

An Analysis

Garry's experiences illustrate several points that others who want to conduct inquiry as part of their work might consider, particularly as they think of questions they want to ask and as they refine the focus of their inquiry throughout its evolution:

Point #1

A basic assumption of this book is that educators want to do their work better. Garry certainly did and this led him to keep asking new questions as he moved from setting to setting and interacted with the people in the discussion group he formed.

Point #2

It is also assumed that improvement involves learning— hence the notion of educators as learners. This may be done particularly well through qualitative inquiry as described in this book but all other ways of learning should be considered as well. Garry is a good example of an administrator who knew he didn't have all the answers and was interested in exploring, wondering, seeking new insights from the people who worked for him. He used a qualitative approach to obtain information from them but also studied the literature, administered questionnaires, and was trying out an experiment of sorts to see what he could learn from a volunteer group of people from across the district.

Point #3

*Educators **learn** by asking questions and we only get answers to the questions we **ask**.* The questions we ask determine the focus of our inquiries. It should be obvious that if Garry had asked why the people in his district didn't follow a particular change model that could be selected from the literature, he would have learned very different lessons than the ones he learned by asking how they *did* change and view change. Both questions would have been legitimate but would have lead to very different answers.

Point #4

Questions come from many sources. Garry's came from the literature on change and thoughtfulness, from his many years of experience in the Alberta school systems, from interactions he had with people in the discussion group he assembled for this study, and from his experiences sharing what he was learning with colleagues while writing his dissertation. There are limitless sources of questions and Garry probably accessed even more than this list suggests. Some question sources inquirers might consider as they focus their inquiries are summarized briefly below:

- a. The *foundational disciplines and traditions* that guide educators ask certain questions which should be considered by inquirers. Philosophy, psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and others ask critical questions about how people learn, teach and grow which can help an inquirer explore their own educational experiences fruitfully. The literature on change from several fields influenced Garry in his focus for this study.
- b. Likewise, questions asked by the various *subject matter disciplines* in which educators specialize may provide useful guidance. For example, a history teacher might ask how political and socio-economic forces in the lives of her students have formed and influenced the students' performance over time. Garry asked questions from the field of change agency in trying to understand how educators in his district were performing as change agents.
- c. *Educational theorists and researchers ask questions* about learning and teaching in the many journals and handbooks on teaching and teacher education. Often educators believe these sources are irrelevant to their work because they are based on studies done by people who are removed from the classrooms and schools. However, the questions they raise are often based on careful examination of schools and could be a valuable source for field-based inquirers. Garry was particularly sensitive to the views of educational reform theorists in his study.
- d. *People participating in our studies raise some of the best questions.* The students and their parents ask questions through their behavior, if not explicitly. When students are not learning, the implied question is, "What can be done to help me learn?" Businesses and citizens ask questions of the schools increasingly which educators should capitalize upon rather than defend against. Accreditation bodies and other evaluation audiences ask particularly questions about how well educators are performing in relation to their various sets of criteria. Colleagues are constantly asking how to teach or administer better. Any and all of these might be considered as sources for questions in a given study. Garry's study was built squarely around discovering the questions his colleagues were raising about change in schools.
- e. *Our own lives raise questions* from many dimensions: Our experiences and background, our awareness of and responsiveness to questions asked from all other sources, our need for change, our theoretical perspectives on how the content we teach is best learned, our beliefs about what can be known and how we can know, about our freedom to ask questions, about the importance of information versus people, about knowledge and knowing, and so on. Garry's brief overview of his own life suggested that his background led him to ask about the importance of change at the individual level in the creation of institutional and societal change. His beliefs about the power of the mind and the individual's freedom to change made the questions he asked possible.

Point #5

Qualitative inquiry often focuses on the questions raised by participants' lived experiences. The qualitative inquirer is often asking, "What is the nature of this experience from the others' points of view?" or "What is really going on here from the various perspectives of the participants, in contrast to what the literature, my theory, or any established interpretations say is going on?" And these questions imply, "What can I become aware of by listening to others that might help me in my search for how to help them?" For example, some of the questions that have been asked in the examples given in this book have been:

- a. What is the right thing to do for Steve (Sid, Cheryl, and Jack asked this in [Chapter One](#))?
- b. How do teachers make ethical decisions regarding students (David asked this in [Chapter One](#))?
- c. How should candidates be prepared to teach (David and the student teachers asked this in [Appendix A](#))?
- d. How can I learn to teach better through journal writing (Marné asked this in [Appendix B](#))?
- e. What is going on with Jimmy and how can I help him (Kyleen asked this in [Appendix C](#))?
- f. What is going on with change in my district and how can I encourage positive change (Garry asked in this chapter and in [Appendix E](#))?

Point #6

Various interpretive frameworks used within the general qualitative inquiry approach raise useful questions. This point reinforces the general theme of this book that none of the qualitative inquiry activities is independent. The analysis,

synthesis, and interpretive procedures discussed in Chapter Eight employ particular questions which guide and influence the focus of the study at all stages. Some common and useful interpretive frameworks are:

Spradley's Developmental Research Sequence

Spradley's (1979, 1980) developmental research sequence, which includes many different questions. He discusses three, which should be used at all stages in the sequence:

1. *Descriptive* questions which allow the researcher to collect ongoing samples of the participants' language while looking at a social situation and trying to record as much as possible without any particular questions in mind except the **general descriptive** question: "What is going on here?"
2. *Structural* questions help the researcher focus further descriptive questions to discover **similarities** among the things described and how participants organize their knowledge.
3. *Contrast* questions help the researcher focus further descriptive questions to discover **differences** among the things described and how participants distinguish objects and events in their experience from one another so the researcher can note the dimensions of meaning the informants employ in making such distinctions.

Spradley also suggests that a study should begin with a very wide descriptive focus and then be narrowed over time with structural and contrast questions focusing on a few selected "domains" or categories of descriptive information. He outlines a procedure for identifying domains called domain analysis, which will be discussed in Chapter Eight. He believes that the domains for focus and further questioning should be selected from all that are identified by asking the following questions:

- What interests *me* as the inquirer? Which of the domains do I want to pursue?
- What focus do the people I am studying suggest I pursue?
- What focus does my theory or the literature suggest I pursue?
- What do social conditions or contractual agreements I am under dictate I pursue?
- What central themes or "organizing domains" appear to determine the focus that should be taken?

Spradley notes that almost all social situations in which inquiry might be conducted consist of several elements about which questions ought to be asked to obtain a comprehensive description. These may be asked by an observer during a grand or mini tour of a social setting or they could be asked of interviewees or of documents (artifacts) under study. The use of grand and mini tours will be explored further in Chapter Seven but the key questions asked are these:

1. **Space:** What is (are) the physical place or places involved?
2. **Objects:** What are the physical things that are present?
3. **Actors:** Who are the people involved?
4. **Activities:** What is the set of related acts the actors do?
5. **Acts:** What are the single actions that people do?
6. **Events:** What are the sets of related activities people carry out?
7. **Time:** What is the sequencing that takes place over time?
8. **Goals:** What are the things people are trying to accomplish?
9. **Feelings:** What are the emotions felt and expressed by actors?

Spradley created a matrix of questions using these nine questions in both the columns and the rows of the matrix and asking what questions would be appropriate at the intersections (e.g., what are the physical things (#2) in the physical place (#1), etc.). Other questions from Spradley as well as the many other sources discussed in this chapter could be combined into such a matrix to generate a set of questions that would take any inquirer a lifetime to address.

Garry used some of the ideas from Spradley in conducting his inquiry. He looked for domains and asked the associated descriptive questions. But he did not ask all that were possible in Spradley's matrix. He selected among them according to the other interests that he had in doing the study (e.g., he was not particularly concerned about the physical setting or objects involved but was very concerned about goals and feelings of the people participating in his discussion group.

Hunter and Foley's Filters

Hunter and Foley (1975) discuss the many different filters people use to sort through information and focus their attention. They identify several questions that are asked differentially across ethnic cultures, claiming that people from certain cultures tend not to ask certain questions that might be very helpful to ask. They note that all of us are selective but in different ways and so one question we should ask ourselves regularly is, “what am I missing?” They suggest that most Westerners focus on verbal information and ignore the meaning-bearing contextual details surrounding that information (including time, space, and nonverbal information). They identify the following questions to be added to any others you might be asking during an observation or throughout an entire inquiry, just in case they may have some relevance to the experiences you are learning more about:

1. Where is the scene you are observing?
2. Where are you in relation to the scene you are observing?
3. Why did you choose the kind of scene you chose to observe?
4. Why did you choose the particular scene you are observing?
5. What is your train of thought— both about your self and the scene you are observing?
6. Where are you located in the scene? Are you moving around? Staying still? Why?
7. Are you interested in the scene? Easily distracted? Both? Why?
8. What are the implications for what you are seeing?
9. Are you bored? How might that affect your observation?
10. Stop a moment. Think about the scene you are in. Do you notice the:
 - o time?
 - o temperature?
 - o weather conditions?
 - o materials of which things are made?
 - o colors of materials?
 - o clothes people are wearing?
 - o sounds in the background (e.g., cars going by)?
 - o persons speaking each phrase?
 - o people's positions in relationship to one another?
 - o ways people move their bodies?
 - o gestures?
 - o spatial arrangements of people and objects?

It isn't clear that Garry attended to all these details. Given his membership in Western culture, it is likely that he did not, unless he consciously made an effort to do so. It appears from his conclusions and themes that he focused on the verbal information the participants in his group talked about rather than on the nonverbal information they were sharing. That focus still yielded a lot of data to explore. But Hunter and Foley make a good point that much of the contextual details that would help Garry interpret the verbal information had to be processed by him subconsciously as well because he probably didn't make it explicit. That is one approach educators as learners will likely take; but you ought to consider taking explicit note of these details from time to time as well.

Smith's Foreshadowed Problems

Lou Smith (Williams, 1981) begins his study with “foreshadowed problems” as his focus. He is constantly reading and thinking about how to do schooling more effectively in light of whatever experience he is able to have in schools. Whenever he goes into a new setting, he brings with him the accumulation of these thoughts in the form of questions or problems that he wants to ask in the context of a new setting. Thus, the exact set of questions is constantly changing. Garry appears to have been doing something similar to this, although he probably wasn't doing so as explicitly as Smith does. He used his experiences as a teacher, principal, superintendent, and doctoral student to generate the questions for his dissertation.

Walker's Approach

In contrast to Smith, Rob Walker (Williams, 1981) is not accumulating data across sites but instead asks what he can find that is positive and uplifting about education in any given site. He also asks what role the participants want to assign him, as a means of obtaining insight into their lives and meanings they attach to relationships and events in their lives. Garry did this to some extent too. He invited the teachers and principals in his district to join him in a discussion group and then let them help define his role in the group rather than assert his right as the superintendent to set the agenda. He not only learned more about their own agenda by keeping his quiet, he also learned how they viewed him in this unique role and setting.

Tesch's Approach

Tesch (1990) reviews 50 different qualitative analysis techniques she identified in educational, psychological, sociological, anthropological, and other fields and notes that every analytical stance is generated by a theory or a set of questions about the world and people. The list of possibilities is practically endless, as this growing list indicates and as Tesch's analysis shows.

Story Telling and Narrative Inquiry

Knoblauch and Brannon (1988), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), and others claim that story telling and narrative inquiry are the most appropriate forms of inquiry in which educators might engage. The main question these people seem to be asking in anticipation of telling a story is "What is life like for the person about whom the story is to be told?" They then bring the full power of the story-telling arts to bear on this question and address a myriad of questions such as these identified by Knoblauch and Brannon: "scene, situation, action-in-time," (P 23) and questions about "the phenomenal reality of the classroom [or any educational setting], what it looks like, the objects that define it as a material and social space, how the people in it look, talk, move, relate to each other, the emotional contours of their life together, the things that happen, intellectual exchanges, social understandings and misunderstandings, what the teacher [and other actors] knows, plans, hopes for, and discovers, how different students react, the subtle textures of the teaching experience, the subtle textures of the learning experience." (P 25) These inquirers are most interested in questions associated with giving a voice to the lived experiences of the people they are inquiring into. Garry approached some of the story-telling questions in the portrayal section of his dissertation but none of that shows up in the article version that is found in [Appendix E](#). This kind of question asking takes more time and space to address than most journals in education are used to dedicating. But oral story telling and perhaps electronic journals and literary journals provide hopeful outlets for educators who want to share their stories.

My Basic Approach

My basic approach is to experience the setting as richly as possible, asking myself what is going on from as many perspectives as I have time, relationships, resources, and interest to consider. I know that I will never ask all the possible questions and that whatever questions I do ask will lead me in directions that facilitate some follow-up questions and discourage the asking of others. I know too that who I am and my experiences play a major role in what questions I select among the millions of possibilities.

Point #7

Each inquiring educator must thoughtfully ask their own questions in any given situation. There are lots of theories of education that suggest certain questions as being the essential ones. And there are probably an infinite number of excellent questions that have never been conceptualized, let alone asked. So, this book cannot tell you the key questions to ask in *every* situation. We can only make the point that asking good questions is central to good learning and to good qualitative inquiry.

It is also apparent that any given inquirer cannot be asking all possible questions at once. As humans, we have to focus our attention on one question at a time or we don't get answers to any questions. And whatever questions we focus on restrict the asking of other questions, especially as we pursue questions to deeper levels. However, an assumption of qualitative inquiry is that all questions are connected holistically and answering of any one question has implications for any and all other questions that may be raised.

To be a learner, particularly a learning educator, is to be continually searching for better and better questions to ask and to do our best to answer those questions within the frame we find ourselves. The best product of such questioning and answer-seeking will be better questions, in addition to our tentative answers. And the context in which those questions and answers are created and explored needs to be clearly documented too. Details about what questions were asked and why those were the best questions the asker could come up with at the time should be recorded (in an audit trail) so the readers and inquirer can interpret more thoughtfully the questions and answers.

Ideally, the questions asked would be couched in terms of the experiential context of the inquirer. That context would include all the other qualitative inquiry activities and products discussed throughout this book using the holo-movement metaphor: the literature read, the problems most immediately or powerfully faced, the resources available, the relationships and roles that seem most relevant, the anticipated sharing of learning with others, the information collection procedures available, the analysis, synthesis, and interpretation frameworks being considered, the philosophical stances being taken, etc.

Obviously, the context of any given question-asking activity for any given inquirer is infinite. And no one is likely to be aware of all the contextual details that yielded the questions they are asking. But the more you can say about these details in your field notes and any writing you generate will help others and you better understand and interpret the answers you come up with during your study.



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