Why Qualitative Data Matter: Community Members’ Perceptions of Learning Environments

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Introduction

It is an honour and privilege to be invited here to Thailand and Mahidol University to encourage and nurture qualitative research. There are numerous possibilities for you as teachers and researchers and I hope to spark some interest in your becoming active in both theoretical and practical qualitative pursuits. There are things happening here in Thailand and we just heard the potential things the government is doing to encourage research, development, and publications. I, too, want to encourage you to share your data not only among yourselves, but with your community, region, nation, and the world. We need to know what exciting things are happening here in Thailand. Your perceptions, beliefs, and understandings are important to the wider profession around the globe. I hope some of my insights enlighten your journey to develop, share, and provide qualitative data that matter to you and others.

My Personal Journey

I started understanding the importance of qualitative research when completing my doctoral studies at the University of Illinois (UI). It was a time when there were quite a few paradigm wars and quantitative researchers were attempting to hold their ground. At UI it was a time when some quantitative researchers were holding their own in quantitative experimental design, while others were crossing the boundaries and moving from quantitative to qualitative analyses. The pure qualitative researchers were arguing for much less, if any, adherence to positivism and more experimentation with burgeoning ideas from anthropology and applied linguistics, among other disciplines, and there were still others who were attempting to meld the quantitative and qualitative methods (now what is termed “mixed methods”). It was a wonderful time to develop as a researcher, even though it meant I had to learn various ideas, understand who I could talk to, and then put together a doctoral committee who would allow both quantitative and qualitative collection and analysis strategies and techniques. I walked those various boundary lines and was constantly bombarded (still am) from all sides. Now, it is a bit easier (or am I just older?). Nonetheless, at that time I had to be proficient in many research ideas and paradigms. Make no doubt about it, I leaned toward qualitative analysis. After all, I was interested in meaning, not just numbers void of contextual conditions and understandable statistical significances. I was enamored with the ideas among others of context of situation, meaning-potential, and what this all meant to
foreign and second language teachers and teacher education. I saw during my development as a researcher that qualitative data would matter, if only to better understand the plight of (second language) teachers, in real schools, dealing with real students.

*Qualitative Meanings: A Beginning*

I was reminded of the early literature that tapped my curiosity as I began thinking about this plenary address. The literature was sparse and from various authors in different disciplines. Yet all developed and focused my qualitative research acumen. Filstead (1970) taught me to consider the social aspect of research (and eventually the social aspect of teaching and learning).

Qualitative methodology refers to those research strategies, such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing, total participation in the activity being investigated, field work, etc., which allow the researcher to obtain first-hand knowledge about the empirical social world in question. Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to “get close to the data,” thereby developing the analytical, conceptual, and categorical components of explanation from the data itself. (p. 6)

Rist (1977) attuned me to learn how to begin understanding the various people within society, schools, and classrooms. Emphasis is placed upon the ability of the researcher to “take the role of the other,” to grasp the basic underlying assumptions of behavior through to understanding the “definition of the situation” from the view of the participants, and upon the need to understand the perceptions and values given to symbols as they are manipulated by people. (p. 44)

Finally, Erickson (1977) assisted me in analyzing and synthesizing the ideas of Filstead (1970) and Rist (1977) and I began considering what the individual perceptions within the social actions of the numerous participants within various contexts mean.

Qualitative research seeks to tell us what the game is: what attributes of “things” in the game are functionally relevant to playing the game, what appropriate relations among things there are in the game, and what the game related purposes of the players are. (Erickson, 1977, p. 59)

The “game” metaphor helped me to more clearly see (and understand) that if the profession was going to really learn and understand second language teachers, teaching, and learning, what such a “game” meant to teachers was a step to take not only to pursue research but to begin charting new research territory (Bernhardt & Hammadou [1987] found that little research was completed from the perspectives of foreign and second language teachers, and Freeman [2007] noted that Kleinsasser [1989; 1993], among others, offered a “new research direction that examined how people learned to be language teachers” and “argued for a view of language teachers and of language teaching that differed in profound ways from their antecedents” [Freeman, 2007, p. 896]).

As my journey to implement and further understand qualitative research continued, I was drawn to the work of
Eisner (1991) who emphasized an encompassing aspect to qualitative work that it “is sufficiently general to encompass not only teaching and other forms of human activity, but also objects such as buildings and books. Qualitative thought is ubiquitous in human affairs. It is not some exotic form of doing or making, but a pervasive aspect of daily life” (p. 5). Eisner’s work further outlined for me six features of qualitative study to which I still adhere. These include: 1) field focused, 2) the self as instrument, 3) interpretive character, 4) the use of expressive language and the presence of voice in text, 5) attention to particulars, and 6) criteria for judging qualitative studies’ success (coherence, insight, and instrumental utility). The literature up to this period of time lacked clarity of what schools and classrooms were like, relied on instruments done by researchers, most from researchers’ perspectives, used a language of statistics and quantitative jargon, paid attention to norms, means, and standard deviations, and lacked a coherence of meaning, insight into the teachers’ workplace, and utility for practitioners, as well as researchers.

Fortunately, studies started appearing that challenged what is now seen as a more positivistic stance (among others, Goodlad, 1984; Lightfoot, 1983; Lortie, 1975; McNeil, 1986; Metz, 1978). These and other literature of the time allowed me to see how qualitative research could be completed while also warning about the challenges of meeting both quantitative and qualitative research standards. How could I work with qualitative data and still get published in mainstream research journals? How could I meld both quantitative and qualitative findings to pacify persons in either of the camps? How could I demonstrate the potential of qualitative data, qualitative analysis, and qualitative findings? Howe and Eisenhart (1990) assisted me in how to manage my research agenda. They reminded me that there needed to be a fit between research questions and data collection and analysis techniques. They further admonished me to be aware of the coherence of my background assumptions. These and other standards for educational research still guide and guard my research projects and scholarly writing. They also nicely dovetail Krathwohl (1993) when he reminds that “researchers creatively combine the elements of methods in any way that makes the best sense for the study that they want to do. Their only limits are their own imagination and the necessity of presenting their findings convincingly” (p. 31).

Before moving to the importance of combining elements of methods and stressing why qualitative data matter, I have to confess that I have completed studies with one data collection strategy, both quantitatively and qualitatively. I completed a logistics regression on teacher attrition data from the state of Illinois. I found through the various quantitative maneuvers that those teachers who died, did not re-enter the classroom, such an empirical finding was a relief (Kleinsasser, 1992)! I also examined a set of funding applications for a major state’s education department and found that much more qualitative information needed to be gleaned from those that completed the applications in order to more thoroughly understand the applications and what was written in
them (Kleinsasser & Becker, 1992). I further examined high school students applications to an independent school in Australia and found that although some insights were provided, additional questions and further in-depth interviews would help explain why the students and parents wrote on the applications what they wrote (Kleinsasser, 2001). All these studies reminded me that one data source was insufficient, and even though I could count various items in some while applying regression statistics in another, I basically ended the projects (and articles) with a feeling that so much more needed to be qualitatively understood, uncovered, and detailed. I needed to creatively combine methods to more richly portray the various elements being studied. Triangulation became a salient feature to begin answering queries and setting research agendas.

Triangulation I: Validity of Evidence

Triangulation is “Usually the use of three or more differing collection strategies to affirm and articulate the validity of evidence each produces” (Williamson, Karp, Dalphin, & Gray, 1982, p. 82). These authors urge the use of multiple measures thereby making it possible to concentrate on the point at which a series of independent, indirect, and perhaps weak indicators can converge to minimize their separate errors and maximize their overall validity. It was important in early qualitative studies to think about data converging and offering various data to highlight salient insights.

Rosenholtz (1989), my Ph.D. dissertation director, investigated elementary school teachers’ perceptions of their technical culture. “A technical culture encompasses the nature of activities to be carried out in performing an organization’s tasks and embodies the procedures, knowledge, and skills related to attaining organizational goals” (Kleinsasser, 1989, p. 5). Rosenholtz utilized survey and interview data to highlight her findings. I became interested in her theoretical framework, but also wanted to know what teachers actually did in the classroom. My study sought to explain what teachers actually did in nonroutine/certain learning environments and routine/uncertain learning environments (Kleinsasser, 1993, Kleinsasser & Savignon, 1991). In the realm of language teaching and learning, it became evident from three data sources that second language teachers in nonroutine/certain technical cultures focused on language form and use, while foreign language teachers in routine/uncertain technical cultures focused on language form, usually ignoring language use. Moreover, nonroutine/certain language teachers provided instruction to students with the use of social, behavioral, personal, and information models of teaching (see Joyce & Weil, 1986, for definitions), while routine/uncertain language teachers focused on behavioral models of teaching, to the exclusion of other potential models. The interactions in the classrooms were also different. Nonroutine/certain language teachers sought students to be interactive in group work and talking with each other using the second language, whereas routine/uncertain language teachers sat students in rows, completed patterned exercises, and talked about the foreign language rather than allowing students to interact and use the language. Without the additional data source of observations, it was unclear just what differences between teachers in the two varying technical cultures were.
Observations not only helped clarify the survey and interview results, they provided further insights into what these teachers meant by what they reported and enhanced the quality of quantity and of explaining what teachers did when they and the students worked in their various classrooms and school technical cultures.

What was clear in the use of triangulation of data from my first research study was that nonroutine/certain language teachers provided evidence through surveys, interviews, and observations that is now common research knowledge that cooperative learning, high quality exchanges between teachers and students, and responsiveness to different learning styles promote (second) language learning and academic success (Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006). Routine/uncertain language teachers provided evidence through surveys, interviews, and observations that detailed traditional interaction patterns were prevalent, where the teacher initiated, a student responded, and the teacher evaluated, a typical initiate (I), respond (R), and evaluate (E) pattern (Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979), identified in many classrooms still today (Kennedy, 2005). Since then my graduate students and I have utilized triangulation to document and understand the practical understandings of communicative language teaching (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999a), the technical culture of a high school professional development school (Kleinsasser, 1999), the beliefs, practices, and interactions of teachers in a Japanese high school English department (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004), the development and change of a graduate course in testing and assessment (Kleinsasser, 2005), the professional development of English language teachers in a Japanese high school (Kleinsasser & Sato, 2007), and how second language practitioners develop language tests and assessments (Kleinsasser, 2008). Qualitative data, from these and other studies, matter because we can now qualify the issues with a richness of details that quantitative data only count. We can offer theory to practice that helps practitioners make meaning of various data sets for their specific contexts.

Triangulation II: Convergent, Divergent, and Inconsistent Data

Converging data is great when it happens; however, this may not always be the case. Mathison (1988) already alerted the profession that triangulation does not necessarily result in converging themes, but may result in divergent and inconsistent themes that may result in evidence that must be explained and discussed by researchers. Triangulation may lead to multiple propositions about the context and participants within each study.

My first doctoral student and I ran into this problem in understanding undergraduate students’ beliefs and perceptions in their mathematics education course (Foss & Kleinsasser, 1996; 2001). We used interviews, observations, a mathematics anxiety scale, and a survey to uncover their development as elementary education teachers over a period of one semester. As we explained about the contradictory evidence:

If the evidence from the data collection methods such as grades, anxiety rating scales, and teaching evaluations were the sole means of portraying beliefs
and actions, the pre-service teachers in this study exemplified change (i.e. not only more relaxed, but also knowledgeable in methods of teaching mathematics). However, the components of the analysis that provided the rich description supported explanations of what actually transpired. Regardless of reduced mathematics anxiety, competent grades, and top ratings from cooperating teachers, the pre-service teachers’ apprehensions for adopting the methods course philosophy and their unchanged beliefs and practices strongly suggested a much more complex process than perhaps psychologists, teacher educators, or the pre-service teachers ever imagined. Moreover the results of this study imply the use of multiple data source allowing for the contrasting conceptions of mathematics held by pre-service teachers, and the methods instructor may help more clearly explain two of the most unsettling features of teacher education development: the changing of conceptions and the learning of mathematics pedagogy. (Foss & Kleinsasser, 2001, p. 288)

Another of my doctoral students and I also ran into a similar problem with survey and observation data (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999b). We found that respondents on the one hand completed survey questions that informed us they used or were in agreement with communicative language teaching (CLT). However, once classroom observation data entered the analysis, teachers rarely implemented communicative language teaching of any kind. Hence, leaving us wondering why they said something on the survey but acted quite differently in the classroom; inconsistent and divergent data that needed accounting, explanation, and further investigation.

Additionally, divergent and inconsistent data not only occurs across data collection methods, but within participant samples as well. A master’s student and I found this to be a challenge in providing understandings of the advice home country teachers gave to non-home country teachers (Crozier & Kleinsasser, 2006). We found several contradictions that appeared in the responses to the information prompts completed by 30 non-native and native English teachers who represented 14 home countries (one each from China, Japan, Mexico, Oman, the Philippines, South Korea, Switzerland, Taiwan, and the United States, two each from Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Singapore, four from Indonesia and 11 from Vietnam).

1. Many respondents wrote that a communicative-based approach to teaching, such as CLT, would be beneficial to a non-home country English teacher. However, other respondents contradicted this statement by replying that students focused on grammar and ignored speaking in class. Similarly, many respondents answered that English was a tool for national or international communication, yet other respondents contradicted this view by stating English was a useful tool for passing examinations in high school and university. (p. 37)
2. The majority of respondents believed a non-home country English teacher would only need a basic level of L1 ability to live comfortably in their country, but many contradicted themselves further by suggesting the same teacher should learn not only the national but also local variety of language as well. (p. 37)

3. Similarly, although an elementary level of L1 ability was seen as sufficient by the majority of participants, a minority of participants went on to note a non-home country English teacher would be socially isolated with such a level, or possibly face bilingual or multilingual problems in the classroom, such as difficulty in understanding the local variety of English. Interestingly, there was much disagreement among the 11 Vietnamese participants when asked the L1 level of proficiency a non-home country English teacher should have in Vietnam, with their answers ranging from ‘none required’ to ‘an almost native level’. (p. 37)

Qualitative data matter in understanding the nuance and complexity of how people respond and what people mean. Qualitative data uncover the realities of people in context and manage consistencies, inconsistencies, and contradictions, because such insight matters in understanding teachers, students, classrooms and in influencing teaching and learning while promoting further research questions.

**Triangulation III: Multiple Shareholders and Their Perspectives**

As we progress to understand groups of teachers, students, and administrators, among others, it is becoming more and more relevant to pay attention to how these groups are portrayed in the literature. Additionally, it is paramount to consider, as above, the converging, diverging, and inconsistent data within each group, as well as the converging, diverging, and inconsistent data across each group. More than one perspective within each group and across each group further highlights not only the social nature of teaching and learning, but the complexity of teaching and learning in various educational environments. These issues also make research more complex and demanding.

A school principal and I evaluated an independent primary school’s Spanish program in Australia (Kleinsasser, 1997; Kleinsasser & Crouch, 2000). We found that various shareholders had various ideas about the Spanish program and what students should be learning. The Spanish teacher wanted the students to learn to communicate in the language, the primary grade teachers wanted Spanish to enhance cognitive processes, the high school foreign language teachers wanted to make sure that students would transfer their foreign language learning skills to the various languages (not Spanish) offered in the high school, the parents wanted students to be able to translate Spanish movies seen on TV, and the administration sought to promote and develop multiculturalism through Spanish. Students shared they just wanted to speak Spanish. Once can see what various people thought of the focus of the program. The perceptions offered were quite diverse and part of the
evaluation highlighted the simple fact that taken together the shareholders’ expectations were not necessarily the same. Negotiation of meaning among and between each shareholder group was a necessary first step in thinking about program goals, objectives, expectations, and results. Qualitative data highlighted many of the problems that administrators believed were within the environment but were not made visible until qualitative analyses of the various data sets provided such insights.

Kleinsasser and Liu (in progress) are looking at a student teacher’s experience in a junior high school. The student teacher along with the 70 plus teachers in the school, the subgroup of English language teachers, the cooperating teacher, and the university supervisor offer data from surveys, interviews, journals, and artifacts to help discuss and portray the student teacher’s induction year. The task is daunting to provide such an array of converging, diverging, and inconsistent data! A most interesting finding is that the student teacher socialized well into the school culture, satisfied the cooperating teacher and university supervisor, he even changed his hair and clothing to suit his context. He then informed the researchers at the end of the study that he will leave teaching. He does not want to be like the teachers in this junior high school. Qualitative data matter because they account for subtleties, nuances, and contingencies. Qualitative data matter because they highlight the challenges, problems, and obstacles in learning to teach, learning how to teach, and learning about learning. Qualitative data matter to both theoreticians and practitioners because they interrogate the theoretical and practical problems of teaching, learning, and language acquisition, among so many other variables.

Recent Qualitative Literature in Second Languages

Richards (2009) most recently offers a review of second languages qualitative studies since 2000. He notes the various topics of published qualitative research in second languages include approaches to teaching, identity and socialization, narrative/lives, teachers beliefs, and linguistic ethnography, among others. He also draws attention to the issues of quality within the developing qualitative second language literature that considers validity, reliability, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and methodological interrogation. The most interesting part of Richard’s review highlights the publication rate of qualitative studies in various professional journals. He notes that between 2000 and 2007 one quarter of the papers published in TESOL Quarterly, The Asian Journal of English Language Teaching, and Language Teaching Research are qualitative in nature. The Modern Language Journal, Applied Linguistics, Prospect, and The JALT Journal publish one in five papers that are qualitative, while less than ten percent of the papers are qualitative that are published in the International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, IRAL, Language Learning, RELC Journal, English for Specific Purposes, ELT Journal, Journal of Second Language Writing, and System. Although qualitative studies are being published in the second languages field, they remain a minority within the publication of major second language teaching and learning journals. There is potential to increase these rates of publishing qualitative studies.
Paradigm Shiftings and Shifting Paradigms

There is no doubt that we continue living in a time of paradigm shiftings and shifting paradigms. The initial dichotomy of positivistic (Does an instrument measure what it is supposed to measure? [validity] Will the same measure yield the same results on different occasions (assuming no real change in what is to be measured) [reliability]) versus phenomenological (Has the researcher gained full access to the knowledge and meanings of informants? [validity] Will similar observations be made by different researchers on different occasions? [reliability]) viewpoints continue while some of us attempt to transcend the quantitative and qualitative debate by acknowledging Saloman’s (1991) insight that “Without observations of the whole system of interrelated events, hypotheses to be tested could easily pertain to the educationally least significant aspects” (p. 17). Or being aware of Eisner’s (1991) ideas that “it is far more liberating to live in a world with many different paradigms and procedures than in one with a single official version of the truth or how to find it. Verificationists are right to worry about the validity of claims, they are wrong to claim that the road to truth is the sole property of their party” (p. 48).

Qualitative data matter because as Metz (2000) eloquently argues: “Qualitative methodologies in education – and they are plural – carry assumptions or propositions about the nature of knowledge, the self, social interaction, culture, and society. Research is a multifaceted dialogue among meta-theories about existence and knowledge, substantive theory, and information about the empirical world” (p. 61). Additionally, Page (2000) reminds those of us doing qualitative research why we actively participate: “In a sense, qualitative methodology can be portrayed as a work in progress and its practitioners as scribes in motion. The methodology encounters questions and advances new tactics and, in the process, produces other questions” (p. 29).

I challenge you to join me with your works in progress and as scribes in motion. How will you advance the profession with qualitative analyses? How will you make qualitative data matter?

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