Qualitative Research: Exploring an Undiscovered Country

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**Introduction (Choosing a Destination)**

My experience with qualitative research has been like discovering and then exploring a previously undiscovered country. It has been a somewhat overwhelming process at times, but has led me to the discovery of a great many things, some of which were found within me. In this essay, I will detail my first experiences with qualitative research while relating them to the discoveries of brave explorers going where no one has gone before.

First, there must be a destination. Every great journey begins with planning and a qualitative research study is no different. I needed a topic that would lend itself easily to my needs and would require research subjects to which I could gain access. I weighed many topics in my mind and finally decided on collaborative teaming. Specifically, I wanted to research teachers’ experiences with and perceptions of the collaborative teaming process. This is currently a hot topic in the education profession. Districts are continuously looking for ways to increase collaboration among educators in hopes that it will increase their focus on student centered learning and thoughtful teaching. Because of this, many teaching teams are moving from the traditional meeting style to a structured collaborative approach.

**Literature Review (Expedition Planning)**

Now that I’d decided where I was going, I needed to find out as much as I could about my destination. This not only helped me to get to where I was headed successfully, but also helped me to know what to expect when I got there. The most important way to ensure a successful journey lies in a detailed and thorough preparation.

A growing number of schools are employing cooperative teaching arrangements to educate all students in educational programs (Salend, Gordon, & Lopez-Vona, 2002). Collaborative planning and teaching can result in a variety of positive outcomes for the kids we have today as well as the educators who teach these children and youth (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006). However, transitioning to this type of process is not always easy. Initial meetings can be rambling affairs, especially for teams lacking clear guidelines.

School leaders can promote meaningful work by requiring team members to arrive at collaborative decisions around curriculum, assessment, or instruction (Graham & Ferriter, 2008). But, it is not all up to school leaders. The teachers themselves must dedicate themselves to the collaborative process. Studies have found that in similar collaborative situations teachers were interested in constructing shared knowledge and working toward shared visions. Rather than because of directives from above – from program or school administrators – teachers worked together toward common goals because of commitments to each other and to students. In other words, teaches and staff were driven by a love of learning and concern for the well-being of their students (Spatig, White Stephens, Flaherty, Jeffers & Arneson, 2011).

The collaborative teaming process is a growing trend. Many school districts are using it to help meet the demands of the modern public schools by increasing teaching collaboration and focus on individual student learning. But it is not easy. It takes hard work and dedication on the parts of both teachers and administrators. The most important thing to remember is that collaborative planning and teaching is for the benefit of the kids—the only kids we have (Thousand, 2006).

**Gaining Access (Braving the Wild)**

Once I had a general direction in mind and had learned all I could about my destination, I needed to pinpoint my area of exploration. My most immediate resource was an elementary school in the same town where I am employed. Luckily, I knew the principal at this school; I’ve worked with her in the past and she too is a doctoral student at Marshall University. According to Bogdan & Knopp Biklen (2007), being flexible in you requests for entry might mean the difference between gaining access and being turned away. So, before I contacted this principal, I lined out my needs so that I could be very specific in my requests and had a few backup schedules in mind. I needed to observe two collaborative team meetings (preferably with the same team) and I needed to do it early in the morning to accommodate my own working schedule. Fortunately, my first request was acceptable to the principal. When I called the principal, she was more than happy to help me with my project. She responded the very next day, after speaking with the potential subjects, and gave me the specifics of when I could come to the school for my observations.

I would have to guess that gaining access usually isn’t this easy. I benefited from working in the same school district where I was requesting to observe and from having a previous working relationship with the principal of that school. The fact that she was a fellow doctoral student most certainly helped as well; she was sympathetic to my needs as she had performed the same task herself previously.

**Fieldwork (Surveying My Surroundings)**

Once I had arrived at my destination and had gained the acceptance of the local tribe, it was time for my exploration to begin. One of my main goals for this experience was to immerse myself as deeply as I could in the everyday lives of the people I was observing while not affecting their normal business. Qualitative designs are naturalistic to the extent that the research takes place in real-world settings and the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). I had to become as open as possible and keep my own influence light. After all, in the choosing of research subjects, I had acquired native guides. I needed to let my guides show me the lay of the land in their own natural way. This was the only way to get an accurate picture of their everyday lives.

**Observation One**

For my first observation, I observed only, without taking notes, as to not upset the natural atmosphere of their meeting. I wanted to be accepted as part of their group, not treated as a strange outsider watching their every move from the fringes. While I directly participated in their meeting very little, my presence was accepted.

The collaborative team I am observing is a group of third-grade teachers at an elementary school that serves approximately five hundred students. The teachers are each experienced, but are at various points in their careers.

In this meeting, the teachers went about their normal routine, discussing various issues. Personally, the problem I had with this observation was keeping up with the conversation while trying to commit to memory everything that was being said. This was difficult. However, upon transcribing the event later, I found that I could remember much more than I thought that I would. Having enough to say on the experience was not a problem.

One of the major questions that I had after this first observation was “Who is the leader of the group?” One team member in particular, Penny, seemed to be the one in charge. In my field notes, I wrote:

I wonder about Penny’s leadership of the group. I’m not sure if this group has a designated leader or not. It seems Penny would step up and get things rolling even if she isn’t the team leader. The meetings are held in her classroom. She directed me where to sit. And, she began the meeting and then continued to do most of the guidance throughout the proceedings.

I wondered specifically if leadership in collaborative teams was important. Were leaders appointed by the administration or were they elected by the group? Also, does it matter? The issue of leadership continues to come up throughout my research.

The most important thing I observed during this first outing was exactly what one would expect to see at a collaborative meeting, which is collaboration. I witnessed many instances of collaboration during my first visit, but one comment I made in my notes does stand out. Responding to the group members discussing how they can help each other better prepare students for district mandated benchmark testing I wrote:

This was a great moment and what I had hoped to see when I came in to observe a collaborative team meeting. These teachers aren’t just sharing ideas, they are working together to teach students to the best of their ability. They are truly collaborating. The students’ ability to use the responders was in question by all, but until Jane brought up the topic it was just a worry without a solution. By coming together to share ideas, these teachers can collaborate to solve the problems they each face.

I felt that this first observation was a success. I had gained access to the group and had been able to collect some really valuable data concerning how and why they meet as a collaborative team.

**Observation Two**

In this, my second observation in the field, I felt I was entrenched deeply enough into the group to take notes during their meeting. It had been two weeks since my last visit with the group and I was afraid they would not welcome me as warmly as before. However, I was greeted warmly and offered what the natives called a “doughnut.” It was delicious.

While questions about leadership and comments about collaboration continued to be prominent, new issues were also raised. For instance, I was amazed at the focus these teachers had to stay on task and get things accomplished. I commented:

These teachers are used to moving fast. More importantly, they are good at focusing on what applies to them directly and filtering out what does not. These are professionals who are masters at working in the most distracted environment imaginable. Is there anything that could truly throw them off track?

The speed at which they change topics is staggering. In the two thirty-five minute meetings I observed, the team discussed an average of thirteen topics each meeting. That means that they spend, on average, less than three minutes per topic. One might think that there’s no way they can actually be accomplishing anything at that pace, but he’d be wrong. These teachers arrive at their meetings with topics on their mind and problems to solve and they waste no time achieving their goals.

I did comment on one possible negative trend emerging in my research and that involves teacher disenchantment with new educational initiatives. It’s important to point out that at no point during my two observations with this group did any of the members express displeasure with the collaborative teaming process itself. However, I witnessed an unspoken reaction that sparked in my mind as a possible underlying factor for modern teachers. I noted, “It is unclear as to whether the teachers are actually excited about creating student portfolios. They never say anything negative about the upcoming initiative, but they don’t seem overly thrilled with the idea either.”

Likewise, I observed:

These teachers have much for which to plan. Anything that is not an immediate need will be shelved until later. Also, could it be that they know better than to move forward with planning until they get information from the top? It seems almost as though they have so much coming at them (demands, initiatives, reports, etc.) that they don’t even worry about something new until its time has come. Could this be because they’ve seen other proposed strategies and initiatives come and go too often to take notice?

It’s possible, hardworking and dedicated as they are, that these teachers are overworked, but I don’t believe that is the only problem. As I’ll note again before my research is through, there are teachers who both love and hate the collaborative teaming process. Could this distinction be based solely on the disenchantment of witnessing programs and initiatives come and go with no real impact?

**Interview One**

When selecting my first native guide, I chose an experienced teacher from a different group that the group I had first observed. In fact, this person teaches at the middle school to which the previous school is a feeder. This subject, Mrs. D, has been teaching for many years and is currently the leader of her collaborative team. It is best to think of ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations (Spradley, 1979). It is for this reason that I tried to keep my interview sessions as light and friendly as possible. Doing so, my informants were put at ease and I was able to record some very interesting data.

Mirroring the findings from my observations with the elementary group, Mrs. D expresses concerns that not all team members are committed to the collaborative teaming process. When asked to elaborate on this issue she said:

I think a lot of teachers think it’s a waste of their time and that it’s not that important for us to have those team meetings every week. I think they think that their time could be better spent doing something they need to get done instead of listening to someone talk about student issues.

But isn’t talking about student issues is the whole point of collaborative teaming? This reminded me much of the elementary team. It seems teachers at all levels are overworked. And, what’s worse, this seems to lead to a nonchalant disregard of new educational initiatives.

The flip side of this is that the process does seem to work, at least it does for those who believe in it and dedicate themselves to making the collaborative process work. When asked if the collaborative teaming process has affected her teaching Mrs. D responded:

It has affected it. Because we can’t get off track, cause we are focused on student learning the whole time, other than other areas. It’s all about how we are going to do to ensure that students are getting the math skills and the reading skills. We’re focusing more on individual students other than as a class. We did focus on individual student before now, just not as much as we do now. You know, test skills, benchmarks. I think it’s a lot more focused.

I feel that the elementary group I observed would agree with this. The success of any collaborative team will be equal to that of the effort its members put into it. Mrs. D’s perspective as am experienced educator really helped to define for me what collaborative teaming should be and what it can be when its stakeholders are committed to making it work.

**Interview Two**

For my second native guide, I wanted an educator with a different perspective than Mrs. D. Luckily, Mrs. D recommended Ms. T, the first year teacher who she is mentoring. Just as I had hoped, Ms. T was able to offer a very different perspective than her experienced mentor. More importantly, her unique viewpoint was almost entirely in line with the data I’d already collected.

In my interview with Mrs. D, she mentioned how she felt the collaborative teaming process would help new teachers transition into the profession more smoothly than someone who only participated in the traditional teaming process. When asked this same question, Ms. T confirmed Mrs. D’s hunch by responding:

Oh yeah, definitely made it easier. I know my biggest fear coming in was about knowing what I have to teach and about teaching the CSO’s I need to hit the requirements for their IEPs. Where do I go? What do I look at? . . . Meeting with the teachers and having someone I can go to and talk to about everything and know that they can help me and know the order in which I can hit everything. That has definitely made me a lot more comfortable in my teaching. I’m hitting everything I’m supposed to. I’m right there with the other teachers.

For districts looking for ways to help new teachers strive in and remain in the profession, this could be a major asset. Furthermore, Ms. T isn’t just more comfortable in her teaching position than she would be otherwise, she actually feels as though she’s doing a better job because of it. She echoes Mrs. D’s sentiments when she says:

I think it’s improved it. Because I know I have someone I can go to. I think last year student teaching was totally different. . . Having all the teachers on board has made teaching for me much easier this year.

These teachers agree that the benefits of collaborative teaming lie in bringing teachers together to support each other in meeting the special needs of all students. Teams can create shared mini-lessons that all teachers will deliver, shifting the focus from individual efforts to a collective exploration of effective instruction (Graham, 2008). For teachers, especially new teachers, this process is a helpful tool for staying connected to your peers and gaining support when needed.

**Coding and Analysis (Translating My Findings)**

Scientific discoveries, be they ancient or modern, have to be analyzed. Some findings need to be translated. It is the same for qualitative data. The data I’ve collected can’t be understood on its own. It must be viewed with an understanding of its source and the perspectives of the people it concerns. It must be viewed through their eyes first before it can ever be translated into something useful for others. Qualitative data describe. They take us, as readers, into the time and place of the observation so that we know what it was like to have been there. . . Qualitative data tell a story (Patton, 2002).

This, I felt was a difficult part of the research process. Scanning the transcripts of two observations and two interviews for common themes isn’t easy. Eventually, I settled on three main categories for the code words with which I had labeled my field notes: cozy collaboration, Teaching and Testing, and Irritating Issues. These three categories encompass every code word that I used in the coding of my field notes. For instance: In the category Irritating Issues, one will find the code words intercom, drama queens and mandates. These three code words represent specific pieces of data that I have observed or my observer comments concerning them. The purpose here is to help me, the researcher, synthesize my findings into something others will understand. This is, after all, the art of ethnography – taking something that is perceived as “strange” and making it “familiar” to audiences (Luttrell, 2003).

The first finding of my research study will be a surprise to no one who is familiar with public education. It is that teachers have difficult jobs. It is a fact that the job of teacher has become increasingly complex, demanding, and exciting due to our nation’s increasingly diverse student population and requirements of NCLB, Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, and other state and federal mandates (Thousand, 2006). More importantly, in this case, is the finding that the collaborative teaming process seems to be able to aide teachers in their everyday struggles, at least somewhat. My data show that some teachers feel as though the collaborative process helps new teachers to survive and even strive during their initial teaching experience. Perspectives from new and experienced teachers alike seem to show that this is the case. Furthermore, the data show that even experienced teachers can benefit from the enhanced collaboration of this structured meeting environment.

Secondly, the data indicate that leadership within the collaborative teams is very important. Regardless of whether the team leader is appointed or elected by the group, without a leader the team would flounder aimlessly and see no real benefits to their meetings. It is the team leader’s role to ensure that the meetings are on track and that the conversations are focused on student learning as opposed to other topics. Without this guidance, the meetings would either end too soon or go on far too long, either outcome representing a fruitless waste of time. Meetings can swing from one extreme to the other: either struggling to fill time or tackling too many tasks in hour-long meetings. Frustration is inevitable for groups struggling with new responsibilities (Graham & Ferriter, 2008).

Finally, the data uncovered in this research study show that the collaborative meeting process is only as productive as its members are dedicated. Without stakeholder buy-in, the effort is for naught. According to interview data, the biggest hindrance to the success of these meetings comes from those teachers who refuse to participate in the process. These are the teachers who grade papers during the meetings instead of collaborating with their peers to solve student learning issue. These are the teachers that complain about the meetings cutting into their planning time instead of using that time wisely.

In short, the collaborative teaming process can be a powerful tool when used properly. It allows teachers the time and structure to have meetings that are both productive and helpful. When teacher buy-in is high, these meetings can help to support new teachers and reach even the most troubled students. However, if treated with contempt by those who are disenchanted by the sometimes overwhelming tide of educational initiatives, it can achieve nothing more than wasting time.

**Writing Process (Documenting My Experiences)**

The mountains and valleys of an untouched wilderness are never as grand when seen in an adventure’s sketchbook. Likewise, the results of any field study pale on paper when compared to the memories of the researcher. But that is the burden of the qualitative researcher. How does one convey the body language and dramatic pauses of observation and interview on paper? One must strive then to present his findings as clearly and completely as possible. As Merriam has stated, I must offer my own interpretation of someone else’s interpretation of reality (1995).

Through my two observation and two interview transcripts, I believe I’ve presented the differing perspectives of a handful of educators on the topic of collaborative teaming. It is by no means a complete picture of their experiences or feelings. It is merely my interpretations of their actions and ideas. I feel that in these writing, and in this final essay, I’ve been able to present a relatively clear picture of what it is like to participate in a collaborative team as a classroom teacher. I’ve differentiated the perspectives of beginning teachers and experienced teachers, leaders and followers, and believers and skeptics. What begins to emerge is a living tapestry of human perspective that cannot always be categorized. What it can be, though, is a clue, a clue to the meaning behind the words. I feel as though I am a little closer to discovering the truth of the issue and I hope that others who view this research will grow a little closer to discovering it themselves.

**Conclusion (The Journey Home)**

The ending of a great journey can be bittersweet. Coming home means a return to what is comfortable, but also means leaving behind all that is exotic and new. For an expedition to be truly successful, one must filter what is uncovered thoughtfully and preserve only that which is truly meaningful.

Throughout this process, I’ve learned a great deal. I’ve learned that the collaborative teaming process can be a useful tool for those who are dedicated to increasing the learning outcomes of those they teach. But it can’t be entered into lightly; one will only get out of it what one puts in. It takes time and dedication. It takes sacrifice and it takes teamwork.

The same is true of qualitative research. It’s difficult and not for the faint of heart. The transcribing alone is enough to drive one mad. But its rewards are great. There is no better way to really get to the heart of an issue, or a problem or a people.

I believe I’ve come away from this process a little more knowledgeable about collaborative teams and a lot more knowledgeable about myself as a researcher and as a professional. I’ve returned home from this great expedition into the unknown a little wiser and much more confident in my own ability to achieve the impossible.

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