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A Novel Experience: A Classroom Exercise for Exploring Patterns

by Jerry Gale

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Naming a pattern is the mosaic gloss that is imposed by (re)searchers in their search for meaning. What is pattern though? Watching the stocastic movements of "snow static" on a television screen, the viewer typically sees no structure or rhyme to the snow. However, define a boundary within the frame of the television screen (a frame within a frame), and the viewer will begin to see/name structures and patterns emerging. Is the pattern within the snow, imposed by the viewer, or in the interaction of the two?

As clinicians, we are constantly seeing (creating?) patterns in the dances with our clients. While many avoid attributing (at least out loud) direct "causes" of the actions/behaviors observed, patterns (with names) are frequently applied. But two questions that can be asked are: "Whose pattern is it?" and "What is the significance of the pattern?"

Qualitative research methodologies evoke various approaches to address these issues. Having the (re)searcher present his or her biases, getting feedback from the participants themselves of their understanding of the data and analysis, analyzing the text of the text of the text, persistent observation, constant comparison analysis, triangulation and negative case analysis (among others) are all strategies currently employed by qualitative researchers to claim validity of the pattern named. But how does one learn to see (feel, sense, smell, etc.) through the labyrinth of possible patterns to consider the plethora of assumptions embedded within and throughout? How does one cut through these multi-layered contexts of meaning? How does one learn not to be blinded by the reflection of his or her own shadow?

A Novel Experience

In order to help students/(re)searchers learn to experience these questions (not necessarily answer them), as well as to encourage them to challenge their own pattern making practices, the following assignment, originally developed by Douglas Flemons at Nova Southeastern University, was derived from a suggestion of Milton H. Erickson's (Zeig, 1980) to read a novel backwards chapter by chapter. The assignment involved the reader reading the last chapter first, then the second from last chapter next, on down to the first chapter. At the conclusion of each chapter reading, the reader writes a prediction of the previous chapter's contents as well as a prediction of the first chapter's contents. By the time the reader reaches chapter one, there are multiple descriptions and predictions of what the author actually composed in the opening chapter. The reader then compares the various predictions and expresses what he or she learned from the assignment.

This task was recently assigned to students in a class taught at the University of Georgia. A variety of responses were reported by the students. While most found the assignment beneficial,

many felt confused, disoriented and uncomfortable during the process of doing the task. Several students reported surprise (and concern) that what they predicted was not actually there. Some were very good at predicting the future (i.e., the past) events. Others were surprised at the continuity and cohesiveness of the novel that existed even in reverse reading. Some were challenged to determine what was important in the story and what was by-product. Still others challenged their own assumptions of what was the right and proper way of reading a book. One student noted how she had a pattern of skipping by the middle chapters and going straight towards the end (beginning), while another noted how she got bored and impatient and had wanted "to get on with it."

There were those who compared the exercise to doing therapy, as a therapist works to uncover the earlier chapters of a client's history. One student commented (that he noted) that he often "provide(s) (his) own interpretation of a client's past without inquiring directly into it...and thus produce(s) a completely fictional client, or version of the client which bares little resemblance to the person (he is) attempting to help." Still another student saw the connection of this exercise to designing a therapeutic intervention and wondering how the client will read the therapist's words.

In a discussion with the class upon the completion of the assignment, the collection of their journals, and the reading of the above commentary (albeit, an earlier draft), other commentaries were given. Many in the class said it gave them a new appreciation of how meaning(s) and pattern(s) are imposed on the clients by the therapist (himself or herself). Many reported that the assignment helped point out how easy it is to be induced into believing a particular story pattern and not to ask challenging questions. Also, many stated that this assignment helped them to challenge their own assumptions and their linear (simple cause and effect) thinking both about themselves and about their clients.

The purpose of this paper is not to tell everyone to read a novel backwards (though you might consider it), but rather, to get the reader to challenge her or his own pattern making activities. It is hoped that readers will find their own exercise(s) to challenge their knowingness and surety. Both as clinicians and researchers we need to look at our own embedded assumptions as we question the world around us. Paraphrasing Heinz von Foerster, a blind person who sees she or he is blind is no longer blind.

References

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