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Extending the Conversation: Qualitative Research as Dialogic Collaborative Process

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Collaborative research often refers to collaboration among the researcher and the participants. Few studies investigate the collaborative process among researchers themselves. Assumptions about the qualitative research process, particularly ways to establish rigor and transparency, are pervasive. Our experience conducting three collaborative empirical research studies challenged and transformed our assumptions about qualitative research: (a) research planning taught as concrete and linear rather than as emergent and iterative, (b) data analysis conceptualized as individual discovery rather than collaboratively-constructed meaning, and (c) findings represented as individual product rather than as part of an ongoing conversation. We address each assumption, including how our collaborative research diverged from the assumption and how this divergence has impacted our own practice. *Key Words: Dialogue, Collaborative Research, Group Meaning-Making, and Rigor in Qualitative Inquiry*

Introduction and Background

Demonstrating rigor in qualitative inquiry has become a major focus of the research community in light of the scientifically-based research movement of the George W. Bush federal administration. Establishing the trustworthiness and authenticity of findings is an ongoing concern of the field (Creswell, 2002; Hatch, 2006; Reissman, 1993). Making the inquiry process more public is one way of establishing rigor (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Greater transparency can help counter the charge that qualitative research resembles fiction or journalism (Anfara et al.; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Hatch has suggested that qualitative research is experiencing "postmodern paralysis," in part because qualitative researchers are now "theorizing, teaching, and writing *about* qualitative research and issues related to it" (p. 405) rather than conducting data-based studies. Hatch called for more examples of well-constructed and conducted qualitative studies that can counter the positivist bias in most journals.

The focus of this paper begins to address some of the concerns articulated by Anfara et al. (2002) and Hatch (2006), by making the role of collaboration among multiple researchers more visible to the consumers of qualitative research. To do so, we will address our own assumptions about research that our collaborative work has challenged: (a) research planning taught as *concrete and linear* rather than as *evolving, emergent, and iterative*, (b) data analysis conceptualized as *individual discovery* rather than *collaboratively constructed meaning*, and (c) writing of the findings as a *product* *representing ideas created and owned by individuals* rather than as *one part of an ongoing conversation among scholars.*

Our work together began in 2004 with our shared interest in investigating blended learning environments (those that use both online and face-to-face discussions) through qualitative methods including narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and phenomenology. We embarked on what would become a series of three studies investigating how one small group of graduate students talked together online as they shared their life stories in a course on human development. We consider our research to have begun the moment we had our first conversation about this online context. The ideas for this paper emanated from our ongoing collaboration over the past few years. After completing the three research studies we began to reflect on our collaborative process, realizing that while our published work includes methods sections, they have been truncated because of space limitations in journals (not an uncommon occurrence, cf. Anfara et al., 2004). Thus, our publications do not fully reflect the collaborative process we have engaged in. Since the focus of our inquiries has been on how individuals make meaning through online dialogue and how groups create stories, we noted the irony of excluding our own stories of how we have made meaning together as researchers.

In this paper we attempt to make transparent our own collaborative process and to show how this process challenged and ultimately transformed our assumptions about qualitative research. We articulate the collaborative process we followed in a way that lends rigor to the qualitative research endeavor and to model a way of being in dialogic collaboration that other researchers may find of value. Even though we organized our own publications in a traditional format, it did not seem to accurately reflect our actual process. Embedded in our process of collaboration was the emergence of new knowledge, questions, and understandings that expanded beyond the findings and the discussion. These insights caused us to re-examine our initial research questions, the theoretical framework, and even the method of data analysis. In the spirit of inquiry and our new experience of group meaning-making, we paid attention to these new insights and reframed our previous understandings.

Collaboration as a component of research, if it is addressed at all, is usually taken to mean something that occurs between the researcher and the participants (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000; Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Van Maanen, 1988). Few studies acknowledge or investigate the collaborative process among researchers themselves. Some that do, such as studies done by Rogers-Dillon (2005) and Bryan, Negretti, Christensen, and Stokes (2002), focus on the hierarchies of research teams and the power dynamics that result. Bennett and Kidwell (2001) examined collaborative research teams comprised of faculty to better understand *individual* effort toward the group's work. MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, and Milstein (1998) provide guidelines for systematic coding of qualitative data with teams, focusing on attaining intercoder agreement. These studies all differ markedly from our focus on how meaning is made through dialogue among researchers. Our focus is on what Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, and Ladany (2005) refer to as the "consensus process" in their Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) model. They note that "despite the integral role of consensus in CQR, we know very little about what actually happened . . . In the one study to assess the consensus process . . . there was equitable discussion before reaching consensus." (p. 197) Our goal is to better understand what happens during that discussion.

Our Histories as Researchers

Researcher reflexivity as a component of interpretive research is a cornerstone of the process. Thus, we begin by articulating our own histories, backgrounds, and perspectives. We each entered our collaborative process in different places and in different ways. We describe this in our own words.

Trena Paulus

I came into this research group while I was in a time of transition. In making a transition from graduate student to professor I struggled with how much of what I had formally learned about research methods applied to the actual practice of inquiry. During this same time I began teaching qualitative research courses and shifting from a focus on technology to a focus on collaborative learning and dialogue. This time of transition has contributed to the evolution of my understanding of what it means to generate new knowledge, to engage in research, and to "find" answers in the data.

Marianne Woodside

I began my study of research over thirty years ago when quantitative methods represented the way in which research was conducted. I remember my frustration when planning my dissertation work. I wanted to conduct a mixed methods study, something unheard of at the time. My breakthrough came when I read an anthropology text; learning about ethnography transformed my thinking about research, the questions that could be addressed, and the data that could be collected. Over the years I have worked collaboratively with colleagues, but the work among the three of us is significant for me because of our constant attention to epistemology and theoretical frameworks.

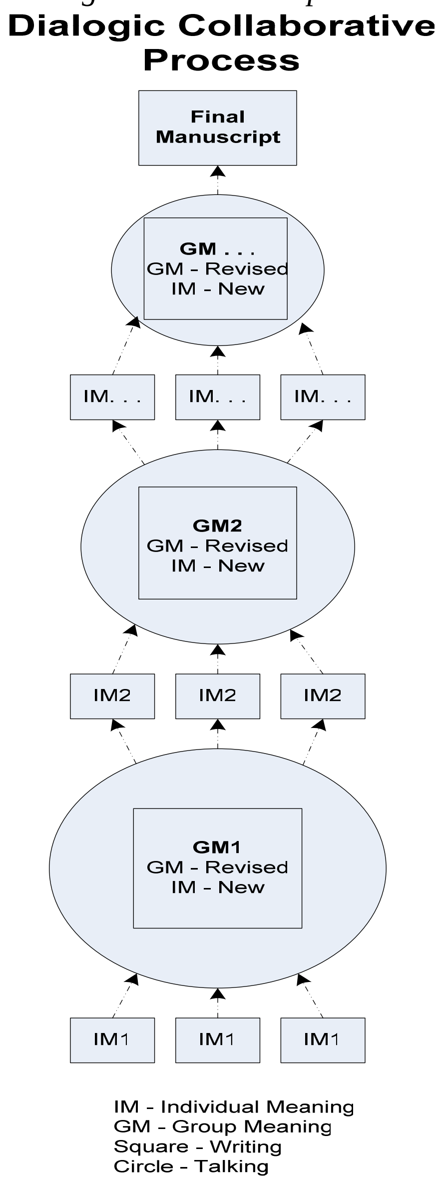
Mary Ziegler

My assumptions about qualitative research were shaped when I was in graduate school because I knew very little about research before then. Although qualitative research was encouraged in the department where I did my doctoral work, this type of research was still suspect as empirical methodology in the wider academic community (only a little more than a decade ago). Consequently, a major part of the methods section of my dissertation was defending the use of qualitative data and showing how to align the analysis process with quantitative methods. When our research group began its work, I was accustomed to data analysis as a process of coding and counting. I became aware of how limiting this approach was as we worked together with the open spirit of discovery.

Thus, we had a variety of prior experiences with qualitative research when we began working together. Each of us had conducted and published numerous studies, grounded in what we had formally learned and professionally practiced. We set out to work on one specific project with a solid research question in mind. Early in the research process we noted that the way we worked together differed markedly from our experiences in other collaborative research projects. As we experienced research as an organic, evolving process for the first time, we found ourselves challenging the assumptions which persist in how research is written about and taught. We next describe our collaborative, dialogic process and how it challenged our understanding of these assumptions. Figure 1 represents how we view this process.

Our Collaborative Work

Figure 1. *Dialogic collaborative process.*



From the bottom up, Figure 1 represents the iterations of individual and group meaning-making. We typically began by generating individual meanings (IM), represented by the three squares. These meanings were usually in written form and brought into the circle of our group meetings, during which we engaged in dialogue. We created group meaning (GM) through our conversations, revising what had been written individually. Our individual meanings shifted through our collaborative dialogue. We left the meeting with new tasks and writing to be done, after which the cycle repeated itself. Eventually a manuscript emerged. We declared a manuscript "finished" more for logistical reasons than for intellectual ones, realizing that should we return to it again, more would change. Although the process was transparent to us as a group, journal space limited our making this process transparent to a wider audience.

The idea of "multiple authorship" in academe is operationalized in numerous ways: from dividing up and farming out responsibilities to each member of the group, with one individual charged with putting the pieces together, to following a leader who makes assignments and assumes a major responsibility for the project. The foundation of our collaborative process, in contrast, is based on the epistemological belief that knowledge is socially constructed (Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Stahl, 2003a, 2003b). We noted that in order to create new knowledge together, group meaning would have to be created through dialogue. Although we approached the work as professionals, we also approached it as learners. We believed that our collaboration had at its core a learning component.

Cranton (1996) describes this process as collaborative learning, where individuals interact to better understand themselves, each other, and their social world. In this type of group learning, meaning making is shared and the group collectively constructs new knowledge. This aspect of shared meaning is often neglected in the literature on transforming meaning systems (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Kegan, 1993; Mezirow, 1978, 1991). Although an individual's meaning system might have expanded or changed, the group constructs a common meaning system that is ongoing and related to collaborative group learning described by Cranton. Group knowledge is co-constructed and individual members become part of a discourse community (Bruffee, 1999), where knowledge is expanded beyond the teller/listener paradigm (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000), new knowledge is created (Housley, 2000), and cultural norms are challenged or re-storied (Jones, 2004).

Kvale (1996) describes hermeneutic interpretation of text as understanding meaning within a cultural context. We have used variations on this process for each study we have conducted. The method is referred to as the hermeneutic circle, which means that "the meaning of the separate parts is determined by the global meaning of the text" (p. 47). The global meaning changes the meaning of the separate parts, then the separate parts challenge and revise the global meaning. This iteration continues until there is a deeper meaning and understanding of the text.

Attending to the construction of meaning at the individual/group nexus seems underrepresented in the literature on qualitative research. The interplay between the individual meaning and group meaning has received little attention despite increasing emphasis on social theories of learning and epistemologies such as social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) in social science research. Illuminating this often unacknowledged bridge between individual and group meaning making has the potential to extend our understanding of meaning making, in this case, meaning making during the research process. As the three of us engaged in the process, we acknowledged that the foundation of our work reflected Cranton's (1996) notion of group construction of new knowledge. We were surprised to find that this new knowledge was not only about what was happening in the data, but of what constituted the research process itself. Research is, after all, about creating new knowledge. Through our collaborative experience, we have redefined what we understand to be research: a group process of active meaning-making through dialogue rather than a "discovery" of new knowledge,

Challenging Assumptions about Research

In an effort to make our research process more transparent, we have first described our background as researchers and presented the model of collaboration we use in our work. Next we outline our collaborative efforts.

Our first study (Ziegler, Paulus & Woodside, 2006a) began when Mary noticed that one of the small groups of students in her human development course were exchanging many more messages in the online component of the course more than the other groups were. We were interested in what was happening with that group; both what the participants were talking about as well as how they were talking to each other. Through hermeneutic analysis we arrived at a *climate of engagement* as the overarching theme capturing the essence of the participants' online interactions. This climate included engaging in the online environment, engaging in dialogue, engaging as a group, and engaging with the content. We also identified a specific dialogue pattern, which captured *how* the members of the small group talked with each other. This analysis raised new questions for us about how learning occurred in a group context.

Our second study (Ziegler, Paulus & Woodside 2006b) examined more closely the elements of this dialogue related to learning. We revisited the discussion transcripts from a different theoretical and analytical perspective to consider how this small group was learning through conversation. Using hermeneutic analysis combined with discourse analysis, we described four aspects of the group meaning-making process: noticing, reinterpreting, theorizing, and questioning assumptions. This analysis led to even more questions about how an individual's story transforms as it is shared with others in a narrative context.

Our third study (Paulus, Woodside & Ziegler, 2007) focused on the content of the course itself: life stories and human development. We used narrative analysis to examine the interplay between the individual and group stories being created by the participants in the online environment. Revisiting the transcripts yet again, we constructed a holistic perspective of what a group story looks like and how it is created through conversation.

We next go into more detail about the assumptions our collaborative work has challenged: (a) research planning taught as *concrete and linear* rather than as *evolving, emergent, and iterative*, (b) data analysis conceptualized as *individual discovery* rather than *collaboratively constructed meaning*, and (c) writing of the findings as a *product representing ideas created and owned by individuals* rather than as *one part of an ongoing conversation among scholars.* We start by explaining each of the research assumptions, give examples of how our own work diverged from the assumption, and then reflect on how this divergence has impacted our practice.

Research Planning: Linear or Emergent

Assumptions

The research question is central to the research process. This question is to be grounded in a theoretical framework and followed by a plan for collecting data which will be analyzed for an answer. This proposed plan itself reflects the notion that research is a linear process (Creswell, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Patton, 1990). The underlying assumption is that a good plan with a solid question adds rigor and directs the process. Sound planning begins with identifying a gap in our knowledge which is often formulated as a problem. This is followed by a research question that will address the problem and the use of systematic procedures for collecting and analyzing data. Typically a plan (e.g., a dissertation proposal) is completed before the researcher enters the context where the research is to take place (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2002).

The plan helps novice researchers grasp the very complex process of understanding participants' worlds and lives. There is a fairly standard format for presenting the completed study to the research community: introduction; review of research; significance of the study and research questions; methods; findings; discussion; and implications for future research. The dissertation provides a framework from which to write about the research endeavor; but the pervasiveness of this linear structure also constructs the nature of the research effort (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Our Own Work

We did not begin with a specific plan for each of the three studies. Rather, our second study emerged as we completed our first study (analyzing the online dialogue of a small group of students). Late in the analysis phase of the first study, we had already generated a 40 page draft which described five aspects of dialogue. Four of the five aspects fit with our overarching theme of a *climate of engagement*. The fifth aspect, learning, emerged as an important part of the experience of the participants, but seemed to stand on its own and to warrant a more detailed analysis. We decided to set aside the aspect of learning for later. We returned to the literature to see if we could discover a rationale for doing so, and identified Gorsky and Caspi's (2005) categories of interpersonal dialogue; social dialogue and subject-matter oriented dialogue. We positioned the first study as examining the social dialogue and decided to focus the second study on the subject-matter oriented dialogue, in this case learning.

During our second study the research question and process also evolved over time. We initially developed themes related to *what* was happening in the online dialogue, a rich description of aspects of learning. As we concluded this analysis and began to write our findings, it became clear that *how* the group talked to each other was also important. We returned to the transcripts and noticed a specific dialogue pattern. We included this focus on *how* as an additional research question and used discourse analysis to provide a richer description of this process.

Reflections

A major assumption about research is that the question drives the study. Students learning how to conduct research are asked, "What do you want to know?" and reassured that the rest of the research process naturally grows out of that choice of research question. However, our work together caused us to wonder how it is possible to "know what you want to know" before you enter the field and start exploring the environment you want to understand. In our experience, our inquiry began because there was a particular environment that was puzzling. The process was organic and emergent; when one element of the process changed (e.g., wondering how the learning occurred), everything else shifted as well. It made sense to conceptualize the research question as fluid, to reflect the dynamic relationship between the question and the data; as one evolved, the other evolved. The question might remain the same throughout the inquiry process, but there is no requirement for it to do so. If the overall process is viewed as heuristic, then the question is not separate from the analysis, but an integral part of the analysis. This realization changed the nature of the research process for us.

Thus our assumptions have evolved so that the research, planning and implementation process overlap. Each of us was trained in our graduate programs to revise our research proposals to become more and more precise. However, what we have realized in our collaborative work is that such a detailed plan may constrain the interpretive process and limit the findings. Although qualitative research is supposed to be emergent and holistic, in our early research experiences the plan was implemented within very narrow parameters, and the findings were in many ways preordained by the detailed plan. We were reminded of how different such systematic planning compares to the way ethnographers enter the field with an intention of being present and open to what the community members have to say (Atkinson, 2005; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

The Data Analysis Process: Individual Discovery or Collaborative Meaning Making

Assumptions

As Guba and Lincoln (1981) point out, "scientific inquirers can specify all rules for data collection and analysis in advance of the inquiry" (p. 72). However, as we discussed in the previous section, the implication that the research can and should be planned in advance was not so straightforward as we conducted our studies. This led us to question further assumptions such as what constitutes "data," how much data is sufficient, and how often the same data set can be used for analysis.

The data sources typically used in qualitative research are well established (e.g., interviews, observation, and document analysis). According to Patton (1990), "data generated by qualitative methods are voluminous" (p. 379). Voluminous data are thought to lend credibility and rigor to a qualitative study because they can provide more evidence for a particular finding. In addition to voluminous data, multiple sources are said to add credibility to the research design because they reduce source bias. Although theorists eschew using methods in qualitative research that mirror those used in quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), in practice many researchers continue to use these methods because they address the prevailing criticism that qualitative research is not empirical, or less empirical, than research based on quantitative data (see for example, Marques & McCall, 2005). Like other researchers, we had each used methods such as saturation, triangulation, and interrater reliability to add rigor to the analysis, and therefore strengthen the validity of our findings. Our work together not only challenged our assumptions about these methods, but also suggested that collaborative research *itself* may be a method for enhancing rigor.

Saturation, commonly used in grounded theory, implies that data will be continuously collected until no new themes are identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This assumes that new data sources will be continually available until the researcher no longer needs them. When approaching our first study, we questioned whether existing transcripts of the online dialogue of four women could be a valid basis for inquiry, since it transpired over a brief three-week period. We questioned whether the data were sufficiently voluminous. We decided to proceed because it was a rare opportunity to examine what appeared to be an in-depth, meaningful online conversation that was not facilitated by an instructor or researcher. Making this decision meant that we would not have the opportunity to collect more data from this group of participants.

Another outcome of our decision to work with this particular data set is that we could not triangulate evidence from different sources in order to increase confidence in the credibility of the results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Triangulation, a term taken from land surveying, is intended as an alternative to the term validation, commonly used in quantitative methods (Jick, 1983). We challenged the necessity of multiple data sources because we were concerned that these would lead us to look for commonalities among sources, rather than focus on understanding what was happening with the online dialogue itself. Our process mirrored Richardson's (1997) metaphor of *crystallization* rather than triangulation. Crystallization depends on one's viewing angle and "provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic" (p. 522). Our viewing angles changed as we read and reread the transcripts and prior interpretations to look for essential nuances that would be lost in voluminous quantities or multiple sources of data. This crystallization occurred as we continually shifted from individual to group interpretations during our collaborative process.

Inter-rater reliability is one method to ensure that themes or codes are consistent. Marques and McCall (2005) argue that interrater reliability provides a valuable verification tool that not only establishes coherence of qualitative data, but provides a "major solidification" (p. 458) of the most significant themes in a study. In our collaborative process, each of us worked independently with the data which allowed for multiple viewpoints, but then we took all of those viewpoints and made sense of them as a whole. Instead of the traditional interrater reliability that uses a selection of text to test thematic consistency by counting the number of *rater* agreements (Marques & McCall, 2005), we tested each theme through a dialogic process of understanding the meaning of the text and moving from a surface understanding of the meaning through layers of possibilities. We constantly checked our interpretation against the text, the context, prior interpretations, and each other's interpretations.

Our Own Work

This circular process, or hermeneutic reconstruction, was at the heart of our qualitative work (Schwandt, 2000) and was not only a tool for enhancing rigor, but a way of being a researcher that none of us had experienced before. Only as we were completing the first study did we realize that this single data set raised multiple new questions, suggested different theoretical frameworks, and led to new analyses that took us deeper into the heuristic process. In order to authentically pursue the new questions raised by the data, we had to challenge our deeply held assumption that revisiting the same data could be judged by our peers as duplicating prior effort (often referred to as "double-dipping"). Pursuing the compelling new questions and our commitment to the heuristic process outweighed prior assumptions about the number of times a data set can be used. We moved seamlessly from one study to the next.

One example of our use of the hermeneutic circle comes from our third study. We realized that we had been so focused on what was occurring in the online dialogue and how it occurred that we did not consider how individual meaning (each person's life story that they had written prior to the online dialogue) had been transformed into shared meaning. Thus, our emerging research question became centered on how individual meaning became group meaning. Since describing one's life has an element of story, we decided to look at the transcripts from a narrative perspective. Our first assignment was to independently read the four life stories and look for themes within and across the stories. Our goal was to give the participants a stronger voice in this study than in the previous two. At the same time, we were exploring the literature on narrative and its components.

The individual life stories had common themes, and some of these themes paralleled the literature. We rewrote each of the life stories by reorganizing them according to themes and then read these interpretations numerous times to better understand the whole. In the reading, we realized that the focus on individual meaning did not, as we had hoped, lead us to better understand how the individual meaning became group meaning. Even though we had generated pages of text, worked for weeks and rewritten numerous drafts of the life stories, we decided to condense what we had written about each of the participants into a short paragraph that introduced the individual and put her key life events in a context that we could use as a starting point for the next phase of the analysis.

Although the work we did with the individual stories does not appear in our final paper, it was an essential step in understanding how we went about making sense of the connection between individual and group story. Without going through this process, we might not have had the clarity we did about how to proceed. By getting caught up in giving life to the participants' voices, we moved much more deeply into the heart of narrative and its role in constructing group meaning.

Reflections

Qualitative researchers take an interpretivist approach to their work, yet get caught up in demands for rigor by using techniques that have evolved from a positivist approach to understanding the world. As Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (2001) explain,

> In our view, qualitative research is not enhanced by poor imitations of other research styles and traditions. Analytic procedures which appear rooted in standardized, often mechanistic procedures are no substitute for genuinely "grounded" engagement with the data throughout the whole of the research process. (p. 15)

We found that some methods of verification, such as interrater reliability, may in fact limit one's findings to those that are ostensibly similar across multiple, independent observers working with small data sets. This has the potential to obscure the complexity that exists when working, both independently and together, through an iterative analysis process with all of the data. So instead of adding rigor, these methods can potentially reduce the complexity that is essential to the human experience.

Making the collaborative process among researchers transparent has great potential for adding rigor to qualitative data analysis. Yet, when Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified the limitations of the terms validity and reliability, and suggested the term trustworthiness instead, the strategies they described (credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of findings) did not include collaboration as one way to add trustworthiness to the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Through collaboration, procedures are likely to be transparent to the group and can, therefore, be made public. Data analysis benefits from an iterative, dialogic, and collaborative process because thinking is made explicit in a way that is difficult to replicate as a single researcher. The role of collaboration is rarely discussed in the field; rather, data analysis is assumed, at the core, to be an individual interpretation that requires the use of verification methods to substantiate the findings.

Writing up the Findings: Individual Ownership of Ideas or Ongoing Conversation

Assumptions

Along with the research process and analysis of the data, writing up and publishing the findings are also laden with assumptions that our own collaborative process has challenged. Conducting a research study is, in essence, making a truth claim. Who owns this truth? Does a published study claim, in essence, a definitive "truth"? Or can it be reconceptualized as one utterance in an ongoing professional dialogue?

This focus on ownership of ideas starts early in one's academic career. Students are warned as early as middle school of the academic death sentence; being accused of plagiarism. Students struggle, as do we, with what constitutes ownership of an idea, since all ideas build on prior knowledge. How to determine an original idea from one that was encountered in a conversation with someone else, either in print or in person, is a difficult task.

The dissertation process itself has historically been taken as a measure of a new scholar's ability to conduct independent research. In the social sciences and humanities, little support may be given to the student other than to approve steps along the way. The oral examination requires the individual student to publicly account for what she or he has discovered and presented, with faculty asking difficult questions to see whether students can successfully "defend" their ideas. Once the degree is granted, one's academic career is launched through the tenure process, with its emphasis on establishing an independent research agenda and demonstrating scholarly ability. Sole authorship articles are often privileged over collaborative work. When there are multiple authors, order of authorship implies significance of contribution. Collaborative contributions to knowledge remain less valued than individual contributions, so much so that there is no structure in the publication of research to denote equal and collaborative contributions of multiple authors.

Studies are traditionally presented and conceived as if done by a "lone researcher;" an individual analyzing data in a laboratory environment and making objective discoveries. "Most qualitative methodologies are deeply infused with individualistic conceptions and ideologies" (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1041). At best, research may be done cooperatively, with multiple researchers engaged in the process, but as an efficiency measure rather than generative one. Research tasks may be divided up and allocated to individuals to complete, but eventually they are brought back to the primary investigator whose task it is to make sense of it all. Language such as "first author" and "principal investigator" is pervasive and reinforces the assumption that one person is responsible for or has directed the research. In many cases this may accurately reflect the process, but we found this metaphor limiting in seeking to describe our own work.

The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) is used to guide much research in our fields of education and human services. The APA addresses issues of plagiarism and publication credit in section 8.11 and 8.12 of its *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (2003).

> 8.11 Plagiarism: Psychologists do not present portions of another's work or data as their own, even if the other work or data source is cited occasionally.
> 8.12 Publication Credit: (a) Psychologists take responsibility and credit, including authorship credit, only for work they have actually performed or to which they have substantially contributed. (b) Principal authorship and other publication credits accurately reflect the relative scientific or professional contributions of the individuals involved, regardless of their relative status. Mere possession of an institutional position, such as department chair, does not justify authorship credit. Minor contributions to the research or to the writing for publications are acknowledged appropriately, such as in footnotes or in an introductory statement.

The idea that authors could have contributed equally to a publication is considered a "special agreement," and is to be mentioned in the author note: "You may also explain any special agreements concerning authorship, such as if you and your colleagues contributed equally to the study" (American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 204). Bryan et al. (2002) describe issues of authorship and publication as primary obstacles to their collaborative research team, finding no way to allocate equal authorship credit to individual team members. As Rogers-Dillon (2005) puts it, "the system of grants, tenure, copyright, and Internal Review Boards (IRBs), at least in the USA, make such collaborations difficult if not impossible" (p. 449).

Our Own Work

Our collaborative work goes beyond coordinating individual efforts or dividing up tasks and submitting these to the group. We meet regularly, generally every other week for two hours, to generate understandings through conversation. Between meetings we encounter new ideas which may be relevant and work individually on portions of the paper. These ideas and written work are then brought to the group, exchanged, and revised many times until we no longer can say who initially wrote the various segments. As outlined in Figure 1, the iterative process moves from the whole group to each individual, back to the group to individual as long as is needed, through cycles of writing and conversation. Over time these cycles decrease in duration.

We participate in both face-to-face and email conversations, write numerous drafts, and are constantly thinking about the meaning being created together. Very often our discussions do not begin where we left off, but rather begin as if we never had the last discussion. We often must traverse familiar territory until we re-establish common ground. There have been times that this reworking has taken us in a different direction, much to our surprise and, at times, our chagrin. The process has no natural conclusion, rather it is bounded only by the practical need to bring closure to a particular phase by completing a paper and publishing it in a journal. By the end of one paper we are generally well into the next one. As we read more, we have more to say ourselves, and so it goes. What is essential is that we always to remain open to divergence and convergence; flexibility and fluidity were our guides.

Reflections

In contrast to the "lone researcher" or "primary investigator" metaphor, any individual thoughts (written, spoken, or otherwise) can be seen as iterations of past conversations being re-lived in current conversations (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1962). Rather than viewing writing as a representation of individual thought, we see it as participation in an ongoing conversation, among ourselves and with others in our disciplines. The two processes are intertwined and communicative; flip sides of the same coin. Our focus is on creating group meaning rather than coming to an agreement on how to synthesize individual contributions to a pre-defined project. This has caused us to struggle with order of authorship and how to quantify our individual contributions to what was a collaborative endeavor in the truest sense of the word. Our approach has been to alternate authorship position and/or include an author note that contributions were equal. This note is not always acknowledged, however, by those responsible for reviewing our annual materials in consideration for merit, tenure or promotion.

Although our work together has challenged fundamental assumptions about research, we believe that the hermeneutic process has made our work more rigorous than if we had used the methods we had been accustomed to using as individual researchers. These challenges have risen organically from our work as it has progressed over the years.

Conclusion

Assumptions about research are pervasive, and the need for qualitative research to compete with or position itself in relation to the positivist paradigm remains implicit and all too often unacknowledged. Collaborative research, as we have experienced it, addresses the concern that qualitative research methods need to be more transparent and public. The transparency begins with the researchers themselves, because they first must make the process visible to themselves through dialogue and writing. Through our collaborative process we have demonstrated how dialogue and writing blend to become inseparable parts of a transparent meaning-making process.

Rather than representing static beliefs, arguments or conclusions literally *owned* by an individual, we now experience writing as primarily communicative and part of the ongoing conversation of scholars. Writing extends the conversations we began in person. Our commitment is to the generation of new ideas and new understandings, rather than advocating for our individual ideas and understandings as the “right idea” to pursue. The space within which we worked has had to be fluid, tolerant of uncertainty and ambiguity, and open to change.

From her study of long-term collaborators in higher education, Creamer (2004) found that partners described themselves as one of three types: “like-minded” (likelihood of differences of opinions was low), “triangulators” (likelihood of difference of opinion existed about non significant issues), and “multiplists” (likelihood of difference of opinion was expected). Each type described a different way of working together. The focus, though, remained with the individual, rather than the collaborative group. In our view of collaborative research, one’s individual opinion is beside the point. What matters is the evolving nature of the process, the messiness of the data, and the ongoing conversation open to idea generation through dialogue.

Janesick (2000) confronts assumptions of qualitative research through the metaphor of the dance. While she intends her intriguing metaphor to transform the components of a research study, she does not extend the metaphor to include how the dance among the researchers during the inquiry process is uniquely appropriate to the interpretivist paradigm. In our research, meaning did not emerge fully developed, rather it started as a single dance step by an individual, with another individual adding a step, and then a new two-step was born. This new step was repeated and became stronger. Then a few weeks passed and we would forget the details of the dance so we would reconstruct them, knowing they were new and fragile. As in a dance, someone would take the lead for a moment to practice the new steps, then hand the lead off to another. Leading did not mean directing the dance, it meant remembering the steps of the dance that had been constructed and assuring that the structure held so new steps could be added. When the dancer stumbled, the steps disintegrated for a while, but then were reconnected in deeper and stronger ways so the movement could continue.

The dance metaphor brings the dialogic collaborative process visibly into the analysis. In our collaborative research, we recognized that each of us authentically voiced different views, approached tasks in different ways, and came from various ideological perspectives. These differences added multiple perspectives when co-constructing the meaning of a text and provided a richer, more flexible approach to rigor than strategies such as saturation, triangulation, or interrater reliability. This type of collaboration required each person to be themselves and also be willing to suspend a cherished idea or perspective for the larger, often different picture, yet to emerge. Although we approached the work as individuals, the process led to socially constructed meaning that transcended what we as individuals might have constructed on our own. Although each of us contributed our individual ideas to the inquiries we conducted, we could not have predicted at the outset of each meeting where a spoken word would go, or how a written sentence would be interpreted, shaped, and woven into the collaborative meaning. As we engaged in this process, we encountered new questions, some of which led to new explorations of the same data or a complete revision of our plan. We hope to continue the conversation about an alternative view of inquiry that is based on a dialogic, collaborative process of meaning making that fosters a research process that is more transparent, public, and available for ongoing scrutiny.

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