

# An Analysis of Assumptions

What key points can be drawn from the story of this research project? The participants in the story demonstrated many of the assumptions someone wanting to use naturalistic inquiry ought to consider. Some of these will be discussed but many more are viable.

But here are some of the assumptions participants in this study were making and you might think about regarding yourself and your own inquiries:

1. Good teaching involves many of the same skills as good inquiry. Some of these skills include asking questions of our experience, being perplexed about events we participate in, being interested in the views of others and working skillfully to tap those views sensitively, attending to others with our ears, eyes, and other senses, thinking about our experiences in new ways, relating our experiences to other events and thoughts from other contexts to see what insights those relations bring to us, being fully awake to what is going on around us, and on and on. Other similarities were identified in Chapter One.
2. Naturalistic inquiry by educators involves participation in the education activities, while observing, questioning, thinking. It is possible to participate in some teaching activities without really thinking about what is going on; but when teachers are looking for better ways, putting their own ideas on trial, looking for feedback on their projects, and putting students' interests at the top of their priority list, they are doing the same thing participant observers do in sociology or what ethnographers do in anthropology. They are immersed in the culture of the school while trying to understand it from several points of view.
3. The focus of these participants was on meaning' what did the experiences students and educators were having in Unified Studies mean to those participants? What values did they associate with those experiences? What implications did their experiences have for their continuing lives? Interpretation of lived experience and the clarification of meaning are central goals of qualitative inquiry.
4. The records presented in this chapter of the participants' experiences were essentially descriptive and exploratory. They represented attempts by the writers to discover what was happening to them in this interesting setting and to entertain a variety of interpretations of those happenings. Qualitative inquiry is more focused on discovery and exploration than on confirmation and testing of conclusions. The focus shifts too, as the discovery proceeds; it is not centered concretely on issues decided in advance.
5. The focus of these participants' inquiries was more on interactions, complex settings, and processes than on isolation of 'critical variables,' testing of products, or summaries of the bottom line. Qualitative inquiry is most often used in this way too.
6. The participants in this story appear to agree with five axioms set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as central to naturalistic inquiry:
  - a. Regarding the nature of reality, the naturalistic paradigm holds that realities are

multiple, constructed, and holistic rather than single, tangible, and fragmentable.

- b. Regarding the relationship of the inquirer and the thing being inquired into, the naturalistic paradigm holds that the knower and the known are interactive, inseparable rather than independent, a dualism.
- c. Regarding the possibility of generalization from a study, the naturalistic paradigm holds that only time and context-bound working hypotheses are possible rather than time- and context-free generalizations.
- d. Regarding the possibility of establishing causal linkages through research studies, the naturalistic paradigm holds that all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects, rather than claiming that there are real causes, temporally precedent to or simultaneous with their effects.
- e. Regarding the role of values in inquiry, the naturalistic paradigm holds that inquiry is value-bound and not value-free (p. 37).

By way of illustration, the story told earlier in Appendix A described the Unified Studies program from several different points of view' mine, a teacher's, and several student teachers'. Although there was considerable overlap, it was clear that each of us was constructing a view of reality and that we accepted the fact that each person could see some things in very unique ways and that the whole of our interpretations was of more importance and value than to find one 'true' definition of everyone's experience.

The discussion of Parker Palmer's views regarding the relationship of the knower and the known illustrated our acceptance of the second axiom. Teachers cannot really understand their students until they are willing to share themselves with those students. I learned much more about Unified and about the teachers and other participants there as I shared my views and concerns with them. A qualitative educator-inquirer cannot remain aloof and antiseptic. One must get into the experience full-heartedly to gain the most from it. And we must be willing to change based on what we learn during our inquiry.

Although you who are teachers may resonate to the stories that have been told in this book, you must be the judges as to whether the claims I am making apply to your situations or not. You must take your contexts into account. The statements Cheryl made about her experiences with Unified were time and context bound statements. But shared contexts assure applicability to other times and places if you want to make that transfer. That is the invitation offered by qualitative inquirers as they share their experiences and thoughts with others.

Cheryl's journal entries illustrate vividly that her teaching efforts were as influenced by the students and Sid and the environment she was working in as these people and objects were influenced by her teaching. This is an example of mutual simultaneous shaping. Naturalistic inquirers decline to isolate single causes and effects because there is so much going on that everything is influencing everything else in some way.

Finally, a basic claim of this chapter is that the assumptions we make as educators about inquiry and our place in the world have tremendous impact on what we do here. This is an open acknowledgement that our values are central to all we are and do and that our inquiry is tied intricately with those values. Levinas' focus on the ethical as undergirding the methodological, or even the metaphysical, is a reminder that the use of qualitative inquiry methods and the naturalistic paradigm are subsidiary to our values and beliefs about the importance of the other people in the world with whom we share our inquiries through teaching and other forms of sharing.

The participants in this story illustrate the point that naturalistic teacher-inquirers use natural settings (their classrooms and field trips) as the principal sources of information; they collect the information directly through their own natural senses (seeing, hearing, and experiencing personally, etc.). This is a very appropriate means of investigation for educators who are in ideal positions to conduct naturalistic inquiry as part of their normal work.



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