

## An Analysis of KL's Experience

Please refer back to [Figure 1](#), which illustrates a process commonly used by qualitative inquirers. As discussed there, conducting inquiry necessarily involves the inquirer getting to know people and developing rapport and relationships of trust with them so they will share their perspectives on their experience with the inquirer.

The stories shared in this book also illustrate the importance of relationships to the entire inquiry process. Looking closely at the relationships KL developed with Jimmy, the other students, the counselor, the parents, the principal, and other teachers, it is clear that all the other inquiry activities shown in Figure One were involved in her relationship-development activities. While she was asking questions, gathering information, keeping a record, interpreting information and experience, and even sharing her interpretations, she was developing relationships and that interpersonal interaction facilitated all the other activities. It should also be clear that all these activities of inquiry are also essentially *teaching* activities. Let's explore these claims further.

Traditionally, qualitative inquiry, as developed through anthropology and sociology, has been performed by outsiders in social situations. For example, anthropologists visited cultures to which they were strangers in an effort to make the strange familiar to members of their own culture back home. In such a situation, one of the inquirer's major challenges is to develop productive working relationships with people in the culture under study as quickly as possible so they will be allowed to conduct the study, participate in various cultural events, and talk freely with informants. Developing a role in the setting that is mutually acceptable to all involved has been a critical part of that challenge.

Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Georges and Jones (1980), Williams (1981), and many others suggest ways qualitative inquirers who are strangers to a setting can develop such working relationships. Some of these seem relevant to a teacher or principal who wants to conduct inquiry in his or her own school setting; but others seem unnecessary because practitioners who are inquirers are not strangers to the cultures they are inquiring into. They are usually already deeply involved in working relationships before they even think of themselves as inquirers, *per se*. A review of the points these and other authors make in light of the stories told in this book may help you plan to develop fulfilling inquiry relationships in *your* setting. Suggestions from the literature include the following activities:

- a. Gradually change from formal to more informal relations over time by interacting with people in a variety of settings. This may involve stages of gaining access to an inquiry site, getting oriented to the site and people in it, getting more and more familiar with these people as they inform you about their culture, and finally taking leave of the people and exiting the site.
- b. Build trust with each other by listening and using the information people give you in ways they perceive as positive. You may have to identify and work through “gatekeepers” to gain access to certain people.
- c. Do not disturb the people you are studying. Be unobtrusive and fill natural roles that are acceptable to you *and* to the people you are working to understand. This may involve some negotiation as relationships deepen, are broken, are renewed, etc.
- d. Join your hosts in what they do in a jointly defined role that allows you to remain detached enough that you can reflect on what they do and say without becoming so involved with them that you become one of them (“going native”). You want to be able to use *your* perspective to think about theirs.
- e. Learn from them– they are your teachers, not your students or your subjects.
- f. Learn how they think without necessarily thinking like they do. Learn what it is like to be them; but you usually will not want to actually *be* like them. Use your subjectivity, feelings, and humanity while participating with them to gain insights into their experiences from their subjective point of view. This may involve the following:
  1. Use the feelings you have to guide the questions you ask (maybe the informants have had similar feelings and will talk about them in ways that will help you understand).
  2. When informants begin to understand your feelings, they will be more willing to share theirs and to accept you in their relations.
  3. Use these feelings to generate research hunches– then follow up on them by gathering more data– not just accepting your initial reactions (that would be bias!).
  4. Experiencing some of the same feelings the participants have will help you develop empathy, which will give you greater insight into their experiences and meanings they attach to them.
  5. Rather than pretend you don’t have feelings or try to ignore or restrict those feelings, describe them in your field notes and reflect on them to decide if they are helping you understand the people you are studying or if they are distorting the experience and biasing your study.

Teachers, other educators, and other practitioners who also see themselves as inquirers have to be concerned about these same issues but in rather different ways. Unlike the typical anthropologist, they are already “insiders,” with reputations and responsibilities in the settings in which they want to conduct inquiry. They already have teaching or administrative roles which shape the inquiry roles and associated relationships they can develop. Because they aren’t there just to do research but to improve their practice through inquiry in that setting, the notion of developing inquiry relationships is different for educators. But they still have to focus on developing relationships that will encourage others to give them feedback and help them see the world through more than just their own eyes.

Let’s look at KL and the roles and relationships she was developing in her school study in light of the suggestions to “inquirers” summarized above.

**a. Move through relationship stages from formal to informal.** KL had already established a teacher-student relationship with Jimmy before she began thinking about studying him as part of this project. Their relationship was fairly formal and studded with expectations from both of them and from his parents, the principal, and other staff and students in the school. They all had expectations of her as a teacher and of him as a student. But their relationship and expectations began to change when KL paid more attention to Jimmy. She talked to him more frequently inside and outside of class than she would have normally. She already had entrée to visit with him but she hadn’t taken advantage of that access until she focused her inquiry on him. Unlike an outsider anthropologist, she did not have to exit the setting because she was truly a natural part of it. She did not have to introduce herself at the beginning and obtain access to Jimmy or the others in order to conduct a study. All these arrangements were already part of the educational setting. But she did have the challenge of deepening relationships beyond the expected levels common between teachers, students, parents and peers.

**b. Build trust in an ethical relationship.** This recommendation for qualitative inquirers is such a fundamental characteristic of good teaching that it matches perfectly with the teacher as researcher stance. KL did obtain information about Jimmy that could have devastated him if she had presented it to other students or even to his parents, inappropriately. Likewise, she had to build a trusting rapport with Jimmy, his parents, the counselor, and with other students in the class before they would talk to her. She maintained that trust throughout the study and beyond by disguising the identities of participants and the school in which she was working in her report.

**c. Be unobtrusive and fill natural negotiated roles.** KL was a relatively new teacher at this school. So it was not too unnatural for her to be trying some different kinds of activities. Asking the principal to interview one of her students, using a video camera in her classroom, administering socio-grams, conducting interviews with parents during parent-teacher conferences, and asking former teachers and the counselor about Jimmy might have been considered unusual by these other participants. But they were not outlandish or inappropriate given her status as a new teacher. These were legitimate activities for a teacher. She also did not simply impose these roles on others. With some anxiety, she asked the parents if they would interview *her* about Jimmy and let her interview *them*. They were thrilled with these new roles for themselves and for the teacher. She brought the video camera into the classroom and by implication invited the students to let it be there and not disturb their normal activities. She invited the students to fill out socio-grams and to talk to her in short informal interviews. These were not entirely new roles for them or for her; but they were variations from the norm, which students could have refused to explore.

**d. Be involved, yet detached enough to use *your* perspective to think about theirs.** This recommendation seems a bit more challenging for the educator who *is* involved already as an educator in a setting in which they want to conduct inquiry. KL was able to maintain a certain degree of detachment from Jimmy and his problems by using triangulation (obtaining information from several different sources, using several different methods), by keeping a detailed record of what she was hearing and seeing, as well as her thinking and feelings about what she was learning, and by maintaining her teacher role throughout the project and not just becoming another one of the students or taking the parent role upon herself. The standards discussed in [Chapter Five](#) are intended to help practitioner-inquirers share experiences with the people they are trying to understand without giving up their role as an inquirer.

**e. Learn from them.** This recommendation can also be very challenging for educators because they often see their role as being the teacher, and it becomes easy for those in authority to forget that they don't know everything and that they can learn from their own students or subordinates. In her case, KL was frustrated as a teacher with Jimmy because he didn't seem to be learning and he was disturbing the rest of the class. Instead of assuming that she understood what his problems were and simply applying some preset "discipline action" on him, she asked what she could learn from Jimmy about this problem. She also asked what she could learn from his peers, his parents, his former teachers, the school counselor, and from a careful review of her interactions with him during classroom events. She was open to being taught by Jimmy and these others; and as a result, she learned a lot. She was willing to ask questions as a teacher. This seems like one of the most critical elements of a good inquirer.

**f. Use your subjectivity to gain insights into others' experiences from *their* point of view.** Related to the previous point, good inquirers do not pretend they are objective with all subjectivity controlled out of their inquiries through the use of particular methods. Instead, they use their subjectivity to develop empathy with the persons they are trying to understand. This is another powerful characteristic of good teachers that can be used to help them be better inquirers as well. KL began to feel the frustrations Jimmy was feeling as she took a closer look at his experiences, heard him telling her how much he needed friends, saw other sides to him through the eyes of his parents and the school counselor, and saw how unfairly she herself was treating him when she watched herself on video. She began to see the world through Jimmy's eyes and her compassion for him grew. She could relate his feelings to similar feelings she had experienced during her life. She could only do this because she was willing to *use* her feelings to gain insight rather than deny them or get lost in the experience of them.

Both Peshkin (1985) and Smith (1980) provide helpful insight into the value of subjectivity. The notion of neuro-linguistic programming, set forth by Nagel, Siudzinski, Reese, and Reese (1985) and elaborated by Robbins (1991) provides technical guidance on ways to develop rapport between teachers and students, interviewers and interviewees,

counselors and counselees, and other human situations that involve using one's subjectivity to understand, learn from, and influence others. These authors claim that by mirroring or imitating the behavior of another as unobtrusively as possible, one can begin to establish a rapport that will facilitate understanding and increase the influence the teacher or inquirer might have on those they are mirroring. Although KL was not explicitly using all these sources and their guidelines, she was certainly developing rapport with Jimmy and using that rapport to understand him better.

In the field of educational evaluation, several authors reached a common conclusion– unless the inquirers become part of the community of action, their research and evaluation results have very little meaning, and therefore, very little impact, on practice. Guba and Lincoln (1989) presented evaluation as negotiation, with the evaluator facilitating the presentation and negotiation of various views, values and concerns among people who have competing stakes in the outcome of the evaluation. Cronbach and Associates (1980) presented a similar notion of the policy shaping community and the need for the evaluator to be an active member of that community before other participants will listen to any evaluation study results. More recently, Patton (2011) has returned to these conclusions by promoting Developmental Evaluation as a way to promote utilization of results by evaluation clients.

Educators are already part of the community that can make a difference in the practice of education. They are insiders, whereas professional researchers and evaluators from private institutes, universities, and government funded research projects are outsiders. Educators already have relationships developed with the people in their settings who can share their experiences in ways that may lead to change, such as KL and Jimmy achieved. If educators can expand their roles to include qualitative inquiry, they will not only be better informed with a strong basis for making better educational decisions; but they will be in position to invite their associates to do the same. KL's story shows that qualitative inquiry and the associated development of inquiry relationships is a natural extension of what teachers and other educators are doing in their communities already.



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