

Some Additional Beliefs and Assumptions Regarding Human Inquiry

Assumption #1

The knower and the known must interact to generate knowledge for the knower about the known; therefore, the interaction should be part of the focus and should be enhanced to generate the most useful and valuable knowledge. Interactions may range from very direct, as in developing a friendship with someone who can help you understand their world, to very indirect, as in observing someone through a hidden camera or giving a test or questionnaire to someone (in social science) or measuring heat in a chemistry study. But none of these interactions allows the knower to have no impact whatsoever on the known.

In my qualitative study of Unified Studies, I have had to develop some kind of trusting relationship with every student, teacher, or other person I wanted to learn from and part of that trust building involved sharing my interests in the program and what they could do to help me understand the program better.

In my historical study of my grandmother's life, I had to build trust with her and other family members to give me access to documents; and some documents are probably still unavailable to me because of those relationships. What I can ask of her and of the documents was also both enhanced and restricted by who I am.

In my survey study of Unified Studies graduates, I built the questionnaire out of interactions I had had already with some graduates and with current participants in the program; so the instrument was shaped by those interactions. Those who met only the questionnaire were clearly influenced by that encounter in different ways (some responded, some ignored it, some partially responded; but all had a 'relationship' with me through the instrument and relationships have some sort of influence on both parties).

In my experimental study on test-wiseness, I set up an artificial situation in which I was able to randomly distribute instruction booklets of two types (a treatment booklet teaching some principles of test-wiseness and a control booklet with stories and poems in it) to a group of students who were preparing to take an important test. Then I assessed the test-wiseness skills of the two groups and compared them. This was clearly a case of the knower interacting with the known. I had to tell them something of what I was doing but not too much, at least not before administering the booklets. The booklets and the test of test-wiseness, as well as my invitations to participate and my instructions to them, were all part of my influence on them and on how they responded to the experience I set up for them; thus influencing the way they responded to the materials and the results I obtained from the study.

Assumption #2

Although some Truth is absolute and therefore some realities or knowledge about that Truth are not negotiable, our knowledge or views of reality are rarely absolute. We are struggling as human beings to clarify what we really know and what we must take on faith. We do this in 'learning communities' and 'socially construct' many of our realities through interactions with others, putting forth our conceptions and seeing how others respond to them.

I believe that God can be part of my learning community if I will accept and seek him and hearken to what he would teach me. He is actually part of that community anyway; but I can learn much more by acknowledging that and acting upon it than I could ever do by ignoring or denying his existence and his knowledge. So studying God's revelations to humans, listening to His prophets, and praying to Him regularly seem a very natural part of my efforts to be an inquirer.

Yet, I also believe we have had a veil of forgetfulness drawn across our minds and it is not always clear what God would say about a given field of inquiry. We have to struggle and seek, many times it appears, 'on our own' to know. So faith is a big part of inquiry and learning to live with ambiguity as well.

Very few time-free or context-free generalizations are possible to make when drawing conclusions about people. Building 'time- and context-bound working hypotheses' is a much more appropriate goal in educational research theory building. The closest we can come to generalizations is through the accumulation of findings across many studies in diverse contexts, across time, by multiple inquirers using multiple methods. But even the generalizations thus generated are open to contradiction through discovery of counter evidence. We need to be humble about what we are 'discovering.'

There are many different stories I can tell about Unified Studies based on my inquiry over several years. But whatever I might say about what they are doing in this program, I have to be tentative because there are continual surprises and nearly always an exception. And even if I do reach a conclusion that seems to apply across all years of the program, next year's student body may surprise me and the teachers; and similar programs elsewhere may yield very different results.

I'm struggling to get my Grandmother's story straight but she changes parts from time to time during revisions. Also, her children point out alternative interpretations of experiences they had in common with her which modify my conclusions. Even if I do get it straight as far as she and her children go, other readers are likely to interpret her life and the context in which she lived differently than I have because they bring different questions and assumptions to the experience. Yet, over many life histories and other histories, some consistent patterns are likely to emerge across many interpreters (but not all, I'll bet).

My survey of graduates identified many similar evaluations of their experiences in Unified Studies. But not all graduates agreed completely on any one conclusion.

Most of the students who participated in the test-wiseness treatment group did better on the final test than did those in the control group. But not all of them did. This could have been because some were already test-wise or because my measures of test-wiseness were flawed or because my instruction was ineffectual for some students, or because of many other reasons. My one study does not yield conclusive evidence. But combined with many other studies of similar purpose it might lead to some findings that people would trust enough to act upon (would that make them true then?).

Assumption #3

Similarly, I am skeptical about the facility of establishing credible causal linkages between variables through educational research studies. As Lincoln and Guba suggest: all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects. This isn't to say that there are no causal connections but showing them as indisputable facts is very difficult if not impossible to do, at least in human affairs.

It appears from stories many students tell me that Unified Studies is having a major impact on their high school education and their views of themselves as life-long learners. But they all have so many other things going on in their lives at the same time that it is impossible to separate out the impact of Unified from all the other influences. It is even difficult to isolate just where Unified starts and where it stops in the life of any given student.

My Grandmother believes she became a teacher instead of a librarian because her father asked her to quickly finish her teacher certification process and help the family financially instead of continue her education. But what caused her to heed her father's request? What lead her father to make that request? What stopped her from turning to librarianship later (she actually was a librarian for many more years than she was a school teacher). And which causal linkages we might define in her case would be applicable across all girls and their fathers?

Nearly all the graduates interviewed claimed that Unified Studies had made a positive difference in their lives since graduation. But not all of them made this claim. And each positive claim was about a slightly different kind of influence they felt the program had had. But these are all opinions of people who have had millions of other experiences in their lives too. So how can we be sure what Unified actually caused?

I tried to conclude that my test-wiseness instruction helped some of the participants in my study become more test-wise. But what about the others? If it didn't work equally well for all of them, how can I say there is a causal link between my instruction and their performance?

Assumption #4

I believe inquiry is value-bound and not value-free (Lincoln and Guba, p. 37). In other words, researchers or inquirers ask questions and design their studies based on particular assumptions, beliefs, and/or values. Therefore, their studies are guided by their values and the results, conclusions, and interpretations are also shaped by those values, just as their values are shaped by what they find. Values from different groups of people can (and usually should) be counterbalanced by values from others if the results of inquiry are going to be credible or at least worth considering by others. But no value-free studies are conceivable by people who have values (and we all do).

I began doing my study of Unified because the idea of integrating several disciplines into a common course for high school students and conducting much of the class out in the environment and not just in the school building appealed to me. It felt right. But I've met many people who feel exactly the opposite. If they were to do my study, they would probably want to show that these people are harming their students while I've spent most of my time wanting to find out what was good or laudable about their work.

I love my Grandmother and want to tell her story to the rest of the family and anyone else who might be interested in the time and places she lived. I wanted to help her tell her story and so I give priority to her version of things over versions her children suggest might be more accurate. I could take a very different approach if it weren't for these powerful values I keep bumping into in myself!

The survey of graduates is shaped by the same values I used in designing the participant-observation study. I invited others to join me in developing the questionnaires and conducting related interviews. We argued about the questions we were asking and about the conclusions we should reach once the answers came back. So my values and theirs have been combined to some extent in doing this study. But I hired those people to help me and they haven't (or won't eventually) spend nearly as much time examining the results as I. And if there were others who were to join the project now, they too would have an influence. So a combination of values is at play here.

In the test-wiseness study, I was trying to meet a class requirement to do an experiment. I sort of believed in test-wiseness as a concept but I felt really uncomfortable manipulating people to participate in my study just so I could get credit and a good grade. I could have had very different values and probably would have modified my instruction, the tests I gave, and even the relationship I developed with participants accordingly. That certainly would have impacted the results.

Assumption #5

Humans inquire. We are always asking questions, seeking answers, sharing what we learn with others, reshaping our answers based on their responses, acting on what we think we know, changing directions when we discover our errors, and so on. Some inquiry is very formalized while most is informal and essentially taken for granted. I believe that thinking about who we are as inquirers can enhance all our inquiry efforts.



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