Semiotics and Qualitative Research in Education: The Third Crossroad

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Abstract

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In this paper, I would like to show how qualitative research in education and semiotics can be brought together for the benefit of each field. Starting with attempts to define both qualitative research and semiotics in ways that can inform both disciplines, I hope to accomplish this task by mapping a series of three crossroads that define the past, present, and hopefully the future of the field.

Introduction

For the past ten years, I have sought to bring together and more importantly, to reconcile, the ideas of qualitative research in education and semiotic theory. My motivation is simple: I feel that each field has something important to offer the other. Semiotic theory can help expand the conceptual and practical domain of qualitative research by serving as a philosophical foundation for the discipline, thereby allowing qualitative researchers to build upon a set of ideas that powerfully extend the aims and goals of their research. Qualitative research in education can help expand semiotics by serving as a source of empirical research and findings, thereby helping move semiotics away from its current nearly total preoccupation with theory and into a state where empirically determined issues play a more important and visible role.

Since qualitative research in education and semiotics have developed independently of each other, there are few people who understand the issues and ideas of both fields. Therefore, I will start by defining some crucial issues in both qualitative research and semiotics. Once these definitions have been laid out, I hope to establish the potential link between the two areas by presenting an examination of three "crossroads" in the history of qualitative thinking which can then be used to situate the comparisons between the two domains.

A Quick Definition of Semiotics

Perhaps the major problem in defining semiotics is the fact that there are two main sources of contemporary semiotic theory.

One branch of semiotic theory is grounded in the European efforts at the turn of the century to reconfigure the study of language. That effort was led by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure, 1959). In this approach, all elements of language are taken as parts of the larger system of language in use, and in fact all components of language are defined not in terms of some absolute standard, but by their relations to other components within the overall system.

The key component of the sign relation, according to Saussure, was the dyadic relation of the signified (or the sign proper) to the signified (or the concept of something which the sign triggered in some sign user). Saussure maintained that the link between the signifier and the signified was arbitrary, thereby allowing for the formation of the networks and patterns of differences that characterize meaning. By focusing on these signifier-signified links, the researcher can "get below" the surface of sign relations and look at the underlying structural network of meanings. The best example of such a system was the system of meanings underlying language and language use.

Saussure, therefore, saw language as the premiere, but certainly not the only, sign system. Using language as a guide, we are able to talk about the "languages" of such diverse things as kinship patterns, fashion, and food preparation. We can call such systems "codes." Within the semiotic literature, this notion of codes is a key part of the legacy of Saussure. In his work, Saussure saw codes as an interrelated set of signs that allow us to explain and understand our world. Those theorists and researchers who adhere to a Saussurean model of semiotics tend to call their form of inquiry "semiology."

The second branch of semiotics is grounded in American pragmatist theory. The founder of pragmatism, and also the founder of this branch of semiotics, is Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce, 1955). Peirce's model of signs is built on his theory of reality. Starting with the Aristotelean notion of potency and act, Peirce expanded this characterization into a triadic model: potency, act, and relation. Those aspects of reality which deal with and characterize pure potency he called Firstness. Firstness deals with (among other things) issues of possibility. Those aspects of reality which deal with and characterize pure action he called Secondness. Secondness deals with such things as brute force, pure reaction, and pure awareness that something is happening here and now, without knowing or understanding what it is that is happening. In other words, Secondness is the pure action-reaction relationship. Those aspects of reality which deal with and characterize relation and lawlike actions and situations he called Thirdness. Thirdness deals with such issues as rules, laws, and habits. Anything symbolic, including language and sign systems in general, are real as Thirds. But any system of Thirds embeds and contains prior systems and components of Firsts and Seconds.

Peirce's model of signs, like his model of reality, is also triadic. Any sign consists of three interrelated components: the sign, the object, and the interpretant. The sign is that particular physical or conceptual entity that will serve as the "home" of the sign relation. A word, both in terms of its definition and in terms of its actual existence as a mark or a sound, is a sign. But a sign is not all that interesting in and of itself -- it is interesting in terms of what it represents, or stands for. The thing that it stands for or represents is its object. Finally, there will be a consequence of the object being represented by the sign in question that will be different from the manifestation of the object in and of itself, and that mediated consequence is what Peirce called the Interpretant. Interpretations of signs as signs for particular objects is an obvious example of an interpretant, but the concept of interpretant is much broader than interpretation. For example, the fact that "an orange" is signified by the words and not an actual orange has, among other consequences, the fact that the words "an orange" cannot be eaten and enjoyed, while the actual object can.

The notion of the role of inference in sign systems is the third necessary aspect of Peircean semiotics. Peirce laid out three distinct types of reasoning: deductive, inductive, and abductive. Deductive reasoning deals with drawing conclusions that are logically necessary and further our set of truth claims, inductive reasoning deals with drawing conclusions that are highly probable and expands our domain of probable truth claims, and abductive reasoning deals with conclusions that are plausible, and expands of domain of meaningful, if not certain, claims. As we move from abduction to deduction, we are moving along a dimension from the simple reconciliation of meaning toward one of necessary truth.

In order to develop a link between semiotics and qualitative research, it will be necessary to pick which type of semiotic theory will serve as the basis for the synthesis. Given its broader perspective and more explicit links with issues relevant to research proper, the Peircean approach will be deemed to be the most useful starting point. Another consideration is the controversial but defensible idea that Saussurean semiotics is a proper subset of Peircean semiotics (Deely, 1990).

A Quick Definition of Qualitative Research

in Education

It is difficult to find an unambiguous and definitive statement as to what qualitative research in education actually is. This is primarily due, as Lancy (1993) points out, to the fact that "...topic, theory, and methodology are usually closely interrelated in qualitative research (p. 3)." Therefore, a brief definition of the field will center on the methods, terms, and topics employed in qualitative research. These have been quite diverse. For instance, Bogdan and Biklen (1994) point out that qualitative research in education draws from many sources, reflected by the use of such terms as "...symbolic interactionist, inner perspective, the Chicago School, phenomenological, case study, interpretive, ethnomethodological, ecological, and descriptive (p. 3)." In a similar fashion, Glesne and Peshkin (1992) observe: "Qualitative inquiry is an umbrella term for various philosophical orientations to interpretive research. For example, qualitative researchers might call their work ethnography, case study, phenomenology, educational criticism, or several other terms (p. 9)."

Taking a Historical Turn

As we have seen, definitional problems in semiotics and qualitative research are quite different. In semiotics, definitions are difficult since there are two distinct forms of semiotic theory. We have solved that dilemma by grounding our ideas strictly in a Peircean model.

The problem is quite different in qualitative research in education. Given the lack of defining ideas independent of method, I will turn instead to a historical review of the evolution of the breadth of methods over the past 30 years. I will break down this development in terms of the ideas of the first two crossroads.

The First Crossroad

Qualitative methods were first brought into education via the use of anthropological and sociological methods for the study of educational settings and systems (cf. Vidich & Lyman,1994). The first crossroad in qualitative research in education involved the importing of non-experimental and observational procedures and field-oriented and data-driven theories from other disciplines in social research. Some of the early proponents of this effort include Spindler (1955), Jackson (1968), Erickson (1973), and Wolcott (1973). Early theoretical positions centered around grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and socially constructed models of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

This crossroad is highlighted by the inclusion of field and ethnographic approaches into empirical and scientific educational research. Particular research methods included participant observation (Spradley, 1980), case studies (Stake, 1995), and ethnography (Atkinson, 1990). Prior to this point,the use of experimental methods and the study of the psychology of the learner dominated the "legitimate" and "scientific" domains of educational research. By adding these field-oriented modes, the educational researcher could now be "scientific" without having to depend on such psychological theories or experimental methods. In fact, the primary consequence of this first crossroad is that it allowed for the formation and maturation of an anthropology and a sociology of education. As a result, the hegemonic hold of studying education from the perspective of experimentally- manipulated psychological factors was finally broken. However, these newly developed disciplines saw themselves mainly as branches of their parent disciplines, and not as fully formed inquiries within education per se.

The Second Crossroad

The second crossroad was marked by three events: 1) the expansion of qualitative research to include contemporary interpretive methods; 2) the creation of introductory textbooks, handbooks, and guidebooks for qualitative research; and 3) the development of a philosophical foundation for qualitative research per se.

The first area of change in qualitative research was the inclusion of interpretive areas within the field. Some of these interpretive areas include critical theory (e.g., McLaren, 1989), feminism (e.g., Lather, 1991), action research (e.g., Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Friere, 1970), cultural studies (e.g., Giroux, 1993), and postmodernism in general (e.g., Cherryholmes, 1988). The movement of this research direction was more clearly a move away from gathering data and building theory per se, and more towards the general critical theoretical notion espoused by Habermas (1972) of using empirical inquiry not only to verify theoretical claims, but also to understand and ameliorate ideological situations. In the interpretive cases described above, the understanding and amelioration was usually directed toward the institution and consequences of schooling.

Another indicator of the maturity of a perspective can be identified by noting the number of handbooks, guides, and introductory texts dedicated to that perspective. In the case of qualitative research in education, the number of such works has been growing steadily in recent years. Guidebooks include such famous and varied examples as Jaeger (1988), Glesne and Peshkin (1992), and Miles and Huberman (1994). Introductory texts include such well known examples as Bogdan and Biklen (1992) and Lancy (1993). Finally, the publication of the *Handbook of*

Qualitative Research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) is an important indicator of both the maturity and the relative growth of the field from its first crossroad precursors.

The final area of change was perhaps the defining aspect of the second crossroad -- the establishment of a philosophical foundation to characterize the work and thinking of many qualitative researchers in education. Arguably, Lincoln and Guba's *Naturalistic Inquiry* (1985) is the basic philosophical statement in this second and current era of qualitative research. Even though there has been a growing base of criticism for Lincoln and Guba's positions (e.g., Heap, 1995), many research handbooks in the field still turn to the basic philosophical points raised by Lincoln and Guba (e.g., Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 1988). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that a substantial number of qualitative researchers at least tacitly support many, if not all, of the positions that Lincoln and Guba raise. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to lay out all of the positions that Lincoln and Guba espouse in this work, the following three key points can be noted.

First, Lincoln and Guba argue that qualitative research assumes a different ontological position than traditional quantitative research. In short, they claim that quantitative research espouses the idea that reality is outside the control of the researcher and that consequently inquiry is essentially a spectator activity. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is characterized by the fact that the researcher constructs the reality that he or she sees. Along with this idea is the notion that each person involved in the inquiry, as either participant or subject, constructs his or her reality as well (pp. 70-91).

Second, Lincoln and Guba argue that the epistemological foundations of qualitative research are based on values and value judgments, not facts. In a common view held in the field, they claim that the researcher's values guide and shape the research conclusions because the researcher is busy constructing the reality of the inquiry. At the same time, the researcher has to be sensitive to the realities created by others involved, and the consequent changes and differences in values. All findings in a qualitative study, and, therefore, all "truth" claims, are socially negotiated (pp. 160-186).

The final point deals with Lincoln and Guba's desire for qualitative research to be as "empirical" and "scientific" as quantitative research, even though the philosophical foundations of qualitative research, from their perspective, is ontologically relativistic and epistemologically guided by subjective value judgements. This is a particularly important point for Lincoln and Guba professionally, since they both are noted evaluators of educational programs and projects. Since continued funding of many projects depend in part on evaluation results, it is important that evaluation conclusions be substantiated with public empirical data. Lincoln and Guba solve the "empirical problem" by taking a quasi-"Grounded Theory" approach to the matter. They valorize the researcher as the primary "research instrument" of the research endeavor, and charge the researcher with the task of going through the data with the intent of identifying "themes" that "emerge" from this data. How do we determine that these themes are the valid constituents of the data? By triangulating the themes with themes that have "emerged" from the same data when looked at by other researcher-instruments, and by triangulating this interpretive data to other forms of data relevant to the research at hand. By careful use of triangulation, then, the

researcher can be just as confident of his/her results as even the most careful, rigorous, and skillful of quantitative researchers (pp. 187-220).

With the establishment of a broader and socially motivated scope, the appearance of a number of comprehensive guidelines and textbooks, and a comprehensive philosophical perspective that leads to "sound" data collection and analysis, it might appear as if qualitative research in education is on a healthy footing. However, the truth of the matter is that the field is actually on the verge of another, and perhaps the most important, crossroad it has yet to face.

Delineating the Current Crisis

in Qualitative Research in Education

The ironic part of the current crisis in qualitative research is the fact that it is, by and large, hidden. That is, there is a general perception that qualitative research is suffering from a crisis of respectability and legitimacy (cf. Shank, in press, for a more detailed discussion of this issue), but it is really more the case that an explicit critique from within the field itself is necessary to address this general malaise. This critique needs to be foundational and philosophical, and therefore should be focused on the ideas espoused within *Naturalistic Inquiry*. It is beyond the scope of this paper to put forth such a detailed critique; instead, crucial issues relating to each of the three key points discussed earlier will be put forth as evidence for the need for a more detailed analysis.

In the first point, Lincoln and Guba call for a model of reality where the researcher constructs, or creates, the reality that he/she sees. In philosophy, such a position is called solipsism. The most primitive form of solipsism states that "only I am real -- all else is a figment of my imagination." While I do not think that this is the position that Lincoln and Guba want to embrace, I do not see how they can escape it. Consider the following quote from *Naturalistic Inquiry* (pp. 83- 84):

Those who see reality as a construction in the minds of individuals asserts that it is dubious whether there is a reality. If there is, we can never know it. Furthermore, no amount of inquiry can produce convergence on it. There is, in this ontological position, always an infinite number of constructions that can be made and hence there are multiple realities.

This is a position that Lincoln and Guba hold is most appropriate for educational research (cf. p. 87).

The second point holds that observations are not distinguishable from value claims. There are two problems with this idea. First of all, in order for this claim to be true, then all observation statements whatsoever have to be shown to be reducible to value positions. For instance, if I were to say "The sun is yellow," it is incumbent upon Lincoln and Guba to acknowledge that either; a) this statement is simply an attempt to make a fact claim independent of any particular value system, or b) somehow this apparently innocent looking observation veils some value claim or statement. If Lincoln and Guba accept option (a), then they commit themselves to a position where at least some observations are free of value domains, and if they accept option (b) they have to demonstrate why this option is necessary in the face of the apparently more simple

and parsimonious option (a). As prima facie evidence against option (b), I offer as a likelihood that a diverse group of people, ranging from primitive tribal communities to cutting-edge techno-communities, would be able to come together and agree that "the sun is yellow" and disagree on nearly every statement of value per se.

In the third case, Lincoln and Guba seem to want to bring positivism in through the back door after kicking it out through the front door. In other words, Lincoln and Guba insist upon the notions of multiple realities and value-driven data, and then use techniques like triangulation which depend on the idea of convergence upon a particular rendering of a truth claim in order to work. To put it another way, Lincoln and Guba espouse separate realities for all participants, and then treat the commensurability of these realities as being essentially non-problematic. That is, they show us how to use triangulation et cetera to bring these realities together, but never tell us how it is possible in the first place for these realities to be reconciled in terms of each other. In fact, similar theorists, such as Rorty (1991) state that these versions of the "truth" are ultimately incommensurable, and adopt notions like consensus to explain the fact that we can communicate and work with each other. But Lincoln and Guba seem unwilling to take this position, and instead hold out for the notion of analyzing data, rather than forging any consensus for meaning. For instance, they say (p. 203):

Data accumulated in the field must be analyzed inductively (i.e., from specific, raw units of information to subsuming categories of information) in order to define local working hypotheses or questions that can be followed up.... Inductive data analysis bears remarkable similarities to content analysis, a process aimed at uncovering embedded information and making it explicit. Two essential subprocesses are involved which may be termed, for convenience, "unitizing" and "categorizing."

The above process is actually no different from a standard positivist pilot study. The idea of inductive analysis (the term "inductive" is used improperly, but that is a topic for another paper) is quite congruent with a positivist perspective. In both cases, the data is broken into manageable "chunks" which are then analyzed and combined to form models. The only difference in the latter case is the absence of an explicit theory, which is more of a logistical than conceptual factor.

The inescapable conclusion, from even this partial analysis, is that *Naturalistic Inquiry* is totally inadequate to serve as a conceptual and philosophical foundation for qualitative research in education. It is the need to find a more adequate and genuine foundation which is at the heart of what I am calling the "third crossroad."

The Third Crossroad

Qualitative research is currently standing at its third crossroad, whether it realizes it or not, and its movement at this point will determine its nature within the field for years to come. The field was formed at the first crossroad, when some educational researchers chose to move away from the standard experimental path. At the second crossroad, qualitative educational researchers chose to move away from the field-oriented path blazed earlier to pursue interpretive and foundational issues that still allowed qualitative inquiry in education to adhere to the principles

of empirical science. At this time, I am recommending that at least some of us qualitative researchers in education pursue a new, and semiotically-informed, path. I have laid some of the basics for that path in Shank (1994), but I would like to review a few key points, and draw several critical implications to pursuing this path. This third path is characterized by three distinguishing ideas.

The first idea is that education is a fundamental and relational human phenomenon. By fundamental, I mean that education should be viewed not just as the activities we do in the institution we call schooling, but that educating and learning is something we do as humans that is as basic to us as eating, sleeping, seeking shelter, or seeking love. By relational, I mean that the act of education cannot be reduced to a pairing of the act of teaching and the act of learning, but that education is real as a relation between learning and teaching. As such, it has primary semiotic reality (cf. Deely, 1990; Ricoeur, 1976).

The notion of semiotic reality is complex and deserves a bit of attention. By "semiotic reality," I am talking about an entity whose reality is determined by its status as being understood or even understandable by virtue of the fact that it brings certain things into relation to each other. Let me illustrate this with one concrete example. Consider the degree to which a marriage is "real." In a very important way, the "reality" of a given marriage has some degree of autonomy from its components; namely the husband and the wife. In other words, while the relation of the husband and the wife to each other and to the marriage helps constitute the marriage, its reality cannot be reduced to these sets of relations per se. This leads to the curious state of affairs, observed over and over again by marriage counselors and others, that sometimes a husband is okay and a wife is okay, but the marriage as its own entity is not okay. This entity is in part dependent upon the existence of the husband and the wife, but while it is framed by this relation, its reality as known and even as manifested in the world of experience is over and beyond any set of components traceable to either the husband or the wife. In other words, for something to be semiotically real, it is real as a relation. As such a relation, it not only completes other relations, but it brings something new into the world.

The second idea is the notion that qualitative inquiry is a systematic empirical inquiry into meaning, and as such, is foundationally dependent upon the concepts and implications of semiotics. By this, I mean that qualitative research looks upon the data of the world not as facts, but as signs. As signs, they can be clues, symptoms, or omens (cf. Shank, 1987) of the nature of reality in the situation we choose to examine and explore. Another way to think of this is to follow Deely (1982, 1990) and hold that semiotics allows us to understand the ways in which natural human phenomena, including the phenomenon of educating and learning, can be informed and changed by the inter-penetration of the specifically linguistic semiotic action of anthroposemiosis. If this is the case, then the search for meaning that characterizes qualitative research is not just an action to describe the role of education in culture, but should transform that role in the process.

The third idea is the notion that an inquiry can be systematic, and empirical, and yet not scientific. That is, in a very real sense, qualitative research in education has the potential of being one of the first modes of empirical inquiry to move into a post- scientific framework. While the idea of a post- scientific systematic mode of empirical inquiry to too new for most of us to be

able to draw out a full picture of its implications, I will describe it by saying that such an approach, translated into a collective and interdisciplinary project within inquiry, has the potential to usher in an Age of Meaning as the next development in inquiry.

The implications of this ideas are radical; radical enough, in fact, to justify identifying this juncture as a genuine crossroad. If educational researchers and semioticians can work together to craft this new mode of inquiry, then this road, while not for everyone, can be nonetheless be laid down as a new path for both fields.

Final Thoughts:

As almost a postscript, I would like to say that it is likely that the metaphor of a crossroads is too confining. Instead, qualitative research and qualitative researchers are most likely on the edge of a divergent explosion into inquiry, covering artistic, investigative, clinical, and many other directions. More than any other mode of inquiry, qualitative research by its nature demands diversity. Paradoxically, that it why it is so important to work on finding a conceptual umbrella such as semiotics, that allows for the diversity while giving us a path for common meaning. I hope that this paper has been at least a small step in this direction.

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