Roving for and Snaring Data: Getting Better at Fieldwork
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Getting Good at Qualitative Research Symposium
presented at the Annual Meeting of the AERA
Montreal, Canada
19 April 1999
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Getting good at qualitative research

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My dad was a plumber. He spent three years as an apprentice. I once asked him what he learned during his three years as an apprentice plumber. His answer: “You learn the tools, the tricks, and the techniques of using the right tool for the job. That’s how you get good at something.”

Anybody who’s ever tried to muscle in a standard screw with a Phillips’s screwdriver appreciates the wisdom of the observation: the right tool for the job.

Today’s talk recounts my experience of designing a personal, customized set of tools that helped me become a better fieldworker during my dissertation research. In particular, I focus on how I reached back into my satchel of tricks and methods that I used during my ten years as a high school English and writing teacher to develop a set of observational procedures that yielded richer and more fine-grained data.

This paper proceeds in two sections: First, I consider what it means to be an observer, a watcher, or as one of the students in my study asked after the first day of fieldwork: “Who’s the dude in back of the class?” Second, I detail how several specific tools of roving and snaring data helped me become a more skilled dude in the back of the class.

First, some thoughts on observation. It’s a pretty ordinary everyday functioning. As humans we observe; however, our observations in this channel are often crude in that they are unsystematic. John Dewey (1934) would call this mode of observation, mere recognition. Recognition is an observation arrested before it develops to perception. Perception involves mindful, conscious processing of the qualities observed. Harry F. Wolcott (1995) differentiates between everyday “just observing” and the researcher attending to observation. The question for a novice researcher, ambitious to get good at qualitative research is how do you become an attending percipient as opposed to a mere watcher?

Many of the “how to books and articles” suggest systematic processes and recommend various instruments and inventories for observing. There are checklists, rating scales, and structured classification systems to help focus one’s observations and provide a storage device for one’s insights. I decided that at first I would go “minimalist” and only use a field notebook, which is the primary recording tool for most qualitative researchers. Entering my site, here’s what I knew about how to use this tool:

1. It’s more than a notebook—it’s a symbol of one’s role. Be sensitive to how others perceive you and your notebook. It can make people uncomfortable.
2. Chronicle the events unfolding in your site on the left. Leave some room on the right for interpretive insights. Keep insights separate from events.
3. Field notebooks are organized in a myriad of ways according to the idiosyncrasies of the researcher. You’ll develop your own style and fetishes.
Since this is a symposium called *Getting good at qualitative research*, I feel comfortable saying that my first months with a field notebook were not very good. I performed like an over-eager scribe, earnestly sitting in the back of the classroom and diligently trying to capture every exchange and hiccup. The implicit theory of my approach can be likened to a trawling net that sweeps the seas grabbing all forms of fish and debris. If I catch everything, I’ll somehow land the champion catch. While there’s good reason to enter a site and attempt to observe everything, there’s a difference between just recording everything and attending to learning about your site.

I now turn to section two of this paper: Getting Better at Observation.

When I would re-read my fieldnotes, I was frustrated because I was chronicling what was occurring, but not consistently capturing the lived qualities of the events. As a high school English teacher, I had a favorite trite margin note for those flat, listless compositions that mechanically reported events: “Show—don’t tell. Remember what Mark Twain says, ‘Don’t tell me the old lady screamed, wheel her out and let her scream.” My concerns were amplified because I intended my dissertation to be arts-based educational research.

Barone and Eisner (1998) define arts-based inquiry as research possessing the presence of certain aesthetic qualities or features such as expressive language and other literary devices.

While Barone and Eisner (1998) identify the features of this form of research and Lightfoot writes eloquently about her experience of writing in this genre (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997), they don’t address or consider whether this approach to inquiry necessitates unique tools of data collection. In short, trawling for data wasn’t netting me the subtle, nuanced details that would enable me to write the kind of study I hoped to produce. In an effort to do better, I began to invent and transport exercises that were staples of my repertoire as a high school writing teacher. Some of my strategies worked and I think that I became a more incisive observer and my field notes yielded more perspicacious detail.

I now turn towards describing several of the field note exercises that worked for me. I organize them into two categories: Roving and Snaring.

**Roving**

Roving prevented me from getting mired in recording the mundane play-by-play of the classroom. I began to engage in a series of activities writing teachers call ‘freewriting’ or ‘fastwriting.’ A staple of writing teachers, it’s a technique that enables writers to utilize skills we already have in narration and description. Once class got underway I would sit in the back and assign myself 10 minutes of free writing. As I looked around the room and watched what was unfolding I would record whatever came into my mind. The only rule followed in freewriting is that one’s pencil can never stop. The rationale behind the exercise is that fluency of thought
becomes inhibited by conventions of writing. Free-writing gave me license to ramble and the utility of the free-ramble is that occasionally you stumble into a keen insight. Wolcott (1995) describes the insights of observation as coming in short bursts of attention. I found free-writing a mechanism for inviting short bursts. Another version of the process is called focused free-write and it’s the same process except you stick to a controlling idea. In my study, I would, for example, title a page: “Engrossment” and then free-write for 10 minutes in class.

**Clustering**

Another roving exercise that yielded success, particularly, when a lot was happening in the class is called clustering. Clustering begins with the writing of a key word, on the center of the paper and then letting one’s mind flow, associations burgeon and connections appear. I found clustering important and useful during those events in the classroom where I wanted to capture the gestalt of the episode rather than a linear tracking of the events. I also used clustering when I wanted to focus on a distinct theme and develop the idea more thickly. For example, after a set of lessons where a group of boys in the class were acting with a sullen disregard for the class, I sat in class one day and clustered the theme: Macho. I mapped this extensive web that included sub-topics like biceps, stoic, bluster, competition, chest hairs, etc.…

**Snaring**

The second category of exercises I call snaring because they cultivate a mode of scrutiny that often yields that riveting detail or description that embodies the essence of a thing, a place or a person. Cezanne writing about his purpose in painting evokes the goal snaring: “Right now a moment of time is fleeting by. Capture its reality in paint!” or for me: capture it in the fieldnotes.

**Sensorial Inventory**

The first snare exercise is the sensorial inventory. Most qualitative writing that I read is primarily what the researcher saw and perhaps heard. However, more than our eyes and ears make contact with the world. Adept artists stimulate not just sight and sound, but also gustatory, tactile and olfactory senses. A line lifted from a qualitative study on teaching by Mary Burchenal (1994) illustrates how a non-sight detail can hit hard: “The bell rings and students begin to drift in, talking and laughing in jagged rhythms” (p. 294).

An exercise used by many writing teachers to structure and invite the activation of a student’s whole sensory apparatus involves describing a single item through each sense. So for example, students could describe the classroom: what they see, what they hear, what they smell, etc... This exercise is a trick that one can deploy to remediate our over-reliance on sound and sight in data collection.

**Metaphorize It**

The last tool, I will talk about what I call “metaphorize it.” I developed this exercise after I heard
an interview with John Updike who was asked, “How do you come up with metaphors like in your poem where you described his arms like a gasoline hose? While I hoped Updike would offer me the three-step method to Updikian genius. He said, “they just pop into my head.”

Well, that’s a strategy that doesn’t lend itself to the teaching of writing, so I developed a different method that was useful in both the writing classroom and then my fieldnotes. It involves using the poetic construct of the couplet. First, I look at a phenomenon and ask myself what’s the metaphor. For example: I notice Rhea waving her hand vigorously. I then ask, “her hand waving looks like? By commanding myself to think metaphorically, I sift through images until I land on one that offers what Nelson Goodman (1978) calls a “rightness of fit.” Her hand is waving like it’s a water hose that’s loose. Aside from using this device to formulate metaphoric interpretations of my observations, I also used this technique in my interviews. I would ask students to describe what their day in school was like. This was an English classroom and students were learning to be facile with expressive language and my queries would often yield nuggets like one student who described her day at school like “being in long car-ride with her parents.”

I also used several other familiar writing exercises in my field notes including: role-playing, writing on deadline, profiling, list poems and rotating narrator descriptions. Some were more successful than others as strategies for data collection. In the end they worked for me, my field notes were less chronicles of events and more poetic. By poetic, I don’t mean odes and sonnets, but a record of incisive, expressive details that are requisite to the writing of an arts-based research project.

I end by considering what this suggests for getting good at qualitative research. I have three insights.

First, mindful observation requires concentration. Concentration is the capacity of the mind to attend unwaveringly to an object. During my year of fieldwork my wife was pregnant with our third child and, among other things, I was preparing a proposal and navigating year three of graduate school. My concentration was often more skittish than unwavering. Devices like the ones I described helped harness my predisposition to lose focus.

Second, as a novice researchers I wanted exposure to tools, tricks and devices of research. While wary of over-formal, systematized procedures that promised to demystify the art of research, I did benefit greatly when I heard, saw, or read about models of a researcher’s practice. I also looked to transport practices from other domains of my life into my practice as a researcher. Before we’re novice researchers we’re birdwatchers, writing teachers, musicians and sports fans. We have many habits and practices that can support our emerging craft as researchers.
This brings me to my last point which has to do with the practicing norms of the community of researchers. There’s a fascinating book of essays called *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology* (Jackson, 1990) and in it Jean E. Jackson studies the field note practices of 70 anthropologists. She found “Virtually all respondents complain in some manner, most saying they received no formal instruction in fieldnote-taking, several point out that their graduate departments are proud to “do theory” only” (p. 8). She also found that very few anthropologists ever share their fieldnotes or discuss their style and methods.

My hunch is that the norm of privatism in practice exists because the signature of quality in the research process rests in the research product. A favorite mantra of professors at Stanford is the “proof is in the pudding.” Yes it is, but understanding how things get cooked, and how recipes get perfected maybe how we get better.

Ken Macrorie my favorite and best writing teacher believed that you teach people how to write well by making the writing process public. He advocated *revealing* the writer at work. This meant in operation collecting all the drafts, notes, and iterations that led to a finished product and circulating them. He would exhibit a piece of his own writing, trace it backwards to its awkward seedling stage, pass around his notebook, and talk us through the tools he used at different stages of the process. I asked my dad how he learned which tool was the right tool when he started out as a plumber. He said, Jimmy Santos used to stand over my shoulder and when I’d screw up he’d say, “Nah kid that’s not right. Use this tool. Let me show you.” I venture to guess getting good happens faster if the expert researcher can reveal himself at work.

**References**


