

A School's Superintendent's Story

Questions and question asking are at the heart of the qualitative inquiry process and the practitioner as learner idea. The questions the inquirer is asking at any given moment determine the focus and direction of the inquiry at that moment. And as Heisenberg (1958) said so long ago about the interrelatedness of the observer and the observed in quantum mechanics, “we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning.” (p 57, cited in Knoblauch and Brannon, 1988, pp 17-18) Questions are shaped by and shape all we do and are, as inquirers in all dimensions of the qualitative inquiry process discussed throughout this book and summarized in the figures in Chapter One:

- who the inquirer is, including assumptions about inquiry, learning, and teaching,
- field relations and roles under development,
- information that has been collected and is to be collected,
- analyses, syntheses, and interpretations that have been constructed and are planned,
- any sharing of learning that the inquirer anticipates and is doing, and
- what has been recorded about the inquiry experience to that point in time.

Questions are definitely at the heart of this holo-movement process. This chapter will illustrate the claim that who you are as an inquirer powerfully shapes the questions you will ask. Likewise, who you are impacts the field relations and roles you develop, which likewise shape the questions you *can* ask in a given inquiry situation. In turn, while the questions you ask impact the information you will collect and the interpretations you make of it, the data you have and the analyses you make of them affects the subsequent questions you may ask. Finally, what you write in your field notes and what you consider sharing with others are both shaped by the questions you are asking, and the questions are reciprocally formed out of your considerations of audiences for related writings. In spite of the fact that none of these activities is independent of the others, we will focus in this chapter on the questioning activity.

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All the stories shared to this point in the book have been at the classroom level. Obviously, teachers and students are not the only learners in educational settings. A study conducted by Garry McKinnon provides an example of a superintendent as inquirer and learner. Garry's initial question was shaped and modified throughout his study to yield his focus on the central question: “What *is* the change process in an educational setting.” After reading his report in [Appendix E: An Example Study by an Administrator](#), please consider the following analysis of this example in terms of questions and focus as they relate to the rest of the qualitative inquiry process.

Garry's story provides a backdrop for a discussion of several key points about asking questions and focusing an inquiry. Before he officially began his study, he had been exploring alternatives to what he saw in the schools around him while he certified, began teaching high school, worked as a guidance counselor, a vice-principal, a school principal, a deputy superintendent, and the superintendent, and earned a masters degree. At each stage, he asked new questions and sought answers through his study of the literature and by observing people he was working with in the schools. His focus for the study reported in Appendix E developed after he had been a superintendent for ten years and had begun a doctoral program, which led him to “develop an interest in the relationship between learning and teaching and the change process.

Garry began this particular inquiry with a concern about reform within his district. He states in his portrayal of himself, "As superintendent, he spends a significant amount of time in developing relationships with trustees and Department of Education staff. At the same time, he has found it essential to maintain open lines of communication and a positive working relationship with teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members in the school system. ... he has been able to have some influence on educational issues at the provincial level, but he sees a need for a new approach. He has found that much of what is taking place in education in Alberta, is perceived to be beyond the control of the local school jurisdiction. He is concerned that many of his fellow educators have concluded that there are few opportunities for input which have an impact."

In other words, Garry's experiences as a teacher and then as an administrator and a doctoral student studying the thoughtful work of educators at the local level lead him to ask what change was and how he might influence more powerful change in his local district. A review of his audit trail, and the dissertation version of his study, reveals the fact that his questions changed regularly, as did his focus, throughout the life of the inquiry itself. And he ended the study with recommendations for further research, which indicated new questions he had developed from a review of his experience conducting this study. This is not unusual for people who are constantly searching for new insights and trying to improve the world around them. It is a natural characteristic of learners.



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