

## **Getting to the Bottom of the Well: The Value of Qualitative Research into Teaching and Learning**

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### **Abstract**

Qualitative researchers are often compelled to defend their methods and associated underpinning philosophy to researchers from other cultures of inquiry. This is particularly so where academics from a variety of disciplines are undertaking research into teaching and learning from a non-social scientific background. This article examines how we might best mount a defence of the qualitative tradition for teaching and learning research through the identification of: a) the commonalities between quantitative and qualitative research approaches; b) the relation between qualitative research and the humanities; and c) the distinctiveness of qualitative research. In discussing these issues I address reservations often expressed by those who are sceptical of the value of qualitative research, proposing that a fruitful way of explicating this value is to draw attention to affinities across cultures of inquiry.

**Keywords:** cultures of inquiry; humanities; interpretivism; method; qualitative research; science.

### **Introduction**

In my experience of working with colleagues who are new to qualitative research in higher education, there is often a confusion as to its distinctive nature and its value. It is frequently felt to be too subjective and too limited in sample size to be capable of making generalisations. Often, it is seen as a permissive culture of inquiry that celebrates subjective, context bound, ‘anything goes’, interpretations. Many are unclear about the position it occupies within social science. If it is not about measurement and prediction, what is it about?

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In order to address these kinds of confusion, we can take as our starting point the interrelation of qualitative inquiry with other cultures of inquiry. It seems to me that so much of the literature and the teaching of research methods explicates the purpose of qualitative research by counter-posing it to other cultures of inquiry. While this counter-position has its explanatory uses because there *are* differences to consider, thinking through opposites alone can never provide the full story. Part of the risk is in stereotypical depictions of other cultures of inquiry and partly in requiring colleagues to enter into complex philosophical argument. I think we can avoid these risks and instead enrich our explanations of qualitative research (at least in the first instance) by showing its affinities with other traditions and this article is an exploratory journey in this direction.

How learners learn is very much about the relationship established with teachers and this relationship is in turn influenced by its institutional setting as well as family and community factors. This complexity of influences invites interpretivist modes of inquiry from teachers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. My aim is to explore how we can make this invitation meaningful from the standpoint of those coming from different cultures of inquiry. I should acknowledge that among the communities of qualitative researchers there is no single perspective, of course, since it is a field that stretches from post positivist to social constructionist. Yet all such perspectives can be treated as a form of interpretivism which foregrounds an inquiry into human meaning making. My discussion rests on this wide definition though I address some aspects of methodological variation within the qualitative tradition concerning questions of truth claims and researcher detachment.

### **The Two Faces of Qualitative Research**

I will start with my own counter-positions. It might be helpful to see qualitative research in education as Janus faced in that it looks towards experimental and quantitative research for its validity claims; and it looks towards the humanities for engagement with descriptive and analytical depth. Some qualitative researchers cleave towards the first direction often by imbuing their work with what Law (2004) calls ‘method talk’ in an anxiety to demonstrate what they hope to be robustness. Such talk involves drawing on a vocabulary (e.g. replication, validity, rigour, generalisation) that scripts the research as science. This scripting often comes from those who are either unconfident about the distinctive nature of qualitative research or are anxious to secure reader confidence. Either way, the temptation is to shoehorn

into their qualitative approach validity criteria associated with the deduction of clear findings from clear method. Law's argument is that human society is too messy for this clarity to be possible. He accepts that some things are stable, measurable and easily knowable but so much more is difficult to capture because it concerns the affective and is slippery, holding no underlying regularities and predictive capacity, he writes (Law, 2004: 2):

Pains and pleasures, hopes and horrors, intuitions and apprehensions, losses and redemptions, mundanities and visions, angels and demons, things that slip and slide, or appear and disappear, change shape or don't have much shape at all, unpredictabilities. These are a just a few of the phenomena that are hardly caught by social science at all.

None of these phenomena can be brought to heel by the application of strict scientific method, argues Law. Translating these kinds of phenomena into teaching and learning settings in higher education we might include:

Learner anxiety, attainment hopes and horrors, teacher intuition and apprehension, blocked access, excluding practices, historical influences, colonial traces, Pygmalion effects, teacher-student trust, plagiarism, rules of engagement, stated and unstated, formal and informal curriculum.

Most of these factors are hard to measure within a quantitative research framework alone. Law's point is that we need to turn away from conventional social scientific approaches if we are to research complex human settings. Although he mentions them, Law has underestimated, perhaps, the capacity of ethnographic perspectives in social science to deal with the kind of 'mess' he describes through 'thick description', of which more later. Further, Law's depiction of scientific realism seems to me to be helpful so long as it does not demonise science or lead to a rejection of any kind of method. This would be an erroneous reading of Law's position but his polemical thrust might add to a frequently held view that qualitative research is less careful than other forms of inquiry

### **Talking Method**

Law's objection to the risks of over-claiming method as an efficient means of conducting human inquiry is matched by the dangers of inattention to method. One of the strengths of

scientific method is in its commitment to carefulness from which all researchers can learn. A critique of ‘method talk’ should not lead us to abandon talk of method at all, whatever the challenge posed by the phenomenon under study. At the same time, following Law, we need to release method from the burden of delivering firm discoveries from a detached vantage point. With this qualification in mind, some attention to validity questions associated with method should not be scorned. After all a central question on validity is the same for all research approaches, namely can we trust the quality of the data and the claims drawn from it?

Some qualitative researchers offer evidence of triangulation (securing diverse data sets that point in a similar direction), saturation and theoretical sampling (iteratively judging sample size adequacy on the weight of evidence gathered), member checking (sharing your analysis with another researcher) and returning interview scripts and provisional analysis to respondents as moves that support validity claims. Any of these moves are helpful in demonstrating carefulness and trustworthiness. The issue is not about losing these kinds of moves but it is about decoupling them from the notion that they will contribute towards getting at a truth in ‘objective’ ways. Further, talking method should not produce a ‘smooth narrative’ that purports to sweep up the mess.

### **Writing the Truth**

Some qualitative researchers assume that the truth is somehow already lodged in the data, waiting for the researcher’ to excavate it (Rolf, 2006). This holds good for certain kinds of straightforward, easily checkable data (When did you go to prison? What was your sentence?), but the same level of certainty breaks down for deep inquiry (Take me through your first week of incarceration). Overlooking this distinction, the challenge some set themselves is to eliminate bias from their inquiry in order to reach a truth at the site of ‘mess’. This way of thinking is often framed as post-positivist and thus counter-posed to the social constructionist view that we negotiate meanings and definitions of situations on the basis of what we bring to the inquiry (e.g., how we look, what we miss, what we know). From this viewpoint, reality is not held to be transparently available; it needs to be interpreted and the act of interpretation produces a truthful perspective rather than the truth.

The position that human inquiry can never be detached is foregrounded in much qualitative research but it is not exclusive to it. Many scientists will acknowledge that their research may

be influenced by the lens they used. However, what makes it distinctive in much qualitative research is the ontological positioning derived from this. The qualitative researcher is seen as a self-conscious author and as such *part* of the data. Revealing and drawing on this data requires researcher reflexivity. In my experience, reflexivity is often understood to be a synonym for reflection but it has a distinctive meaning that is tied in with a rejection of the objective/subjective binary that informs some research stances.

### **Reflexivity**

Whatever 'ism' they side with, many contemporary qualitative researchers accept that their endeavours are perspectival. Nothing comes from nowhere. This acceptance repositions the researcher from objective truth-finding actor to a self-conscious, theoretically and emotionally invested one. Acknowledging perspective is not the same as acknowledging bias though this erroneous equation is quite common. Thus it is not about producing a confessional posture as if the self were some kind of virus which contaminates the research. Rather it is about situating the researcher and the research.

Davies (1994: 4) defines reflexivity as a 'turning back on oneself, a process of self reference'. Typical reflexive questions might be: What perspective am I bringing to the inquiry? What insights does it afford? What alternative lens might be useful? What were the limits and scope of my inquiry? how was I positioned? The idea of addressing these kind of questions is to offer an alternative to a posture of objectivity. here is an extract from one writer's (Watt, 2007: 88) reflexive account to illustrate:

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...as a researcher you have your own expertise/perspectives. It is my research.

This last comment, 'it is my research' is important; among other things, this declaration of ownership involves speaking in the first person. We are returned to the question of method talk and its effects. A characteristic of the scientific tradition is to write up research in the third person; this can serve to confer an objective air to the report. Foley (1998: 110) elaborates:

To evoke an authoritative voice, the author must speak in the third person and be physically, psychologically, and ideologically absent from the text. That lends the text an aura of omniscience. The all-knowing interpretive voice speaks from a distant, privileged vantage point in a detached, measured tone.

This is quite a hard judgement since there are many ways of engaging with the reader as a peer and of offering a tentative report even in the third person. But there is also some truth to the point that use of the third person encourages scientific realism to inflate the science. Shanks (2002: 11) suggests that if you want illustration that we are talking about a language move here, compare the following two assertions: ‘these effects were observed’ with ‘I observed these effects’. In the first, the agency of the researcher is concealed; in the second, it is owned. This question of signature is sometimes thought to be reducible to that of stylistic choice; this neglects some profound issues about how we represent our inquiries. As textual artefacts research reports are representations of our sense making of reality. It is these representations that can be peppered with method talk which includes editing out the self. The deployment of a particular vocabulary and mode of representation re-presents what we have done and seen. It is something other than the experience to which it refers (Schostack, 2006) because the textual account will have its own life as a scripted artefact. My observation of a teacher is not the same as my account of the observation. We can be more truthful about this fictive dimension by bringing our scripting self into the account.

In my experience, for those seeking to break into a new research genre without really shifting methodological position, using the first person feels like a leap into a normless paradigm. They might take the message that scientific criteria and writing conventions do not fit the purpose of qualitative research but translate this as a licence to conduct qualitative research in a state of ‘careless rapture’ (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 11). In this case, the notion of interpretivism is stretched to accommodate any kind of personal interpretation as trustworthy regardless of the quality of its empirical and intellectual base. If the third person confers an air of detachment, use of the first person can feel like the abandonment of quality checks of any kind. What might need to be made explicit for those who are uncomfortable with what they see as an unnecessary subjective posture, is the role of interpretation in any research.

## **Interpretation**

All research, whatever its framework and purpose involves some degree of interpretation of course. Although much qualitative research is described as ‘interpretivist’ this should not be taken as a counterpoint to other forms of research. In the quantitative tradition interpretation includes questions of appropriate sample, pertinent variables, fitness and order of questions. Quantitative and experimental methods require an intelligent interpretation of meaningful population classifications and of the hypothesised associations or causal links it seeks to probe. It is impossible to arrive at design and implementation decisions without some form of interpretation. Quite simply, any research design involves a process of selection and omission or erasure. It is true, of course, that interpretation works differently in hypothesis led research than it does in inductive models. In the former, the interpretive effort concerns testing and measurement while in the latter, it is directed towards explanations in less orderly or ordered data.

In his essay on blurred genres Geertz (1980) has argued that that the interpretive turn in qualitative social science requires a movement towards literary genres accordingly. He predicted a gradual strengthening of this movement; this has not quite arrived in the mainstream of social science. Researchers have clung tenaciously to scientific realist styles, not least because many journals demand it. Geertz’ point was that these styles do not fit the purpose of qualitative inquiry.

## **Trenches and Wells**

By drawing attention to the place of interpretation for all research, I do not want to overstate the case of common ground across traditions. There are questions of purpose, scale, depth and setting which need to be appreciated in making sense of the differences. The point of a qualitative approach is to get at layers of meaning and explanation that are unlikely to be secured through broad sweep instruments such as surveys. As we know, such instruments work well where respondents are asked straightforward questions (e.g., which fruit yoghurt do you prefer?) but we know this is less so when the respondents will need to reflect more deeply (e.g., what did you learn about food from your family?).

Qualitative inquiries into what might inform human interactions are also hard to explore in controlled settings. As naturalistic inquiry, of course, the qualitative researcher needs to explore what is going on *where* it is going on. This often means building a close rapport with

respondents by staying close to the field in which they operate. This closeness is about producing depth of analysis from well-chosen instances of the phenomenon under study. Yet many qualitative researchers remain defensive about the number of instances they involve in their inquiry. Size matters in both quantitative and qualitative research but in different ways.

It is generally accepted that qualitative researchers aspire to generate *understandings and insights* from an inquiry that comes from depth rather than breadth. But the question of depth needs unpacking. A smaller sample does not mean less validity. It very much depends on the quality of the sample and its ability to provide rich access. Sample size in qualitative research is not about representativeness, it is about creating a sufficient and plausible basis for exploring the meanings people bring to a particular experience/phenomenon. Put differently, sample size in qualitative research is about the construction of an adequate, natural 'laboratory' for in depth investigation, not the exhaustion of a range of experiences. It is on this basis that generalisation is handled differently.

I sometimes ask colleagues to imagine a long and shallow trench and a deep well respectively: the point I make is that the actual volume is similar in each container but it is distributed differently. Translated into research approaches, one method offers a broad sweep view, the other in depth case-based studies. These approaches are not strict opposites in relation to quantitative intelligence. Qualitative researchers often look for patterns and frequencies, be this within a particular case study or interview or across a sample. The concepts of theoretical sample and of saturation in qualitative research is quantitative; and content analysis is strongly so. These analytical moves do not involve sophisticated statistical manipulation of course but depth does not exclude forms of quantification at a basic level. Nor does breadth exclude attention to the singular, the aberrant, the abnormal or the particular. Indeed some scientific breakthroughs are made through observation of a case that stands out as different. This is less acknowledged than it could be. Stake (2010: 12) argues that scientific inquiry has always been an admixture of quantitative and qualitative. He takes Galileo as a case in point:

Galileo's experimentalism did not involve a large sample of trials of objects falling from a wide range of randomly selected heights under varying wind conditions.

In Midgley's view, much more needs to be said about the refusal of science to see its connectivities with other modes of inquiry.



### **The Science of the Singular**

Mary Midgely (2001: 21, 22) argues that the ‘omnicompetent’ claims of scientists turns them into ‘one eyed specialists’ who are unable to see their connectivity to the humanities. Arguably all cultures of inquiry are one-eyed and need to be aware of this. In the case of science, Midgely argues that limited vision leads to a failure to value the imagination as a cognitive tool and a field of inquiry; an empiricist research approach pays no attention to the ways in which we use our imagination to synthesise complex issues; she gives examples of how that can be in poetic form. She also calls attention to the link between visions and scientific idea generation. Visions provided by philosophers, novelists or poets, argues Midgely, expand and shape our thinking. There is also the matter of philosophical questioning.

For instance science is indebted to the philosophical critique of theocracy for its repudiation of a settled God given world for a universe of puzzles to be solved through human inquiry. Enter the scientific imagination with its yearning for a different kind of certainty (based on evidence, testing and reason). Scientists profited from the space carved out by philosophers but its immodest separatism has repressed its indebtedness to them. Midgely (2001: 1) worries about the scientific impulse to ‘[E]xtend the impersonal, reductive, atomistic methods that are appropriate to physical science into social and psychological inquiries where they work badly’.

This worry is not dissimilar to Law’s though we should not be encouraged to devalue scientific method as a means by which to value other methods. Lamenting the ‘academic apartheid’ produced out of separated – and sometimes warring – cultures of inquiry Midgely (2001: 57) writes that a single vision from one disciplinary tradition is never adequate. We need the insights from them all. One source of reluctance from scientists to look beyond their nose comes from a fierce defence of detachment and rational thought as the superior characteristics of their trade; this comes with a neglect of the fact that the emotions and the body cannot be left outside the doors of the laboratory. This is a neglect that connects to the question of authorial voice above discussed. Scientists, Midgely argues, may consume the affective dimensions within the humanities as part of their down time but they shrink from integrating them into their work. Yet, she suggests, whether we acknowledge it or not, we draw on insights from them. We can frame this suggestion through a return to the metaphor of the well.

Helen Simons' (1996) edited book 'a science of the singular' on case study research defends the need for us to generate insights about something by going deep rather than wide. To quote Stake again, 'good qualitative research is about taking a particular case and coming to know it well' (1995: 8). Many of us have split off our acceptance of this need 'to come to know a case well' within the humanities from a defence of it in the social sciences. Thus, we accept that, for example, Hamlet has something to say about human behaviour. Theatregoers do not typically pour out of the theatre complaining that Shakespeare cannot conclude anything about revenge and treachery on the basis of one case study; no-one queries why he did not interview a large sample of Scandinavian princes, or complains that Hamlet was not representative of princes because he was a particularly troubled one. Hamlet is a 'well'. People accept that Shakespeare's dissection of one case can help us to make what Stake (Stake, 1995, 85) has called 'naturalistic generalisations':

People can learn much that is general from single cases. They do that partly because they are familiar with other cases and they add this one to this, making a slightly new group from which to generalise, a new opportunity to modify old generalisations.

I am not suggesting that a work of fiction is the same as qualitative research. Plausibility and evidence are handled differently. Fiction can take off with a 'what if' fantasy in order to elaborate on possible consequences and it is not obliged to offer evidence to support its story. That said, fictitious works are often research-informed and often their places and characters are based on the experience and observation of the writer. Writers tell each other to write about what they know. This is important to appreciate. No serious work of fiction simply comes from the head or heart of the author alone. All serious writers are also serious readers; they write from the scholarly base of other writers. They do not reference these writers but their work is as inter-textual as are research reports. Moreover, there are many non-fiction studies which are elaborated in fictive forms.

Compare for, instance the following two extracts:

Upon entrance (into an institution) he (inmate) begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified (Goffman, 1991: 125).

And:

“You men are in hospital”, she would say like she was repeating it for the hundredth time, “because of your proven inability to adjust to society, the doctor and I believe that every minute spent in the company of others...is therapeutic while every minute spent brooding alone increases your separation” (Kesey, 1973: 130).

The first is an ethnographic study of an asylum by the sociologist, Erving Goffman (1991). Here Goffman is proposing that the self is stripped of sovereignty through the demands and processes of institutionalisation. The second is from Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1973). The fictitious nurse in charge is defending to the inmates of a mental institution her decision to forbid any form of freedom of movement; their right to sovereignty of self, she repeatedly tells them has been forfeited by their social maladjustment.

Both texts enlighten the reader, offering a lens onto life in the asylum; both authors worked in the field as orderlies in mental asylums (as they were called) to research their subject. Both authors are accomplished wordsmiths, able to offer compelling accounts of their observations and subjects. You could say that they have both produced a science of the singular, each based on participant observation of a ‘well’ and arguably through forms of thick description.

### **Thick Description**

In his famous discussion of thick description in *The Interpretation of Culture* Clifford Geertz (1973), drawing on the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle, points out that the mere observation of a person winking cannot tell you whether it is a physical reflex or a form of communication; and if the latter, its symbolic meaning in a given cultural context is unlikely to be self-evident and even if we know of this meaning how can we be sure it is not just a satirical subversion of it? Thus we have to avoid the thin description of behaviourism which observes that a wink has taken place within an observable stimulus-response frame. Rather, we need to get at what distinguishes twitches from communication rich winks and these latter winks from mimicked ones. We can only do this by getting close to the meaning-making activities of human beings, by ‘sorting out the structures of signification’ (Geertz, 1973). Put another way, often, we need to explore what symbolic interactionists helpfully call ‘the interactive order’ to discover who is allowed/prompted to wink at whom, when and where? A qualitative inquiry towards thick description would ask questions like: What are the rituals and dynamics between winkors and winkees? Where is the power? What structures sustain

the rituals of winking? What are the sanctions for not winking or for doing so in the wrong place?

Here is Denzin's summary (1998: 83 in Ponterotto, 2006). Note its affinities with Law's depiction of 'mess' above:

Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard.

'Thick description' is a term which is often used though claims to having produced it are sometimes rather thinly evidenced (Ponterotto, 1996). Evidencing thick description is not about the size of data display or the amount of description provided from it. Thick description, as Gary Shank reminds us (2009: 129) is not simply 'voluminous description'; 'the task of thick description' explains Shank, 'is to make meaning clear'. Thick description, then, is a misleading term because it must be both depictive and analytical, both empirical and intellectual.

It is important to bear in mind that thick description is not wholly data derived – to generate thick description you have to enter the research stage with what Blumer (1954 ) called 'sensitising concepts'. These are provisional ideas and concepts that help with the sense-making process of inquiry. Data and theory should be always dynamically linked in qualitative inquiry. You could say perhaps, that thick description is the outcome of thinking *with* data. It comes from a reflexive interplay between the intellectual and the empirical. For all their painstaking efforts to describe the techniques of grounded theory, ultimately, two of its exponents, Glaser and Strauss, (1967: 251) propose that 'the root source of all significant theorizing is the sensitive insights of the observer himself'. This can get overlooked in an empiricist clamour for 'evidence-based practice'. Acknowledged or not every culture of inquiry brings in the wealth of experience, scholarship and cultural consumption we bring to bear on our endeavours, fictional or not, qualitative or quantitative. It is this combination of personal and formal knowledge which allows for depth of analysis, whatever the method.

## **Conclusion**

Some of what I have said will be obvious to the experienced researcher but my intention has been to structure a defence of qualitative inquiry based on conversations I have had with

colleagues who are unclear of its value. I have tried to show how such a defence can be made by drawing closer to other cultures of inquiry and by defeating method talk. I have offered the metaphors of a trench and a well in an attempt to explain breadth and depth as some kind of equivalence. I have also drawn attention to the place of numbers and interpretation in both qualitative and quantitative research. Finally, I have argued that qualitative studies have affinities with the humanities as a science of the singular for which forms of thick description. There is much I have left out, such as subject variation within the humanities, but I hope I have offered enough to prompt debate about how best to secure a commitment to qualitative education research from teachers who have yet to be convinced of its value.\

### **Bionote**

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