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Conversations on Method: Deconstructing Policy through the Researcher Reflective Journal

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Abstract

In this article the authors argue that the researcher reflective journal is a critical interpretive tool for conducting educational policy analysis. The idea for this research grew from the experiences of a doctoral candidate (Ruth) in pursuit of a policy focused dissertation and a series of on-going conversations with her qualitative methodologist (Valerie). The structure of the paper takes a dialogue form on the topic of policy analysis and the various uses of the journal, including found data poetry and photographic representations of the self as a research instrument, which may expand the findings and increase options for data presentation. Sections of the paper include a discussion on journal writing as a creative process, the reflective role of the researcher when examining policies, and the challenges of constructing a well-designed methodological framework.

Keywords

Researcher Reflective Journal, Alternative Policy Analysis, Qualitative Methods

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Conversations on Method: Deconstructing Policy through the Researcher Reflective Journal

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In this article the authors argue that the researcher reflective journal is a critical interpretive tool for conducting educational policy analysis. The idea for this research grew from the experiences of a doctoral candidate (Ruth) in pursuit of a policy focused dissertation and a series of on-going conversations with her qualitative methodologist (Valerie). The structure of the paper takes a dialogue form on the topic of policy analysis and the various uses of the journal, including found data poetry and photographic representations of the self as a research instrument, which may expand the findings and increase options for data presentation. Sections of the paper include a discussion on journal writing as a creative process, the reflective role of the researcher when examining policies, and the challenges of constructing a well-designed methodological framework. Key Words: Researcher Reflective Journal, Alternative Policy Analysis, Qualitative Methods.

I arrived at Valerie's office with my usual arsenal of ideas on how to compose our American Educational Research Association (AERA) paper. Our working relationship is typically defined by art, poetry, and the yogic journey. As a doctoral student and future junior colleague, I am both intrigued and inspired by her technique of interweaving the researcher reflective journal and found data poetry as tools to deepen qualitative inquiry. My particular interest lies in integrating the journal with educational policy analysis, which I thoroughly explored while writing my dissertation. Found data poetry was incorporated both as an analytical device to summarize interviews with higher education administrators and to chronicle my experiences on writing the dissertation. Weekly dialogues with Valerie on methodology occurred throughout the summer of 2007 until I defended my thesis in February 2010.

To begin writing our AERA paper, Valerie proposed that we dialogue about the process of combining the researcher reflective journal and educational policy. She reminded me that my interests in the researcher reflective journal were born out of our shared discussions on methodology and new types of data sets for conducting policy analysis. I am concerned, however, about the scholarly acceptance of our idea. I raised this question to Valerie by recalling my recent email correspondence throughout the period of June 2009 to January 2010 with Dvora Yanow, a prominent writer on interpretative analysis and policy implementation, who Valerie referred to as my policy guru. Yanow responded to my biographical description posted on my academia.edu webpage (a type of Facebook for academics) where I described my approach to qualitative research and the seamless integration of my background as a ceramicist with my current scholarly pursuits. My biography reads:

While this academic schism [i.e., the process of the studio potter/thespian becoming a higher education researcher] may seem estranged from art, the act of looking and interpreting is analogous. Instead of pondering a script or reforming a ball of clay, I am co-conversant crafting perceptions.

Upon reading this description, Yanow encouraged me to write a future methodological article addressing the idea of crafting perceptions through the metaphor of clay. In return, I posed the following question to Yanow, “How does one tie artistic metaphors into policy implementation?” She openly confessed that while she has experimented with classical music and painting metaphors as handles for conducting policy research, the scholarly community reactions to these techniques were tepid at best. She found that she cannot bridge the worlds of policy implementation with art or even poetry, stating, “there are people nibbling around the edges of this sort of thing.” She continued, “Of course, QI [Qualitative Interpretive] has made it [the artistic metaphor] central; but working in policy and organizational studies, I can't imagine using most of those 'tools/techniques' in my field research” (Personal correspondence, January 10, 2010). Are Valerie and I taking up this challenge? [Ruth's Researcher Reflective Journal, 2010]

Mentor's Response

Valerie: Ruth, of course we are. You were a sculptor, I was a dancer choreographer. We both use the researcher reflective journal to full effect when we can and in fact include in the journal some poetry. You are one of the scholars who takes journal writing seriously. I learned a great deal from you in working on your dissertation committee as a member/methodologist. Your use of the journal to deconstruct a public policy inspired both of us to write this, yes? Let's start this next section by you laying out the policy in question and then we both will try to deconstruct it through the researcher reflective journal.

The Policy in Question: Florida's Statewide Articulation Agreement

In 1959, Florida established a statewide articulation agreement between the State University System (SUS) and its regionally accredited community colleges that guarantees community college students holding a regionally accredited Associate of Arts Degree (AA), admission to one of the 11 universities in the SUS. Ideally, students who complete the required 60 credit hours of general education credit and lower-division course work for their intended majors would have a remaining 60 credit hours (or two years) to earn their bachelor's degree once successfully transferred to the university. Unfortunately, students can get derailed from this plan for numerous reasons. These derailments can be student centered (i.e., change of career paths, stopping out or dropping out of college for personal or financial reasons, and if denied admission to their local university, students can become place bound and unable to complete a four-year degree).

Other reasons can be institutionally centered (i.e., poor advising, lack of transfer services, and inter-institutional communication breakdowns as to what courses transfer from the community college to the university). Upper level credit requirements can vary

by university in the state, causing some students confusion in knowing which prerequisites are required for transfer. If academic advisors at the community college are unaware of these differing requirements, students may enroll in classes that do not transfer into their respective bachelor degree programs. My particular interest in this policy was one of interpretation and implementation. First, I wanted to see how campus administrators perceived this state policy, and secondly how they perceived the implementation of this policy affecting or not affecting underrepresented transfer students. By underrepresented, I mean low-income, first generation in college, and racial and ethnic groups other than non-Hispanic/Whites.

The Role of the Researcher: Reflective Journal and Policy Analysis

Valerie: I see that this policy has really grabbed your attention and as your topic for your dissertation, I know you used the researcher reflective journal effectively to deconstruct this policy. I appreciate your use of the reflective journal and this might be a good place to talk about the importance of the reflective journal through the research process. As you know I have written earlier (2004) about the importance of the journal as a data set. Since the researcher is the research instrument in qualitative research projects, the researcher reflective journal serves the researcher well. For one thing, the journal can be used as a data set for any study and can help the researcher refine herself as the research instrument. Throughout history artists, therapists, poets, chefs, scientists, educators, actors, dancers, musicians, and others have used journals. As researchers we can use the reflective journal in a number of ways:

- a. To refine the meaning and interpretation of the researcher's role
- b. To understand more fully the responses of participants in the study
- c. To use the journal as an interactive tool of communication between the researcher and the participants in a study and
- d. To practice the habit of journal writing as a type of connoisseurship by which qualitative researchers reflect and become connoisseurs of their own thinking patterns and indeed how they understand their role as research instrument.

Finally, I would add that the journal writing is in itself a way to create cohesive, coherent and deeply textured analysis.

Ruth: Yes, Valerie, you are correct. The researcher reflective journal not only helped me to crystallize my methodical stance, but to clearly articulate my research purpose to my doctoral committee. Clarifying the research purpose was a necessary step since the current climate in my academic program, in our college of education, and in the field of higher education research, predominantly draws from a positivistic paradigm. Several meetings with you while drafting my methods chapter motivated me to continually craft and refine my philosophical stance. You provided me with a reading list of relevant qualitative texts and I voraciously read them to construct my case study, including my own discovery of interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000). I incorporated the researcher reflective journal to: (1) record copious notes on relevant literature on the subject of the study, (i.e., underrepresented students, policy

implementation, and organizational theory), (2) “logic out” (my working term) my research methodology, (3) dialogue with myself and pose questions regarding the study, (4) compose poetry, (5) photo document pictures of myself throughout the process, (6) log pertinent correspondence (from committee members, participants, IRB review, and policy scholars), and (7) address critical feedback from you on the progress of my dissertation.

For example, on methods, one can see how I reflected on Kvale and Brinkman’s (2009) notion of “inter view”:

I am pondering Kvale and Brinkman’s (2009) definition of “inter view” which they define as “an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 2). During the interview, the onus rests on the researcher to pose questions that encourage open discourse. In a semi-structured interview, for example, the purpose is to obtain “descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale & Brinkman, p. 3). This, they assert, is the role of the hermeneutical scholar, who must “address the *interpretation* of meaning” (Kvale & Brinkman, p. 14, emphasis in original) and posit a compelling interpretation. The authors acknowledge that an interpretation of a phenomenon does not solely rest on the researcher or interviewee alone; instead, meaning is dialogically constructed (Kvale & Brinkman, p. 18). [Ruth’s Reflective Journal, 2008]

After fully understanding the meaning of “inter view,” I reflected on my choice of using philosophical hermeneutics for data analysis:

In its most basic definition, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state, “*hermeneutics* is the study of the interpretation of text” (p. 50, emphasis in original). The difference between classical hermeneutics and philosophical hermeneutics is explained by Schwandt (2000, p. 194). According to Schwandt the classical definition of hermeneutics holds that in the role of interpreter the researcher objectifies the interviewee when forming an understanding of the text. Whereas, with philosophical hermeneutics, “understanding is not a matter of setting aside, escaping, managing, or tracking one’s own standpoint, prejudgments, biases, or prejudices. On the contrary, understanding requires the engagement of one’s biases” (Schwandt, p. 195). In other words, it is not humanly possible to block out one’s assumptions and biases and to purely objectify human action when interpreting text. Thus, for me, philosophical hermeneutics, which takes a “non-objectivist view of meaning,” (Schwandt, p. 195) is the paradigm I will draw from when conducting my data analysis. [Ruth’s Reflective Journal, 2008]

Halfway through the analysis I became extremely frustrated and eventually abandoned the categorical frame I had originally drafted to analyze my results. Here, I referred to

Yanow's (2000) text on interpretive policy analysis and vented my frustration in my reflective journal:

I am spending the day trying to understand my categorical frame (my case matrix as it is currently labeled in a draft of my dissertation) as opposed to metaphorical analysis. According to Yanow (2000) in metaphorical analysis, "the contrast is usually unstated in the context and is introduced by the analyst, drawing on knowledge of the context" (p. 54). I also discovered that I am using "frame" (p. 13) as a noun as opposed to a verb. What this means is that my case matrix is a frame [versus the act of "framing"]. My case matrix is a frame that represents the architecture of the argument underlying community college and university administrators' perceptions of the statewide articulation agreement as it pertains to underrepresented transfer students. By creating a frame, I am apparently doing a comparative analysis across communities (Yanow, 2000). At this point I see four distinct communities. But as I analyze the interview corpus, I am growing concerned that the categories are becoming exceedingly blurry rather than sharp in terms of their initial categorical placement on the matrix. On this exact topic, Yanow provides an example of how categories in a study she conducted on race and ethnicity (p. 55) became difficult to discern. She also stresses that the role of the analyst is to highlight not the similarities, but attend to the major differences within each categorical group (p. 5). These differences assist in locating the tensions and highlight inconsistencies.

My original placement of individuals on the matrix was based on my intuition. When I re-read the interview texts, I have to test my intuition against what I am actually hearing. This is turning out to be quite a surprise. What is surprising is that my intuition is off. I may have placed my interviewees in the wrong categories on the matrix. I find this revelation shocking because my intuition is usually spot-on. So what's going on? Where did I miss something? What is this schism? Am I getting a little confused because I think I hear administrators telling me what they think they should be saying about underrepresented students rather than what they really think? I also noticed that some of my interviewees seem to answer in the way that Tierney (2008) classifies as administrators inadvertently blaming the minority group for their own academic failures as opposed to institutions becoming more culturally responsive and repairing institutional barriers.

Am I hearing institutional racism or am I looking for it? When an administrator states that we need to "bring them up to the education-ese" and create a "first-class community college student," what does this mean? Is there some indication that administrators want to help underrepresented groups "pass" as Whites instead of passing as Black or Asian in a predominantly White institution? Is this a form of educational imperialism? Is this a type of institutional theatrical performance? How can I tell if informants are stating the truth or just telling me what they

believe is the politically correct thing to say, because when I hear a Black female administrator telling me that the Whites in upper-level administration just “don’t get it”, I need to look deeper for the subtle discrepancies in meaning. [Ruth’s Reflective Journal, 2009]

Inspired by one of the interviewees on this very subject, I created a short found data poem that summarized my perceptions of one administrator’s perception of underrepresented students’ experience matriculating through the American educational system. In the example below, I incorporated words taken directly from an interviewee’s transcript:

Underrepresented students must move
Through the educational morass
Onto terra firma
Clinging to one’s diversity
[Ruth’s Reflective Journal, 2009]

In the final phase of writing the dissertation, I started to reflect more on the process of writing the thesis and the required personal discipline needed to finish the project. To this end, I jotted down my thoughts on the popular cliché “you can almost see the light at the end of the tunnel” uttered by well meaning professors and fellow doctoral students when you tell them you are nearing the end of the dissertation:

I believe the light at the end of the tunnel does not realistically appear until the middle or a third of the way through chapter five [at least for me it did not]. *Warning*: avoidance behavior is the worst at this time as writing this chapter requires vast amounts of brainpower to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. Do not stop. Keep writing. [Ruth’s Reflective Journal, 2010]

I also used the journal to photo-documented pictures of myself throughout my doctoral career (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Selected Self-Portraits (2007-2010)*



Three years of pictures allowed me to gain a sense of myself over time and became an important reminder that in qualitative research, I am the data collection instrument. My body is not divorced from the process as I am an integral part of the finalized piece of work whether I am conducting a policy study or study on higher education history.

Valerie: Ruth, I love your integration of the self-portraits—of course you need to say something about why and what they mean for insertion here—are you saying policy analysis through the journal gives insight into the scholar’s role? For me that would

make sense, and as I observe you wrestle with this I see you authentically grapple with this role in your writing.

Ruth: I believe it is impossible for me to separate my own physical body from the process of conducting research. Since, in qualitative research the individual is the research instrument through which all data are passed, interpreted, and reported, the scholar's role is constantly evolving as self evolves. Does this make sense? I am drawn to questions of policy, how policy is perceived, and enacted (or not). The reflective journal depicts a maturation of this scholar's desire to "know" in both writing and in image. For example, in 2007, I quit my full-time job as an academic advisor to become a full-time graduate student and research assistant. The first picture represents my embarking on the dissertation journey. I was eager to begin, but somewhat naive about the process of conducting qualitative research and completely clueless of faculty agendas operating inside of departmental politics. I was equally unaware of the fact that others might perceive my own enthusiasm to learn as over zealousness or even somewhat threatening.

In 2008, after a minor academic setback, which resulted in the most formative stage of my doctoral career, the second photograph captures a regaining of self and a gaining of a deeper understanding of qualitative research. However, from 2008 to 2009, I encountered a life-threatening illness from which I prevailed and the third picture reflects this struggle. Finally, the last photo depicts a Ruth who has matured into her own academic skin. The sheen of innocence has been replaced with the hard-won glow of knowing myself, proving myself to others, and cementing my research direction. Again, the photographs are part of the reflective journal process that continually marks the presence of the researcher when analyzing the policy. I would argue that the researcher is a vehicle through which policy analysis flows, and the life experiences held by the researcher cannot be separated from the interpretative act, nor from the process of analysis and synthesis of data.

Valerie: Ruth, I see what you mean about this being interrelated. In fact I totally agree that it is almost impossible to separate the body from the mind as any good yoga practitioner and dancer knows. I have written about this before (Janesick, 2004) and most recently (Janesick, 2010) mentioned this. In addition I agree with something you said at your dissertation defense, "it is impossible to *bracket* yourself." That is a holdover I think from people trying to defend the legitimacy of our work as qualitative researchers to try and use guidelines from another paradigm to do so. As you know the reason we are doing qualitative work and using the researcher reflective journal to deconstruct policy is because we see this as a holistic integrated research act. There is no need to import words or concepts from another paradigm into this interpretive paradigm.

Conclusion/Recommendations from Both of Us

The advantage of the researcher reflective journal for educational policy analysis is that it is both an instrument and a technique to thoroughly examine policy and the implementation process. Our interpretation of "policy" assumes that it is always filtered through our eyes and the eyes of others and is therefore never value-neutral. Also, what is written is not necessarily followed in practice. For example, in my dissertation, where several White administrators perceived the Florida statewide articulation agreement as

“wide open,” a participant of color noted *policies are never neutral*. I expanded this contradiction more fully in my journal and determined that interpretations of transfer policies vary greatly by administrative role, years of experience in higher education, gender, and race and ethnicity.

Additionally, the researcher reflective journal can serve as a critical interpretive systemic and rigorous tool to deconstruct educational policy. Qualitative research would benefit by incorporating the journal to open an entire subcategory of policy analysis techniques. As a tool, the journal becomes the “connective tissue” uniting field notes, memos, interview transcripts, and relevant documents and artifacts to unearth what is forming “beneath the surface” (Progroff, 1992, p. 14) of the study. In my case (Ruth), my doctoral study was focused on community college and university administrators’ perceptions of the transfer process for underrepresented students. I wanted to understand how these senior level administrators described and explained the transfer policy in relation to low-income, first generation in college, and underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. The in-depth interviews allowed me to garner policy interpretations. It was through my continual writing in the journal that I was able to keep myself on track to accomplish this. By constructing poems found in the data I sharpened my self as the research instrument by exercising my artistic eye and integrating poetry as a device to synthesize my findings. Furthermore, the well-practiced qualitative researcher knows that he or she must authentically engage with other human beings through the “self” as a conduit that probes and prompts for rich dialogue. I incorporated self-portraits into the pages of my journal as a way to access and reflect on the robustness of the research instrument. For me, (Valerie) writing in the researcher reflective journal each day I know that I have become a better analyst, writer, thinker and of course artist. Writing reflects who we are and I agree that by writing we keep our artistic and creative sides available for deconstructing written policy statements.

In this paper we have argued that the better one knows self, the more attuned the researcher is to the spoken and unspoken subtleties. In other words, the act of uncovering meaning, even if an interviewee is avoiding, purposely exaggerating, politically correctly responding to interview questions, the verbatim transcript provides only a single dimension of text to be interpreted. Therefore the journal provides an additional layer for analysis, but here it is predominantly a solitary journey driven by the discipline of the researcher to fully explore all the threads of the study (i.e., character sketches, field notes, hunches on coding, memos, policy documents, personal challenges, etc.). The culmination is the journal as a solid interpretive tool for guiding analysis and interpretation in qualitative research projects. Research is an active verb and as such we are actively writing.

Traditionally, policy analysis relies on numbers and endless faith in numbers. As Best (2004), a well known statistician, pointed out there are many public issues confused by numbers making them magical, mystical, missing, and all around confusing. We welcome our colleagues who mostly rely on numbers to examine our assertion of assimilating the reflective journal to systematically unpack the stories behind the number. What we are trying to do in our paper is build capacity for an alternative way of doing policy analysis as well as tapping into our writing self and our creative voice.

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