

A Story

The major way in which a qualitative inquirer keeps track of what she or he is seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, learning, and so on is through regular creation of field notes. Therefore, high quality field notes are an important key to successful qualitative studies. The readings and activities described in this chapter will help you learn to take good field notes. Inquirers keep their own unique kinds of records of their experiences, the information they gather, and their thoughts. Each person needs to feel his/her way, a personalized system that is comfortable and useful. I will share my way; but know that many ways are possible.

As a visitor from the university to the high school (See [Appendix A.1](#)), I was free to take extensive notes during the class on a laptop computer. I also tape recorded and video taped sessions for later analysis. I had much more flexibility than Sid and Cheryl for keeping notes; though they also kept some records in journals, as did the student teachers and the students.

In addition to their journals, the teachers kept files of reading materials, class activities, some of the better student products, and an extensive slide library. They also memorized certain moments for future use. They tried to remember the feelings, sights, smells, sounds, and other details associated with particularly memorable experiences so they could relate them to other students and relive the experiences themselves. Cheryl talks of these moments as her celebrations.

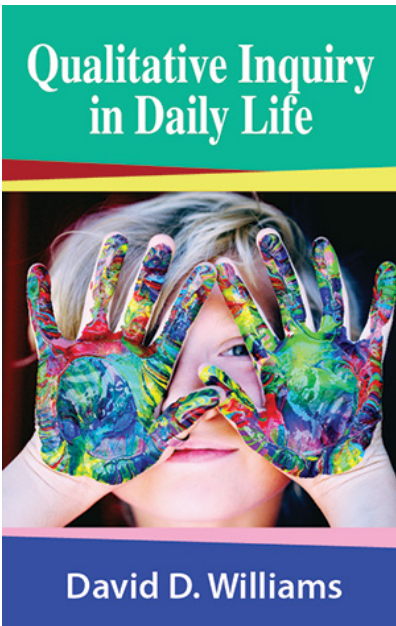
About the second year I was doing my study with them, Sid and Cheryl decided to take more extensive notes themselves and they invited their students to expand the one page journal entries they had been taking after various activities into ROCs or 'Records of Celebrations' to include details about what they were seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking. They have continued this process in subsequent years, of taking notes and requesting students to do the same. As indicated in Appendix A, the student teachers have also kept field notes as an integral part of their experience each year.

Although it was difficult for teachers to continue writing as much after they left their student teaching internships, several were able to take a few notes after hours on school computers, tape record their comments while driving home, video tape their classes and take notes while watching the video tapes after school, or write about their experiences in letters to friends and family. They shared these tapes, notes, and letters with me on a regular basis and I wrote responses and questions in reaction. One of these teachers noted that just being able to talk to someone who had read about her experiences and concerns helped her sort out many of the issues that she was not able to voice or probably would not have taken the time to think about otherwise.

Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life

Several examples of field notes student teachers, a cooperating teacher, and I wrote are presented in Appendix A. The story in Chapter One came almost directly from my field notes as well. Other examples will be presented throughout this book to illustrate various points. I want you to see that there are many different ways to keep records of inquiry activities and that keeping a record is an integral part of doing the other inquiry activities such as developing relationships, asking questions, narrowing a focus, analyzing and synthesizing, collecting information, and sharing what one learns with others.

Keeping a journal or field notes may seem overwhelming to some educators. Meeting 200 to 300 students a day in the upper grades and just keeping up with 20-40 children all day in the lower grades seems like a big enough challenge for most people. When would they ever find time to keep notes on the experience? Yet I and several other teachers and administrators have found that keeping such a record brings rewards that make the extra work more than worth the effort. The story written by Marné Isakson about how valuable journal keeping has been for her is presented in [Appendix B.1](#) to illustrate these points. Please read her account before continuing on with the analysis and discussion in the rest of this chapter.



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