

# Appendix B.1 - Allowing Space for Not-Knowing: What My Journal Teaches Me, Part 1

## Accepting the Challenge

Marné Isakson

One day in the fall of 1985 I was pumping a colleague for answers to questions about my teaching. She stopped me and said, in essence, “Marné, you are the one who has to make sense of what is going on in your classroom. Write what you see happening.” Some suggestions she gave were: “Be as specific and precise as you can. Look back at those observations and reflect on what you are learning. Think about what the events mean for instruction” (Marjorie Siegel, personal communication, September 21, 1985). I took her advice and thus began my odyssey as a kid watcher. For five years I kept teaching journals.

During the last two years I did not keep a journal because journal writing was time consuming. Instead I experimented with alternative ways to record kid-watching. I have not been as pleased with the results. Though I found ways to record observations, mainly on seating charts, the reflection part of the journal process had no counterpart. I missed the journal keeping very much and began to ponder the effects of writing upon my teaching practice.

I decided to take a thorough look at my journals to determine why they were so valuable to me and why they seemed to be such a strong force in my evolution as a teacher.

In this article I share the results of an in-depth analysis of ten pages from two journals written five years apart, a 1985 journal and my 1989 journal. My initial plan was to contrast the two journals to see how I had changed as a teacher. I was surprised to discover how strongly my current theories of teaching were in evidence in my actions as early as 1985. A main difference between the two journals is my improved ability to record observed events. Another difference is that some of the questions I asked in 1985 had answers by 1989. For example, in a journal entry written in 1985 I had asked myself if it would be all right to allow Tom to tell Marty something about his book during Sustained Silent Reading. My response to reading this entry in 1992 was:

**TN** (*Theoretical Note*) **85F2-p6-9/26a** (year [1985], semester [Fall], period [2nd], page [page 6], date [September 26], section of page [a=top quarter of page])

## Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life

*Of course it is okay! I see that I was wondering about breaking “the rules” for SSR that the reading time be individual, uninterrupted, and sustained. But I was also seeing the support of community and the natural bent to share something interesting. I certainly should not discourage such interaction. On the other hand to verbally “encourage” it might kill it also. An overzealous, over-enthused teacher is not what these kids need. They need to see the sharing as their discovery not as “doing what the teacher wants.” Just let it happen naturally.*

As I revisited the two journals, I saw that I am still struggling with many of the same frustrations and seemingly unanswerable questions I was then. So maybe all the work of taking notes has been for nothing? I want to stamp my foot and say “Certainly not!” I decided to go exploring using methods of naturalistic inquiry (Williams, 1992) to see what meanings would surface without imposing a focus at the outset. This article shows this journey.

## Methodology

The basic method I followed was to make fieldnotes while reading the journals and then to analyze those fieldnotes in four different ways: domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, componential analysis, and theme synthesis (Spradley, 1980). I describe each process below.

### Fieldnotes

In Table I is a sample of fieldnotes I made about a journal entry from page 3 of the 1989 journal. Below is a list of the codes used:

Actual Entry: **AE** italicized

Paraphrase: **PP**

My reflections: **PN** Personal Notes are those notes which explained the situation as I remembered it, providing more background to it, or giving my feelings and reactions to the events then or now.

My reflections: **TN** Theoretical Notes attempt to explain why I did what I did, guess the reasons behind my actions and those of my students, try to provide theoretical perspective on the incidents, and otherwise reflect on the meaning of those happenings.

My reflections: **MN** Methodological Notes are where I talked to myself about what I was doing, the inquiry process I was going through, and the resulting products. Methodological Notes became part of my “audit trail” which serves as a record for review by others in establishing the quality of this study.

In the sample in Table I and in all examples given throughout this paper, ONLY

## Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life

the Actual Entry is from my journal. All the other fieldnotes have been made recently to make sense of the entry.

How did I go about making fieldnotes? I started to copy an entry from my handwritten journal onto the word processor. When something occurred to me that I wanted to say about that part of the entry, I summarized that part (PP), and wrote my thoughts about it, labeling these reflections as mentioned above either as PN, TN, or MN. I continued copying from the journal and trying to react fully to what I had seen in the entry. Some of these reflective notes were very short while others were a page or more; the personal notes and theoretical notes sometimes became quite long as I grappled with the meaning I was making of the journal entry.

### Table I

#### *Sample Fieldnotes*

**AE - (89F2-p3d-8/22)** *Carolyn came early to class to tell me she had already finished her first book. "I read 90 minutes last night." She told me about questions she had as she read: "Why did it have that title Three Mile House?" She told about how she figured out the answer. "The author told where four miles was on his jogging route and later that the house was about a mile closer than that." In other words, she had made an inference. She also told about sticking with the book until it was finished.*

**PP** - Carolyn came in early to tell about her reading experience the night before and to tell some of the thinking she did as she read. She had completed the book in one night.

**PN** - She had read a high interest, low vocabulary, short book of 60 pages by Bestseller, a publisher of books for struggling adolescent readers.

**TN** - She wanted to celebrate this accomplishment. She was not only pleased with having read an entire book in one evening but especially in being aware of how she figured things out. Other seniors and other peers may have thought this no big deal, but it obviously was for her and she "needed" to share it. It is important that teachers support these little celebrations. She is coming to value herself as an active, thinking reader. I wonder if she came to the class determined to make sense and to progress, after all this might be her last chance for instruction because she was a senior or was there something about the first day's activities and climate that made her decide to jump in with both feet and take on the challenge of reading. Another remarkable thing about this event is that she did it on the second day of class! Had I so soon built a trusting relationship or was she trying to brown nose me? Either way I think this was a remarkable risk on her part.

**PN** - The year showed Carolyn to be a reader who could become completely involved in what she was reading. She earned all A's in my class. Why had she struggled so much with reading in her previous high school classes? She proved to be a determined meaning maker in mine.

*Note.* **AE** = Actual Entry is italicized. **(89F2-p3d-8/22)** = identifying information (year,

## Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life

semester and class period—page and which quarter of the page—date) e.g., 1989, Fall semester, 2<sup>nd</sup> period, page 3d on the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of that page (*a,b,c,d* designate the quarter of the page where targeted information is found), August 22<sup>nd</sup>. **PP** = Paraphrase. **PN** = Personal Notes. **TN** = Theoretical Notes.

For the purposes of the present study, which was to experience the processes of naturalistic inquiry, I limited myself to five hours of fieldnote making for each journal. This resulted in covering six pages of the 1985 journal and four pages of the 1989 journal. I quantified some contrasts of the two journals by tabulating such things as numbers of long entries and numbers of pages filled for the fall semester of the two years.

### Domain Analysis

Domain analysis (Spradley, 1980) was the first analysis I did. This procedure involves looking for items in the fieldnotes which fit within a particular semantic relationship. I started with Spradley's relationship of "Strict Inclusion" (p. 93), i.e., something that is a kind of something else (X is a kind of Y). I noticed in the first entry in 1985 how vague the descriptions of the events were. So my first domain became "X is a kind of vague description." I listed about six included terms (the X's), such as "good discussion," "smooth day," and "they." I again looked at Spradley's list of relationships and realized that the included terms were more "examples" than "kinds of" vague descriptions, so I changed the heading for the semantic relationship to Examples (X is an example of Y).

I had Spradley's list of semantic relationships in front of me as I read through the fieldnotes. From five of those relationships fifteen domains surfaced for me. See Table II below.

Table II

#### *Sample Semantic Relationships used in Domain Analysis*

Domain	Relationship
<b>Attribution</b>	<b>1X</b> is an attribute of my role as a teacher of reading. <b>2X</b> is an attribute of my theory of teaching reading made manifest.
<b>Strict Inclusion</b>	<b>3X</b> is a kind of participant written about in the journal.
<b>Actions</b>	<b>4X</b> is a way to collaborate.

## Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life

	5X is an example of something I wish I'd done at the time
	6X is an example of a question I asked in the journal
	7X is an example of a contrived task
	8X is an example of an observed classroom event
<b>Examples</b>	9X is an example of my taking cues from the student(s)
	10X is an example of impassioned reflection
	11X is an example of something I'd like to consider doing again
	12X is an example of a vague description
	13X is an example of an anomaly--something that I can't figure
	14X is an example of an instructional decision
<b>Functions</b>	15X is a use of the journal for me

Some of the domains no longer interested me, so I stopped looking for their included terms, i.e., X is an example of a vague description.

After I had combed all the fieldnotes looking for included terms for the semantic relationships I had chosen, I felt ready to select a focus. I based the decision on two criteria: the domain intrigued me, and it seemed to have a substantial number of included terms. Four domains emerged. I reformulated these into questions:

1. What is my role as a teacher of reading? (from **1x** in Table II above)
2. Which student acts captured my interest enough that I recorded them? (from **3x**)
3. What examples are there that I'm taking my cues from the students for what I do in the classroom? (from **9x**)
4. What are the uses of the journal for me? (from **15x**)

I went back to the original journal entries to do focused observations looking for more included terms for these four domains. I rephrased some included terms into more general statements. For example, instead of "Matt dissented but when he found out he could work on his own, he decided to join the forces" I put the following into the domain of my-role-as-teacher-of-reading: "let students vote but don't force consensus; let dissenters go their own way." I also put this same Matt-event into the domain of student-acts-which-captured-my-interest: "Students who don't want to accept the class-voted decision." I was surprised how many more included terms I found by the time I had completed the second domain analysis.

I now needed to limit my study further and I stewed over which domain to choose for further analysis. I finally selected "The Uses of the Journal for Me" because of several reasons: what I saw surfacing through the domain analysis fascinated me; it had one of the smaller lists of included terms and so seemed more manageable in light of time constraints of the current project; and I am wanting to promote teachers as researchers and thought that such analyses might provide some insights for me to share with colleagues.

With this focus, which by the way came five weeks into the study, I went back to the

## Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life

journals for “focused observations” (Spradley, 1980) searching for more included terms. The list expanded to 31 included terms.

### Taxonomic Analysis

To perform a taxonomic analysis, I took each of the 31 included terms and placed it into a group of similar terms. I worked through this process until I felt comfortable with the arrangement. The terms within each group were further sorted into sets and subsets. I then asked the superordinate question “What is ‘The Uses of my Journal’ a subset of?” I continued to ask that question of each answer until I stopped with “Making the world a better place.” The resulting taxonomy is shown in Table IV.

### Componential Analysis

Componential analysis (Spradley, 1980) helped reveal contrasts among the terms of the taxonomy and showed the unique attributes of each of the categories. An performing componential analysis, I went through five steps:

Step 1: I selected two terms in the taxonomy and asked the dyadic contrast question, “How are these two terms in the taxonomy different?” For example, “How is ‘confronting my fears’ (3.2.1) different from ‘justifying my actions or concerns’(3.2.2)?” In this particular case, three answers came to mind:

1. I placehold my fears at a conscious level, in writing, so I can force myself to deal with them vs. I justify something I did and then am done with it (I know what I did and why, fine; tuck it away and move on). The first is a **demand for action** where the latter is more of a **validation to myself**. I labeled these dimensions of contrasts as *Placehold for Reflection* and *End Thoughts*.
2. Whereas the first is written **to cause change** (“Deal with this fear, Marne!”), the second is written so I can remember the situation in order **to repeat the process** if a similar circumstance should arise (“This is what you did, and this is why you did it. Learn from this experience and let it impact future practice subconsciously.”) I labeled these dimensions of contrast as *Understand to Cause Change* and *Understand so It Can Be Repeated*.
3. The fears are **forward-looking** because I must deal with them now, tomorrow, or soon; the justification is primarily **backward-looking** because I am reflecting on events in the past and pondering why I did what I did. I labeled these contrasts *forward-looking* and *backward-looking*.  
By asking this contrast question of several terms on the taxonomy, I derived six dimensions of contrast.

Step 2: I set up a matrix to see what would be revealed about each term on the taxonomy if I thought about it with each contrast dimension. The six dimensions of contrast were placed across the top of the matrix. Down the left side of the matrix I listed the terms of the taxonomy. See Table IV.

## Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life

1. I proceeded systematically through the taxonomy, deciding how each term fit with the dimensions of contrast. For example, I looked at 1.2.1 "Focus on the anomalies" and asked: Is this more *placeholder for reflection* or *end thoughts*?, more *understand to cause change* or *understand so can be repeated*?, and more *forward-looking* or *backward-looking*? I put the answers on the matrix.
2. When I had finished, I noticed that sixteen of the twenty-eight terms in the taxonomy had the same configuration of contrasts along the entire row as did one other term. This fascinated me. How could they look the same when they were so different? For example, the uses of the journal 1.3 "pull out buried assumptions and verbalize underlying theory" and 4.2 "react to my participation as a language user" showed identical dimensions of contrast. I solved this by asking the dyadic contrast question again for each of the terms having a matching configuration. The answers revealed five new dimensions of contrast. In this case, the dyadic question "How are these two uses of the journal different?" evoked these new dimensions: *discovered while writing* vs. *discovered later*; *outgrowth of the situation* vs. *student initiated*; *overall* vs. *specific*.
3. I added these new dimensions to the matrix and did the analysis again for all terms on the taxonomy. Table V has the completed matrix showing results of componential analysis. By the way, I was curious about the meaning of the name of this analysis and searched Spradley (1980) for an explanation. "Components of meaning are discovered by a systematic search for attributes associated with the categories" (p.130). This now made sense. Componential analysis is indeed a way to see various components of meaning or attributes for each of the terms in the taxonomy.

## Theme Synthesis

The value of finding themes is based on the assumption that "every culture, and every cultural scene, is more than a jumble of parts....[consisting] of a system of meaning that is integrated into some kind of larger pattern" (Spradley, 1980, p.132). Themes are not found physically, actually, in the fieldnotes. I could not read the notes and underline or point to the themes. Themes are a synthesis of all the meaning made from the fieldnotes and their analyses. For some people the themes "jump out." For me, discovering these themes was not an easy task, certainly not as straightforward as performing the three earlier analyses. I approached the finding of themes in the following ways:

1. I concentrated on the meaning and uses of journal writing for me and tried to come up with some themes. It helped to ask, "What are the major principles underlying the uses I made of journals in my teaching" and "What are the larger patterns at work here?" Eight ideas came to mind.
2. I did not feel as if I had found the overriding themes yet, so I did a componential analysis of the cover terms of all fifteen of the original domains. Refer to Table II. From the resulting dimensions of contrast, I discovered eight additional themes.
3. I was intrigued with the results of the above process and decided to go further by looking at the dimensions of contrast shown in Table V. I looked at the list of contrast

## **Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life**

statements from a more global perspective than I had before to see if any themes could emerge. Five did.

4. I tried to put into words the essential principle that surfaced from the above three procedures. I boiled the many themes down to one, the core of what my journal signified for me. I decided upon a statement that was the overriding theme of the present study.

The results of initial theme synthesis is in Appendix D.

### **Some Other Aspects of Methodology**

While doing this study I kept a detailed audit trail in which I recorded methodological decisions, confusions, sources I went to for help, dates, and time involved. (See Appendix A.)

All the parts of the journals and all the other journals which were not analyzed have been kept for referential adequacy checks, so in future analyses, I can see if my conclusions hold for the other journals as well.

Some peer debriefing was done when I spoke to colleagues about what I was doing and asked for their points of view. It was valuable for me to talk through what I was seeing and to have them ask me questions and make comments for me to consider.

A complete analysis of procedures used to establish the trustworthiness of this study (credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability) are found in Appendix E.

### **Portrayal of the Researcher**

This portrayal does not quite belong in the methods section because it is about the person being studied, yet neither does it belong in the results section because it is about the person doing the study. The research not only looks at my teaching journals but I am the one who is looking at the journals. For this reason, a special section has been created. This unique condition of data maker being data-gatherer is strong reason for the reader knowing who I am in order to put what I say into perspective.

I have taught English, reading, or both since 1968 in junior high schools, an elementary school, private practice, a university, a community college, and now a high school. I have presented inservice courses on reading, thinking, and writing and have done some writing for professional journals. I have a B.A. in English, a MSED in educational research, and am working on a Ph.D. in Literacy Education. All along I have sought out professional supportive communities by attending inservice and professional conferences, being active in professional organizations, reading professional literature, and finding colleagues to talk to.

My life outside of school is full also. I belong to an active and loving family. My husband is a counseling psychologist. We have two daughters and two sons. We have lived in the East, the Midwest, and now the Intermountain West. I am active in my church, usually in a



## Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life

teaching capacity. My favorite leisure-time activities include jogging, walking, swimming, biking, hiking, going fishing but not fishing, writing poetry, visiting relatives and friends, canning, and reading biographies and young adult literature.

From being around me, one might see that I love to read and write and that I wonder about things all the time, feel compelled to make a difference in this world, and am “weird” according to my seventeen year old.

But who am I in the classroom? What guides my practice? I will share some major turning points for me in this regard:

1. While teaching reading in a junior high school, I finally heard the voices of my students, “But Mrs. Isakson, I hate to read.” What did it matter if they could master skills at 80% or better if they would not read? I realized much to my dismay that we had been so busy learning skills that we had only read out of “real” books twice the entire year and then only for thirty minutes!
2. In 1974 I stayed up all night reading a most intriguing book, *Reading Miscue Inventory Manual: Procedure for Diagnosis and Evaluation* (Goodman & Burke, 1972). This gave me a new way to think about the reading process. I tried some things but had many questions. Until 1984 I could find no one who knew much about the procedure nor could I see its far-reaching implications for instruction. However, I was searching and wondering. I now find it unbelievable that I did not for a moment consider writing to the authors with my questions. I suppose that says that, like many of my students, I did not connect a flesh and blood person with the “author.”
3. In 1982 I heard Frank Smith speak. Everything he said made sense and yet was diametrically opposed to what I was doing in the classroom. When I asked him what I should do, he said that he couldn’t tell me, but that I could figure it out for myself. I took that challenge.
4. In 1984 I saw an advertisement about a ten-day workshop by the authors of the *Reading Miscue Inventory Manual*. I traveled to Tucson to study with Ken and Yetta Goodman and Dorothy Watson. This was undoubtedly the biggest turning point for me. I came home a new person.
5. I joined a support group mentored by Marjorie Siegel. She and the members of the group have had a powerful impact on my thinking. In those monthly meetings we meshed practice and theory, discussed classroom anomalies and suggested strategies, socialized and developed professional relationships. Marjorie challenged me to keep a journal and furthermore to write a professional article that first year. I did both. I also met with her individually every month one spring to study her ethnographic dissertation on semiotic theories applied to reading (Siegel, 1984).

In 1989 I attended an IRA Special Interest Group on teachers as researchers. I left convinced that I would like to find a collaborator to come into my classroom to help me make sense of what was happening. I found a professor who was interested. One of his graduate students became a participant observer in my classroom. This association resulted in much thinking and growth for both of us and a dissertation for him (Boody, 1992)

## Suggested Citation

Isakson, Marné (2018). Appendix B.1 - Allowing Space for Not-Knowing: What My Journal Teaches Me, Part 1: Accepting the Challenge. In D. D. Williams, *Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/qualitativeinquiry/appendixb>

## **Marné Isakson**



Marné has been involved in literacy education since 1969. She earned a BA in English, an MSED in Educational Research, and a Ph.D. in Literacy Education. Her dissertation was awarded the Outstanding Dissertation of the Year 1997 by the International Reading Association. She has taught reading at all levels: Elementary, secondary, community college, university, and professional development. She was named Reading Teacher of the Year three times. She has conducted research on college reading since 2006, developed two academic reading courses, wrote handbooks, helped produce videos and PPT demonstrations of the strategies, and developed a tutoring program for college-bound high school students. After retirement she and her husband started Isakson Literacy, LLC, which offers an online course in academic reading and promotes effective academic reading practices in colleges. She has four children, ten grandchildren, a dog Alfie, and enjoys hiking, swimming, doing family history, and reading, of course.



Williams, D. D. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life*. EdTech Books.  
Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/qualitativeinquiry>



**CC BY:** This book is released under a CC BY license, which means that you are free to do with it as you please as long as you properly attribute it.

