

## Promoting Reflexivity During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

*Reflexivity is a concept that is pivotal in understanding and conducting qualitative inquiry but can be relevant to the teacher identities as they shuttle between what they do as teachers and how they engage with participants in conducting research). In the Notes from the Field article, the authors, Maribel Greene and Gloria Park (a doctoral student working on a research project with doctoral program peers and a graduate faculty member teaching the qualitative research course, respectively) focus on a research-oriented concept of reflexivity to bring about more awareness around their roles and responsibilities as an emerging qualitative researcher (Greene) and a graduate faculty member (Park) working with individuals from diverse contexts. In addition to highlighting reflexivity in their respective roles and responsibilities, the authors document the unprecedented influence the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their work. In this collaborative reflective piece, they discuss their positionalities and reflect on the role of reflexivity not just in their research but as a tool to navigate their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors highlight the importance of (1) being vulnerable; (2) looking more inward in what they do as a researcher and a graduate faculty member; and (3) taking risks in being reflexive to better understand their respective roles. The authors conclude with a list of critical questions and insights inviting readers to find ways to carry on the commitment to integrate reflexivity in working with individuals from diverse backgrounds in both teaching and research contexts.*

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Emerging Researcher, Qualitative Research, Reflexivity.

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Reflexivity is a concept that is pivotal in understanding and conducting qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but can be relevant to the teacher identities as they shuttle between what they do as teachers and how they engage with participants in conducting research (Park, 2017). Reflexivity is about (1) engaging in the constant scrutiny of the self, (2) magnifying and re-exploring the “whys” and “hows” of the teaching and conducting research, (3) forging and understanding relationships with the students and the participants, and (4) questioning their own perceptions of themselves and others (Berger, 2015; Garbe et al., 2020; Giampapa, 2011; Palaganas et al., 2017; Pillow, 2003). Doing reflexivity work provides the authors space to unpack issues of power inherent in who they are and what they do as individuals navigating sociocultural and political contexts. In this collaborative reflective piece, the authors discuss their positionalities and reflect on the role of reflexivity not just in their research but as a tool to navigate their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors highlight the importance of (1) being vulnerable; (2) looking more inward in what they do as a researcher and a graduate faculty member; and (3) taking risks in being reflexive to better

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understand their respective roles (Berger, 2015; Villenas, 2002). In what follows, the authors briefly describe their respective contexts, share their stories within the pandemic, and discuss the lessons learned using reflexivity as a tool within their respected roles and responsibilities.

### **Maribel Greene Shares**

Maribel Greene is a secondary education English teacher at a private college preparatory alternative school for students with learning differences. In her first year teaching at the school, she taught students with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Attention Deficit Disorder, students on the spectrum, and other learning differences; thus, she focused on helping students navigate their educational trajectory along with the executive functioning skills needed as students prepared for college or other professional fields. She is also a PhD student matriculated in a summers-only residency cohort. As a first-generation Latina graduate student, her experiences in academia required that she negotiated her own experiences against the backdrop of a Eurocentric approach towards research methods (Canagarajah, 2002; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Kubota, 2019; Kumaravadivelu, 2016). As a novice researcher attempting to examine teachers' roles during the pandemic within her Summer Research Methods class, she found herself reflecting on and examining the shifts and intersections of her experiences within the pandemic. Her reflection on the reflexivity process focuses around two moments of discomfort. The first was to practice reflexivity as a role as "insider" while conducting research on teachers' experiences transitioning into online spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second was to sit in, examine and embrace the "messiness" of reflexivity while struggling to navigate academic discourse which brought on emotions of inadequacy all while in a pandemic.

### **Gloria Park Shares**

Gloria Park is a professor specializing in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and an applied linguistics teacher educator, and her students come from all over the world. Her students in their teaching sites (either before they embarked on their graduate degree programs, during or post-graduate degree program) work with immigrants, transnationals, refugees, and asylees in teaching them English as an additional language (EAL). Similar to Greene, she goes through many shifts in her day-to-day work as a mother, spouse, teacher-scholar, administrator, and commuter faculty. These shifts are very challenging, providing her with opportunities where issues of marginalization and privilege coexist. In particular, in this piece, she zooms in on her experience navigating her roles as graduate faculty member and program director for her academic year and summers-only cohorts during the COVID-19 pandemic that pushed her university into an emergency mode during their Spring Break in mid-March 2020. Not only was she focusing on transitioning her on-campus Spring 2020 course to a fully online course, but she was also pushed into planning for what this pandemic meant for 30+ students from all over the world planning to be on campus for eight weeks in the Summer 2020. As it became clear that this virus was not going to go away before the Summer 2020 session, which was scheduled to begin in May 2020, she started to prioritize what she needed to do to put everything fully online, worked with the program staff to place all dissertation defenses online to safeguard the health of the faculty and students, and began scheduling all in-person summers-only courses online for the Summer 2020 cohort.

She became more in tune to thinking about the roles of reflexivity and what that meant for her own work as a graduate faculty member. In particular, she constantly scrutinized the way she was structuring the Summer 2020 course (even though she had been teaching courses in this program since 2008). Being forced to teach her graduate course fully online due to the pandemic, she became more critical of her design of the course—how much time does she devote to synchronous sessions? Should she break up the synchronous sessions into smaller

groups? Because the summers-only program is intense in nature, her graduate teacher identity went into full force to make certain she was well prepared to “release” the online course platform to the registered students. In addition, she started to re-explore and re-investigate the “whys” and the “hows” of her online course (re)design during the pandemic, which added extra work on her plate because she felt the need to re-check the course syllabus and modules on a daily basis until the course began on June 1, 2020. Finally, even though she is fully invested in the work she does as a graduate faculty member, she felt the need to add extra layers of this reinforcement as she interacted with her graduate students through Zoom sessions, email responses, messages on the list-serves, text and messenger messages, and phone calls.

Along the same line, but in her teaching of a graduate course during the pandemic, she became hypervigilant about double-checking her course syllabus and revising her course materials to transition her qualitative inquiry course to fully online. She was treading on a foreign territory of teaching a graduate research course fully online. She started to see herself as not only a faculty designing and teaching this course, but also saw herself as a graduate student taking fully online courses to see and experience possible affordances and constraints. This overthinking and “turning the lens on herself” were intentional ways for her to make sure that the course was rigorous enough for doctoral level students. Simply, she perceived online courses to be less than rigorous, especially when it is a graduate qualitative research inquiry course. She needed to face this perception head-on, which translated into intentional over-preparation and over-commenting on assignments.

### **Reflections on Reflexivity during a Pandemic**

Reflexivity is a fluid process that requires the authors to understand that they are ultimately influenced by their positionalities, and in turn, they bring these nuanced positionalities into their space as an emerging researcher and a graduate faculty member. By making their positions transparent to themselves and to the research community, they come to engage in the “learning and unlearning” as they journey through their experiences (Berger, 2015; Palaganas, et al., 2017; Pillow, 2003). This transparency becomes even more critical in times of a global pandemic, given that all activities related to course engagement are delivered remotely. Being transparent about their roles and responsibility is connected to being intentional about what they need to accomplish and why they are making certain research choices and pedagogical choices in the work they do. For instance, in her research design with doctoral cohort peers focusing on understanding teachers’ experiences during COVID-19, Greene had the advantage of “studying the familiar” because she was also living in and experiencing what she was studying. Berger (2015) described these advantages as: “1) easier entrée, 2) head start in knowing about the topic and understanding nuanced reactions of participants” (p. 220). Because teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was a new phenomenon (Aliyyah et al., 2020) that she was researching, she was eager to share her lived experiences; however, since she was “studying the familiar,” she had to stay vigilant and ensure her participants were co-constructing their own narrative. She used Berger’s three ways to maintain “balance between researcher’s own experiences” and her own: 1) using a three-part log of the encounters, 2) comparing information and being reflexive as an “insider” and “outsider,” and finally 3) being humble to seek advice and feedback throughout all aspects of the phases (Berger, 2015, p.230; Ross, 2017). She also created space for participants to review her transcripts and data to collaborate in creating their own identity in the research (Barret et al., 2020; Berger, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). She believed that through these well-defined reflexivity methods put in place before collecting data, she could be as transparent as possible. This is what was necessary and required for good practice, as a novice researcher who was navigating academic pressures and attempting to negotiate power relations with her research participants. She also felt challenged as a first-generation Latina graduate student who wanted to disrupt ethnocentric

ideologies, and she experienced a contradiction between her desires as a researcher and the temptation to control one participant's narrative when they asked her to change the data. She had to scrutinize and investigate that notion of temptation with the backdrop of the kind of researcher she wanted to be versus the kind of researcher she felt she needed to be for academic success.

As a graduate faculty member, Gloria Park focused on transparency and intentionality in sharing as much information about the summer courses going fully online as she could, as well as sharing a detailed outline of both the synchronous and asynchronous nature of her graduate qualitative research course via Google Docs, email correspondence, and weekly open Zoom sessions leading up to the opening of the Summer 2020 courses at the beginning of June 1<sup>st</sup>. In particular, the weekly open Zoom meetings for the month of May 2020 were emotionally intense for Park and her graduate students as they discussed what this meant for their professional development opportunities of interacting informally with faculty in the program. They were also time-consuming for both students and faculty since they took time out of already-packed schedule to be available via Zoom sessions. However, these Zoom meetings provided the opportunity to practice transparency and intentionality, given that the program faculty were able to respond to questions of fear and discomfort.

Secondly, reflexivity allows the authors to “turn the lens on [themselves]” or be critical about their goals and purposes in what they do as teachers and researchers (Berger, 2015, p. 220). By “turning the lens on [themselves],” the authors must question every step they take in conducting research and every word choice and action they employ as they work one-on-one with graduate students. For example, Berger discussed her experience as an outsider investigating women in abusive relationships. She understood her preconceived judgements towards the submissive women who did not leave their abusers, and in doing so, was hypervigilant and “over empathetic” towards them as an attempt to compensate for her preconceived ideas. Therefore, she stated the process of reflexivity gave her awareness of the possible consequences during the research process (Berger, 2015). Here, she “turned the lens” on herself to investigate how her preconceived roles affected her research process. Similarly, Greene used reflexivity as a tool to “turn the lens on [her]self” to engage in and examine her role as a researcher in relation to her participants, in an experience where she felt great tension. She wanted her participants to engage in the process, to construct their own identities in the research; however, in one incident, she felt conflict when she submitted the transcripts and data analysis to her participants, and one participant asked that she change her data. In this incident, she had to push back on her feelings of resistance to the change and the need to control their narrative. In this moment, she had to examine why these two emotions co-existed; specifically, why she felt the need to control someone's narrative for the sake of data, especially because, as a woman of color, she knows what it is like for others to reduce her voice and experiences or mold her culture for the sake of comfort. Of course, she complied; however, she had to wrestle with herself as to why it bothered her to change her data when professing collaboration as the true intent. Villenas (2002) discussed the intersections within the woman of culture, where “women writers of culture...often struggle against [their] own complicity in adopting and gazing through Western male eyes” while still maintaining [their] own identities (p. 75).

In a similar manner, Park became more critical as a graduate faculty member teaching a qualitative research course fully online. She questioned her ways of teaching her pedagogies around online teaching. As she had practiced during the latter part of Spring 2020, while she was familiar with what she needed to do to set the course up as an online course, she was not well-versed in online teaching strategies. She conversed with her faculty colleagues who were more experienced in teaching online. When she met with a few of them via Zoom and they started to share how their online learning platforms were used, she was worried and frustrated. She worried that she could not live up to the same level of planning and pedagogical strategies being utilized by her colleagues. She was frustrated at herself for not being interested in online

teaching in the past. She could have learned more about this during her earlier days at her institution. During the few weeks leading up to the start of her doctoral course, she felt insecure as an imposter trying to teach online. As a result of this perception of insecurity, she went on an overdrive of being more available, having additional synchronous weekly Zoom sessions with smaller groups to have more time with each student registered in the course. Of course, this led to having increased screen time and increased fatigue.

Finally, engaging in reflexivity work also compels the authors to examine, challenge, and understand their positionalities to uphold their ethical responsibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018), especially as they deconstruct and reconstruct their identities through conducting research as an emerging qualitative researcher and working with graduate students. Moreover, through the process of reflexivity, ethical responsibility requires them to navigate and investigate their own motives, biases, and other influences they bring to their research topic and the designing and teaching of the research course. As part of their ethical responsibility, the authors challenge how knowledge is constructed and how reality is created as they work within and beyond their respective contexts. As such, they bring these assumptions into their research sites and educational landscape, which is translated into the ways in which they conduct research (Pillow, 2003) and the materials they bring into their classrooms. In doing so, they position themselves to challenge the existing dominant images and normative structures and discourses that continue to privilege one and marginalize others. For Greene and Park, their ways to uphold ethical responsibilities meant that they double- or triple-checked their work. Greene went through multiple rounds of conducting member-checks with her doctoral peers in her research team. As for Park, she spent countless hours giving individual feedback on weekly research assignments as well as providing a Google Doc of reading notes and sharing the audio-recording of three Zoom sessions per week. These were all shared on the course site and made available throughout the entire summer into the Fall 2020 semester. This allowed students to go back to review after completing the intensive summer sessions.

For Greene and Park, making their positions transparent coupled with being intentional about the work they must accomplish is interconnected with “turn[ing] the lens on [themselves]” by questioning every step they took in their individual work and being ethical to themselves, their peers and students. While these three areas are not the only roles and responsibilities around promoting reflexivity, they became the focal points during the Summer 2020. In moving forward, in what follows, the authors share lessons learned so that others may learn from their shortcomings as well as their well-received strategies.

### **Being More Mindful of our Reflexivity**

Given the multitude of positionalities and identities (teacher, learner, administrator, or all of the above), it is critical to be more transparent and open about the identities that impact the roles and responsibilities. And, of course, these are not only context dependent, but also will come with much variability since they are all individuals in the making, even the individuals who have many years of experience teaching and conducting research. As such, (1) How does one define and understand reflexivity? (2) In what situations should one be reflexive as educators working with students from diverse backgrounds?

Acknowledging that one must recognize and embrace fears, expectations, and unknowns, there is a sense of ethical responsibility that one has toward educating and raising one another’s critical consciousness (Freire, 1998). In other words, it is a movement toward pedagogy of hope and deep caring. As such, (1) How does one help one another share vulnerabilities and dispositions in working with and under unknown conditions? (2) In what ways can one bring ethics of care and responsibilities into one’s classroom?

To this end, the authors hope that this article can begin to raise additional questions for those wrestling with what it means to be more reflexive in the work they do as educators for social action.

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## Notes on Contributors

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**Gloria Park** is a Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in Composition and Applied Linguistics at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Her teaching and research interests are in the areas of critical pedagogy, teacher inquiry, and language identity work. Her scholarship appears in *TESOL Quarterly*, *TESOL Journal*, *Journal of Language*, and *Identity and Education*, just to name a few, and her first monograph was published by Multilingual Matters in 2017.

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