Before the Research: A Personal Account

(Or, Why I Am a Constructivist)

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Abstract

This personal essay presents the essentials of the qualitative methodology known as constructivism and its associated epistemology, ontology and axiology. The author makes a case for constructivism as a research paradigm based on student focused ethics.

Keywords: constructivism; qualitative inquiry; qualitative research; research paradigms; college and university libraries; librarian research; academic librarians

Introduction

Even quantitative and mixed methods researchers can benefit from self-examination regarding their values, ethics, history and goals before beginning a research endeavor. But for qualitative researchers it is absolutely essential to grapple with concrete details to make explicit the undergirding of decisions. Newly minted academic librarians are not always prepared to conduct the original research that is demanded by our career path. Novice researchers, in order to ensure consistency throughout the entire research process need to situate projects within a research paradigm. Constructivism is a part of the qualitative tradition that allows for prioritizing the ethics of inclusion, placing student perspectives in the center of the research process.

Qualitative approaches allow the researcher to do several important things; including exploring multiple perspectives, challenge objectivity claims and build theory based on inductive thinking. Many an article about academic libraries begins with declarations that "now" is a particularly difficult time because of changes in technology and society in general. This perspective is of questionable utility not only because it has become a cliché, but because under the guise of a glancing reference to social context it, in fact, skews the research to the librarian perspective. If one were to conduct typical, quantitative research from this point of view, one would essentially be measuring the degree of stress that librarians experience, greatly diminishing the chance of learning anything new about the research topic. What initially seems like a writing issue might in fact reveal an unexamined or unconscious paradigm or theoretical framework. For a longer discussion of the negative consequences of this issue see Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014).

Qualitative research begins with an examination of the researcher. What I'm sharing in this article is not an argument for or against one qualitative paradigm or another but rather my perspective, in essence part of a "researcher identity memo" more than anything else (Maxwell, 2013). Readers may feel a bit uncomfortable and find themselves experiencing an echo of my own undergraduate experience discussed below.

In higher education, students have always been what is called in anthropology liminal, the state of being between phases. According to Thomassen (2009) liminality "serves to conceptualize moments when the relationship between structure and agency is not easily resolved or even understood..." (p. 5). Students are in the process of becoming productive, educated members of adult society. Even if, year after year, students will always need to find books and articles, we can't take it for granted that how we help them will always be the same year after year (Who are they now? Who are they becoming?).

The fact is that they do change, as cohorts and as individuals. Their formative experiences are different, their expectations and futures are different from students, two, five, ten years prior. One anecdotal example is that over the past ten years my colleagues and I have found students expressing more and more confusion about the difference between the library and the bookstore. This has implications for outreach and marketing, especially library branding. A simple approach would have the goal of identifying how students prefer to communicate or a more nuanced way would be to identify novel approaches, such as collaborations with faculty or student services. The questions we need to explore are about how students produce their own knowledge and how are they producing their future selves, rather than attempting to impose a monolithic or predictive structure on them.

Qualitative inquiry is also well suited to confront the complexity within the researcher. When I was an undergraduate student I was assigned to read the ethnography, *Never in Anger* by Jean Briggs (1970), for my history of anthropological theory seminar. We were warned that this was a groundbreaking, expectation breaking book. I had already read ethnographies involving many challenging descriptions of hygiene, medicine and sex but none of it prepared me for the deep disgust and outrage I felt when first reading the following passage: "...since early childhood I, too, had wanted to know what it felt like to be an Eskimo; and secretly I thought of the trip partly as a fulfillment of that dream. ... Indeed, never having felt very American in my outlook, I rather hoped I might discover myself essentially Eskimo at heart" (Briggs, 1970, p. 20).

It was an affront to my concept of what it meant to be an intellectual because it was a vulnerable, first person account about emotions. I had not realized that I had, by virtue of completely ordinary high school science education, unconsciously absorbed a positivist perspective, specifically the idea that all knowledge is based in objectivity and the scientific method. In short, Briggs broke every academic rule and still managed to be insightful, to put forth a radical perspective and to challenge disciplinary norms. In the process of authentically experiencing a complex research site she was able to render an account of a site that she could not predict or control. To make it all more confusing, my professors were employing critical and postmodern frames of reference. I was also a mere 19 years old with all the typical emotions and underdeveloped thought patterns of an adolescent. I am probably still as complicated, but at least more aware now.

As an undergraduate I had a grand total of one class in anthropological field methods which nevertheless gave me a distinct advantage at work when problem solving

and addressing issues with students. It was only while getting my second masters in urban affairs that acquainted me with more research theory, design and methods and, most importantly, practice defining problems so they can be solved.

In this program I took a class in qualitative methods and more importantly, experienced a variety of fieldwork opportunities. I was working with simple methods based on a core of careful listening; observing and interviewing clients, service providers and board members to create needs assessment, policy analysis and strategic plans. These pragmatic opportunities were, frankly, far more compelling than any theories I had been taught. Working on needs assessment and strategic plans had a wonderful quality of directness, solving "real world" problems in all their complexity. It was very rewarding to see our (always group work) ideas tested and sometimes, helping people.

Librarianship is rife with commitments to objectivity that may be in conflict with service delivery. We need to confront these unconscious tendencies (Broido & Manning, 2002). Broido and Manning (2002) name five characteristics of positivist thinking, three of which I find burdensome in librarianship. They are: 1) having prediction and control as the goals of inquiry, 2) the researcher keeps the subject at a distance and 3) the belief that the researcher can keep her or his values from affecting the findings.

We can find all three of these tendencies cropping up at the reference desk when not checked. The reference desk is a microcosm of inquiry that can provide many prompts for self- examination (VanScoy, 2016). Each librarian needs to ask herself, how much distance is an appropriate boundary without sending a negative message to students? When I can predict the questions do I become bored and act less approachable? If my values are to help students grow and succeed, is it detrimental to keep this from

them? The infamous and long standing reluctance and dissatisfaction students experience

at the reference desk may be due to unexamined paradigms that nevertheless guide our

behavior (Antell, 2004; Atlas, 2005; Carlile, 2007; Foster & Gibbons, 2007; Mellon,

1986; Radford, 1998; Radford & Radford, 2017; Swope & Katzer, 1972; Taylor, 1968).

Choosing a Research Paradigm

Research paradigms (also called theoretical frameworks) represent the

philosophical foundation and worldview of the researcher. While there isn't universal

agreement about exactly what constitutes a research paradigm, the general consensus

includes questions of the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge

(epistemology), purpose, goals and values (axiology). Consistency in underlying aspects

of research design are more likely to result in findings that are understandable and

actionable relevant. This article only looks at constructivism, for a more extensive

discussion and comparison of paradigms, please see Mackenzie and Knipe (2006),

Glesne (2010), Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2018), and Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, and

Gildersleeve (2012). In choosing a research paradigm I decided to start with my personal

goals - first to highlight student perspectives as an ethical stance, and secondly, to

improve praxis.

Characteristics of Constructivism

According to Schwandt (1990) constructivism is marked by "...a general rejection

of the naturalistic interpretation of the social sciences and seek to inquire into, portray,

and interpret the realm of intersubjective meanings as constituted in culture, language,

symbols and so forth" (p. 264). "Thick description" is one hallmark of constructivism. It

is a methodology as well as a product. Although often invoked, thick description is not as

often explained. It is associated with Geertz (2000), Denzin (1989), Schwandt (2001) and Holloway (1997). There are different types of "thickness"- relational, sensory, biographical, historical, situational, interactional – depending on the research question. In general, thick description should inform and not use verbiage to obscure. It is well worth reading Ponterotto's (2006) excellent overview of the concept.

The following points are based on tables found in Mackenzie and Knipe (2006), Glesne (2010), and Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2018). While they are certainly oversimplifications, they are an appropriate starting point for novice researchers.

Ontological Stance - Reality Is the Outgrowth of Human Interaction

I probably don't personally believe this, in general. However, in the complex ecosystem that is the large urban community college where I work, this is undoubtedly true. Every single thing happening at the college is because of students, whether they are directly involved or not. And they are a greatly diverse group, in terms of their interests, skills, backgrounds and goals which creates a wide variety of scenarios and demands flexibility in planning and programs. It doesn't matter at all if I "believe in" this premise as long as I consciously work with it as a fundamental part of the research paradigm I am using.

Axiological Stance - Values Are Situated in the Participant's Perspective

This point is key for me. It's all too easy to get stuck in irritation at the fact that students are often immature and underdeveloped in their independence. These perfectly normal feelings, however, can develop into a distortion, whereby I come to believe I know who they are, what they need, etc. Placing the student perspective in the middle of the research process is not just an ethical choice but a reality check. An example of this is

an ethnography study by Regalado and Smale (2015) who took a much broader approach to understanding the life of commuter students, looking at their living spaces, traveling experiences and technology use in order to contextualize their library use and needs. Readers will need to judge for themselves whether this represents overreach or an ethically motivated advance in the development of student focused research.
The purpose of research is to improve praxis.

This is the only acceptable motivation for me. Beyond that personal choice, however are implications for the appropriate use of theory as an organizing tool (Dewey cited in Shields & Tajalli 2006) and not as an end in itself. According to Mintzberg (2014), "all theories are false". Furthermore, "theory is insightful when it surprises, when it allows us to see profoundly, imaginatively, unconventionally into phenomena we thought we understood.... Theory development is really about discovering patterns" (Mintzberg, 2014). So, in this case, present or future praxis becomes the organizing principle, and not the application of theory for theory's sake.

It also refers back to our ontological stance, acknowledging that the core of our work is human interaction. The goal of my research is to identify the most plausible point for improvement. For example, I have in development a project for analyzing syllabi in part to assess the accuracy of library related information professors are distributing and to possibly develop language with professors to bring more clarity to their syllabi. The student/professor relationship is the core reality that I am exploring.

Epistemological Stance - Knowledge Is Co-created with Participants

The overall thrust of what I am trying to achieve is to move the student into the center of the inquiry process, moving away from unconsciously measuring librarian

stress. Antell (2004) provides a very good example in her study of why college students prefer to use a public library over their college library. She even begins her study with a survey of librarian suppositions about why students make this choice so the reader can compare these suppositions with the findings derived from student interviews. In this way Antell highlights the difference between librarian centered and student centered research.

Conclusion

Qualitative inquiry is a powerful approach to original research, providing researchers with pathways to deep understanding of issues which could ultimately, provide the basis for significant change. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014), "...questions suitable to qualitative inquiry provoke, illuminate, complicate, surprise, and emancipate that which we are coming to know and understand" (p. 197). In other words, qualitative inquiry is well suited for understanding complex research sites, like college and university libraries.

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