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Coming to Study

Key Concepts

Communities of Discourse
Study
Stance of Study

Studying Qualitative Research
Will to Study

TOWARD A *STANCE OF STUDY*

Efforts to explain the dissertation process run the risk of stripping away its messiness and creating the impression of a neat, orderly sequence of discrete steps. Within an idealized model, one first plans the study by identifying or choosing a topic and then selecting a research method that “fits one’s question.” During the implementation phase, data are first collected, then analyzed and displayed, then interpreted, and reported. Each step of the process appears to have a clear beginning and end.

In working with nearly 100 doctoral candidates on qualitative dissertations, we have never witnessed such a neatly executed process. Nor have we encountered students who, having mastered the skills of qualitative research, came to the dissertation ready to apply them. This causes us to ponder two questions:

- *What* must one learn in order to do a qualitative dissertation?
- *How* must one approach learning qualitative dissertation research?

There are, of course, no definitive or universal answers to these two questions, for both the *what* and the *how* will depend a great deal upon the individual embarking on a qualitative dissertation journey. We do, however, believe that no matter where one starts or what one brings to the journey, it is helpful to think of learning in a way described by John Holt (1976):

Another common and mistaken idea hidden in the word “learning” is that learning and doing are different kinds of acts. Thus, not many years ago I began to play the cello. I love the instrument, spend many hours a day playing it, work hard at it, and mean someday to play it well. Most people would say that what I am doing is “learning to play” the cello. Our language gives us no other words to say it. But these words carry into our minds the strange idea that there exist two very different processes: (1) learning to play the cello; and (2) playing the cello. They imply that I will do the first until I have completed it, at which point I will stop the first process and begin the second; in short, that I will go on “learning to play” until I have “learned to play” and that then I will begin “to play.”

Of course, this is nonsense. There are not two processes, but one. We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way. (p. 13)

We resonate with Holt’s contention that we learn by doing. Yet how might this be possible if one is not yet formally or officially doing one’s dissertation? The answer, we believe, lies in how one approaches learning about qualitative research. To explain what we mean, we turn to the concept of *study*.

Curriculum scholar William Pinar (2006), paraphrasing the work of Robert McClintock, observes:

While one’s truths—academic knowledge grounded in lived, that is subjective and social experience—cannot be taught, McClintock (see 1971, 169) underscores they can be acquired through the struggle of study, for which everyone has the capacity, but not necessarily the will. (p. 120)

Several points about this perspective are worth underscoring. First is the contention that one’s truths can be acquired but not taught. This calls for critical reflection on one’s assumptions about and expectations of teacher, student, and the limitations of learning within traditional academic classes. While faculty in their capacity as classroom teachers may impart valuable information about research and the dissertation, only a learner can grapple with the *meaning* of such information in relation to her or his own understandings.

Second, *study* connotes a shift in stance. “Tell me what I need to know and do?” must give way to, “What am I committed to understanding, and how do I engage with the world to pursue this commitment?” On the face of it, such a shift may seem quite attractive, perhaps even simple. Yet over the years, we have encountered more than a few students for whom embracing a *stance of study* was quite difficult. The difficulty, we speculate, relates to the point that not everyone necessarily has *the will to study*. To illustrate what we mean,

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let us consider the kinds of questions students often pose when asked their reasons for enrolling in our introductory course on qualitative research:

- How do I do a qualitative interview?
- How can I analyze my data? Should I use a software package to do this?
- Can I do a mixed-method study?
- If I'm doing a qualitative study, can I include numbers?
- How do I triangulate my data?
- How many subjects do I need for a qualitative study?
- How can I use ethnography (or case study or grounded theory) for my dissertation?



Sample Reference List 1.1

Interviewing

Douglas, 1985

Fontana & Frey, 2003

Fontana & Prokos, 2007

Holstein & Gubrium, 1995

Kvale, 1996

McCracken, 1988

Mishler, 1986

Rubin & Rubin, 1995

Seidman, 2006

Tripp, 1983

Questions framed this way imply an expectation for straightforward, practical answers that are readily available from a knowledgeable source: “Yes, you can do that and here’s how it is done.” Or, “No, you can’t do that, but here is what you can do instead.” This expectation for definitive answers works against a stance of study.

Even a fairly perfunctory search of literature on qualitative research methods will turn up multiple resources on any of these questions. There are, for example, a number of books devoted exclusively to interviewing (see Sample Reference List 1.1) or data analysis (see Sample Reference List 1.2), as well as numerous references on research methods like ethnography, case study, or grounded theory (see Sample Reference List 7.5). Reading more than a few of such references makes it clear that different authors approach interviewing, data analysis, ethnography, and so on in different ways. Understanding the reasoning behind and significance of these differences requires time and diligent effort. It requires *study*.

Yet educational practitioners who are pursuing a doctorate often work in arenas where efficiency is highly valued and rewarded. Pressure to do more with less continually mounts. Workloads increase exponentially. Solutions to problems need to be found and put into place as quickly as possible. “Putting out fires” is not an occasional emergency, but a way of life. Successful acclimation to such a culture often engenders a stance of performing, doing, solving, and acting. If this *stance of doing* is carried into a doctoral program, then successful learning may be seen as the acquisition of specific information that pays off in greater efficiency in the workplace or in the expeditious completion of academic tasks. An unquestioned valuing of efficiency is not conducive to a stance of study.

For many, letting go of a mindset that places a premium on efficiency may be easier said than done. *Study* entails a prolonged engagement with complex ideas. It requires a tolerance for ambiguity and an appreciation of multiple positions on complicated issues. The goal is not an efficient winnowing away of “extraneous” or “irrelevant” information

so that correct action can be taken. Rather, it is a quest for deeper, more nuanced understanding of dilemmas for which there is no correct action, only difficult trade-offs among less than ideal alternatives. This form of study calls not just for an openness to new ideas but also for a recognition of one's own assumptions. At the most fundamental level, these are assumptions about one's self and one's way of relating to others and to the world. The "subject" of study is as much oneself as external bodies of knowledge or information about a particular question. It is, as Pinar (2006) and McClintock (1971) suggest, coming to understand one's own truths, and this understanding often entails profound and humbling insights. A *stance of study*, then, is not for the faint of heart.

This brings us back to the question, "How can one learn by doing if one is not yet doing the dissertation?" It is our contention that embracing a stance of study toward learning qualitative research helps one to cultivate the sensibilities eventually needed to undertake a qualitative dissertation.

ENTERING INTO THE STUDY OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In our experience, it is not unusual for students to approach the idea of qualitative research expecting to learn a specific method. Letting go of this expectation is an important step toward entering into the *study of qualitative research*. It is useful to think of *qualitative research* as a shorthand descriptor that is used in casual conversation and even in the formal literature to connote a wide range of ideas. Some authors, for example, use the term to differentiate linguistic data from numeric data. Other authors use the term to distinguish studies conducted within naturally occurring contexts from those conducted within the controlled environment of a laboratory. Still others are alluding to a set of assumptions about the ways in which legitimate knowledge is generated. Given this, it is not very productive to ask, "What *exactly* does qualitative research *really* mean?" Rather, it is useful to ask, "What are the meanings associated with qualitative research, and how do these various meanings contribute to my own sense of self as an evolving qualitative researcher?" *Studying qualitative research* with this question in mind allows one to learn by doing, because understanding the connotations associated with any concept is integral to the process of a qualitative dissertation.

Probing beneath the casual use of the term *qualitative research* takes one into a complex and often-confusing body of literature. To begin orienting oneself, it is useful to consider several questions when reading an article or book about qualitative research:

Sample Reference List 1.2

Qualitative Data Analysis & Interpretation of Text

- Coffey & Atkinson, 1996
 Corbin & Morse, 2003
 Dalute & Lightfoot, 2004
 deMarrais, 1998
 Gott & Duggan, 2004
 Hodder, 2003
 Kezar, 2003
 Madriz, 2003
 Maranhao, 1990
 Miles & Huberman, 1994
 Morse, 1994
 Peshkin, 2000
 Riessman, 1996
 Wolcott, 1994
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- When was the piece written?
- From what disciplinary perspective is the author writing?
- What method (or genre) of qualitative research is the author discussing?
- What philosophical assumptions underpin this author's thinking?

Historical Context. Writing in 2003, Denzin and Lincoln (2003b) described qualitative research as being in its seventh historical moment and posit that

the history of qualitative research is defined more by breaks and ruptures than by a clear, evolutionary, progressive movement from one stage to the next. These breaks and ruptures move in cycles and phases, so that what is passé today may be in vogue a decade from now, and vice versa. (p. 611)

By 2005, when the third edition of the *Handbook* was published, Denzin and Lincoln suggested that the field of qualitative research was already shifting from an eighth to a ninth moment. Thus, placing a book or article within a historical context can help one to understand not only what point the author is making but why he or she felt it was necessary to make given the conversations occurring at that particular moment. For example, educational philosopher Jonas Soltis (1984) wrote an article called “On the Nature of Educational Research,” which he opens with the comment, “I have been bothered by the fact that I have been unable to place the many and vastly different languages and logics that people call educational research into a coherent conceptual framework” (p. 5). He then proposed three descriptors—*empirical*, *interpretive*, and *critical*—as a conceptual frame for distinguishing among fundamentally different philosophical approaches to educational research. Without taking the date of publication into account, one might think Soltis’s observation about the lack of a conceptual framework still pertains or that his framework is the only one available. Since 1984, however, many authors have proposed a variety of frameworks for describing different approaches to educational research (e.g., Barone, 1995; Barone & Eisner, 1997; Crotty, 1996, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Eisner, 1993, 1997; Oldfather & West, 1994; Paul, 2005; Sipe & Constable, 1996). Soltis’s article still has significance, because it reflects an important moment in the history of educational research, and it helped to frame a previously disjointed conversation. In addition, the way Soltis explains the philosophical underpinnings of empirical, interpretive, and critical inquiry are still informative. But his piece cannot be taken out of its historical context and quoted as though it offers a definitive description of educational research. The same can be said for any resource that students might turn to in their quest to understand qualitative research.

Disciplinary Context. In addition to placing an article or book in its historical context, it is useful to recognize the discipline within which an author is writing. At one time, most discussions of qualitative research were embedded in the social sciences where fieldwork required an alternative to laboratory-based methods of inquiry. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, those who wanted to conduct qualitative research in education typically turned to the social sciences to inform their thinking. This was an understandable connection for those who wanted to study educational processes as they occurred “naturally” within school settings and needed an alternative to the more experimentally oriented research of educational psychology. Since then, however, a great deal has been written

about qualitative research within the field of education itself. Qualitative research that serves the purposes of social science scholars may or may not usefully serve the purposes of education researchers, especially those who are trying to understand the nuances of educational practice. To read all literature on qualitative research as though it is addressing a uniform and universal set of intellectual questions can be counterproductive.

It is important to note, for example, that as some educational scholars were turning to the social sciences for qualitative research methods, others were turning to the arts and humanities. Over time, the literature on qualitative research in education encompassed both threads of discourse—one grounded in scientific ways of knowing and the other grounded in aesthetic ways of knowing. Understanding this difference in disciplinary background can be crucial in sorting out what form of qualitative research an author is discussing and to what extent an author's thinking may be helpful to one's own form of qualitative research.

The importance of disciplinary perspective also came into play as we worked with students from fields other than education. In one instance, a doctoral student in social work was quite interested in doing a qualitative dissertation but feared that this would not be acceptable within her profession. It was not particularly relevant or useful for us to say, "But qualitative research is quite well accepted in education." Instead, the student undertook a review of research literature in the field of social work. There she found a small, but growing, discourse on qualitative research from which she could argue for the legitimacy of this type of study. The same situation arose for students in the fields of genetic counseling, information sciences, and rehabilitation sciences. Our point is simply this: It is important to become conversant with the literature on qualitative research within one's discipline, profession, or field of study. With this as a base, it is possible to branch out into other discourses to gain additional insights.

Entering into the study of qualitative research without an appreciation of disciplinary differences, one runs the risk of at least two problems. First, drawing indiscriminately from a variety of fields can lead to a hodgepodge of ideas rather than a coherent rationale for one's approach to qualitative research. Second, overlooking literature about qualitative research in one's own discipline or field runs the risk of naiveté.

Before leaving this brief discussion about the disciplinary contexts of qualitative research, one other point is worth raising: In a postmodern era, an excessive fixation on disciplinary boundaries can be seen as quaintly old fashioned or rigidly narrow minded. Creative researchers may draw from multiple disciplinary sources to inform their thinking and their inquiries. We are not arguing for exclusivity at the expense of cross-disciplinary deliberation or creative modes of inquiry. We are arguing for an understanding of the intellectual roots and traditions from which one is drawing. When ideas from multiple traditions are blended intentionally and thoughtfully, much can be gained. When they are patched together out of ignorance, the credibility of qualitative research can be jeopardized.

Methodological Context. Qualitative research is an umbrella descriptor encompassing a wide range of methods (or genres). So when approaching an article or book, it is important to consider what method an author is discussing. Some authors might write as though there is a generic form of qualitative research or a common set of procedures that cuts across all forms of qualitative research. We do not find this view particularly useful. Again, we are not advocating for an arbitrarily rigid demarcation among methods. We are, however, suggesting that it is useful to recognize that different methods exist, and each of

these methods has a history. Further, these histories reveal different variations within any given method. Ethnography, for example, has one of the longest histories in educational research, and it would be a mistake to think there is only one way to conceptualize and conduct an ethnographic study. The same can be said for a host of other methods including grounded theory, narrative, case study, and action research.

Often, variations in a particular method may stem from an author's disciplinary perspective. For example, robust discourses about grounded theory continue within sociology (its discipline of origin) as well as in education, psychology, nursing, counseling, and other fields that have adapted the method to their own needs and purposes. What any particular author has to say about grounded theory, then, will be shaped at least in part by the disciplinary context within which he or she is writing. The same can be said of other methods falling under the descriptor *qualitative research*. Beyond disciplinary and methodological contexts, however, is another consideration—philosophical context.

Philosophical Context. Perhaps one of the most surprising and disconcerting aspects of entering into the study of qualitative research comes when a student, looking for practical guidance on specific techniques, is suddenly plunged into a consideration of philosophical assumptions. These assumptions, while interconnected, can be grouped into three clusters under the headings of *epistemology*, *ontology*, and *axiology*. Epistemology refers to assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the nature of truth, and the methods that generate legitimate claims of knowledge and truth. Assumptions about knowledge and truth are connected to assumptions of ontology—what we take to be real and our way of being in and relating to the world. Assumptions of axiology address what we value as reality, knowledge, and truth.

As mentioned above, assumptions of science and scientific research dominated much of educational research for most of the 20th century. By the dawn of the 21st century, challenges to the primacy of scientific ways of knowing had created space for educational research that draws from traditions grounded in the disciplines of philosophy, history, rhetoric (e.g., Angus & Langsdorf, 1993; Covino, 1994; Edwards, Nicoll, Solomon, & Usher, 2004; Roberts & Good, 1993), literary theory (e.g., Petrey, 1990), literary criticism (e.g., Abrams, 1989; Fahnestock & Secor, 1991; Juhl, 1980), linguistics, humanities (Bullough, 2006), and the arts (Barone, 1995, 2000, 2001; Eisner, 1991, 1993, 1997). Today, these various traditions are robustly represented and still debated in the discourses of educational research (as well as in federal policy). Becoming attuned to these fundamentally different worldviews is an important aspect of studying qualitative research in two ways. It helps in sorting through ideas being presented in the literature. And, more importantly, it helps in sorting through the type of research one wants to conduct.

COMMUNITIES OF DISCOURSE

The important point to take from the preceding comments is that different scholars in different fields with different philosophies hold different views of qualitative research. Many scholars associated with the disciplines serving educational research (e.g., sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology) began to think of social science as “dialects of language which provide heuristic fictions for supposing the world is this way or that way” (Popkewitz, 1984, p. vii). We return to this idea later, but for now it is important to

understand that conceptions of qualitative research are formed, debated, and advanced within communities of discourse. It is through a community of like-minded scholars within a common field that knowledge is generated through the various notions of discourse (Sills & Jensen, 1992). It is also the case that discourse communities have various means of critiquing the knowledge claims of their members through review processes. Those who formally represent the review process (e.g., dissertation committee members, journal editors, reviewers of conference paper proposals) serve as gatekeepers and often decide what is acceptable as legitimate qualitative research.

In the following chapters we raise many issues that doctoral students with an interest in qualitative research must consider in order to locate and engage with *communities of discourse* that will further their capacity for scholarship.

A WILL TO STUDY

As we conclude this first chapter, let us return to Pinar's (2006) point that not everyone has a *will to study*. In some ways, it is easy to attribute a lack of will to more pressing demands on one's time, energy, and attention. For overextended educational practitioners, this is no small consideration. Yet we have been privileged to work with a number of practitioners who, despite the pressure of professional and personal commitments, have been drawn to study qualitative research.

We cannot say with any certainty what makes the difference between those who choose a stance of study and those who do not. We speculate, however, that a desire for engagement with ideas—their own and others—is deeply compelling to some doctoral students. Micheline Stabile and Marilyn Llewellyn,¹ two members of our study group, exemplify very different approaches to learning qualitative research (Exemplar 1.1). What they had in common was a deep commitment to their own learning, a capacity for engagement with complex ideas, and a will to study.

EXEMPLAR 1.1 Exhibiting a Stance of Study

Shortly after joining our dissertation study group, Micheline and Marilyn recounted stories about learning to ski. Micheline registered for an introductory course that began with a series of lectures in an auditorium, continued with skill training in the gym, and finally moved to preliminary practice on the beginners' slopes. Marilyn, after a brief introductory lesson on the beginners' slope, hopped on a ski lift, rode to the top of a mountain, and suddenly found herself careening down an advanced slope with the dawning realization that perhaps she had not fully mastered all the nuances of skiing—most notably, techniques for stopping.

Their respective approaches to learning the craft of qualitative research paralleled their approaches to skiing. Micheline proceeded cautiously, wanting to understand as fully and explicitly as possible what she was going to be doing and why. Marilyn plunged in and began reviewing discourses related first to a study on peace education, then to a study on education and social justice, and finally to a study on spirituality and pedagogy.

(Continued)

EXEMPLAR 1.1 (Continued)

Although Micheline and Marilyn represent two very different learning styles, they illustrate a range of approaches that students might take in tackling the learning associated with doing a qualitative dissertation. Because it is impossible to acquire all of the information one needs at the outset of the dissertation journey, the questions posed in the Reflective Interludes provide frameworks for pursuing multiple avenues of learning. If started early and updated periodically, responses to the Reflective Interlude questions allow students to gather—incrementally—the information and resources needed to undertake the journey.

We emphasize *incrementally* because, in our experience, students who flounder in the dissertation process may have assumed that they can master qualitative research by taking one methods course, reading a how-to dissertation guide, or pressing a perceived expert for specific answers to procedural questions. Often, we receive calls from students like Ginny who have heard of our interest in qualitative research. With great urgency, Ginny pleaded for a meeting to discuss her study. Although she still had quite a few pre-dissertation requirements to complete, she frantically latched onto each shred of information as though it were an intellectual life preserver. The simplistic and erroneous conclusions she drew from what we viewed as conversation openers took our breath away. At some point in the conversation, we were overwhelmed by the image of a swimmer caught in an undertow, desperately flailing against powerful currents she could not remotely begin to control. The learning necessary to enter into and complete a qualitative dissertation requires a modicum of calmness in which deliberation can occur. Adopting a stance of study from the outset of doctoral work can serve one well.

From our perspective, the dissertation affords a not-to-be-missed opportunity to deliberate about matters of educational importance and, through deliberation, to come to new understandings of oneself. In the next chapter, we take a closer look at the deliberative and recursive nature of dissertation research.

Reflective Interlude 1.1**What Am I Bringing to the Study of Qualitative Research?**

- What prompts my interest in qualitative research?
- What has informed my understanding of the historical moment in which I am studying and engaging in qualitative research?
- What do I envision learning about qualitative research? What is the basis for this vision?
- What background in research am I bringing to the study of qualitative research?
- What research methods courses have I taken?
- To what research-oriented journals do I subscribe?

- To what research-oriented professional associations do I belong?
- What research-oriented conferences do I attend?
- What books on qualitative research have I read?
- How many qualitative dissertations have I read, and what methods did the authors use? With which of these methods did I feel a sense of affinity?
- Given my responses to the preceding questions, how would I characterize my willingness and desire to enter into the study of qualitative research?

NOTE

1. Throughout *The Qualitative Dissertation*, we draw upon our experiences with students to illustrate the concepts and issues we are discussing. When we introduce individuals using a full name, we are doing so with their permission. Information about these individuals appears throughout the book and offers what we consider to be positive examples of learning associated qualitative research. When individuals are referenced only by a first name, these are pseudonyms.