

Proposing Research: From Mind to Paper to Action

Research-proposal writing is substantively and symbolically an important event. In an excellent book on the subject, *Proposals That Work*, Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000) say that a dissertation proposal has three substantive functions: to plan, to communicate, and to establish a contract. There is, however, a fourth function. Developing a dissertation proposal and getting it approved is a crucial step in the rite of passage of earning a doctorate. Its ritualistic function can sometimes make writing a proposal seem daunting. It transforms the writer of the proposal from the status of student to that of researcher.

RESEARCH PROPOSALS AS RITES OF PASSAGE

In some respects becoming an academic is like joining a club. As in most other somewhat-exclusive clubs, there are those who are in and those who are out; there are elites and non-elites. There are privileges of membership, and there are penalties for not paying dues. To some extent, success in the club is a matter of merit; but that success is sometimes affected by issues of race, gender, and class that can influence entry into the club in the first place, or weight the power of those who have been admitted already.

Although pressures, strains, and contradictions affect those who work in collegiate institutions just as they do those who work in others, still, college faculty are paid for the pleasurable activities of reading, writing, teaching, and doing research. Relative to public school teachers, for example, we have a great deal of autonomy over our time and professional lives. Not all doctoral candidates in education move on to faculty positions in colleges or universities. But those who use their doctorates to assume leadership positions in school systems often gain a degree of autonomy in their working lives that many would envy.

Those who have already earned the doctorate often act as gatekeepers to the club. During the rituals of proposal submission, review, and approval established by the gatekeepers, the power relationship between candidate and doctoral advisor is very unequal. (See Locke et al., 2000, chap. 2, for further discussion of dysfunctions that can occur between doctoral candidates and faculty mentors.) Elements of sexism, racism, classism, and institutional politics can enter the process. When that relationship is inequitable, the rite of passage can be excessively anxiety producing. It takes a great deal of thoughtfulness on everyone's part to make the relationship between doctoral candidate and committee equitable at the proposal stage.

COMMITMENT

When a candidate's doctoral program is working well, a research topic arises out of work that has gone before. Course work, fieldwork, practica, clinical work, and comprehensive exams all lead the candidate forward to an area of inquiry about which he or she feels some passion. If the doctoral program has not worked well—if committee memberships have changed, if the doctoral student has been convinced against his or her own interests to pursue those of a professor—a student can progress through the earlier stages of the rite of passage without identifying a topic that is personally meaningful. Kenneth Liberman (1999, p. 51) notes that if doctoral candidates do not really believe in their topic and are not motivated by the intrinsic values of their own research topics, their work can lack a sense of authenticity. In such a situation, the writing of a proposal may be more excruciating than satisfying.

In some cases doctoral candidates enter the program having already chosen a topic. For a while they make their peers nervous because they seem so advanced and confident. My sense is that such confidence is often misplaced. The experience of the doctoral program itself should bring about some sort of new orientation, some interest in new areas, some growth in the candidate's outlook. If it does not, the candidate is looking backward instead of forward.

Substantively, one of the underlying reasons for writing a proposal is its planning function (Locke et al., 2000). Although Joseph Maxwell in his thoughtful book, *Qualitative Research Design* (1996), separates the process of research design from proposal writing, my experience is that the writing of the proposal is a prime opportunity for doctoral candidates to

clarify their research design. To plan, candidates must assess where they have been and make a commitment to where they would like to go. This can be a stressful part of the process.

I remember one outstanding doctoral candidate who was stalled for 6 months at the prospect of writing his dissertation proposal. It was not that he could not find a subject; nor was he in search of a method. He was just frozen in his writing. After 6 months of not being able to get around his writing block, he finally discussed his anxieties about, in effect, changing club memberships. He said that he had grown up in a working-class neighborhood where people sat on their front-porch steps in the summer drinking beer. That was what his parents still did. He was not sure that he wanted to leave the front porch to start drinking white wine in the living room at faculty gatherings. For many doctoral candidates, completing their dissertations implies a commitment to a new professional and personal identity that can be difficult to make. In many ways writing a dissertation proposal is a key step in the developmental process that occurs in doctoral study, and such processes are seldom free of significant complexities.

FROM THOUGHT TO LANGUAGE

Many students have trouble writing proposals because they are plagued by a sense of audience. The process seems dominated by doctoral committees and Institutional Review Boards that must approve the proposed research. (For more on Institutional Review Boards, see Chapter 5.) When audience plays such a dominating role, writing can easily suffer. Rather than concentrating on what he or she wants to say, the candidate may filter every sentence through the screen of what is expected and what will be acceptable to the committee.

Preliminary ideas about research often stay locked in one's inner speech. They are fleeting, predicated, and unstable (Vygotsky, 1987), making communication of them difficult. However, those ideas in inner speech must be made explicit. Doctoral candidates do have to communicate clearly to their committee what they are thinking.

A key to communicating about plans for research is to focus first on what is meaningful. When a proposal works best, it emanates from the motives of the candidate and works its way through thought, inner speech, and into external speech through meaning. Often, however, the form and substance of the inquiry in a dissertation proposal can seem to the candidate to be imposed from the outside; the format of dissertation

proposals can seem to take precedence over their substance. Then the writing of the proposal can become mechanical and formulaic.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Peter Elbow (1981) offers an approach to writing that I think can be useful in such cases. He suggests that trying both to create with the audience in mind and to make writing perfect from the start imposes an undue burden on the writing process. He suggests making writing and editing two separate aspects of the writing process. And he urges deferring thoughts of the audience until the editing part of the process.

To facilitate that separation, Elbow suggests what has come to be known as free-writing and focused free-writing. Focused free-writing is a process that allows the writer to concentrate on the topic and forget the audience. It advises writers to start writing on their topics and to continue for a specified period of time without stopping. If they get stuck, they should repeat their last word or write the word *stuck* until they get going again. A person new to the process might begin with 5 minutes of focused free-writing, gradually increasing the length of time.

After free-writing sections of the proposal, writers can then select from these the most cogent, refashioning from them a first draft. Elbow suggests other methods to help writers overcome blocks due to anxiety about audience. Near the end of the writing process, rather than at the beginning, writers can edit their drafts with the audience and the form of dissertation proposal in mind. I recommend Elbow's *Writing With Power* (1981); Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman's *Proposals That Work* (2000); Maxwell's *Qualitative Research Design* (1996); and Schram's *Conceptualizing Qualitative Inquiry* (2003) as important resources for anyone about to write a dissertation proposal.

QUESTIONS TO STRUCTURE THE PROPOSAL

What?

Proposal writers need to ask themselves some simple questions. These can be divided into several groups. First is a group of questions I put under the heading of "What?" In what am I interested? What am I trying to learn about and understand? What is the basis of my interest?

Interviewers begin with an interest in a particular area. At the beginning of interviewers' research lurks the desire to understand what is going on. But how did that desire begin? Important questions that must be asked in interviewing research and that are seldom asked in experimental or quasi-experimental research are, What is the context of my interest? How did I come to this interest? What is my stake in the inquiry, and what do I get out of pursuing my interest and learning about it? What are my expectations about the subject of inquiry?

Research, like almost everything else in life, has autobiographical roots. It is crucial for interviewers to identify the autobiographical roots of their interest in their topic. (See Locke, Silverman & Spirduso, 2004, pp. 217–218, for a compelling discussion of this issue.) Research is hard work; interviewing research is especially so. In order to sustain the energy needed to do the research well, a researcher must have some passion about his or her subject. Rather than seeking a “disinterested” position as a researcher, the interviewer needs to understand and affirm his or her interest in order to build on the energy that can come from it. Equally important, researchers must identify the source of their interest in order to channel it appropriately. They must acknowledge it in order to minimize the distortion such interest can cause in the way they carry out their interviewing. An autobiographical section explaining researchers' connections to their proposed research seems to me to be crucial for those interested in in-depth interviewing. (For an example of such an explanation, see Maxwell, 1996, pp. 123–124.)

Finally, interviewers must not only identify their connection with the subject of the interview; they must also affirm that their interest in the subject reflects a real desire to know what is going on, to understand the experience. If, in fact, interviewers are so intimately connected to the subject of inquiry that they really do not feel perplexed, and what they are really hoping to do is corroborate their own experience, they will not have enough distance from the subject to interview effectively. The questions will not be real; that is, they will not be questions to which the interviewers do not already have the answers.

There is, therefore, an inherent paradox at the heart of the issue of what topics researchers choose to study. On the one hand, they must choose topics that engage their interest, their passion, and sustain their motivation for the labor-intensive work that interviewing research is. That usually means in some way or another they must be close to their topics. On the other hand, to be open to the process of listening and careful exploration that is crucial in an interviewing study, they must approach

their research interests with a certain sense of naiveté, innocence, and absence of prejudgments (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Researchers who can negotiate that complex tension will be able to listen intently, ask real questions, and set the stage for working well with the material they gather.

Why? in Context

The next question to ask is why the subject might be important to others. Why is the subject significant? What is the background of this subject, and why is that background important to understand? To what else does the subject relate? If you understand the complexities of this subject, what will be the benefit and who will obtain it? What is the context of previous work that has been done on the subject (Locke et al., 2000)? How will your work build on what has been done already? (See Locke et al., 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 1995, for succinct discussions of the issue of significance.)

Locke and his colleagues are especially cogent in their discussion of what often appears in dissertation proposals as “reviews of the literature.” They stress that these sometimes mechanical summaries of previous research miss the intent of reading the literature connected to the subject. Such reading should inform researchers of the context of the research, allow them to gain a better sense of the issue's significance and how it has been approached before, as well as reveal what is missing in the previous research. These understandings can be integrated into the various sections of the proposal and do not necessitate a separate one that sometimes reads like a book report. (See Locke et al., 2000, pp. 63–68, and Maxwell, 1996, chap. 3, who is also thoughtful on this issue.)

In addition to asking why the topic is historically significant, critical ethnographers suggest that how the topic relates to issues of power, justice, and oppression must also be raised. Especially important are the issues of power that are implicit in the research topic itself (Solsken, 1989) and in interviewing as a methodology. John Rowan (1981) suggests that researchers consider not only how their own personal interests are served by their research but also who else's interest is served. What about the participants in the research? What do they get out of participating? What do they risk? Does the research underwrite any existing patterns of oppression? Or does the research offer some possibility of understanding that could create liberating energy? In a world beset by inequity, why is the topic of research important? (See Fay, 1987, for an important discussion of the foundations of critical social science.)

How?

A next question to ask is, How? Assuming that researchers have decided that in-depth interviewing is appropriate for their study, how can they adapt the structure of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing outlined in Chapter 2 to their subject of study? I offer examples of such adaptations by two doctoral students who have worked with this approach to interviewing. (I share results of their work in the Appendix.)

Marguerite Sheehan (1989), who was a doctoral candidate in early childhood education at the University of Massachusetts, addressed the question as follows. She was interested in studying child care as a career. In her review of the literature she had found that most of the research on child-care providers focused on those who had left the field early because of what was called "burn-out." Sheehan was interested in people who stayed in the field, especially those who saw providing child care as a career. She hoped to come to understand the nature of their experience and to see if she could unravel some of the factors that contributed to their longevity in the field. Sheehan took the three-interview structure and adapted it as follows:

Interview One (life history): How did the participant come to be a child-care provider? A review of the participant's life history up to the time he or she became a child-care provider.

Interview Two (contemporary experience): What is it like for the participant to be a child-care provider? What are the details of the participant's work as a child-care provider?

Interview Three (reflection on meaning): What does it mean to the participant to be a child-care provider? Given what the participant has said in interviews one and two, how does he or she make sense of his or her work as a child-care provider?

Toon Fuderich (1995), who also was a doctoral candidate at the School of Education of the University of Massachusetts, was interested in studying the experience of Cambodian refugees who as children had experienced the terrors of war. She adapted her interest in this topic to the three-interview structure as follows:

Interview One (life history): How did the participant become a refugee? What was the participant's life history before coming to the United States?

Interview Two (contemporary experience): What is life like for the participant in the United States? What is her education, work, and family life like?

Interview Three (reflection on meaning): What does it mean to the participant to be living in the United States now? How does she make sense of her present life in the context of her life experience?

Who? When? Where?

The next set of questions asks whom the researchers will interview, and how they will get access and make contact with their participants. In Chapter 4 we discuss the complexities of access, contact, and selecting participants. What is called for at this point is a consideration of the strategy the researchers will use. What will the range of participants be? What strategy of gaining access to them will the researchers use? How will they make contact with the participants? The strategy may allow for a process of participant selection that evolves over the course of the study, but the structure and strategy for that selection must be thought out in the proposal.

Some writers suggest that the "how" of a qualitative research study can itself be emergent as the study proceeds. That orientation assumes that because qualitative research does not begin with a set of hypotheses to test, strict control of variables is not necessary. Furthermore, because the inquiry is being done in order to learn about complexities of which researchers are not totally aware, the design and even the focus of the study have to be seen as "emergent" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 208–211, pp. 224–225) or "flexible" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, pp. 43–48).

Although it is understandable that researchers would want to build flexibility into a research design, there is a danger in overemphasizing the "emergent" nature of research design in qualitative research. To the inexperienced, it can appear to minimize the need for careful preparation and planning. It can lead to the notion that qualitative research is somehow an "art" that really is incommunicable, or that somehow those who engage in it have earned a special status because they do not share the assumptions of those who do what is called quantitative research (McCracken, 1988, pp. 12–13). The danger of overemphasizing the "emergent" nature of the design of the study is a looseness, lack of focus, and misplaced nonchalance about purpose, method, and procedure on the part of those who

do qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) themselves stress that the emergent nature of qualitative research cannot be used as a license for "undisciplined and haphazard 'poking around'" (p. 251).

RATIONALE

Although the paradigms that underlie research methods in the social sciences seem to be changing rapidly (Kvale, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the extent to which researchers will have to defend their use of in-depth interviewing as their research methodology will depend on their individual departments. Some are still dominated by experimentalism or other forms of quantitative research. In others there may be a predisposition to experimental and quasi-experimental methods but nevertheless openness to qualitative research. In still others there may be a strong preference for qualitative research among a significant number of the faculty.

Whatever the departmental context, for the interviewing process to be meaningful to researchers themselves and its use credible to reviewers, it is important that researchers understand why they are choosing interviewing rather than experimental or quasi-experimental research. They must understand something about the history of science, the development of positivism, and the critique of positivism as it is applied to the social sciences in general and the field of education in particular.

Because there is currently more acceptance of qualitative research in graduate programs in education, many new researchers have not been asked to learn the assumptions and the practices of experimental or quasi-experimental research. Without this background, qualitative researchers do not know what they do not know about methodology. Consequently, their rationale for choosing a qualitative over a quantitative approach may not be as well grounded as it could be.

At the minimum, Campbell and Stanley's (1963) definitive essay on threats to what they call internal and external validity in experimental and quasi-experimental research should be required reading for all those who intend to do interviewing and other forms of qualitative research. They should grapple firsthand with the issues that shaped a generation of educational researchers and that still inform a significant body of educational research practice today. Even better would be thoughtful reading in the history of science and epistemology. (See, e.g., James, 1947; Johnson, 1975; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mannheim, 1975; Matson, 1966; Polanyi, 1958.)

WORKING WITH THE MATERIAL

Research proposals should describe how researchers intend to work with and analyze the material they gather. Describing this process ahead of time is especially difficult for those who are doing empirical research for the first time. It is difficult to project how they will work with material from interview participants if they have never done interviewing work before. In Chapter 8, I discuss working with the material. I stress the importance of paying attention to the words of the participant, using those words to report on the results as much as possible, and looking for both salient material within individual interviews and connections among interviews and participants.

The role that theory plays becomes an issue when researchers are actually trying to analyze and interpret the material they gather. Some scholars would argue that the theory used to discern and forge relationships among the words that participants share with interviewers must come out of those words themselves. Theory cannot and should not be imposed on the words but must emanate from them. This approach, extensively discussed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), has been somewhat persuasive in the field of qualitative research. It argues, rightly I think, especially against taking theoretical frameworks developed in other contexts and force-fitting the words of the participants into the matrices developed from those theories.

On the other hand it may be naïve for us to argue that researchers can be theory free. Everyone has theories. They are the explanations people develop to help them make connections among events. Theories are not the private preserve of scientists. Interviewers walk into interviews with theories about human behavior, teaching and learning, the organization of schools, and the way societies work. Some of the theories are informed and supported by others, and some are idiosyncratic. Others arise from readings interviewers have done in and about the subject of their inquiry.

Some scholars argue that in qualitative research such reading should be kept to a minimum lest it contaminate the view and the understanding of the researcher (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To a certain extent I agree with that view. It helps to interview participants about their experience if the interviewers are not weighted down with preformed ideas based on what they have gleaned from the literature.

For example, in an interview I had the pleasure of conducting with Linda Miller Cleary in 1996, she spoke to me about the interviewing

work that she and her colleague Thomas Peacock were conducting on the experience of American Indian educators (Cleary & Peacock, 1997). She said that, especially when interviewing in a cross-cultural setting, she was cautious about doing too much reading ahead of time. While affirming that she had to do enough reading to be informed and thoughtful about her topic, she was concerned about taking too many stereotypes from the literature into her interviewing. She said that "because I hadn't done a lot of reading, I could ask questions that were real questions" (L. M. Cleary, personal communication, August 11, 1996).

Interviewers must be prepared for their work and be aware of the research on which they are building (Yow, 1994, p. 33). Some researchers go further and argue that interviewers must be expert on their topics before they begin the interviews (Kvale, 1996, p. 147).

I think an intermediate position is sensible at the proposal stage. It is crucial to read enough to be thoughtful and intelligent about the context and history of the topic and to know what literature on the subject is available. It is important to conduct the interviews with that context in mind, while being genuinely open to what the participants are saying. After the interviews have been completed and researchers are starting to work intensively with the material, a return to the reading will help with the analysis and interpretation of the interview material. No prior reading is likely to match the individual stories of participants' experience, but reading before and after the interviews can help make those stories more understandable by providing a context for them.

The range of fields and associated readings that those who do research in education must synthesize is daunting. Often, we fall short of the task. But for those who take the task seriously, it is first-rate intellectual work. This work should be affirmed, represented in the proposal, and digested before the completion of the research, but not necessarily totally before the interviewing. This is a precarious and difficult position to hold. It requires maintaining a delicate balance between the sometimes competing claims of the relevant literature and the experience of the interview participants.

PILOTING YOUR WORK

The best advice I ever received as a researcher was to do a pilot of my proposed study. The dictionary (Gove, 1971) definition of the verb *pilot* is "to guide along strange paths or through dangerous places" (p. 1716).

Although it may not seem ahead of time that the world of interviewing research takes one along strange paths or through dangerous places, the unanticipated twists and turns of the interviewing process and the complexities of the interviewing relationship deserve exploration before the researchers plunge headlong into the thick of their projects.

I urge all interviewing researchers to build into their proposal a pilot venture in which they try out their interviewing design with a small number of participants. They will learn whether their research structure is appropriate for the study they envision. They will come to grips with some of the practical aspects of establishing access, making contact, and conducting the interview. The pilot can alert them to elements of their own interview techniques that support the objectives of the study and to those that detract from those objectives. After completing the pilot, researchers can step back, reflect on their experience, discuss it with their doctoral committee, and revise their research approach based on what they have learned from their pilot experience. (See Locke et al., 2000, pp. 80-82; Maxwell, 1996, for further discussion of pilot studies.)

CONCLUSION

As teachers must plan their objectives and how their methods fit those objectives in order to be responsive to what they meet in their classrooms, so too must researchers plan carefully for research. They must be thoughtful about the what, why, how, who, when, and where of interviewing. They must be as focused and clear as possible about their inquiry when they begin the study. Such planning is the prerequisite for being able to respond thoughtfully and carefully to what emerges as the study proceeds.

Because in-depth interviewing uses a method that is essentially open-ended, preparation, planning, and structure are crucial. Each interview requires a series of instantaneous decisions about what direction to take. Researchers entering an interviewing situation without a plan, sense of purpose, or structure within which to carry out that purpose have little on which to base those decisions. Without a thoughtful structure for their work, they increase the chance of distorting what they learn from their participants (Hyman et al., 1954) and of imposing their own sense of the world on their participants rather than eliciting theirs.