

Personal Journal Writing: Selecting the ethnographic method for enquiry

Abstract

After identifying the need for additional research into the writing process, particularly relating to expressive writing in the form of personal journals, the researcher explicated his personal assumptions regarding some of the values of this mode of self-expression. The ethnographic approach to research was introduced, with key tenets and assumptions serving as a basis for the review of several specific qualitative studies of the composing process. Commentary on the suitability of this approach to the personal writing experience led to the conclusion that an ethnographic approach would be essential to account for the highly interactive and subjective nature of the journal writing episode.

Three summers ago, while travelling through the Orient and Europe for four months, I began to keep a daily journal, in the form of an ongoing series of extended letters home to a friend in Canada. I soon realized how valuable this personal writing was becoming for me, by providing me with the means to reflect on my daily experiences, to make sense of my novel and often challenging environment, and to discover new facets of my own underlying perspectives and motivations, all within the medium of my personal written expression of my thoughts and feelings.

In recent years, educators have been becoming increasingly aware of the tremendous potential that personal journal writing can have for allowing students to engage in a meaningful writing activity, using their own powers of written self-expression to come to a greater self-awareness (Craig, 1983; Myers, 1980; Staton, 1980). Presently, additional research is necessary for the

furthering of our understanding of the writing process as it takes place during the transaction between an individual and the emerging piece of self-created literature.

Central to any systematic exploration of a phenomenon is the selection of a particular methodological paradigm. This paper presents a rationale and justification for the application of an ethnographic approach to the study of journal writing, and indeed, of all language-using situations. Before discussing this potentially effective approach to examine the transactional nature of personal writing, it seems appropriate to present some of my personal assumptions regarding journal writing.

Personal assumptions regarding journal writing

The following tenets were formulated through my own experiences with this form of self-expression, and each has been confirmed in the talk and writings of numerous other keepers of journals. They point to the importance of allowing students the opportunity to engage in this type of writing in any classroom where the personal experiences and language of the learners are placed in the forefront.

- Journal writing elicits "spectator-role" reflection through the individual's personal language.
- The journal is an effective tool for imposing an order on experiences and aiding in the formation of a world representation.
- Journal writing allows for the focusing, editing, and revising of one's inner stream of consciousness.
- Journal writing involves the deep and honest communication with oneself, and should therefore be respected with absolute privacy.
- Reflective writing elicited by journal writing can lead to a realization of the importance of writing and language to all understanding; this could, in turn, lead to a synthesis of school with life.
- By exposing an individual to his or her own underlying meanings, journal writing may lead to a greater self-awareness and self-understanding.
- Because journal writing encourages an individual to reflect, write, react, and interact, it is effective in broadening the total writing experience.

While these are not an exhaustive reflection of my complex

system of beliefs and values, they indicate the perspective from which I will be establishing the most appropriate methodology for enquiry into this area of language research.

Ethnographic enquiry: Introduction and assumptions

The term "ethnography" applies to a wide body of qualitative research methodology, into which several types of enquiry may be classified. "Naturalistic" studies involve the natural setting as the direct source of data, with the researcher as the key instrument, assuming that human behaviour is significantly influenced by the setting in which it occurs. Qualitative research is descriptive, involving the detailed recording of a situation or event, with the expectation that everything which occurs has the potential of being a significant clue to unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied.

Ethnographic researchers focus on the "human" aspects of each situation, and are concerned with the processes involved in each individual's personal interpretations of significance for that situation. An inductive approach is employed in the interpretation of collected data, as abstractions are formed as the features of the situation are examined; rather than testing hypotheses, an interpretive researcher seeks to emerge with a "grounded theory" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p.29).

One area of ethnographic research which is especially concerned with the study of experiences from the perspective of the individual(s) involved is phenomenology. This approach requires that researchers investigate the events and interactions of individuals with an intent "to gain entry into the conceptual world of their subjects in order to understand how and what meaning they construct around events in their daily lives" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, pp.31-32).

In summary, then, qualitative research represents a fundamental rejection of the quantification of all aspects of human belief and experience, and seeks instead to describe the complex social reality as a mosaic, reflecting the world how it is, and not how we wish it to be.

Ethnographic studies of the writing process

The ethnographic research paradigm assumes that, in any exploration of a language-using situation, all aspects of the context of a situation, including the researcher's presence, are an integral part of the process and should be described and studied as such. The pioneering and highly influential work of Emig (1971) introduced the potential efficacy of such a descriptive method of reporting on the composing processes of twelfth grade

students. By observing students in the context of their school classrooms, she sought to discover the important aspects of the nature of their composing strategies, as well as their attitudes toward writing.

Rather than setting an artificial writing task in which to observe certain pre-established variables, Emig entered the world of the students, and through careful interviewing and naturalistic observation, created "writing biographies" for a relatively small number of students, including one in-depth case study. Her technique was replicated, in part, by Mischel (1974), who also closely examined one student writer using a qualitative case study approach. In this way, both researchers were able to develop an idea of what was important to these individuals in this setting, rather than be constrained by a discussion of only one or two variables such as pausing time and subvocalization behaviour. As a result, their examination of the composing process attempted to describe a multitude of the interactive components of every writing situation, including the context for writing, the nature of the stimuli, pre-writing and pre-planning, composing aloud, reformulations, and teacher influence.

Central to the discussion of the findings of these two studies was the distinction between "reflexive" and "extensive" writing; students were typically engaged in far more extensive, or school-sponsored, reportorial writing, than the more expressive, self-directed, reflexive mode of composition. A major focus of the implications for this research was a plea for more composing experiences for students requiring the reflexive mode, involving a shift from the teacher-centered classroom to a writing environment which would be more conducive to creative self-expression in language.

When Pianko (1979) set out to characterize the composing processes of several college freshmen writers, she incorporated a plan of research which embodied the descriptive, qualitative dimensions associated with ethnographic enquiry. By combining her carefully recorded aspects of the behaviours of the students while writing, with in-depth interviews about the strategies employed, and about general attitudes, feelings, and past experiences with writing, Pianko was able to analyze more fully what writing meant for each of the students she observed. Taking into consideration the multi-dimensional nature of writing, she examined all of the variables she could identify in light of what she learned from the personal interviews, toward the development of an interpretation of the composing process for these students.

The ethnographic approach enabled Pianko to identify a need for more incorporation of student interests and motivation in the writing programs offered in schools, and to outline specific strategies for teachers to employ in order to engender the

positive attitudes their students would need in order to become more fluent with bringing their thoughts into their personal written language. While providing directions for teachers to foster the effective transaction between students and their written expression, this method of enquiry resulted in the substantiation of a number of potentially valuable classroom practices, such as personal journal writing, as effective means of providing such stimulation for students.

In his interpretive study of personal journal writing as an instrument for exploring self-definition, Myers (1980) identified several important dimensions of this type of self-expression, by relating his review of the literature on journal writing in psychology, literature, and religion, to the actual written accounts of student teachers who had kept journals during their practicum experience. Synthesizing these views and reflections on this process into a dynamic thematic model, Myers was able to explore the phenomenon of personal writing from the perspective of those actually involved in the writing. With his subjects as informants, and himself as the only instrument with which to gather and interpret data, Myers succeeded in applying an ethnographic approach to a highly personal, and seemingly unquantifiable event, to produce a thematic interpretation which further illuminated this dimension of the writing process.

Limitations of the ethnographic approach

One major criticism of the type of qualitative research described above is that it lacks generalizability, due, in part, to the lack of controllable variables, and the relatively small, nonrepresentative samples employed. To a large extent, this is a valid assertion, since ethnographers do not purport to directly apply their findings to any other situations. Rather, by describing fully as many aspects of, and interactions within, the situation in which they are researching, they seek to make explicit all of the significant factors affecting the process they are interpreting.

Ethnographers would argue that the experimental approaches to the study of language-using situations produce data which are not generalizable because they deal with a distorted linguistic event. Where key aspects of the language process are not allowed to transact, it appears highly tenuous to expect a clearer understanding of real language situations. By seeking patterns within and across language events, qualitative researchers attempt to incorporate all instances of language into their ever-evolving theories. As Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) assert, "being able to explain all observed behaviours of language users during a language event provides a sounder basis on which to generate theory -- to generalize -- than does explaining a subset of behaviours one finds convenient" (p.90).

With qualitative research, the highly personal involvement of the researcher results in some degree of "observer effect". Considered to be an integral part of the research setting, the ethnographer is often the sole data-gathering instrument and therefore risks "colouring" all of the findings, with personal beliefs and perceptions affecting all interpretations of observed situations. This is addressed by the methods that ethnographers employ to minimize such problems, such as the observation of people acting within a natural setting, the modelling of interviews after conversations between trusting parties, and most importantly, the careful consideration and explication of one's own biases and assumptions throughout the gathering and reporting of all data.

Perhaps the greatest limitations of this type of qualitative research involve the factors of time constraints and an overabundance of data to interpret. By producing comprehensive, "thick" descriptions of the phenomenon under examination, qualitative researchers invariably generate a tremendous amount of raw data in the form of field notes, transcribed conversations, and interview notes, which must be analyzed and synthesized to discover key patterns or personal meanings. There seems to be no sure way of totally eliminating this problem, since narrowing one's enquiry may result in the overlooking of crucial dimensions of the process being studied.

Choosing an interpretive approach

Because of the intensely personal and idiosyncratic nature of the creation of one's world representation through personal writing, it seems evident that any investigation of this process must necessarily take into account the underlying subjective dimensions of such an experience.

This was indicated by the findings of Butler (1981), who discovered in his work with student teachers that "journal writing achieves depth and importance to the extent that it portrays emotions, and that it is through the expression of feelings that the writing becomes fluent, or even impelled" (p.79).

The interpretive approach to research, according to Carr and Kemmis (1983), allows for the careful interpretation of any actions, such as journal writing, "by reference to the meaning that the individual actor attaches to them" (p.88). By accounting for the multiplicity of underlying assumptions, values, and intentions that an individual brings to any situation, interpretive research provides a rich source of information from which the true meanings of that person may be illuminated.

Viewing such a subjective phenomenon as journal writing from a positivistic, experimental approach would involve the negation of some of the most crucial aspects of this form of

self-expression. Entering this area of research with a set of explicit theories to be tested, while seeking scientific explanations to enable the formulation of generalizable causal laws, would contradict the very nature of the individualized process which takes place. The wealth of underlying values and feelings which are implicit in the effective generation of written self-expression in this mode would be denied by the experimental paradigm, which assumes a value-free context in which to research educational questions.

In this expressive writing situation, the "objective" social reality assumed by the experimentalists simply does not exist; the deeply subjective nature of this activity is best observed from an interpretive stance, in which its "reality is understood by understanding the subjective meanings of individuals" (Carr & Kemmis, 1983, p.86).

Conclusions

It appears evident that an ethnographic approach to research relating to personal journal writing would provide educational researchers with the most appropriate means of illuminating this complex and subjective experience. My own experience with journals has shown me that the personal writing episode can be a valuable and rewarding opportunity for self-expression. As my self-created text becomes composed on paper, newly-conceived ideas emerge from this written formulation. This recursive process of cognition and comprehension during writing seems to me to be just another form of the moment-by-moment interpretive processes by which we all continually make sense of what is happening around us.

Since our experiences are interpreted and made meaningful by our representing them with our language, teachers should become aware of the importance of the personal journal as an excellent means of facilitating this sense-making process in the lives of their students. Allowing students the opportunity to engage in this valuable written dialogue with themselves seems to be an essential first step in leading them toward a mastery of more and more of the communicative function of language and of the total writing process.

Interpretive explorations of this writing process would allow for a deeper, qualitative understanding of how individuals interpret and define their reality through their personal language. It is my belief that this approach can provide educators with an invaluable tool for discovering the teaching strategies which can best enable students to become more effective communicators with themselves, and with their world.

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