Participant Observation Inside Out:
Becoming Insider and Outsider in a Familiar Research Setting
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I begin my presentation with two scenarios:

**Scenario 1**
Knowing teachers’ reputations for not responding to invitations in the mail to participate in research studies, I decided to use a more direct approach to securing a site and participants for my pilot study. I called each potential school site and asked for the art teachers’ names. They gave them to me. I went to each high school, right to the office, introduced myself as an art educator, and asked if I could put my letter of introduction in Ms. Soandso’s and Mr. Soandso’s mail boxes. In each school, they let me walk right over to the faculty mail boxes and put the letters in myself. I felt as if I knew the office staff and the student aids. They were so familiar to me. I felt exhilarated on the phone and in the schools by using knowledge from my own days as a high school art teacher to “get inside.” I wrote in the log I kept throughout this pilot study that “I felt like a private eye, a sleuth” and, that “for the first time in three years of graduate studies in education, I was having fun doing research!” I walked through the halls of the schools unnoticed. I looked like a teacher, or a sub, or sometimes, in my old jeans and big sweater, a student. When I actually got inside art classrooms, my heart soared as it had when I was an art teacher watching my students make art. The teacher, with whom I worked most closely, and I chatted often and enthusiastically about our shared loves and aspirations as art teachers. I wrote in my log that I felt so at home in these high school art classrooms that, “I could feel the paint and clay under my fingernails.” This happy feeling, *insiderness*, gave me hope and strength during the difficult months of conducting a pilot study and preparing a proposal for a qualitative dissertation. I think I leaned on insiderness in this time of need.

**Scenario 2**
I grew increasingly uncomfortable in the classroom. An incident in the school caused heightened security and suspicion of strangers on campus. Despite attempts at building rapport with the teacher and students I worked with, I felt less and less like a member of the class. I had a study to conduct and my committee and I wanted results. I felt self-serving, a little ingenuous, when interacting with students and teacher. I wanted something from them. I did want to give back—and teachers told me that I was making valuable contributions both by my participation in the classroom and in the potential contributions of my research. My giving back, though, was as an outsider—an art specialist guest. I wrote in my log, in one of many moments of feeling defeated and frustrated with *becoming a qualitative researcher*, that “I did not know who I was to Paula,” the main teacher in my pilot study. How did she perceive me? I was afraid of breaching this subject with her, afraid it would jeopardize my research by making our relationship more awkward instead of less. And I could never explain to Paula’s students—not to my satisfaction nor, I think, to theirs—what I was doing, what I was after, what research is, and why I asked such odd questions in interviews. I didn’t understand qualitative research enough myself to really explain. Rapport developed, but felt mostly like that of an outsider being let in,
just a little. We did grow more and more comfortable and familiar, me with them as students and teacher, they with me as researcher and guest in their classroom. At the completion of my pilot study, I moved to another town to do my dissertation study. I still see Paula at conferences. The tone of our conversations is a little awkward, too superficial. I have never seen any of the students from Paula’s class again.

**Reflections on the scenarios:**
I believe I experienced “insiderness,” but I never became an “insider.” Unfortunately, I often believed, at the time, that I was and was perceived as an insider. Researcher relationships share characteristics with many kinds of relationships, for example, in our methodologies class I recall a long discussion in which comparisons were made between relationships with research participants and with your hair stylist. Yet each project and each episode within a project requires its own relationship-building tools from gaining access, to participant observation, to disengagement. “Insiderness” is not synonymous with good rapport. So work on relationship building skills in your research projects and in the rest of your life. It’s good qualitative research practice.

The four main stumbling blocks I have been able to identify based on my experiences as a quasi-insider are:

1. Insiderness can be a crutch for novice researchers who seek comfort in the familiar when faced with the otherness of qualitative research. Be aware of what you lean on and why.
2. The degree to which researcher is accepted as insider depends on time spent, nature of inquiry, contexts of the research site, participants (including researcher’s) level of self confidence in their roles, and individual personalities. So, don’t expect anything: rather, find out.
3. Insiderness and outsiderness are characteristics we perceive in ourselves and in others. Seek ways in which to understand others’ perceptions and your own as best as you can.
4. Reflect, reflect, reflect. This is the most effective tool I have used to help me forge my way through participant observation as, “insider.”

**Conclusion:**
There is an art to participant observation as “insider” and “outsider.” As in art, each move, each expression is decided in the moment, revised if possible, and then becomes indelible. Pay attention to each move you make as participant observer. Each move counts. Only through practice and reflection can we get better at anything worth doing well. Participant observation in qualitative research is worth doing well.

In his 1998 AERA Presidential Address, James Banks identified four types of researchers: (1) Indigenous Insiders, those who are members of the community they study, (2) Indigenous
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Outsiders, those who were once members of the communities they study, but through high levels of education or other circumstances are no longer considered members, (3) Non-indigenous Insiders, those who become accepted as insiders, and (4) Non-indigenous Outsiders, those who remain outsiders. When I heard this address, I was six months into the nine-month pilot study, that I have just spoken of. Three years prior to this time, I had been a high school art teacher. At the onset of my pilot study, I felt more comfortable in the high school art classroom that I studied than I had in most of my graduate courses up to that point. Yet, soon, I grew uncomfortable at the high school. Instead of developing rapport, my relationship with the teacher seemed to become forced and insincere. And my relationships with students remained formal adult-child relationships, not the ever warmer and more familiar teacher-student relationships I had had with my students. I was still wondering who I was and who I was to my study participants, insider or outsider. Honestly, I was trying so hard to fit in in graduate school, to find a sense of belonging there, I think I was torn between seeking comfort in the old familiar high school art setting and securing my place in the educational research arena.

I’m not sure if I can ever achieve the level of insiderness I desire in my research, what Banks refers to as Indigenous Insider, member of the community I study. But, Indigenous Insider is what I wanted to be when studying an art classroom. What I was, was actually most like an Indigenous Outsider, once a member of the community I study, but through high levels of education or other circumstances no longer a member. I was becoming a qualitative researcher. I was not a high school art teacher anymore. The best I could actually have hoped for, in my pilot study was to be re-accepted into the classroom setting, more or less, a Non-indigenous Insider, or, as Banks said, an outsider accepted as an insider. Perhaps this is a fifth type of researcher we can add to Banks’ list. I do still aspire to improve my skills at building rapport in familiar research settings towards deeper levels of insiderness, whether as insider or outsider.

References
