

Part 1: An Introduction to Qualitative Research

What is Qualitative Research & Inquiry?¹

An inquiry is simply a question, but as a process it invites a series of questions. A major guiding question can be a simple one; for example, "What is art teaching like on a Navajo Reservation?" This question is open-ended, experiential, and invites many different responses. Sub-questions, also can be used; such as "What types of instructional strategies do Navajo teachers use?" Some questions come from a review of the literature, while others emerge in the process of conducting qualitative research.

According to Eisner (1991), qualitative research is the search for qualities--the characteristics of our experience. We translate these qualities through our chosen form and conceptual outlook. Six features of qualitative study are that it is 1) field-focused, 2) action-oriented where the researcher is an instrument, 3) interpretive in nature, 4) expressive in language, 5) highly detailed, and 6) persuasive (Eisner, 1991, pp. 32-40).

Qualitative inquiry is a process of describing, analyzing and interpreting insights discovered in everyday life (Wolcott, 1994). Similar to quantitative research, qualitative methods begin with [empirical] observation of a phenomenon and its characteristics. In qualitative studies this results in new insights and reclassifications, rather than strict numerical comparison and classification (Willis, 1978). This form of research can also generate theory and extends our understandings, rather than generalizing about them (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Stake (1988) refer to qualitative research as naturalistic inquiry, which is a careful study of human activity in its natural and complex state. Qualitative types of research depend on personal, social, and idiosyncratic meanings, that are valued for themselves.

Some Approaches to Qualitative Research

Qualitative research includes many types of inquiry including ethnography, phenomenology, educational criticism, case study, arts-based research, and social critical theory among others.

- **Ethnography** is an inquiry process carried out by a person from a point of view based on experience and knowledge of prior research. Researchers try to understand the significance or meaning of an experience from the participants' point of view. Some researchers also use the term ethnography to refer to all techniques used in fieldwork (Stuhr, 1986). **Microethnography** is the study of a smaller experience or a slice of everyday reality, such as instruction. This involves a process of data collection,

¹ Adapted from Stokrocki, M. (1997). Qualitative forms of research methods. In S. D. La Pierre, & E. Zimmerman (Eds.). *Research methods and methodologies for art education* (pp. 33-56). Reston, VA: NAEA.

content analysis, and comparative analysis of everyday situations for the purpose of formulating insights (Smith, 1978).

- **Phenomenology** is the study of an experience and its essences. The method is a line-by-line search for essential statements and an in-depth analysis of them (van Manen, 1984, 1990). Beittel (1973) and his students for instance, were the first to publish their phenomenological photographic investigation of and dialogue on creativity with artists in a drawing laboratory. Another good model of phenomenological inquiry is Jeffers' (1993) explanation of how a group of preservice teachers in an elementary art methods course made sense of their aesthetic decision-making experience.
- **Case Study**, which originated in psychology, is research that depicts a problem in all "its personal and social complexity" (Stake, 1988, p. 256). It is a search for an understanding of a complex case. When conducting a case study, Stake warns us to set limits in the beginning and widen them as we later interrelate different components. Most researchers only gradually come to realize which issues are best to construct their stories. An issue may emerge as a classification; for example, a staff person who calls students either "hoarders or sharers." An issue also may evolve as others change; for example, "whenever the child cried, the teacher became busy with other children" (Stake, 1988, p. 259).
- **Narrative Analysis** - Narratives, in this context, refer to stories that represent a sequence of events. They can be generated during the data collection process, such as through in-depth interviews or focus groups; they can be incidentally captured during participant observation; or, they can be embedded in written forms, including diaries, letters, the Internet, or literary works. Narrative analysis can be used for a wide range of purposes - comparative analysis between groups, understanding social or historical phenomena, or diagnosing psychological or medical conditions. Narratives are the source of data used, and their analysis opens a gateway to better understanding of a given research topic. Researchers used narrative analysis, for example, in a study on tuberculosis (TB) in Delhi slums (Khan, 2012). Using data from personal stories of women living with TB, the authors examined the "genderization" of TB and the related consequences for women.
- **Action research** is a process in which participants examine their own educational or creative practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research. Typically, action research is undertaken in a school, community or museum setting. It is a reflective process that allows for inquiry through doing. Often, action research is a collaborative activity among participants searching for solutions to everyday, real problems experienced in schools or neighborhoods. Rather than dealing just with the

theoretical, action research involves direct involvement through participation and observation with a site and community.

- **Art-based research** is the intentional use of an artistic process or practice to understand and examine experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. These inquiries are distinguished from research activities where the arts may play a significant role but are essentially used as data for investigations that take place within academic disciplines that utilize more traditional approaches. For instance, the artist-researcher might create a series of paintings over a period of time and then set up a research protocol whereby the artist interprets the image through spontaneous body movement in the presence of one or more witnesses.

Interpretation

Interpretation is a process of translation. Many types of interpretation exist: psychological, historical, legal, religious, and symbolic. The process of interpretation is similar to a detective searching for clues and establishing facts. Interpretation is concerned with uncovering the multi-layered meanings of a phenomenon and understanding them more deeply. According to Bleicher (as cited in Stokrocki, 1983), "Understanding is the recognition and reconstruction of meaning through language." For example, as when you walk into a room and perceive it to be cold, you are translating this sensorially and experientially. Your task is to achieve a deeper interpretation. Why is the room cold, where is it in space and time, what is happening to you cognitively and psychologically?

Eisner (1991) defines interpretation as a process of explaining the meaning of an event by putting it in its context, making the experience vivid, identifying its prior conditions and potential consequences, and providing reasons for practices. When interpreting, remember to 1) state your pre-understandings of the phenomenon and explain its context; 2) realize [state] that your information is probably true; 3) seek meaning in your description; 4) search for connections to the phenomenon; and 5) apply your findings to your own life and state how the experience has changed you.

Maitland-Gholson and Ettinger (1994) explain interpretive decision-making as it relates to selected examples in art education. They examine different interpretive research roles in order to: 1) construct meanings directly from participants' words and actions [phenomenology], 2) uncover hidden norms and biases through consensus of insiders and outsiders [critical theory], 3) disclose patterns of power and behavior through linguistic analysis [interpretive analytics], and 4) uncover changing ideological meanings [deconstruction].

Observation

Participant Observation is a process of describing, analyzing, and interpreting an everyday activity to understand it more fully (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participant Observation implies that the researcher is learning from people and not just studying them. The researcher is the prime tool for gathering data. One can be a complete observer, a full participant, or a half participant and half observer. Seigny (1978) calls a combination of all three stances triangulation, a social process of viewing a situation from all three perspectives. You can also achieve triangulation by using different research techniques. Wolcott (1988) suggests that triangulated techniques are helpful "for cross-checking, or for ferreting out varying perspectives on complex issues and events" (p. 192).

Triangulation also increases trustworthiness of research by incorporating three different viewpoints and methods. Developing a good memory also is important. For instance in the Navajo study mentioned earlier, I was criticized because they felt that writing everything down meant that I didn't learn my lessons well. Qualitative researchers, therefore, must explain their approach and selection of methods (Smith, 1978; Stokrocki, 1991a).

How do I Gain Access or Permission to Research?

Gaining access, a process of seeking permission to conduct a study, can be formal or informal. For example, in her attempt to work with Japanese art educators and observe an individual school, Mason (1993) describes weeks of meetings to determine the scope of her study and to insure that the situation would be the best possible one to observe. In contrast, after failure to reach possible research sites through Arizona State University's Center of Indian Education, I found a more informal network that could provide me with potential sites. The process began with a personal contact and continued with casual introductions at regional art education meetings on the Navajo Reservation. At times, signed consent to even conduct the study took nearly six months to convince Navajo superintendents. They also wanted to see the completed report. Gaining access mainly involved establishing a sense of trust.

At times, gaining access may consist of a simple letter on school stationery that states,

"The ___ School/Organization grants permission to ___ to conduct research on _____ in the _____. The information will become part of the student's thesis work." Include a copy of your research proposal. Participants, including students, however, have the right to refuse to cooperate and to change their minds at any time.

It's best to refer to the people that you study as participants, not subjects. The term subjects is demeaning. The ethics or rules of conduct regarding qualitative research are changing as researchers form alliances with participants in trying to understand specific situations and make recommendations. Through such interactions both parties become equal in status. Qualitative

research assumes reciprocity--an exchange of favors. Some reason should be given to participants for their cooperation in your research (Patton, 1990, p. 253). Reasons can vary from a feeling of importance from being observed, useful feedback, pleasure from interactions with the observer, or paid assistance.

What Are the Stages of Qualitative Research?

Qualitative research unfolds in three stages: (1) data collection, (2) content analysis, and (3) comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A research question doesn't need to be finished at the beginning of a participant observation, and will change throughout the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1992). Most qualitative researchers are not interested in forming universal generalizations, but in generating concepts or insights for future use. Smith (1978) advocates that researchers document how the research process changed over time. There are many ways of conducting qualitative research.

1. Data collection is a process of recording an event and gathering information. To begin start by writing first impressions. Making a map of the site can be helpful, noting participant interactions and recording field notes to include dates and times, and conversations and movement among participants. Use both audio (or video) tape recording, as well as field notes, in case the electronic equipment fails. Photographs may add vividness to your research, but you also can sketch participants' artworks or artmaking in progress. Create a profile by asking questions about the racial and economic background of the setting and its participants. Gather cultural documents; such as a school mission statement, course of study, art curriculum, and art handouts for further interpretation. Reconstruct data that may be lacking; such as a curriculum sequence or lesson plan objectives.

2. Transcribe your notes, other pertinent information, and findings into separate documents on the computer. Keep a running calendar of visits and events. Data should include site, date, class time, lesson description, and students' age levels, grades, class memberships, gender, and race. Note non-verbal behaviors and timing events, which may be set approximately every five minutes, called a time frequency. Anonymity is important. Use pseudonyms or initials of participants for names; otherwise, obtain signed and dated permission for release of participants' and school names. How many classes or how much time should you spend observing and analyzing?

3. Interviewing is a process of asking questions in the form of a natural dialogue. Some interviews are highly structured in advance and others are more conversational (James, 1994). Since participants often do not to take questionnaires seriously, it is better to follow-up with informal interviews. Some questions may be open-ended. For example, the question "what is art?" may need the following prompts to help someone organize their thoughts: drawing, creativity, and expression? A good way to approach participants is to ask them to tell

you their story. It is important to find participants who are willing to cooperate with you and to give extra information and insights.

4. Content analysis (and coding) is a search for themes or patterns of meaning. This may include writing summaries, organizing data to form relationships, condensing information to the most important things, and writing stories (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 429). Some researchers borrow categories from previous research. Other categories emerge from the data in metaphoric forms. To start, write down your first impressions and evolving questions of an event at the beginning of your study and include them as assumptions. Keep a running account of how they change. Then compare them with evidence obtained in time.

For example, on the Navajo Reservation, the slow pace of classroom time overwhelmed me. I kept looking for something to happen and had to get coffee from the office to stay awake. I needed to slow down and focus my attention on specific actions. Coming out of Cleveland's active, inner-city schools, I found it difficult to adjust to the Navajo's extreme quietness or nonaction. The Navajo believe that sitting and thinking is doing something. The students, however, produced marvelous artworks and the silence and reflection had a calming effect on me. Wolcott (1994) believes that self criticism, as I just described, is a significant methodological finding.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggest the following starter categories: setting, participant views, process, activity, passages, stages, behaviors, and methods. Use your categories to organize concepts and ideas gathered from your observations, interviews and other data. When doing content analysis, be sure to define all the categories and concepts.

5. Thesis Writing: To start writing, use an outline and make a table, graph, diagram, or chart to explain the process you arrived at to "capture" your data. Something as simple as a checklist is quite handy for researchers to scan a large amount of information. Then write up your report or essay. Ethnographers use a simple formula. In the first sentence, mention your conceptual finding or argument. In the next sentence, define the concept. Then give a few examples of dialogue or stories from your research. In the last sentence summarize what you learned new about the concept.

Wolcott (1988) suggests that you write your first draft while at the site, then you can ask more questions and fill-in the gaps while there. Describe the context, participants, program, schedule, etc. Simply write the story. Some people need an outline. I transcribe my field notes into the computer as I work and code simultaneously. Remember to state the limits of your study: time, person, site, malfunctioning equipment, and other problems. Finally use forms of comparative analysis to discuss findings or explanations. For instance you can begin to compare and contrast your experience of observing two different teachers or art classes. Try to include evidence from related research or local experts to support your findings. When you present your ideas and give an example to refresh the reader's memory.

6. Conclusions are significant findings that you discovered about the concepts in your title. Some qualitative researchers list major findings. I pin up my entire study on a bulletin board to track major concepts (in my title or in my research questions) and color code them throughout my paper. My recent paper, for example, "A Microethnographic Study of Art Teaching on the Navajo Reservation," begins with a section explaining the concepts in the title (microethnographic, art, teaching, & Navajo). At the end of my paper, I check to include what I learned about these concepts. What you are doing at this point in your research is condensing or collapsing the data further. If you can't find significant conclusions, review and raise questions about the related concepts or theories, get advice, and invite collaboration and competing opinions (Wolcott, 1994). Be honest about what you didn't find and what methods didn't work. Mention that future research is needed and in what areas such research is needed.