that has occurred in the past and from which they project themselves into the future (Heidegger, 1962).

Dewey has also characterized situation in this way. To him, human interactions with the world and its constituent parts grow in ways that appear sequential with "one act growing out of another and leading cummutatively to a further act" but resulting in a "consummatory fully integrated activity ... (Dewey, 1938, 31)." This occurs because of the nature of situations:

What is designated by the word 'situation' is not a single object or event or set of objects and events ... For we never experience nor form judgments about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole. ... In actual experience, there is never any such isolated single object or event; an object or event is always a special part, phase, or aspect, of an environing experienced world -- a situation (1938, 66-67).

And is related to the distinctly cultural nature of being human:

Of distinctly human behavior it may be said that the strictly physical environment is so incorporated in a cultural environment that our interactions with the former, the problems that arise with reference to it, and our ways of dealing with these problems, are profoundly affected by the incorporation of the physical environment in the cultural ... what man does and how he acts, is determined not only by organic structure and physical heredity alone but by the influence of cultural heredity, embedded in traditions, institutions, customs and the purposes and beliefs they carry and inspire (1938, 43).

The recognition that people exist as part of situations allows us to see that to teach is more than knowing and reasoning (Feldman, 1997; Greene, 1973). We become aware of what Greene calls the "existing being" -- the person being in the situation with "all of its shifting moods, feelings, impulses, [and] fantasies (Greene, 1967, 7)." We also acknowledge that the teacher is more than the rational knower and reasoner in the classroom, and that almost everything that occurs in the teaching situation is affected by the teacher's past and present, presence, moods and gestures, expectations, intentions, the students with whom she is continually engaged, and the milieu of particular human "traditions, institutions, customs and the purposes and beliefs." (Greene, 1967; 1973; Dewey; 1938).

The self emerges through experience

Jean-Paul Sartre has told us that existence precedes essence (Sartre, 1995). Maxine Greene reminds us that Dewey also claimed that the self is not something that is predetermined but is constructed through the choices we make in our experiences (Dewey, 1916). This notion of the person's self being shaped not only by what we experience in a passive sense but also by what we choose to do, and therefore experience,
is an integral part of existential thought and important to us as we try to step out of Plato's cave. Greene put it this way:

And his existence comes first, his brute being-in-the-world. If he is to become an identity, he must plunge into action and relate himself reflectively to the situations making his life in time. Also, he must choose. He must create values, and indeed create himself, by choosing the kind of person he is moment by moment, year by year. His essence, that which he "really" is, turns out to be the identity he defines for himself as he lives (Greene, 1967, 8)

In order to actively choose, it is necessary to be conscious, interested and committed, rather than mechanical and routine (Greene, 1978). If a teacher does not attend to the situation then reflection on what is mechanical and routine will remain so.

The teacher must attend to the situation. When this occurs we see teaching as an intentional activity. I use intentional in two senses. The first is the everyday meaning, where an intention is "a determination to act in a certain way (Merriam-Webster, 1981)." From an existential perspective, a teacher must not only determine to act in the sense of choosing to act, she must be as conscious as possible of the situation, making sure that she understands the situation, and deciding upon what is useful and what can be believed (Greene, 1973). In doing this, the teacher acknowledges that everything around her has meaning that arises from the situation, including her own way of being, which in itself arises through experience. To do this is to distinguish between what Heidegger calls the "present-at-hand" and the "ready-at-hand (Heidegger, 1962)." To think of things as present-at-hand is to ignore that we know the object through our being in the world. As a result, we think of it as something that is separate from us and unchangeable. This leads to a mechanical and routine view. On the other hand, when we recognize that objects are ready-at-hand, that is that they have meaning because of us, we can critique and make problematic those meanings. So when we reflect about the situation, we must remember that the world as we experience it is a human construction, and the image that arises through reflection is as Sartre reminds us, "the image of what I am (Sartre, 1956)"

In other words, Sartre makes particularly clear the interdependence of subject and object and the important fact that the meanings of a phenomenon (be it literary text, a street battle, a drug sale, a child's journal, a playground, a shattered window) are contingent on a certain mode of human attending, active attending and active interpretation, not the blank passivity of powerlessness (Greene, 1989, 36).

The second meaning of intentionality is as a specialized term used in the philosophy of the mind. John Searle has defined it in the following way

[Intentionality is] the feature by which our mental states are directed at, or about, or refer to, or are objects and states of affairs other than themselves (Searle, 1984, 16).

He continues that intentionality refers not only to intentions, in sense of the word as I have defined it above, but also to
beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, love, hate, lust, disgust, shame, pride, irritation, amusement, and of those mental states (whether conscious or unconscious) that refer to, or are about, the world apart from the mind (1984, 16).

Searle ties these intentional states to human action by stating that actions can be understood in terms of these intentional beliefs and desires. In doing so he has distinguished between those actions that are premeditated and those that occur without reflection by linking them to "prior intentions" and "intentions in action (Searle, 1984)."

In order for these intentional mental states to operate in a way that links them to actions, Searle has postulated the existence of the Background, "the set of skills, habits, abilities, etc., against which intentional states function (1984, p. 68)."

All conscious intentionality -- all thought, perception, understanding, etc. -- determines conditions of satisfaction only relative to a set of capacities that are not and could not be a part of that very conscious state. The actual content by itself is insufficient to determine the conditions of satisfaction (1992, 189).

Consciousness and action are tied, according to Searle, through the existence of intentional mental states, both prior and those in action, that operate relative to the Background.

These two means of intentionality allow us to come to a better understanding of how the emergence of the self as a teacher arises through experience. Using the first definition we see that a teacher's actions are tied to decisions and choices that affect what will be and therefore what the teacher will experience. But these experiences shape the teacher's Background by affecting "skills, habits, and abilities," which is clearly a component of what we mean by the "self." The second meaning of intentionality adds another dimension to how we understand the self. Again it should be clear that what Searle refers to as intentional states -- "beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, love, hate, lust, disgust, shame, pride, irritation, amusement" -- are a component of what we mean by the "self." So what we have is a hermeneutical process by which people, through the interaction of their Backgrounds, intentional states (2nd meaning), intentions (1st meaning), and actions, affect their situations in which they are immersed, which results in a changed Background, different intentional states, different intentions, a new set of actions, and so on.

Greene has reminded us that Dewey wrote that "the self is not ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action (Dewey, 1916, 408)." As we have seen from our analysis of intentionality, those choices are an integral part of the self. But the two meanings of intention help us to understand how decisions and choices can in fact be passive, routine or mechanical, rather than conscious, interested or committed (Greene, 1978). Searle's intentional states can develop without conscious effort to understand, consider, or problematize. This leads us to Greene's third characteristic of existential thought, that people are free to choose, but freedom to act is finite.

**Freedom**

We must begin by trying to understand what freedom means in relation to existential thought. As with my analysis of intentionality, I begin with dictionary definitions. The Random House dictionary tells us that freedom is "The state of being at liberty rather than in confinement or under physical constraint," and that it is the "power
of determining one's or its own action" and "the power to make one's own choices or decisions without constraint from within or without; autonomy; self-determination (Random House, 1968)." In this definition we see freedom being synonymous with autonomy and liberty, where autonomy suggests freedom of the individual due to the right to independent thought and action, and where liberty suggests freedom from the control of others.

Freedom, as defined by Greene, is both different from and more than autonomy and liberty. To Greene, human freedom "is the capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise (Greene, 1988, 3)." Liberty, as Greene points out, can be thought of in relation to social or political terms. For example, liberty in the US context is conceived as being constituted in a set of human rights that are protected by laws. While those laws may ensure liberty they do not necessarily provide individuals with the capacity to act freely, and, conversely, individuals can have this capacity but are constrained from acting on it.

To be autonomous, according to Greene, also is not the same as freedom. Greene sees autonomy as being self-directed and responsible; it is to be capable of acting in accord with internalized norms and principles; it is to be insightful enough to know and understand one's impulses, one's motives, and the influences of one's past (Greene, 1988, 118).

However, even this highly developed sense of autonomy is not necessarily the same as being free. That is because it is possible to have insight about one's intentions without being able to "name alternatives, imagine a better state of things, [or] share with others a project of change (Greene, 1988, 9)." The person is autonomous, but does not have the capacity to be free because he or she is not aware of possibilities or the constraints that limit possibilities. To return to the analogies that began this discussion of existentialism, autonomy within Plato's cave or as seen through the reflection from the fun house mirror is not freedom.

Existentialists, such as Sartre (1956), claim that the freedom to choose is an essential part of being human. However, what we see over and over again is that people, and in our case people who are teachers, act as if they have very limited choices or none at all. One way to understand this is to say that freedom puts a burden on people in that freedom to choose allows one to make wrong or bad choices. Anxiety or fear results from this realization and as a result people forget that they have this freedom, or they flee from it. Similarly, as Jack Whitehead (1989) has put it, we may find our practice to be a "living contradiction" between who we want to be and how we act, because we believe that we are highly constrained as to what we can do.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) has suggested several ways that people flee from the responsibilities of freedom. They are:

1) The child who is "perfectly free only in unimportant matters and forced to submit in all others." This way of being often includes the oppressed.

2) The "sub-human" who "fears existence and minimizes his desires." These individuals refuse all responsibility and become "cogs in the wheel" or soldiers "just following orders."
3) The "serious" one who "loses himself in some object in order to annihilate his subjectivity." A person with this way of being puts an ideal or object above other concerns.

4) The fanatic "elevates one cause and militantly tries to impose it on others."

5) The adventurer "grasps his freedom, enjoys its exercise, but is indifferent as to where and how he does it and the freedom of others."

6) "The passionate man does not try to lose himself in an object as the serious man does but tries to possess the object."

7) The lazy man who is "comfortable in obedience to custom and routine." (Broudy, 1971, 165-166).

We can all see people who we know, or even ourselves, in these seven ways of being who avoid the recognition of existential freedom. In addition, for some of them we can even admit that there can be some good inherent in their stances toward the world.

For teachers, these ways of being arise when the ability to act "to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise" is constrained by the real and mythical (Tobin & McRobbie, 1996). For example, here in Massachusetts in November 2000 as I write this, teachers are constrained by decisions made by local education authorities, and statewide by the policies of a conservative government that has imposed high stakes examinations on children and teachers. At the same time, teachers feel the constraints of cultural myths, such as those related to the need to transmit knowledge, content coverage, academic rigor, and the preparation of students to be successful in the next course (Tobin & McRobbie, 1996). These constraints to existential freedom are seen in the types of dilemmas that a student teacher might face. For example, she may feel the conflict between wanting to be liked by the students and perceived as nice, while at the same time taking to heart the old saw "not to smile until Thanksgiving." There is also the conflict that Ted Sizer so eloquently wrote about in *Horace's Compromise* (Sizer, 1984) - there simply is not enough time and resources to do all that one feels is necessary to do in order to be a good teacher. Finally, there are the constraints that arise because the cooperating teacher and the student teacher disagree about how and what to teach, and why (Hultgren, 1987).

It is these types of constraints on teachers' practice that present the picture that freedom is finite, and that results in an existential concern that has been identified by psychologists such as Irvin Yalom (1980) and Rollo May (1983). Yalom has focused on the dilemma or paradox that we find ourselves in because existential freedom suggests that because "the individual is entirely responsible for Š his or her own world, life design, choices and actions (p. 9)" , and that freedom can be terrifying: "it means that beneath us there is no ground -- nothing, a void, an abyss (p. 9)." The result is that individuals seek structure and constraints to ground themselves.

What existentialism attempts to do is to help people to acknowledge that they do have the freedom to choose, and that their choices affect the situations in which they are immersed and define who they are. As Van Cleve Morris put it 40 years ago,
[Our] existence precedes essence. We first are; then we attempt to define ourselves. [Humanity] is the great contingency; [our] essence is not given. Š we have been "thrown into existence"; not knowing whence we came, we wake up to discover ourselves here. And once we discover ourselves in existence, we commence the long slow journey to find our essence. As we travel, we perform this and that activity, make this and that choice, prefer this, reject that, we are actually engaged in the process of defining ourselves, of providing the essence for which we search. (Morris, 1961, 74)

What existentialists have claimed is that at some level, we are aware that we create ourselves and are therefore responsible for our own essence and for how our choices and actions affect others. Morris has reminded us that this is a "mountainous" responsibility, and can account for why people flee from freedom and allow themselves to be told what to do.

For those of us who want to improve teaching, then the problem is how do we help others to accept this responsibility not to flee, and to choose and act responsibly? Morris suggested that there is an "existential moment" when we become aware of our own existence and make free choices. While I do not believe that one needs to experience a transcendental moment like Stephen Daedalus on the beach or Odysseus tossed about in the waves, I do see action research, and in particular an existential approach to action research, as a means for teachers to acknowledge their freedom and to identify how they are constrained and what power they have to act in a ways that is responsible to themselves and for those who they care for.

Existential Action Research

In my practice as a teacher and facilitator of action research I have provided teachers and other practitioners with this operational definition:

Action research happens when people research their own practice in order to improve it and to come to a better understanding of their practice situations. It is action because they act within the systems that they are trying to improve and understand. It is research because it is systematic, critical inquiry made public (Feldman, after Stenhouse (1975)).

In my move to existential action research, I found that it was necessary to modify this definition in several ways. First, the original definition focused on practice rather than being. By doing so, the definition tends to reify the notion of the teacher being separate from the educational situation in which he or she is immersed, and therefore allows for a disconnect that can lead to alienation. The possibility exists for a "we-they" relationship with their practice and with the others who are part of the educational situation of their practice. In fact, this could lead to the teacher feeling defined and constrained by others (Greene, 1978). The result is a lack of freedom because the teacher is not aware of all the possibilities. The alienated teacher, constrained and confronted by the political and social structures of schooling, and her own lack of capacity to "surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise (Greene, 1988, 3)", researches her practice but only in a narrow technical or practical sense. An existential approach to action research takes the position that one cannot separate what a person does from who the person is, and that the teacher must question who she is as a teacher in order for action research to be
happening. Therefore, the definition needs to be amended so that we can say that action research is happening when a person inquires into his or her own being as a teacher.

An existential approach to action research recognizes that the subject of the research is one's own being. Once this is acknowledged, it becomes clear that my operational definition comes up short in another way. I wrote that "people research their own practice in order to improve it." If existential action research is an inquiry into one's own being, then what is the "it" that is improved? This is where the existential concept of freedom becomes important. To the existentialist, an improvement in our way of being is a move towards gaining "the capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise." When people engage in existential action research, they begin to feel the disquietude, the "incompleteness of our vocation (Greene, 1989)," our "living contradictions (Whitehead, 1989)," or the incompleteness, contradictions, dissonances, and dilemmas that we have in our way of being teachers. The improvement of being, then, comes about through the acknowledgement of our own discomfort with how we are in the world, and the recognition that we have the freedom to choose.

This leads to a better understanding of our practice situations. That is because existential action research has a way of attending to the situation that is different from other forms of action research. It is "a certain mode of human attending, active attending and active interpretation, not the blank passivity of powerlessness (Greene, 1989, 36)." It leads to the whole issue of choice and decision, and the power to act. It is a search for freedom through critical understanding. To paraphrase Morris, existential action research allows the teacher to take increasing charge of her own practice and to see that practice, as it stretches out in front of her, as a potential statement of what she thinks she means in the world. It asks the teacher to specify what she thinks is best in herself and to present that best, through the vehicle of her practice, to the world (Morris, 1961).

My definition of existential action research so far could apply to reflection. What makes it action research is first that actions are taken, and second that it meets Stenhouse's criteria for research. However, in our discussion of existential freedom, we distinguished between freedom to choose and freedom to act. Freedom to act may be limited as a result of real, not just mythic constraints. Greene reminds us that there are those teachers who see "present demands and prescriptions as obstacles to their own development, or Š feel it difficult to breathe. There may be thousands who, in the absence of support systems, have elected to be silent (Greene, 1988, 14)."

Existential action research requires some type of support system for teachers. Because existentialists have confidence in people rather than institutions as change agents, in existential action research that support comes from other teachers. Greene has tied this need for cooperation or collaboration to existential improvement of being:

It is when teachers are together as persons, according to norms and principles they have freely chosen, that interest becomes intensified and commitments are made. And this may open pathways to expanded landscapes, richer ways of being human -- unique and in the "we-relation" at one and the same time. (Greene, 1978, 34)

The result is that Šfreedom shows itself or comes into being when individuals come together in a particular way, when they are authentically present to one another (without
masks, pretenses, badges of office), when they have a project they can mutually pursue (Greene, 1988, 16-17).

Putting this all together, existential action research happens when people work together to research their own ways of being a teacher to increase their capacity to choose freely and to act responsibly for themselves and those they care for. In short, an existential approach to action research is an optimistic view of what people are capable of accomplishing.

From a human perspective Š nothing is fully predictable or determined. All kinds of things are possible, although none can be guaranteed. When risks are taken, when people do indeed act in their freedom, a kind of miracle has taken place. Arendt reminds us that we ourselves are the authors of such miracles, because it is we who perform them -- and we who have the capacity to establish a reality of our own (Greene, 1988, 56).

Dimensions of action research

Where is this existential approach located within the field of action research? I answer this by using the construct of the action research space, which was devised by Mary Rearick and me (Rearick & Feldman, 1999). In this construct we identified three dimensions of action research. The first, which is derived from Susan Noffke's review (Noffke, 1997), characterizes action research by purpose. The second dimension focuses on theoretical orientation, drawing upon Grundy's categories of technical, practical, and emancipatory orientations (Grundy, 1987). The third dimension uses Rearick's idea of reflection as being autobiographical, collaborative, or communal (Rearick & Feldman, 1999).

Purposes of action research

Susan Noffke (1997) has told us that there are multiple purposes for teachers who engage in action research: the professional, personal, and political. Those who engage in action research for professional purposes see action research as a form of research that has as its main objective the production of new educational knowledge. Because they acknowledge that the products of traditional educational research move slowly if at all into practice, they see action research as a means for bridging the gap between theory and practice. Noffke noted also that there are personal purposes for teachers to do action research. The main benefits for teachers from their engagement in action research are greater self-knowledge and fulfillment in one's work, a deeper understanding of one's own practice, and the development of personal relationships through researching together (Noffke, 1997, 306). Noffke also notes that there is a long-time tradition of action research for political purposes beginning with the work of John Collier, US commissioner of Indian Affairs, and Kurt Lewin, civil rights movements around the world, and the practice of participatory action research. People engaged in action research for political purposes seek to create social change toward greater social justice (Noffke, 1997, 305).

Action research can have professional, personal, or political purposes, and teachers choose to engage in action research for multiple reasons. For many teachers, action research is a required part of a preservice or graduate teacher education program.
Other teachers find themselves being asked or required to do action research as an inservice professional development activity. Others volunteer to be part of funded projects that have action research designed to bridge the research-practice gap, develop curricula, or as a way to implement knew forms of pedagogy. And there are teachers who engage in action research independent of education or staff improvement programs and funded projects. Instead, either on their own or in collaboration with other teachers, they seek to inquire into their practice for professional, personal, and political purposes.

In the previous section I argued that existential action research happens when people work together to research their own ways of being a teacher to increase their capacity to choose freely and to act responsibly for themselves and those they care for. In short, an existential approach to action research. By defining existential action research as inquiry into one's own being, it may appear that it fits into Noffke's category of personal purposes. However, it should be clear that it also satisfies professional and political purposes. For example, an increased capacity to choose freely and to act responsibly can help a teacher to converse with others in ways that enables them to see how they have "fown from freedom" in response to real and mythic constraints. Existential action research can also be seen to satisfy professional purposes because it is done by a group of teachers working together. While it may not result in the forms of knowledge that can reside in a knowledge base (Feldman, 1993c), knowledge and understanding about practice, situation, and being a teacher are generated and shared in the process of coming together through conversation (Feldman, 1999).

It should also be clear that existential action research satisfies political purposes because to attend to one's own being to uncover and understand real and mythic constraints puts the focus on the moral aspects of teaching and how institutions, which are shaped by politics affect one's way of being a teacher. And, of course, to choose freely and to act responsibly is to engage in moral and political acts.

An assumption that underlies the purposes for action research and the reasons why teachers engage in action research is that it will ultimately result in the improvement of education. Of course improvement can be defined in many ways. For some, improved education means that students score higher on standardized exams. For others, it can mean more equitable opportunities to learn for all students. An improvement in education can also be seen as changes in the role of teachers and students in the ways that classes are conducted. Others might even claim that the best way to improve education is to do away with the institution of schooling. In any case, this assumption suggests that action research is a normative process for which its practitioners have a vision of improved education that is the ultimate purpose of the process. In existential action research, that vision is tied to the idea of helping students to become aware of their own freedom to choose and the real and mythic constraints on them, and helping them to gain the knowledge and skills that will provide them with the capacity to act responsibly.

**Theoretical orientations**

Shirley Grundy, (1987) following on the work of Jurgen Habermas (1971), has described three orientations to research: the technical, the practical, and the emancipatory. The technical orientation is similar to what Schön (1983) has described as technical-rational. It is positivist and assumes a stance in which problems are defined and solutions sought. The practical orientation towards research begins with the
understanding that most human problems are ill defined because they are highly situated and are moral and ethical. Human problems are also ones that are ultimately answered through action rather than solely through the production of knowledge. Therefore, a practical orientation to research leads to the making of decisions through deliberation, and is one in which knowledge production comes about through interpretation and meaning-making. An emancipatory orientation has as its basis perspectives such as critical and feminist theories that seek to uncover the structures that coerce and inhibit freedom. Grundy claims that the emancipatory orientation to research leads to an engagement in "autonomous action arising out of authentic, critical insights into the social construction of human society (Grundy, 19)."

Where does an existential approach to action research lie along the dimension of theoretical orientation? When I teach my course in action research, I tell my students that I have four explicit goals. The first is to prepare them to do action research. The others are:

• to develop professional community;
• to help them to illuminate power relationships in their educational situations; and
• to help them to recognize their own expertise.

The existential approach to action research that I promote in the class reflects elements of all three of Grundy's theoretical orientations. The methods used include ways to identify problems of practice and methods for finding solutions to them. However, while a technical orientation to action research may end with the solution, the existential approach leads the action researcher through a reflective process that raises existential concerns such as meaninglessness, self-estrangement, anxiety (the concern about one's performance), fear (forces outside of oneself), and the possibility of "bad faith (Sartre, 1956)." As a result, the action researcher becomes aware of multiple solutions that are tied to a multiplicity of interpretations of the educational situation, which leads to a better understanding of the situation and one's own being through interpretive meaning-making and deliberation.

Critical theorists and feminists have been critical of existentialism because of its seeming focus on the individual and lack of attention to wider social, political, and economic concerns. While existentialists have challenged this reading of their philosophy (Cooper, 1999), I agree with their critics because of the lack of an explicit social agenda in much of what is called existentialism. However, the existentialist approach to action research does make social concerns explicit, and incorporates them by structuring the research as a collaborative activity. It is important to note that by collaborative, I mean a group of action researchers working together, helping each other in their inquiries, rather than a collaboration between teachers and university researchers (Feldman, 1993b; 1996b; 1999). It is through this collaborative effort that existential action research transcends the individual and moves toward the emancipatory orientation and helps my students to reach the goals that I set in the course on action research.
The reflection dimension

Mary Rearick (Rearick & Feldman, 1999) has identified three forms of reflection that are located along this dimension: autobiographical, collaborative, and communal. In autobiographical reflection action researchers examine the meaning of their stories to probe into their metaphorical meanings to understand and explain practice. Collaborative reflection involves sharing personal theories, asking questions and seeking answers beyond the self. Communal reflection involves an examination of the social construction of the self and the situation within cultural, historical, and institutional contexts. It can involve political public dialogue about philosophical questions such as the meaning of democracy, freedom, and social justice.

As with the other dimensions of the action research space, an existential approach includes all forms of reflection. This is best illustrated by first looking at what Elizabeth (Dolly) Pedevillano calls existential reflection (Pedevillano & Feldman, 2000). An existentialist view of reflection begins by making several acknowledgements. First, because we are conscious beings, we all engage in reflection. Second, reflection takes on various forms and can include others in multiple ways (Rearick & Feldman, 1999). Third, there is an implicit assumption in education that reflection is a normative process that leads to "better" educational situations, where better is defined in relation to particular ideologies.

The goals of existential reflection are to move forward in an authentic way by building a strong understanding of who one is as a teacher; and to:

- illuminate assumptions about oneself as a teacher;
- bring to light assumptions, theories and myths about the outside systems that affect teaching; and
- work towards a transformative and transcendent experience and emancipation.

Existential reflection builds on knowledge that begins, and already exists as part of the self. The person has this knowledge from being in the world as a person who teaches. Existential reflection seeks to uncover the self as teacher, to discover one's ways-of-being a teacher, in our original experiencing of the world including feelings like passion, mood, interest, curiosity and enthusiasm. In doing so, we are trying to name that which already exists, to make meaning of the world that we are in already. As a result, as Sartre tells us, self-reflection is "conducted not by switching on an inner searchlight, but by observing how one is reflected in that 'world of tasks' which is the 'image of myself' (Cooper, 1999)." In this way, existential reflection is similar to Rearick's autobiographical reflection.

An existential approach to action research incorporates existential reflection, and through its collaborative mode, adds aspects of Rearick's collaborative and communal reflection. That is because a teacher, through existential reflection in collaboration with others, pays attention to the intersection of her tacit knowledge and assumptions about teaching and learning with the details or task at hand in the lived world of the classroom. The result is that the goals of existential reflection are achieved.
Conclusion

From my analysis of existential action research using the dimensions of action research, it appears as if existential action research is everything. In it we can see elements of all purposes, theoretical orientations, and types of reflection. Does this mean that my formulation of existential action research is so nebulous that it loses its usefulness, or that like a politician seeking office, I am promising something to everyone? What I argue instead is that we can see all of these possible aspects of action research in existential action research because the existential approach rejects the theoretical separation into parts. What existential action research attempts to do is to bring together all ways of seeing who we are, where we are, what we do, and why. To use separate means is to lose the essence of being.

Denton has illustrated this with the following example:

> Consider my favorite example of an orange. We may describe the orange in terms of atoms and molecules; we may describe it as a color-patch; we may describe it as an approximation of a circle, its sphericeness. But to describe it as an orange is to see it in its original orangeness; that is, as it is related to me in the act of experiencing an orange, my being-with-the-orange (Denton, 1971, 165).

Denton ties his critique to research in this way:

> If I walk into [a classroom] with my sociologist's glasses on, I will quite likely see roles and role-relationships, formal and informal power structures, etc. If I walk in with my psychologist's glasses on, I shall probably see achievement and underachievement, responses and reinforcements, etc. With my architect's glasses, something else again. And so on and on this would go, depending on the number of "glasses" we had available. Each set of glasses brings with it definition, categories of description, research methodologies, and theories of explanation. But what happens if we try to see with naked eyes? We would see, I think, something more akin to the common sense of accumulated teaching lore than to that which is usually referred to as educational research (Denton, 1971, 164).

We are not strangers to this experience. We have all experienced seeing a teacher at work, and knowing somehow that what is happening in the classroom with the children is good for the students and good for the teacher. But when we try to use our theories to develop ways to measure what is happening with checklists, rubrics, or even narrative accounts, we lose something important. What we attempt to do with existential action research is to hold on to all that we can about our knowledge, understanding, and our way of being in the world, so that we can build our capacity to choose freely and to act responsively for those we care for.
References


