Paradigms Methodology Methods.pdf

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Paradigms, Methodology & Methods

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Have you ever been reading happily through a research article and suddenly become muddled between what counts as a paradigm versus a methodology versus a method? Did you know that there is a distinction between a methodology and a method? Have you ever engaged in your own research and tried to categorize what you were doing as paradigm, methodology, and method? The goal of this manuscript is to help you understand these three terms and then apply them to your own research.

Paradigm

Let us begin with the term paradigm. First, we must issue a buyer-beware. Some qualitative researchers feel that this term has been over-used and thus lost its meaning and significance. Using the term playfully, it is almost as if there has been a paradigm shift away from the concept of paradigm, and particularly paradigm shift. We will come back to the concept of paradigm shift below.

A paradigm is a matrix of beliefs and perceptions. There are power relationships and action implications inherent in paradigms. Foucault’s (1972, 1972-1977) theory helps us to understand paradigms. Foucault believed that there are mindsets of the age. These mindsets emerge through the conversations and actions of people. They are specific to a time and place context. They are social rather than individual entities. The mindsets simultaneously emerge out of daily being with others, and determine how we interact with others.

Let us examine one of Foucault’s own examples. One of the research topics that Foucault was interested in was mental illness. He analysed the systems and structures that were instituted to deal with persons who were classified as mentally ill. One component of the mindset of the age when he was doing his research was a belief that people who are mentally ill are dangerous. This belief was both informed by, and resulted in,
institutions keeping people who were mentally ill away from the general populace. These mindsets of the age are insidious (or in other words dangerous) because they are largely unconscious. If we are aware of these beliefs at all, our conscious concepts are using vague and fleeting. Paradigms can be conceived of as collections of mindsets of the age.

At this point, it would be helpful for us to consider another term. This term is *discourse*. Mills (1997) wrote about *discourse* as the meaning and power of the language between people. The concept of *discourse* extends beyond words and language. The concept includes the meanings of the words and the way in which we use language to express and share power.

Let us extend our exploration of the concept of *discourse* to explore *dominant* and *challenging discourses*, and then pursue an example. Often there are more than one, and often contrasting, mindsets of the age. The mindset that is held (often unconsciously) by the majority, or the powerful minority, is called the *dominant discourse*. The contrasting mindset, which is often advocated by a group of people, is called the *challenging discourse*. Sometimes there is one dominant and multiple challenging discourses.

One of the disciplines where you will read the terms *dominant* and *challenging discourse* is in Disability Studies. The dominant discourse that remains prevalent is that it is sufferable and pitiable to have a disabling condition. This discourse is enacted in the sympathy extended to parents and the attribution of the quality of patience to these parents. In other words, the public perception (largely unconscious) is that sons and daughters with disabling conditions are burdens and try one’s patience. The enactment of this dominant discourse is the creation of respite services to relieve parents of their burden, and the earmarking of research dollars toward preventing and curing disabling conditions. One of the challenging discourses is that persons with disabling conditions are regular human beings, no more a burden or challenge than anyone else. Just like others, people with disabling conditions have both strengths and challenges. All people can contribute to society given the opportunity. Advocates offering this challenging discourse, encourage research dollars to be spent on quality of life pursuits rather than prevention and amelioration.

Now, let us return to our initial concept of *paradigm*. Some would say that there has been a *paradigm shift* from people with disabling conditions as victims and burdens to regular citizens with strengths and challenges. However, it does not take a long glance to observe stigma and oppression still in place. This is why *paradigm shift* was challenged a number of paragraphs above. Entrenched and unconscious mindsets are difficult to eradicate and there is seldom a wholesale shift from one mindset to
another. Instead, we tend to talk about dominant and challenging discourses, recognizing the complexity of social life.

Methods & Methodology

The relationship between method and methodology is like the relationship between the words psyche and psychology, or between derma and dermatology. Psyche basically means the internal mind, and psychology is the discipline that studies and supports the internal mind (i.e. the research of academics in the faculty of psychology, and the counselling of psychologists). Derma is our outer covering, or skin. Dermatologists research skin and treat skin conditions.

The methods are the techniques or processes we use to conduct our research. The methodology is the discipline, or body of knowledge, that utilizes these methods. So, for example, one of the methodologies is ethnography. In ethnography, the researcher considers a bounded population (or in other words a group of people where the boundaries, or who is included or excluded is fairly obvious) and inquires into how they go about their day-to-day lives, and the meaning they attribute to these experiences. There are some informative ethnographic inquiries published about schools. These analyses are particularly compelling when inquiring into the evolution of dominant and challenging school discourses over time, or between cultures. The key to the ethnographic methodology is that the researcher does not manipulate or change the situation; she inquires into the day-to-day arrangement and events in the natural setting. In order to conduct this type of research, the researcher must play a role in the setting, or in other words, be a participant-observer. The researcher usually dedicates time and energy to the setting over a long period of time, in order to richly and deeply inform his inquiry.

What are the particular methods used by the ethnographer? The ethnographer collects artefacts. School artefacts include the children’s drawings and reports, and the teacher’s lesson plans. Another method used by the ethnographer is writing field notes. The ethnographer keeps a detailed journal about what he observes, the conversations he has with people such as the principal, teachers, and students, and his emotional response as he participates in the classroom. The ethnographer often employs the method of conducting interactive interviews. Interactive interviews are a conversation with a purpose. The interviewer writes a loose framework of themes that she would like to pursue in the conversation. She then follows the lead of the person she is interviewing. The conversation is a give-and-take, wherein the ethnographer is permitted to share her own perceptions, as well as pursuing the beliefs of the interviewee. After employing the methods of: a) collecting artefacts, b) writing field notes, and c) conducting interactive interviews, in order to collect data, the researcher must then analyse the data in keeping with
the ethnographic methodology. Data analysis is the subject of another educational resource brief.

An Extended Example

Here is an extended quotation from Kinash, Noble and Hoffman (in press).

In 2008, the first two authors spent one day per week for twelve weeks at a primary state school. The context of our inquiry was a small, rural, Queensland school. There were two multi-age classes with a total of 32 students from prep (5 year-olds) through year seven. Our research goals were to: 1) assess the impact of educational technology on learning outcomes, and; 2) share the research findings in the form of training resources with children, teachers, and teacher preparation students. This action research agenda to infuse educational technology in the pursuit of an inquiry-based stance to teaching and learning is grounded in the work of Jacobsen and Lock (2004); Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen (2003), and Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford (2006). Our aims for the students of the school were to: 1) inform their identity as members of their local community; 2) scaffold their sense of self-efficacy and help them find and adapt tools to manage their own learning, and; 3) help them discover multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression through educational technologies (Rose & Meyer, 2006; Rose & Meyer, 2002; Rose, Meyer & Hitchcock, 2005).

This article was authored through a collaborative partnership between three authors. Dr. Shelley Kinash was a Visiting Academic from Educational Technology at the University of Calgary in Canada. The newness of the rural Australian context allowed her to trouble what is taken-for-granted and made the unconscious salient (Seamon, 1979). Dr. Karen Noble is the Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. Dr. Noble contributed a richly informed experiential background in the situated context. The text of this article does not differentiate between sections primarily authored by one or the other academic; they found a synergy of stance and voice that afforded blended authorship. The third author is Madison Hoffman, a Year Seven Student at the school where this case study is situated. Ms. Hoffman brought a fresh perspective, unencumbered by the academic vernacular. She lives the daily experience of being a student in a rural Australian context. She has experienced teachers who embrace and enact a stance of child agency, and those who believe she is “too big for her britches,” or that she “needs to be taken down a notch.”

This research was situated in a pedagogical paradigm. The dominant discourse is one of school as the procurer of reading, writing, and ‘rithmatic, or what Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen (2003) call a “back to the
basics” mentality. The challenging discourse, forming the underlay of this article, is an inquiry-based stance to teaching and learning. Embedded in this stance, is a belief in the agency of the child.

The framing of this research takes an eclectic methodological approach. In other words, numerous methodological traditions inform this research in order to enable the researchers to inquire into the questions. Considering the term, *paradigm*, the framing of this research is written within the interpretive paradigm. The dominant discourse is that research needs to follow a rigorous, set plan, and choose a single methodology. The challenging discourse, enacted within this research, is that the plan, questions, and methods emerge through the interaction within the research context. Multiple methodologies are employed to enable researchers to turn the lenses on their inquiry. The Kinash, Noble and Hoffman (in press) research is not the only example within this paradigm. Kincheloe and Berry (2004), for example, called this eclectic approach to research a *bricolage*.

Three examples of methodologies informing this research are: action research; phenomenology, and; ethnography. Action research blends inquiry and application into a seamless whole. Traditional research poses a question, collects and analyses the data, interprets the results, and then publishes the report or article. The practitioners may then read the research report or article, judge the relevance to their context, and then possibly apply the results within their setting. Action research, on the other hand, enables the researcher to be effect change simultaneously while collecting and interpreting data. For example, the academics engaged in the research presented above are modelling an inquiry-based stance to teaching and learning, which is changing the teachers’ and children’s approach. Further, publishing with a child author is actively changing entrenched research paradigms about who counts as legitimate author.

Phenomenology is the study of everyday life. The researcher seeks to observe and understand the day to day life and meaning within the context. For example, one of the first pursuits within this research was to distribute enough digital cameras to the children so that each had an opportunity to capture images of the spaces and tools of their learning. The researcher then sat with each child, as the student/researcher talked about the meaning and significance of each photo.

The third example of methodology employed within this research was ethnography. Ethnography as a methodology was described above. The academics became participant observers within the school context. Ms. Hoffman was encouraged to embrace her roles as both student and researcher, as she co-authored the publication.
You will have noted multiple methods described in the proceeding paragraphs. Some of these methods are briefly summarised here again, to serve as examples. Within this research, we observed and wrote field notes. For example, one day, as I was engaging on the carpet with the children, I noticed one of the older boys start out positioning himself at the back of the room, as far from me as he could be, where he tried to distract other children. He became more and more engaged in our conversation, evidenced by his relevant and insightful comments and questions. Physically, he crept forward, moving overtop the other children. By the end of our session, he was sitting on the table, nearly on top of me. I wrote about this observation in my field notes, as well as my emotional response, and possible interpretations of significance. We have held focus groups with small groups of children. We have conducted interactive interviews one-on-one with children and their teachers. We have documented our observations through digital still photography and digital videography, sometimes in our control, and sometimes in the control of the children.

Conclusion

This document in the educator’s resource series addressed the interactive concepts of paradigms, methodology, and methods. In summary, paradigms are the theoretical mindsets, or collections of beliefs that underlie our approach. Methodologies are discipline-specific approaches and processes of our research. Methods are the specific ways in which we go about collecting our research data.

References


