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On Becoming a Qualitative Researcher: The Value of Reflexivity

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Abstract

Learning how to conduct qualitative research may seem daunting for those new to the task, especially given the paradigm's emphasis on complexity and emergent design. Although there are guidelines in the literature, each project is unique and ultimately the individual researcher must determine how best to proceed. Reflexivity is thus considered essential, potentially facilitating understanding of both the phenomenon under study and the research process itself. Drawing upon the contents of a reflective journal, the author provides an inside view of a first project, making connections between theory and practice. This personal narrative highlights the value of reflexivity both during and after a study, and may help to demystify the research process for those new to the field.

Keywords

Reflexivity, Research Journal, Qualitative Methodology, and Student Researchers

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On Becoming a Qualitative Researcher: The Value of Reflexivity

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Learning how to conduct qualitative research may seem daunting for those new to the task, especially given the paradigm's emphasis on complexity and emergent design. Although there are guidelines in the literature, each project is unique and ultimately the individual researcher must determine how best to proceed. Reflexivity is thus considered essential, potentially facilitating understanding of both the phenomenon under study and the research process itself. Drawing upon the contents of a reflective journal, the author provides an inside view of a first project, making connections between theory and practice. This personal narrative highlights the value of reflexivity both during and after a study, and may help to demystify the research process for those new to the field. Key Words: Reflexivity, Research Journal, Qualitative Methodology, and Student Researchers

Learning to reflect on your behavior and thoughts, as well as on the phenomenon under study, creates a means for continuously becoming a better researcher. *Becoming* a better researcher captures the dynamic nature of the process. Conducting research, like teaching and other complex acts, can be improved; it cannot be mastered. (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. xiii)

Introduction

Given the complex nature of qualitative inquiry, it is reasonable to expect new researchers to feel some trepidation at the onset of a first study. Although there are guidelines in the literature, the paradigm's emphasis on interpretation and emergent design provides no precise formula on how to proceed. Each project is unique and ultimately it is up to the individual to determine what works best. Since the researcher is the primary "instrument" of data collection and analysis, reflexivity is deemed essential (Glesne, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Russell & Kelly, 2002; Stake, 1995). Experts contend that through reflection researchers may become aware of what allows them to see, as well as what may inhibit their seeing (Russell & Kelly). This entails careful consideration of the phenomenon under study, as well the ways a researcher's own assumptions and behavior may be impacting the inquiry. Although convincing on a theoretical level, as a new researcher I had little idea what this meant in concrete terms.

That began to change as a result of the practical experience gained during my first pilot study, which was carried out in the context of a graduate course on qualitative methodology. As part of that inquiry, I decided to put reflexivity to the test by keeping a

research journal. In a subsequent graduate course I returned to this journal, using it as a stimulus to reflect back on the original pilot study in order to deepen my understanding of the research process. This personal narrative is the result. Although many of the benefits of journaling were apparent while I was engaged in the initial inquiry, before working on the current paper I did not appreciate the extent to which writing and reflection had pushed that project forward. In addition, this second level of reflection had led to significant new insights, profoundly influencing my growth as a qualitative researcher. This research story thus sets out to highlight the value of reflexivity as a powerful learning tool both during and after a student's first research efforts. In addition, this inside view of my project may render qualitative methodology less mysterious for others new to the field. During the initial inquiry I relied upon experts for guidance, but may also have profited from hearing the voices of struggling beginners like myself. Professors working with graduate students may likewise be interested in a student perspective on the benefits and the value of reflexivity in methodology course work.

Method

Richardson (2000) refers to writing as “a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic” (p. 923). A “personal tale of what went on in the backstage of doing research” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 741), my own experience is the subject of this paper. My research journal contains a permanent record of the pilot study, and served as a memory prompt for this second level of reflection. Drawing on excerpts from the journal, I made links between the literature on methodology, decisions taken during the project, the process of reflexivity, and my evolving understanding of the complexities of qualitative research. I analyzed journal entries for what they revealed about the management of each phase of the study, the issues and tensions which arose, and the ways I dealt with these as a new researcher. A retrospective examination of my own research permitted me to make meaningful connections between theory and practice. This inquiry thus provoked a depth of learning which may not have been possible through any other methodological means. By reconsidering my pilot study in this way, I experienced the extent to which reflection is an essential mediator in the research process. Reflective writing allowed me to meaningfully construct my own sense of what it means to become a qualitative researcher.

Why a Research Journal?

A number of experts (e.g., Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Maxwell, 1996, 2005; Spradley, 1979) recommend writing short notes, or memos, to one's self during the entire research project, claiming a number of benefits. They point out that getting ideas down when they occur is actually the beginning of analysis. Writing notes to one's self permits researchers to discover things in their heads that they did not know were there (Elbow, 1995; Huff, 1999; Woods, 1999). Soon after I began journaling, the generative nature of this practice became clear.

It seems obvious now that if I was not writing down ideas and thoughts as they come to me, I would be missing a lot. What I did not expect was that the process of writing them down somehow stimulates more thought. Perhaps it simply makes me more conscious of my thoughts...Since formally starting to reflect on this project by writing memos a couple of weeks ago, I have opened the floodgates and ideas come to me throughout the day. It seems now that this study is always on my mind. (Journal entry, October 18, 2003)

As Maxwell (1996) asserts, memos can “convert thought into a form that allows examination and further manipulation” (p. 11).

In addition, audiences should have the opportunity to see how the researcher goes about the process of knowledge construction during a particular study. By engaging in ongoing dialogue with themselves through journal writing, researchers may be able to better determine what they know and how they think they came to know it. An introspective record of a researcher’s work potentially helps them to take stock of biases, feelings, and thoughts, so they can understand how these may be influencing the research. Making such information available to readers provides them with a means to better evaluate the findings. Proponents of the openness in qualitative inquiry assert a need to publicly disclose research decisions to “make analytical events open to public inspection” (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 31), for “a key part of qualitative research is how we account for ourselves, how we reveal that world of secrets” (p. 29).

While these are compelling reasons for the use of a reflective journal, little mention is made in the literature of the potential value of reflexivity from the perspective of a beginning researcher. As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggest, reflection is crucial as a means to continuously work on becoming a better researcher and a journal provides a focal point for this activity. Students are necessarily preoccupied with acquiring a myriad of research skills (such as interview techniques and data analysis) and may be tempted to delay the use of a reflective journal until after they become more comfortable with what might be considered the basics. However, maintaining a journal during my first study, followed by reflective writing which focused on that work, led to a more sophisticated understanding of not only reflexivity, but all aspects of research methodology.

My Research Purpose

Many state the importance of choosing a suitable research topic (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Gallos, 1996; Glesne, 1999). It is important to figure out “which issues, uncertainties, dilemmas, or paradoxes” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 14) are most intriguing. Fieldwork is a process that assumes a degree of wholehearted commitment (Wolcott, 1995), so topics should be chosen on the basis of what a researcher believes is most worthwhile. “Good research questions spring from [a researcher’s]...values, passions, and preoccupations” (Russell & Kelly, 2002, p. 5). I had spent 14 years educating my children outside of school and knew this was the area I wanted to explore more systematically. At the same time, journal entries testify to some of the concerns I had with this choice of topic. I made use of my journal to work through some of these

concerns, by carrying out a number of reflective exercises related to research purpose and trustworthiness, as recommended by Maxwell (1996, 2005).

Researchers are advised to carefully consider their reasons for conducting a particular study (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Maxwell, 1996, 2005). Maxwell (1996) explains that there are personal, practical, and research purposes. Researchers first of all need to be aware of their personal reasons for carrying out a study -- their subjective motives -- for these will have important consequences for the trustworthiness of a project. If design decisions and data analyses are based on personal desires without a careful assessment of the implications of these methods and conclusions, they risk creating a flawed study. While it is neither possible nor necessary to purge one's self of personal goals and concerns, Maxwell contends that it is crucial to be aware of these concerns and how they are shaping the research, and to think about how best to deal with their consequences.

Given my own involvement in home education, the first reflective exercise I engaged in was to examine my reasons for wanting to research this topic. As a home schooling mother, I was convinced of its educational virtues. However, journaling allowed me to make connections between home education and my teaching experiences years earlier.

As a teacher I believed in the uniqueness of each child and felt education should be approached with this in mind. However, from my own teaching experiences I know that this is not so easy in a school setting...How might schools better meet the needs of individual students? (Journal entry, September 30, 2003)

Through the writing process, I was able to excavate memories of my own classroom practice, in which I had experienced the difficulties of trying to meet the needs of all learners. On the other hand, I knew that individual needs are more easily met in a home school setting, where learning tends to be highly individualized. I explored these ideas in my journal.

I honestly believe that there is much to be learned from what home schoolers do...My study might teach us something about learning, itself...Is there anything present in the learning situation in a home school that can tell us more about how children learn/about the learning process itself? (Journal entry, September 30, 2003)

By articulating my thoughts on paper, I soon identified what it was about home education that might be worth studying. I wondered what these unique learners might teach us about individualized learning processes. My literature review demonstrated that the learning process in home school environments had not been studied in a systematic, rigorous manner. There was definitely a gap in knowledge regarding how children learn outside of formal educational contexts. Writing and reflection proved generative, for I was able to clarify not only my research purpose (a desire to gain insight into the learning process in a home setting), but also why I thought this was worth pursuing.

Eisner (1991) observes that “few people seem to be happy with the overall state of our schools, but fewer still seem to know just what to do about them” (p. 10). I wondered what might be understood about learning based on home schooling practices. Can what home educators do somehow be applied to the larger system? Here was the practical purpose for my research. During the journal writing process, questions emerged which forced me to think more deeply about what I wanted to do with this study and why.

Why conduct a study when I think I know what I am likely to find? I know it, other home schoolers may know it, but perhaps only through rigorous, scholarly research will others come to know and possibly accept it/learn from it. (Journal entry, October 10, 2003)

Reflective exercises revealed my desire to provide school officials and policy makers with more information, so they might better understand the nature of home school learning, for there remains a great deal of skepticism in these quarters. By identifying personal, practical, and research purposes through reflective writing I was confident I had chosen a worthwhile topic of inquiry.

Designing the Study

In designing a study, qualitative researchers face at least three challenges (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The first is to develop a conceptual framework that is “thorough, concise, and elegant” (p. 5). The second is in planning a design that is “systematic and manageable yet flexible” (p. 5). The third challenge is being able to integrate these into a “coherent document that convinces the proposal reader...that the study should be done, can be done, and will be done” (p. 6). Research design requires much thought and reflection, and journaling would definitely have facilitated this process. However, the initial literature review and a preliminary research proposal for my pilot study were completed in an earlier methodology course, and I had not yet initiated my reflective writing practice. When the time came to carry out this pilot project I needed to update the literature review, and I summarized research articles in my journal, highlighting the most important points. I was amazed to see how attitudes towards home education were shifting in a more positive direction in such a short time. The importance of remaining current became apparent.

Participant Issues

With the research design in place, it was time to find a home schooling family willing to take part in the study. My participants were chosen because I had easy access to them, and I believed they could provide me with a good “opportunity to learn” (Stake, 2000, p. 446) about the phenomenon of interest. All four members of this family (two parents, John and Anita; a 13-year-old boy, Jeff; and a 15-year-old girl, Susan) were very articulate and provided extensive data related to learning in a home school setting. However, even though my participants were exemplary, rereading journal entries related to participant issues revealed some of the difficulties which arise in qualitative inquiry. Many of the entries recall the uncertainty I often felt. Was I approaching an issue in the

right way? What should be the principles which guide my research? Conducting research, which looks so intensely at the personal lives of others, is not for the faint of heart, and at times I wondered whether I was up to the challenge. Journal entries indicate my growing awareness of some of the potential risks inherent in qualitative research, and shed light on some of the specific concerns I had to negotiate over the course of the study. For example, I worried about what I might do with interview data that portrayed the participants in an unflattering manner.

Do I have the courage to be totally honest no matter what I might find? I know my participants and would never want to hurt them. However, it wouldn't matter who the participants were, I would not wish to paint anyone in a negative light. This issue has led me to question whether I am cut out to be a qualitative researcher. Why would anyone participate in a research project if they thought I might write something negative about them anyways? (Journal entry, November 1, 2003)

A week later similar concerns resurfaced, as the following comment illustrates.

I don't feel its right to quote someone in a manner they would find embarrassing... (Journal entry, November 6, 2003)

I often felt torn between considering the needs and best interests of my participants and reporting findings according to my own interpretations.

I thought a great deal about the question of whose interests would be served by my research (Wolcott, 1995). I wanted to provide the educational establishment with more information on home-based learning and knew that I also had much to gain personally, but how would my participants benefit from their involvement in my project? When I approached John and Anita with my research idea, they readily agreed to participate. They thought that being involved in a research study would be a good learning experience for their children. When I spoke to Jeff and Susan, they were equally enthusiastic. A couple of weeks into the project, I wrote,

John asked if they could have the interview tapes when the study was over. I agreed ... A small benefit to them for participating in this study. (Journal entry, October 23, 2003)

I remember feeling relieved when John asked for copies of the tapes, as this was one tangible benefit I could offer. The older of the two adolescent participants also had a request. This one, however, was much more complicated, as this excerpt suggests.

Susan asked me about the possibility of including a copy of the study in her portfolio [for university entrance]...I certainly don't have a problem with this. Isn't research supposed to benefit our participants in some way? But I worry about how what I write in my report might either help or hinder her. Will knowing that this is ultimately one of the ways in which this study will be used influence what I decide to present or not present?

What if I write something that might work against Susan's interests?
(Journal entry, October 18, 2003)

This prompted me to seriously consider my responsibilities to those who agreed to be part of my study. A researcher must be cognizant of the state of his/her ongoing relationships with participants and how this might be influencing the outcomes of a study. The questions raised in this particular journal excerpt reflected an uneasy awareness of the power I actually had as a researcher. Looking back, I realize that no matter what students may learn from course work or the qualitative research literature, they cannot appreciate the gravity of such issues until they begin working with actual participants.

Other journal entries also indicated an ongoing concern with maintaining rapport and causing no harm. This preoccupation was intensified by the fact that my participants were from my own community, but I suspect that researchers agonize over these matters in most studies. The initial excitement of being involved in my first inquiry gradually gave way to a heightened realization of the many ethical issues surrounding the practice of qualitative research. A number of excerpts highlighted this growing sensitivity. For example, I wrote,

How do you deal with something your participants would not see as flattering, especially when you know them personally? (Journal entry, October 7, 2003)

This particular entry marked an increasing uneasiness around the politics of interpretation and representation, although at the time I would not have been able to articulate the source of my discomfort in these terms. One month later, the same issues were tormenting me.

What will I do if my participants and I don't agree on some aspect of the "findings"?...You certainly can't misrepresent your participants. At the same time, you are more familiar with the literature, and as a researcher have your own expertise/perspectives. It is my research. These issues are complex, and frankly, more than a little scary...It seems that qualitative researchers are constantly engaged in a fine balancing act on a number of levels. (Journal entry, November 7, 2003)

What strikes me most about this excerpt is how I took for granted that there was a single reality out there that one could represent accurately. By reviewing my reflective journal retrospectively, I realize now that over the course of this project I frequently questioned my epistemological and ontological assumptions. Although I assumed that the participants and I were co-creating knowledge, it seemed a delicate balance. What role should participants play in the interpretive process, if any? How strong should my voice be? I planned to do participant checks after analysis. However, some (e.g., Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002) actually consider such checks a *threat* to validity, arguing that verification must take place during the research process so that it can shape the process, not after analysis. I continue to grapple with these issues. Stake (2000) suggests that "what is necessary for an understanding of the case will be decided by the

researcher” (p. 441), but given recent paradigm shifts, not all would agree. As a student, it is a challenge to keep abreast of continuous transformations in the field.

Another ethical question which arose was the degree to which a researcher may intrude in the lives of participants.

I don't want to impose on this family. Even though I know them, they are very busy...Given their busy, irregular schedules and my own, it is not as easy to arrange to meet with them as I thought it might be. Fitting research into busy lives is no easy matter. (Journal entry, October 21, 2003)

As this entry illustrates, after four interviews I felt I may have been asking too much of my participants, but at the same time wondered if I had enough data to shed light on my research questions. Wolcott (1994) emphasizes the importance of extended time in the field, but few researchers have unlimited access to participants. This underscores the importance of a well thought-out research design and the need for constant monitoring of a project. Writing this narrative made me aware of how journaling helped me to keep track of what was happening in my study on a number of levels, so that timely adjustments could be made if and when necessary. This use of the journal helped me to manage the project.

Data Collection

Data Management

Many observe that the qualitative researcher must “expect to be overwhelmed with the sheer volume” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 131) of data that accumulate. I soon discovered the truth in this statement, noting in my journal that “papers [were] piling up . . . even after just one interview” (Journal entry, October 24, 2003). Forewarned, I made a special effort to manage the data. I decided to include field notes in my research journal because I reasoned it would “be easier to see connections if everything [was] in one place” (Journal entry, October 22, 2003). The journal was housed in a large binder, so I was able to add, remove, or rearrange documents as I thought necessary. I found that “the physical act of maintaining the binder gave me the feeling that I was in control of the material I had accumulated” (Journal entry, October 22, 2003). Having field notes and reflective memos in this one location did not completely eliminate the sense of being overwhelmed, but it did help to keep it in check.

Observations

I had planned to collect data through observations, and found some useful tips in Spradley's (1980) classic text, *Participant Observation*. However, it soon became evident that carrying out observations would not be as straight forward as I had envisioned. After the very first conversation with one of my participants, I wrote,

Susan and I discussed a possible observation time, where I could come over and just sit around and see what she normally does. There was silence on the other end of the phone when I proposed this...She thought that if I were present, she would not “do” what she “normally does”... So, what I thought would be clear and simple – an observation at the home of a family who knows me – is not going to be that at all!! I am worried now that such an observation may not even be possible! (Journal entry, October 21, 2003)

My young participant’s insightful comment, which I stressed over in my journal, prompted a return to the literature on participant observation and led me to rethink my plans for data collection. Some experts suggest that “it is now possible to question whether observational objectivity is either desirable or feasible as a goal” (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000, p. 674). The qualitative researcher is situated in any given study and should be aware of the fact that he/she is part of the scene being observed, and as such has an influence on it. This perspective emphasizes observation “as a context for interaction among those involved in the research collaboration” (p. 676). I finally decided not to use observation and also gained an appreciation of how participants may unexpectedly influence the course of an inquiry. Susan’s questioning of my proposed observations also highlights the power relationships that exist in any research situation. Rereading this entry long after the completion of the project provided me with insights into my personal approach to the participant-researcher relationship.

Interviews

As the journal entry below illustrates, my assumptions about the interview process were also disrupted after entering the field. During the first interview session, at the home of my participants, I had to leave the room for a few minutes and suggested that they continue to talk into the tape recorder about their reasons for opting out of institutionalized schooling. They had been engaged in lively conversation up until this point, and I took for granted that they would continue on without me. However, “when I left the room they decided they could not tell their stories without me being physically present” (Journal entry, October 27, 2003). There was no doubt that my presence was influencing the nature of the knowledge generated in this interview situation. Even though I had read that, “[i]ncreasingly qualitative researchers are realizing that interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two or more people leading to negotiated, contextually based results” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646), I was still operating under old assumptions.

By returning to the research scene through writing this reflective paper, I have been able to chart some of my own learning as it related to interviewing. My original ideas were somewhat unsettled when I first encountered the interview literature. However, it was not until I was faced with a concrete interview situation that the theory I had read about became more explicit. I was consequently better able to comprehend how knowledge is in fact negotiated and dependent upon the interview context. The written

record of this incident in my journal permitted me to make these links, which otherwise may have been lost to me in the busyness of the actual project.

Based on my reading (e.g., Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998; Spradley, 1979), I decided interviews would be informal and conversational; exploratory, flexible, with open-ended questions. I followed Seidman's recommendation to conduct a series of three separate interviews. The first establishes the context of the participants' experience. "People's behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them. Without context, there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of an experience" (p. 11). All four participants were present at the first interview, and the session was lively and informative. When I returned home from the session I wrote down my impressions.

I began the first interview by trying to contextualize this family's experience. However, the interview took on a life of its own and I need to look at whether what I set out to accomplish was actually realized. I feel I may not have said enough myself, may not have directed the conversation enough...[But] in the group setting I found that they got one another talking and there seemed little need for me to intervene. If I am interested in their stories, is it appropriate to interrupt? (Journal entry, October 24, 2003)

I often conversed with myself in the journal in this way. I summarized what I had been trying to achieve and then assessed what actually happened, which frequently led to questioning. In the above excerpt, for example, I was unsure of how directive I should be in an interview. In spite of what I had read, I obviously still understood the interview to be an uncomplicated situation in which the researcher asked questions and participants provided answers. Throughout the project I was caught up in such struggles, between my own unexamined assumptions and recent theory. While journaling, in itself, did not necessarily provide instant answers, by focusing on how things had gone in the research situation and relating it to the methodology literature, I was better situated to make adjustments before moving on to the next stage.

Following Seidman (1998), the second interview focused on concrete details of the participants' present experiences. In subsequent interviews I asked them to reflect on the meaning of these experiences. I found that each interview provided a foundation of detail that helped to illuminate the next, and began to appreciate first hand why interpretation must necessarily be ongoing. "There isn't much sense to go out and get more if you haven't digested what you took in last time" (Wolcott, 1995, p. 99). However, I also discovered how difficult this was to achieve. Seidman recommends that interviews be 3 days to a week apart. This allows participants "to mull over the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the interviews" (p. 33), and also puts pressure on the researcher to find time for reflection and interpretation between sessions. Interview data were piling up as I struggled to complete transcribing each interview in preparation for subsequent interviews. Although I did manage to transcribe and at least briefly think about every interview before going on to the next, I felt rushed, and worried about how this would affect my interpretations.

About half way through this period, I panicked. Did I have the *right* data? In my journal I reiterated what Kvale (1996) has to say on this matter.

Kvale cautions us to be careful about the nature of the data we collect...We need to spend prolonged time in the field, which produces piles of data ... [but] quantity alone is not enough. The content of that data is also vital. To have the “right” content...we must know where we are going. At the same time, qualitative studies are by definition “emergent,” so I need to be open and sensitive to where my participants and my own insights may take me. There seems to be a fine line between meandering off in all directions and trying to get data needed to answer our research questions. (Journal entry, October 30, 2003)

By summarizing Kvale’s advice in my own words, I was able to gain some perspective on where I was at in the study and take measures to evaluate the quality of my data. I reviewed my research questions and carefully assessed the nature of the data I had collected so far. Thus, I was able to go into the final interviews knowing what was still needed in order to address my questions. Looking back on the data collection period in this way helped me to gain a sense of how my reflective interactions, with both the data and the literature, directly influenced the decision-making process during the study. Writing about what was going on in my project helped me to clarify the particularities of a given situation, which was an important step in identifying possible ways to proceed. Looking back on my use of the journal, it is obvious that for me writing does facilitate thought. It also provided me with a sense of emotional security. A student grapples with not only the “how to” of research, but also with the complexity of the research process itself, and the journal provided a place to pull everything together in a concrete form that I could draw upon to guide the project.

The Emergent Nature of Qualitative Inquiry

My experiences with data collection have shown how I depended upon “purposeful reading” (Wolcott, 1990) throughout the study for information on research methodology. The brief notes I took on many of these readings were included in my journal, adding another dimension to the reflective process. I explained,

This journal provides me with a means to not only note what I think is of significance in my readings, but I can get down on paper my thoughts and reactions to this information... (It) is a place to interact with what I am reading, which promotes my own learning and understanding. (Journal entry, October 21, 2003)

The journal naturally became a place to bring together participant data, notes on the methodology literature, my thoughts and ideas, and reading responses. As the decision to modify my plans for data collection illustrates, using the journal in this manner proved very productive. Struggles around data collection also bore out what I had read in the

literature, namely that qualitative inquiry requires flexibility and an openness to whatever comes up in the field.

The evolution of my project's title also indicated an increasing appreciation of the ways in which qualitative work is emergent. A title captures the essence of a study, and thinking about it helps a researcher to conceptualize a project. Whenever I had an idea for a title I wrote it down in the journal. Inspiration came from personal experience, the literature on home education, participant data, and insights gained in the field. Each title change reflected a more refined understanding of some aspect of research. The initial title, *Exploring the Learning Process in a Home School: A Case Study*, implied that it would be my perspectives as researcher which would be privileged. At that point, I took for granted that I would be looking for some objective "truth" rather than co-creating knowledge with my participants. I was unfamiliar with the notion that qualitative research represents "a new way of thinking about the nature of knowledge and how it can be created" (Eisner, 1991, p. 227), and that researchers are part of the meaning-making process.

It took nine title modifications before I finally arrived at, *A Different Kind of Education: One Family's Perceptions of Learning Outside of School*. I had read that a case study presents multiple perspectives and realities (Stake, 1995), and of the importance of representing the participants on their own terms through the meanings they attach to their own words and actions (Glesne, 1999; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 2002). In my journal, I noted that my reason for dropping the term *home school* from my original title was that my "participants tell me that this does not describe what they do" (October 19, 2003). I realized that if it was their perspectives I was trying to capture then I needed to use their terminology. In looking back at these title changes and the reasons why I made them, I located specific moments in my learning.

Issues of Trustworthiness

One of the biggest concerns that I have is the issue of trustworthiness. I'm just not certain how I can deal with my subjectivity in a way that will lead to what will be considered by others to be a trustworthy project. (Journal entry, October 25, 2003)

Constas (1992) writes that "questions concerning the credibility and status of qualitative inquiry are related to the privatization of qualitative analysis" (p. 253). He argues that researchers should make all aspects of their analysis open to public inspection. The idea of researching a topic I was close to myself, and having acquaintances as research participants, was appealing because I thought we had much to teach others about the learning process. However, as journal excerpts demonstrate, I also wondered if such a study would be of interest to anyone. Would it be taken seriously?

Is my study just going to end up being a self-fulfilling prophecy? By this I mean, I know what I will/want to find, so I'll just go in and find it, and won't that be easy! Even my participant check could be called into question...I write wonderful things about them, they agree, we're all happy...lousy research? (Journal entry, October 15, 2003)

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) caution researchers to be wary of the desire to justify their own experience. It is important to be interested in the topic, but a researcher cannot allow emotional attachment to “preclude the open, exploratory learner’s attitude that is necessary for good data collection and analysis” (p. 14). Once data collection began, I found that although this family’s approach to home education was similar to my own, it was also quite unique. I did find many of the things I had expected, but also discovered a great deal about their practice as well as my own. However, the question of trustworthiness continued to trouble me, and I repeatedly returned to my journal and the literature in search of reassurance.

After reading an article on verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity (Morse et al., 2002), I made these comments in my journal.

This article makes a few more things clearer to me re: trustworthiness...I was still somewhat uncertain about how reflexivity would add to the trustworthiness of my study. I now see that it has helped me to clarify my thinking, values, purposes, and beliefs. I can now be up front about this so others know where I’m coming from. I cannot shake off my biases, but I can make them known. (Journal entry, November 7, 2003)

Reason (as cited in Maxwell, 1996) argues in favor of *critical subjectivity*, which he describes as,

... a quality of awareness in which we do not suppress our primary experience; nor do we allow ourselves to be swept away and overwhelmed by it; rather we raise it to consciousness and use it as part of the inquiry process. (p.12)

Through reading and reflective writing I gradually understood how my personal experiences could be an asset rather than a liability. The key was to “be open to recognizing how our own position both privileges and limits us” (Russell & Kelly, 2002, p. 10). Eisner (1991) describes *connoisseurship*, the art of appreciation, as “the ability to make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities” (p. 63). I had insights into learning in a home school setting that others may not have. For example, many families do not follow a formal curriculum. They simply find that learning proceeds differently outside an institution. Someone unfamiliar with home education might not be sensitive to the forms that learning takes in an informal context, and may thus miss a great deal. As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggest, “subjectivity is something to capitalize on rather than to exorcize” (p. 104).

At the same time, Stake (2000) points out that a “researcher’s knowledge of the case faces hazardous passage from writing to reading” and researchers must seek “ways of safeguarding the trip” (p. 442). I therefore aspired to what Wolcott (1990) refers to as “correctness or credibility” (p. 126) and felt comfort in his assertion that “readers will not be offended if you do not claim to know everything” (p. 46). I tried to ensure that data supported interpretations, and strove towards “thick description” (Geertz as cited in Stake, 2000). Letting participants speak for themselves was a way to *show* readers what I

had found. By triangulating data (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995, 2000; Wolcott, 1994), I attempted to provide “a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility” (Eisner, 1991, p. 110). Through interviewing the four members of a single family, it was possible to compare their descriptions of the learning process. I noted in my journal, “that the same stories are being repeated and elaborated on by different participants” (Journal entry, November 7, 2003). Document analysis also allowed me to verify some aspects of the interview accounts. For example, in one interview my participants described how they had become interested in whales and eels while on vacation. Both Susan and Jeff followed up on these interests by writing articles for their field club’s annual publication. I used these articles to contextualize information acquired during interviews. Along with interview transcripts and journal entries, the articles also became part of an audit trail.

However, aware that new models for trustworthiness exist, I will think this through carefully before undertaking another study. Richardson (2000), for example, proposes an alternative. She argues that triangulation assumes,

...that there is a “fixed point” or “object” that can be triangulated. But in postmodernistic mixed-genre texts, we do not triangulate; we *crystallize*. We recognize that there are far more than “three sides” from which to approach the world... [With the crystal metaphor] what we see depends upon our angle of repose...Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know. (p. 934)

I find this compelling, and it may be the standard for trustworthiness in my next study. While writing this paper, I frequently thought about how I might approach future research.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves organizing what has been seen, heard, and read so that sense can be made of what is learned (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Since analysis takes place throughout the entire research process, a study is shaped and reshaped as a study proceeds, and data is gradually transformed into findings. Since “each qualitative study is unique, the analytical approach used will be unique” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 433). In addition, each researcher has his/her own preferences, strengths, and weaknesses, and must determine what works best. “Direction can and will be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer, known only when – and if – arrived at” (Patton, 2002, p. 432). When I reached this final stage of analysis, and had all of my notes and data in front of me, I was at a complete loss. Putting it all aside, I reread Wolcott (1990, 1994), Merriam (1998), and Stake (1995) seeking clues on case study analysis. I took brief notes on these readings in my journal, but did not turn to writing as a way to explore possible reasons as to why I was having difficulty. Nor did I reflect on the stress I was experiencing and how that might be affecting my ability to move forward.

During this period of analysis, journal entries most often consisted of experimental charts, diagrams, idea maps, and data displays rather than narrative. Researchers are advised to “display data” (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1988, 1998;

Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1994), to provide evidence for claims in a format readers can easily access. “The creation and use of displays is not separate from analysis, it is a *part* of analysis” (Miles & Huberman, p. 12). One knows what one displays. This was an efficient way to pull out and organize themes from the mass of words in front of me, so I could begin to formulate arguments. However, as I sat hour after frustrating hour with the data deciding what stories to tell, my confidence was at an all-time low. Rereading the literature was of some assistance, but somehow no one captured the essence of what I was going through. At the same time, I was so focused on the need to do something with the data that I did not consider journaling as a means to think things through, on both a personal and a research level. That was a mistake. In retrospect, this was perhaps the time I needed it most. This is not to downplay the utility of the charts and data displays, only to suggest that given what I now know about the enormous value of reflexivity, I would make much more effort to write a daily commentary, no matter how pressed for time. However, much earlier in the study I had already observed that,

... one of the challenges of learning to do this kind of research is that we are trying to do so many things simultaneously (i.e., data collection, analysis, transcription, writing, and learning how to do research – not to mention the rest of our lives!). (Journal entry, October 28, 2003)

The iterative nature of qualitative inquiry adds to the complexity of the task (Holliday, 2002).

As the study progressed, and there was more material to cope with, journaling became a lesser priority. Journal entries such as this attest to the reality that it was extremely difficult to keep up with everything qualitative research requires, especially given my beginner status.

I ended up rereading my transcripts over and over again in an effort to identify themes, scribbling in the margins when I thought I had identified something of potential importance. After preliminary coding, I decided to organize significant quotations onto my computer thematically. I labeled nine tentative categories, and then cut and pasted quotations into each one, ending up with over 25 pages. Once this was complete, I printed a hard copy. Cutting and pasting quotations into categories was very time consuming, but it paid off in the long run by offering visual evidence of the dominant themes. We are led to believe that themes simply “emerge from the data,” but looking back at my journal I discovered that most of the categories had been identified before this time, and what I was extracting from the transcripts either confirmed or disconfirmed them. These categories came from my expectations of what I thought I might find even before I started collecting data, from ideas present in the literature on home education, as well as from insights gained during the research process. Constan (1992) argues that researchers should describe their methods of analysis and identify the origin of categories. He points out that “although the general qualities associated with analysis are often alluded to, the specific procedures used to organize and interpret data are not always discussed” (p. 254). Researchers are expected to reflect on how they come to know what they know, and the chronicle of one’s thinking contained in a research journal potentially facilitates such awareness.

Writing the Narrative

Writing forces the investigator into a new and more intensive kind of analysis (Spradley, 1980). This is the case even though it is not a discrete step in the qualitative research process, but something done throughout an inquiry. The practical experience I was gaining during the pilot study made some of the reasons for this clear, as the following excerpt demonstrates.

I am finding that the more time that passes between the actual interview and the writing and the analysis, the less vivid my memory becomes . . . My ability to provide rich description diminishes. (Journal entry, October 27, 2003)

However, a number of journal entries indicate that time was always a constraint.

No more time to work on this. It's not much of an analysis but I just don't have time to do more... A limitation, for sure... (Journal entry, October 23, 2003)

In a case study, the researcher makes a detailed description of the case and its setting (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995), for description is the "foundation upon which qualitative data is built" (Wolcott, 1990, p. 27). Researchers become storytellers, inviting the reader to see through their eyes what they have seen, and then offering an interpretation (Wolcott, 1990). As a beginning researcher, I was uncertain about whether I had an appropriate level of detail to make my case comprehensible. This may have been less of an issue if I had done more writing during data collection when details were fresh in my mind. Carrying out a qualitative inquiry demands a major commitment of time and energy, and journal entries serve as a reminder that I sometimes had to cut corners.

Personal Issues

Patton (2002) warns that qualitative research is "time consuming, intimate, and intense" (p. 35). The research described in this paper took place over a period of three months and completely took over my life, as this entry illustrates.

I'm exhausted but feel compelled to find out more. My eyes are feeling strained in a way they never have before, from the computer screen, reading, and lack of sleep. They are actually going out of focus and I need to go in and have them examined, but don't feel I have the time right now!... I have been neglecting my family, not to mention my own health. Have not been exercising, have gained weight. I'm not eating properly... am frustrated with my husband because he is too busy to take a week or two off from work to give me extra time to work on this. This thing has taken over my life. I'm unbalanced... (Journal entry, November 1, 2003)

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) confirm that “[e]xploring demands near total absorption” and “qualitative researchers find their lives consumed by their work as they seek understanding and connections” (p. 173). At times, I felt guilty about taking so much time for my project.

I love doing this work, which is why I become so involved in it. I am not sure how to maintain a balance...I want to do a PhD but am concerned about the cost to my family. I know it's good for me, but is it best for them? (Journal entry, November 7, 2003)

In spite of such uncertainties and tensions, upon completion of my case study I knew I did want to be a qualitative researcher. I concur with Wolcott (1995) who asserts that the rewards make it worth the effort. Reflecting on my first research effort strengthened my conviction, for I gained confidence in my ability to cope with the demands this type of research requires.

Some Lessons Learned

Although I learned a great deal about qualitative inquiry and reflexivity while engaged in my original pilot study, writing this narrative consolidated and extended that learning. If I had not kept a journal much would have been lost, both during and now after the project. Having access to journal entries permitted me to consider my research holistically. This secondary level of reflection led to an increased recognition of the central role the journal played in the initial study. Through using writing as a method of inquiry I was able to make links between how I carried out my study, reflective journal entries, and the literature on qualitative methodology. This process enabled me to connect theory and practice, thereby gaining new insights into the complexity of qualitative inquiry and what it means to be a qualitative researcher. My own fledgling practice thus served as the foundation for what turned out to be a very personal and powerful learning experience. Looking back on my struggles at each stage of my study led to a deeper understanding of the nature of the qualitative research process, and a fuller appreciation of the vital role of reflexivity both in accomplishing a project, and in my ongoing development as a researcher. Perhaps most significantly, writing this account has altered my sense of identity (Richardson, 2000). Revisiting my study has strengthened my confidence in my ability to negotiate the complex process of qualitative inquiry, and I now *see myself as a researcher*. The multiple layers of reflection drawn upon in writing and revising this paper have made me more cognizant of how far I have come, and have taken me further along the path to becoming a qualitative researcher. At the same time, I know there can be no final destination, for each time I return to the original journal entries and my reflections on them, something new emerges. As I discover more about theory, the topic of study, the research process, and myself, my perspective shifts. Becoming a qualitative researcher is, indeed, a never-ending process.

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