
PRACTICE, EDUCATION, WORK AND SOCIETY

Writing Qualitative Research on Practice

Joy Higgs, Debbie Horsfall
and Sandra Grace (Eds.)



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Writing Qualitative Research on Practice

PRACTICE, EDUCATION, WORK AND SOCIETY

Volume 1

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The Education for Practice Institute
Charles Sturt University, Australia

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Joy Higgs

*The Education for Practice Institute, Charles Sturt
University, North Parramatta, Australia*

Debbie Horsfall

*The Social Justice Social Change Research Centre,
University of Western Sydney, Australia*

Sandra Grace

*The Education for Practice Institute, Charles Sturt
University, North Parramatta, Australia*



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ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-90-8790-906-2 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-90-8790-907-9 (Hardback)

ISBN: 978-90-8790-908-6 (ebook)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858, 3001 AW
Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Printed on acid-free paper

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JOY HIGGS

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Practice, Education, Work and Society

This series examines research, theory and practice in the context of university education, professional practice, work and society. Rather than focussing on a single topic the series examines areas where two or more of these arenas come together. Themes that will be explored in the series include: university education of professions, society expectations of professional practice, professional practice workplaces and strategies for investigating each of these areas. There are many challenges facing researchers, educators, practitioners and students in today's practice worlds. The authors in this series bring a wealth of practice wisdom and experience to examine these issues, share their practice knowledge, report research into strategies that address the challenges, share approaches to working and learning and raise yet more questions.

The conversations conducted in the series will contribute to expanding the discourse around the way people encounter and experience practice, education, work and society.

Joy Higgs, Charles Sturt University, Australia

JOY HIGGS

FOREWORD

This book is a celebration of the scholarship and the practice of writing qualitative research. It presents research and practice knowledge about the writing acts and challenges of writing qualitative research. At the same time as writing a book that is accessible to people new to qualitative research we offer insights and questions to experienced qualitative researchers.

The book contains 29 chapters in four sections. In Part 1 *Framing qualitative research writing about practice* the authors explore what it means to do research on practice, to frame research questions, to write as practice inquiry and rethink what constitutes a text. In Part 2 the authors examine a range of research approaches and the associated *writing genres*. Part 3 examines *writing strategies* ranging from writing basics and referencing to data analysis to writing collaboratively and imagining. In Part 4 we examine the *public* face of qualitative research writing through journal papers, books and theses. We conclude with a celebration of writing. To a large extent we see writing of qualitative research as a process that occurs throughout the research, a range of strategies that match research philosophies and methods, and a set of practices and strategies that give voice to the research process and its participants.

In this book we embrace a series of dialogues, not in search of resolution but rather in pursuit of greater possibilities for writing qualitative research. These dialogues involve exploring the spaces and tensions between:

- expectations and diversity in writing genres
- rigour and creativity
- scholarship and practice knowledge
- questions and answers
- cognitive and embodied practices
- chosen and discovered paths of communication.

We invite readers to participate in these dialogues and to explore some of the many options for writing research that the book explores.

**PART 1 FRAMING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
WRITING ABOUT PRACTICE**

1. DOING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research is a way of looking at the world and a constellation of approaches used to generate knowledge about the human world. In this book we focus on a particular aspect of that world: practice. We define practice as “the enactment of the role of a profession or occupational group in serving or contributing to society” (Higgs, McAllister, & Whiteford, 2009). This definition is intentionally broad to give scope to the chapters that follow and to be inclusive of many occupations, both recognised professions and other fields of work where the occupation’s community contribution transcends the boundaries of traditional professions terminology.

The goal of this chapter is to explore the nature of practice, to provide the context for the book and consider the implications of this context for qualitative research which is itself a practice.

THE NATURE OF PRACTICE

One way of interpreting practice is to characterise it as doing, knowing, being and becoming (Higgs & Titchen, 2001). Doing and knowing frame the immediate dimensions of practice, and being and becoming frame the more ephemeral and lived dimensions.

The context of professional practice is of major importance to the shaping and structure of this practice. ... the knowing and doing of ... practice (or the knowledge-in-action which comprises practice) are influenced by many factors. Some factors, such as the culture, personal frame of reference and life history are particular and internal to the practitioner. Other factors, including the practice situation, other people and other cultures, occur in the practice environment and influence directly or indirectly the practice design, process and outcomes. (Higgs & Titchen, 2001, p.4).

Another key aspect of practice lies in the intentions and interests of the practitioner. Interests in the Habermasian sense (see Habermas, 1968) are explored further in the next chapter. Here we focus on ethics and critique. Consider the following two definitions (Higgs et al., 2009):

Practice is the enactment of the role of a profession or occupational group in serving or contributing to society.

Praxis is a form of practice that is ethically informed, committed, and guided by critical reflection of practice traditions and one’s own practice.

The distinction between these definitions reflects both the conscious choices practitioners make in shaping their practice (e.g. to challenge practice traditions) and the tacit or ingrained behaviours (e.g. ethical conduct) they adopt. In making a connection between occupational practice and research practice we can see the characteristics of praxis being closely linked to the critical research paradigm (see Chapter 2).

Contemporary practice in all its settings offers many opportunities for qualitative research to capture our imagination and motivate us to explore new options and pursue new actions, in new places, with different people. Practice also confronts us with “wicked”¹ problems that constantly challenge our commitment, courage and expertise, as individuals, as organisations and as societies. Such challenges can seem very difficult and personally demanding. Even without these stimulating opportunities and wicked problems, our individual and collective practice constantly needs to develop to keep pace with the perpetual change of our globally connected world.

In Figure 1.1 we seek to portray some of the many complex dimensions of practice. In this image we recognise the challenge of capturing this multi-toned, individually perceived phenomenon.

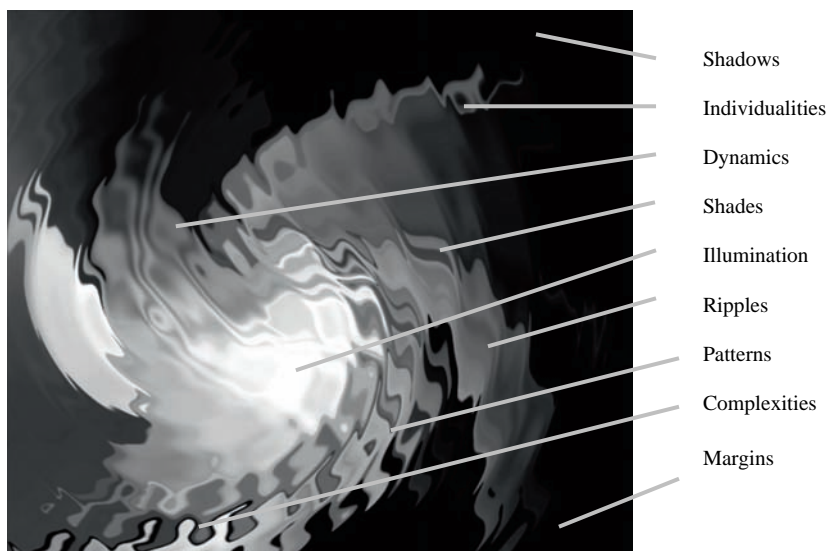


Figure 1.1. Practice dimensions

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

With all its inherent complexity and people focus, practice provides many opportunities, challenges and possibilities for research. In subsequent chapters some of these issues are explored in consideration of:

- the types of research question that qualitative research can address. For instance: Will the research aim to bring alive a human phenomenon, richly portraying a lived experience? Will it challenge the taken-for-granted aspects of practice and recommend or explore changes to that practice? Will it provide a vehicle for the once silent voices of some members of society to be heard?
- the implications for writing style of choosing different research approaches. For instance: Does the research strategy require stories or comparison tables? Are images inherent, optional or rare?
- the nature of different writing genres and what it is like to write in these genres. For instance: Does the reader become immersed in the experiences reported? Does the writer need to learn a new language (e.g. critical dialogues) to authentically follow the writing style?
- the strategies that researchers pursue in writing qualitative research. For instance: Is writing a spontaneous flow of ideas, or a process of planning an argument around a structure of headings and then back-filling? What is the role of co-authors and critical readers in the writing process?

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Research is “a systematic process of investigation, the general purpose of which is to contribute to the body of knowledge that shapes and guides academic and/or practice disciplines” (Powers & Knapp, 1995, p. 148). The term qualitative research has no simple definition. It refers to a range of research strategies with one common feature: they rely upon qualitative (non-mathematical) judgments. The rise of qualitative research was marked by:

a quiet methodological revolution ... in the social sciences ... Where only statistics, experimental designs, and survey research once stood, researchers have opened up ethnography, unstructured interviewing, textual analysis, and historical studies. Rather than “doing science” scholars are now experimenting with the boundaries of interpretation ... to understand more fully the relationship of the researcher to the research. In various disciplines in various guises, this implicit critique of the traditional world view of science and quantitative methods is taking place. All of these trends have fallen under the rubric of “qualitative research”. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. ix)

In qualitative research there are five major assumptions concerning the construction and nature of knowledge, each of which is antithetical to the empirico-analytical paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The qualitative paradigm assumes:

- There are multiple constructed realities (that is, different people have different perceptions of reality through their attribution of meaning to events, meaning being part of the event, not separate from it).

- The process of inquiry changes both the investigator and the subject/participant (that is, these players are interdependent, in contrast to the independence ascribed to the research and the researcher in quantitative research).
- Knowledge is both context and time dependent. Whereas quantitative research searches for generalisations and universal truths, qualitative research searches for a deep understanding of the particular (Domholdt, 1993).
- It is more useful to describe and interpret events than to control them (as in quantitative research) to establish cause and effect.
- Inquiry is “value bound”. Values appear, for instance, in how questions are asked and how results are interpreted.

In 2005 Denzin and Lincoln (p. xv) reviewed the commonalities across qualitative research and contended:

The generic focus of each of these versions of qualitative research moves in five directions at the same time: (a) the “detour through interpretive theory” and a politics of the local, linked (b) to the analysis of the politics of representation and the textual analyses of literary and cultural forms, including their production, distribution, and consumption; (c) the ethnographic, qualitative study and representation of these forms in everyday life; (d) the investigation of new pedagogical and interpretive practices that interactively engage critical cultural analysis in the classroom and the local community; and (e) a utopian politics of possibility (Madison, 1998) that redresses social injustices and imagines a radical democracy that is not yet a reality (Weems, 2002, p. 3).

As authors of this chapter, researchers and research teachers we advocate the following essentials for qualitative research:

- respect for the participants of the research endeavour (as individuals of agency and cultural belonging) and, where appropriate, engagement of participants as co-researchers
- recognition of research as a powerful tool for shaping social change and enhancing the human world
- the contribution of new knowledge to a field of human practice and being that is well articulated in a sound theoretical framework
- the location and justification of the research strategy within an articulated research paradigm that demonstrates congruence between the philosophical and methodological stance
- recognition of research as an interpretive act and a journey of learning
- the pursuit of quality (in particular credibility and rigour or authenticity to the research strategy) and ethical conduct
- the pursuit of elegant simplicity in presenting a sound argument in the written report of the research.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: THE STATE OF THE ART

Qualitative research moments

The development of qualitative research in North America was described by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) in terms of eight phases or moments. These are represented in Table 1.1, drawing directly on Denzin and Lincoln's description of the moments. They pointed out that although the emergence of each phase can be historically located, each continues to influence and be present in research practice across the world.

Table 1.1. The eight moments in qualitative research identified by Denzin & Lincoln, 2005

| | |
|----------------|---|
| First moment | The traditional phase (1900-1940s) Accounts of field experiences, including classic ethnographies, try to reflect the positivist scientific paradigm. |
| Second moment | The modernist phase (1950s-1970s) Accounts of work in the field and in practice draw on marginalised and other voices in society, while seeking rigour in similar ways to quantitative approaches. |
| Third moment | Blurred genres (1970-1986) Naturalistic, postpositivist and constructivist paradigms emerge that blur the boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities, providing researchers with diverse strategies and techniques, including narrative, phenomenology, feminism and hermeneutic approaches. The researcher becomes a bricoleur borrowing from many disciplines. |
| Fourth moment | Crises of representation (mid-1980s-1990) The blurring of genres problematises the writing of research. The researcher's identity and power as constructor of the text is acknowledged, so the direct link between lived experience and the text is opened to challenge. In turn, issues of validity, reliability and generalisability arise, so that research becomes hard to evaluate and its authority to improve practice is challenged. |
| Fifth moment | The postmodern period of experimental ethnography (1990-1995) Researchers try to grapple with the crises of the postmodern era, searching for different ways to represent the "other". Grand narratives and "distant observers" are abandoned in favour of action-based and activist research and local, small-scale theories. Other evaluative criteria are sought, including moral and critical perspectives. |
| Sixth moment | Postexperimental inquiry (1995-2000) New ways of expressing lived experience are taken up, including poetry, literary forms, autobiography, visual and performative approaches. |
| Seventh moment | The methodologically contested present (2000-2004) The value of qualitative research is contested by demands for evidence-based approaches to practice and knowledge, using objectivist models and experimental techniques. This can be seen as a backlash to the growth of qualitative research, or to the extreme postmodernist positions, and as an expression of more contemporary conservatism. |
| Eighth moment | The fractured future (2005-) Qualitative researchers confront the methodological backlash, and revisit the demands of moral discourse, the sacred, and critical conversations about the diversity of human life, including experiences of freedom and control in a global society. |

The scope of qualitative research

Qualitative research offers us a substantial spectrum of cultures (Hall, 1999) for inquiring into the behaviour and experiences of individuals and groups of people. A number of these are briefly summarised in Table 1.2. Each reflects a tradition of thinking offered by one or more disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, politics and education. This table reflects a number of different attempts to develop a summary of the diverse approaches available. Creswell (1998) has presented some of these in table form and added his own catalogue, which in turn inspired our attempt.

The cultures of inquiry available to us are still developing, as qualitative inquiry continues to attract the interest of academics and practitioners from around the world, working in a wide range of disciplines and professions. This diversity is seen by some as a great strength. However, for others the diversity of qualitative research approaches is a weakness and there is a lack of credibility in the quite different claims the various approaches make as to what counts as knowledge or as “good” or even ethical research. Others worry that the protocols put in place in some cultures of inquiry are individualistic, depending on the particular whim and skill of the researcher. Still others raise the concern that the very freedom that qualitative research brought to the research arena is in danger of being compromised by the restrictions some researchers place on the research approaches they espouse, in the guise of seeking validity in a world where quantitative research still dominates.

Despite these reservations qualitative research is increasingly regarded as a powerful and credible tool for revealing and understanding the human world. The rich range of qualitative research approaches is one of its great strengths. It provides multiple ways of understanding the inherent complexity and variability of human behaviour and experience. Indeed, pragmatic approaches to research design actively encourage us to adopt multi-disciplinary perspectives and mixed methods strategies for studying situations that involve different and complex layers of individual and collective practice. Climate change is an example of a universal practice challenge that demands serious study of the very different ways in which people develop understanding, make decisions, communicate, act and, above all, learn to change the way they behave.

For people engaging with qualitative research for the first time, it can be a daunting prospect to try to make sense of the full range of options. This task is made harder by the sometimes confusing, inconsistent and overlapping terminology that is used. Finding clear and reliable road maps is often the first step in the research journey. Table 1.2 offers a starting point for that journey. In Chapter 2 further clarification is offered through a discussion of research paradigms.

Whichever research approach is chosen, the discipline required of all qualitative researchers is to build and communicate transparent protocols for enacting the research strategy chosen as the basis for self- and external evaluation of the research strategy.

Table 1.2. Cultures of inquiry

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Action and advocacy-based inquiry | <p>These are inquiries which value the learning, transformation and liberation that can result from taking action and reflecting on the consequences. The starting point is usually a problem, challenge or opportunity that is confronting a group or an individual. The dimensions of the situation are usually fuzzy, and conflicting views and interests are often involved. The work is often driven by a value set that change is needed and that people can be empowered through action and learning from action. Approaches include collaborative inquiry, where researchers work closely with those who own the problem or opportunity, participatory action research, and various forms of action-reflection learning. Action research has been a powerful vehicle for those who advocate for marginalised groups in society. Originating from community-based inquiries into confronting issues like fascism and bigotry, this tradition of inquiry has been adopted more recently by many professions, including nursing, education and management, to understand complex and evolving situations arising in practice.</p> |
| Narrative inquiry | <p>Narrative inquiries focus on the life stories of individuals or groups. Approaches include biographies, autobiographies, written and oral histories, memoirs, story telling through a variety of “texts” (including nonverbal texts such as images and music), fictional accounts of archetypal stories, histories and document analysis. The focus can range from particular stages in life, to critical events (such as having a child), to the development of the individual or group over time. Traditions of narrative include literature, psychology, sociology, anthropology and history, and perspectives range from objective to interpretive. In the latter context, attention is often focused on the intentions and perspectives of those who write or tell the stories and the extent to which they create or even fictionalise their accounts. Narrative can also explore the ways in which our sense of who we are is powerfully influenced by language. Postmodernists are often concerned to challenge the helpfulness of both individual and “grand” (collective) narratives and to challenge the language and other texts through which they are told.</p> |
| Ethnographic inquiry | <p>This culture of inquiry involves deep and extended immersion in the everyday activities of groups or larger social systems. The researcher collects rich data through participant observation, interviews and curation of artefacts, rituals, stories and aesthetic texts such as songs. Interpretations explore the meanings and themes reflected in language, objects, surface behaviours and interactions, and in the deeper culture. With strong roots in anthropology, ethnographic inquiry is now an umbrella heading which includes a diversity of approaches, including critical theory, feminism, symbolic interactionism and some postmodernist perspectives. It goes well beyond developing a picture or profile of a dimension of a group’s everyday life and can probe for deep insight into the ways groups of people negotiate and contest meanings in the course of their interactions with each other.</p> |

Table 1.2. *Continued*

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Phenomenological inquiry | This culture of inquiry focuses on lived experience and the way people make sense of those experiences. It aims to develop rich descriptions of the way phenomena are experienced by individuals or groups, and to understand the meanings these people attach to their experiences. Researchers are asked to avoid pre-judgments about the experience in question, to develop thick descriptions of the experience, explore the many meanings it can have, and then to try to extract the shared essence of the experience. Phenomenology has its roots in philosophical thinking about the nature of human experience and has been taken up in different ways by psychologists and sociologists. Researchers from more aesthetic or arts-based disciplines are interested in how intuitive experience can be represented in ways that avoid the limitations of words. |
| Hermeneutic inquiry | This culture of inquiry involves the construction (or collation) and interpretation of new (or existing) texts. Its origins lie in the rule-based interpretation of religious texts. This has expanded to include many text forms (including word and image texts) in a range of disciplinary areas for broader research purposes. The texts can be derived from interviews or other experiential data. They can also comprise existing texts (e.g. reports, publications). |
| Theoretical inquiry | This culture of inquiry is concerned with the way theory can be built from the observed behaviours and lived experiences of individuals and groups. Often called theory that is grounded in data, this culture stands in contrast to theory that is first derived from the world of ideas and then tested in action. Data are first collected by interviewing people or observing and recording the way they act and interact with others. The data might also include documents that already exist. All these forms of written material are then meticulously coded in a range of ways to build theory (concepts and propositions about the relationships between concepts) that helps us understand human phenomena. The construction of theory is often put alongside other cultures of inquiry. It is particularly useful for helping to surface and articulate complex aspects of human behaviour and experience that might be outside the consciousness of the people who enact it and that have not been picked up in other forms of theorising. |

RESEARCHING PRACTICE

Research into or about practice can be pursued for many reasons. Broadly speaking, these reasons can be categorised as the generation of new knowledge associated with the search for understanding and the pursuit of change to existing circumstances.

How qualitative research can illuminate practice

By interpreting the lived experiences of practitioners and participants in practice (e.g. clients), qualitative research helps to enhance the researcher's understanding of the nature, processes and experiences of practice. This in turn, allows research

findings to enter into and enrich the knowledge of the field. This can be called the illumination of practice. Research in this instance is a means of expanding knowledge about practice and contributing to current practice discourse.

How qualitative research can help to change practice

Applied research can help to change practice directly through the process and life of the research itself (e.g. using action research) or indirectly by producing knowledge which is used by others (such as practitioners and teachers) to change practice and educate others about practice.

One of the undoubted strengths of qualitative research is that it enables us to get up close to practice in a variety of ways. It can tell us what people believe about their practice, it can explore the results of what they actually do, and it can explore the gap between the two. This is often a significant trigger for people to change their practice.

Just as important is the practice of many qualitative cultures of research inquiry to directly invite practitioners to contribute to the work of the research project. Typically, qualitative research does not use surrogates, so it is practitioners who generate the data. Practitioners are also often invited to design the research strategy and help make sense of the data. And quite often, the researcher is a practitioner, someone with first-hand interest in using the research process to enhance or even transform their practice.

Another way in which qualitative researchers can influence practice is through seeking out practitioners to be partners in research projects from the outset. This might mean inviting them to frame the issues to be addressed and to share responsibility for the quality of what is done. But perhaps the most powerful way that qualitative research can bring about change in practice is to research practice as it is actually happening. Qualitative research offers just the sort of flexibility and diversity that allows us to do that. The power of doing this sort of research is that practitioners are able to “see” themselves in action: the research process is like holding up a mirror or turning on a camera. Some studies go further and invite practitioners to deliberately experiment with new practice as part of the research, so that research is framed as a learning journey, not just a journey of finding out about issues that might be useful to us at some later time.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this book the challenge of writing qualitative research on practice is embraced with critique, imagination and enthusiasm. This chapter presents practice as a complex, lived, individually appreciated, interpersonal and rather elusive phenomenon. Qualitative research, as we have introduced it here, provides a range of vehicles and frameworks for understanding, illuminating and changing practice.

NOTES

- ¹ “The concept of “wicked problems” was originally proposed by Horst Rittel (a pioneering theorist of design and planning, and late professor at the University of California, Berkeley) and M. Webber in a seminal treatise for social planning, Rittel expounded on the nature of ill-defined design and planning problems which he termed “wicked” (that is, messy, circular, aggressive) to contrast against the relatively “tame” problems of mathematics, chess, or puzzle solving.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem Accessed 28 Aug 2008. See also Rittel, Horst, and Melvin Webber; “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” pp. 155–169, *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 4, Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, Inc., Amsterdam, 1973. [Reprinted in N. Cross (ed.), *Developments in Design Methodology*, J. Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 1984, pp. 135–144.]

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Joy Higgs AM PhD

*The Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning & Education
The Education for Practice Institute
Charles Sturt University, Australia*

Nita Cherry PhD

*The Australian Graduate School for Entrepreneurship
Faculty of Business and Enterprise
Swinburne University of Technology, Australia*

2. FRAMING RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND WRITING PHILOSOPHICALLY

The Role of Framing Research Questions

Research is the pursuit of knowledge through questioning. The questions addressed by researchers are key tools in framing, focusing, critiquing and ultimately resolving research goals. In this chapter we explore the framing of research questions and the role research questions play in the research.

In this book about writing qualitative research we see the questions posed and pursued in research as a philosophical process of developing a deeper understanding of the human phenomenon being investigated using the world view and lenses of the researcher. In qualitative research the questions are framed to set the stage for the research and re-framed to honour the emerging understanding of the phenomenon. The way research questions are framed and refined identifies the interests and curiosity behind the researcher's chosen research topic and goals.

The questions posed reveal the intention of the research, foreshadowing the answers, insights and knowledge that are likely to emerge. There are many possible ways of posing questions about a topic. For example, consider the topic of people living with disabilities in regional Australia. Research questions could include the following: What are the population (epidemiological) trends of disability? What perceptions, beliefs and communal knowledge does a society hold about what it means to live with disability? How do specific population groups interpret and respond to disability? How do families deal with the challenges arising from having a family member with a chronic disability? What is it like for a person to reshape his or her life, having acquired a serious disability?

The way research questions are formulated make transparent what a study is really trying to illuminate. They frame the research territory and can be seen as a door that opens up the playing field for a research project. Research questions are central to assessing the appropriateness of the chosen methods and topic, including the research paradigm, approach and design; they guide the content of data collection and the theoretical lenses of data analysis. Thus, framing research questions is a core activity in producing quality research.

HOW ARE RESEARCH QUESTIONS FRAMED?

Framing a research question is not the same as simply posing a question. Research questions are part of the research framework; they are not framed in isolation. The questions need to relate closely to the research goals and methods. Some researchers

come up with curiosity-driven questions first, without fully understanding the type of research tradition that these questions may lead to. Others choose to pursue their research without specific initial (or fixed) questions and identify them later during the research project. They ask: what questions have been answered by this research? Other researchers choose a research approach first and then frame research questions that fit their chosen approach. Whatever sequence is taken towards framing research questions, researchers commonly find themselves spending many hours checking, rethinking, reframing and reformulating them. By contrast, in quantitative paradigms, it is good practice in the qualitative paradigm(s) to revise research questions throughout the entire life of the research (Mills, 1959). In this way, framing research questions is an activity that accompanies researchers throughout the lifespan of a research project. It is a maturing process where research questions develop alongside other research activities and may only be finalised during data analysis and discussion of the findings. Regardless of its timing, the role of framing research questions is of key importance in developing a congruent research design.

Research questions are constructed in a way that enhances and matches the project's research goals, theoretical and philosophical frameworks and methods. Many qualitative research methods books allocate little space to discuss the framing of research questions. However, Maxwell (2005) and Flick (2006) devoted entire chapters to research questions. Maxwell advised that goals are of primary importance because together with the conceptual framework they should form a coherent unit. Flick argued that research questions are the dominant drivers of research and should therefore lead the methods design. We assert that research questions should be seen as a key guide for conducting a research project. Research plans and research questions develop together and inform each other. They build a reciprocal relationship. Some researchers start with a research question whereas others wait for questions to emerge during data collection and analysis. When finalising research it is good practice to ask: Does the data answer the research question(s) or does it answer other questions?

WHAT ISSUES INFLUENCE THE FRAMING OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS?

Good research questions are well integrated into the overall research design and research context. There are many issues to consider when formulating research questions. These issues range from practical resource considerations to philosophical framework approaches. Higgs and Llewellyn (1998) identified the following dimensions to be considered when framing research questions: contexts of participants, personal frame of reference, theoretical and philosophical frameworks, and feasibility issues. These issues are discussed below.

Context of chosen research topic

It is a useful and informative exercise to explore how other researchers within a topic area have formulated their research questions. What questions have already been posed within the literature and the current body of knowledge? How have

others framed their questions about the same topic of interest? Distinguishing the chosen research question(s) from other questions in the chosen topic area emphasises what the novel contribution will be and positions a project within the larger context of related research.

Contexts of participants

Questions need to be not only appropriate for the overall research context but also sensitive to your participants and their contexts, including sociocultural, demographic, illness/wellness and geographical considerations. Research questions need to be sensitive and ethical and suit the purpose of the inquiry. For instance, research into intellectual disability could address issues of concern to the target population, such as parenting rights.

Personal frame of reference

Theoretically, researchers can choose their research topic and philosophical framework. Their choice can depend on external and/or internal motivations. External motivations may include salary, meeting PhD requirements, getting a research grant, etc. Internal motivations may include personal curiosity, fascination with a phenomenon. Although these motivations may not become explicit it is helpful for researchers to become aware of their motivations. They are a helpful guide and permit researchers to understand themselves and their research more deeply. Being aware of motivations enables them to choose their research journey more purposefully and in particular to fine-tune their chosen research topics, issues, interests and questions. The more researchers own their research design the better quality research they can produce.

The researcher's personal frame of reference, the curiosity behind wanting to conduct research, can consciously shape and be exposed through the research questions. The personal frame of reference illustrates what it is that researchers are interested in exploring. Researchers can choose to start their research with a personally driven approach to develop their research question. Willis and Smith (2000, p. 6) encouraged researchers "to make sure they are asking questions which they find 'natural' and are about something they find important and interesting. They need to have ... a 'feel' for the kind of inquiry they will need to pursue". This advice points to the importance of integrating personal frame of reference with overall research methods. In qualitative research, researchers usually discuss their personal frame of reference to provide credibility for their interpretive voice (Patton, 2002). Researchers should be aware of where they are coming from, what they know and what the assumptions are that shape their perspectives.

Theoretical framework

Research is a powerful way to contribute new understanding to a field of existing knowledge. The theoretical framework for a particular research project influences

the content and the scope of that project. This framework carves out the core literature, identifies existing discourse and insights, and identifies areas where there is a need to expand or deepen this knowledge. The chosen theoretical framework provides an understanding of the strength and limitations of current knowledge. Delineation of this current state of knowledge provides evidence of the researcher's depth of understanding of the content area. At the same time the chosen theoretical framework sets boundaries by clearly articulating which theories will not be considered in a research project. Carefully framed research questions confirm the theoretical framework.

Philosophical framework

The philosophical framework of a research project establishes the research paradigm within which the project is situated and provides guidance concerning the type of knowledge that will be generated and the rules and tools that are appropriate to use. The chosen philosophical framework explains the assumptions about knowledge and knowledge generation that underpin research in that paradigm. Knowledge can be defined in diverse ways. For example, knowledge can be understood as deeper understanding, cultural beliefs or insights. Defining what is accepted as knowledge is a core research activity. The chosen philosophical framework needs to be compatible with the research questions.

Feasibility

Feasibility is an important practical factor that influences the framing of research questions. Researchers need to be flexible and practical when developing research questions. An important question that all researchers need to ask themselves is: Is the question researchable? Which methods best lend themselves to answer the question? Some questions can be better addressed through quantitative methods, others through qualitative methods. Feasible research questions are practical questions that can be explored within given resources and contexts. Does the researcher have the means and resources to explore the posed research question? For instance, a ten-year longitudinal study is not feasible when the maximum time to complete a doctoral thesis is only eight years. A comparison study with an overseas cohort may not be feasible without sufficient funds for travel.

Breadth of questions

Research questions should be phrased in a way to enhance their appropriateness to the chosen research goals, design strategy and productiveness within the philosophical framework. Overall research questions that are too broad are non-committal and obscure the research goals. Such questions lack guidance and the researcher may not know where to start with the literature review. Thus it is important to set clear boundaries for the research topic by clearly framing the research question(s). On the other hand, research questions can be too precise,

leading to a tendency to overlook important related factors. Further, precise questions may have assumptions unknowingly imposed within them (Maxwell, 2005). These assumptions need to be understood and clarified as part of the research process.

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PHILOSOPHY?

The connection between research question and philosophy is the match between what the researcher wants to understand and what exists and can be known. The overall research question is a compass for the research and it is imperative to match that question with a philosophical framework.

Philosophy is concerned (in part) with the thinker's conception of the world and ways of knowing this world. It is defined as "rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence), the justification of belief (epistemology or theory of knowledge), and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value)" (Honderich, 1995, p. 666). There are different philosophical frameworks, each of which constitutes knowledge differently. Habermas (1968/1972), a leading contemporary philosopher, made the connection between interests, questions and knowledge. He asserted that the three fields of science, the natural, social and critical sciences, generate different types of knowledge, are grounded in different interests, require different approaches to defining reality, and therefore ask different types of questions. These differences are broadly illustrated in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Connections between knowledge, interests, and research questions (Informed by Habermas, 1968/1972, 2003; Higgs, Trede, & Rothwell, 2007)

| Field of science | Natural science | Social science | Critical science |
|------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Knowledge interests | Technical; prediction, certainty and control | Pragmatic; consensus and common understanding | Ideal and what ought to be; transformation and emancipation |
| Knowledge product | Technical understanding; technical control | Negotiated understanding | Transformative understanding |
| Approaches to reality | Objectified materialistic world | Mutual understanding in the conduct of life; social interpretation | Sceptical of perceived realities; activism |
| Research questions | What happened? How can future effects of this practice be predicted and controlled? | What does it mean? How do people experience this phenomenon? | Whose interests are being served? How can/should the status quo be changed? |
| Research paradigm | Empirico-analytical | Interpretive | Critical |

Research questions embed the values, world view and direction of an inquiry. They also are influential in determining what type of knowledge is going to be generated (Higgs et al., 2007). A chosen research topic could be explored through many different research questions and their matching methodologies. Different types of questions generate different types of knowledge and therefore fit within different philosophical frameworks. The deeper meaning behind research questions lies in ontological and epistemological perspectives within the chosen philosophical framework. Ontology is that branch of metaphysics that is concerned with the nature of reality; what can be known and what really exists (Flew, 1984). Epistemology is that branch of metaphysics that is concerned with the theory of knowledge; how something can be known and how something exists. Epistemology sets boundaries around knowledge and establishes its scope (Honderich, 1995).

Researchers adopt a philosophical stance about what can be known and how it can be known. This philosophical stance can be expressed as accepted assumptions and shared understandings within a research paradigm and its philosophical community. A philosophical stance, with its chosen ontology and epistemology, provides the rationale and justification for the chosen research methods. Research questions give substance to this philosophical stance and direction to the research process.

What are the implications of adopting a particular ontological and epistemological stances?

Different research paradigms reflect different world views (ontological stances) and different epistemological positions. In Figure 2.1 these differences are represented.

What does an ontological question address and what does it look like?

Ontological questions address the nature of reality. The ontological stance has major implications for the type of knowledge that will be generated. If feelings, perceptions and interpretations of a phenomenon are rejected as non-reality there are consequences for the type of inquiry, the nature of questions that can be asked and the research methodologies that can be used. Knowledge defined as only that which exists materially and which is empirically measurable through the five senses excludes many other existences. The task of qualitative researchers is to describe, report and represent the realities of their research participants. This is achieved by using rich descriptions, with quotes and observation data. Here are examples of ontological questions in qualitative research on the topic of student experiences:

What is the nature of the student experience?

What are the lived experiences of student learning?

What is it like being a student from another cultural background?

How might students reframe their learning targets and activities if they were the primary curriculum decision-makers?

ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES:

In the positivist/empiricist research tradition the world is objective, since it is said to exist independently of the knowers, and it consists of phenomena or events which are orderly and lawful.

In the constructivist view, knowers are seen as conscious subjects separate from a world of objects, who have theories about their practice and behave according to tacit rules and processes. In qualitative research, multiple constructed realities are recognised and are grounded in people's different attributions of meaning to events and experiences.

In hermeneutics, knowing is seen as a kind of being, as a concrete form of being-in-the-world and as pragmatic, involved activity or "know-how" that is more basic than reflective thinking and occurs prior to it. This knowing is embedded in unarticulated common meanings and shared background practices of groups of people.

In critical theory, knowing means sceptically understanding the self-interest and political interests of others: people are socially and politically located, knowledge is always influenced by emancipatory interest (Habermas, 1968/1972).

EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES:

To positivists or empiricists, knowledge arises from the rigorous application of the scientific method and is measured against the criteria of objectivity, reliability and validity.

The idealist perspective focuses on interpretive understanding of experiences. Knowledge of human behaviour requires an understanding of the context of this behaviour.

Constructivists view knowledge as an internal construction where meaning is individually assigned to events, ideas and experiences. Sociocultural resources support this construction.

The (historical) realist is concerned with critiquing and transforming the influences of power, authority and politics on social structures, and how macro- and micro-political, historical, and socio-economic factors influence our lives and how we understand our lives.

Figure 2.1. Ontological and epistemological perspectives.(Higgs, 2001; Higgs & Titchen, 1998; Higgs et al., 2007)

What does an epistemological question address and what does it look like?

Epistemological questions address theories of knowing and the relationship between the researcher and the researched in terms of developing understanding of the phenomenon in question. The researcher's philosophical framework defines knowledge in a certain way, for example as certainty, insights or experiences. Epistemological questions are: How can something be known? How do we know we know? Examples of epistemological questions based on the same topic are:

How do students make sense of their learning experiences?

What does it mean to be a student?

How do different learning environments impact on students' learning?

How are questions framed to fit different qualitative research traditions?

Within the interpretive paradigm there is a variety of methodological traditions, each with its underlying philosophical perspective; phenomenology, ethnography, narrative inquiry and critical hermeneutics are some examples. Research questions

are encoded using the language of these traditions (Morse, 1994). Studies located in phenomenology pose descriptive questions that explore lived experience. Studies located in ethnography pose descriptive questions that particularly explore the cultural context. Studies located in philosophical hermeneutics pose interpretive questions that explore perceptions and interpretations of a phenomenon.

There are distinctive research paradigms, and within each paradigm there are various traditions. In practice each research project has a unique design, and it is common that such designs blur and mix traditional inquiries (Willis & Smith, 2000). For example, within the hermeneutic tradition there are many blended inquiry approaches such as hermeneutic phenomenology, philosophical hermeneutics, radical hermeneutics, and critical hermeneutics. Table 2.2 represents the challenges and options posed by different research traditions. The questions posed in this table should be seen as exemplars; they are not prescriptive.

Table 2.2. Examples of research questions and traditions

| | Ontological Questions | Epistemological Questions |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Hermeneutic phenomenology | What is it like to be a distance learning student? | How do distance learning students describe their university life? |
| Philosophical hermeneutics | What are the perceptions and interpretations of universities about distance learning students? | How do students interpret their experiences of university life? |
| Critical hermeneutics | What are the values and limitations of being a distance learning student? | Whose interests are served with these values and limitations? |
| Radical hermeneutics | What are other possibilities of understanding distance learning students? | How could distance learning students learn differently? |
| Narrative inquiry | What is the nature and role of language in distance learning education? | How do students in distance learning modes use language and communication strategies? |
| Ethnography | How do distance learning students describe their experiences of university life? | What is the cultural context that influences these students' experiences of distance learning? |

Research questions need to have a good match with the research goals and can help focus the research project. Framing research questions is a crucial aspect of the architecture of building research design. Research questions need to suit the research purpose and match the theoretical and philosophical framework.

FROM THE RESEARCH QUESTION(S) TO OTHER TYPES OF QUESTIONS

At almost any stage during the research process, from writing the proposal to publishing findings, researchers pose questions to assist with their research. The

nature and purpose of these questions differ. For example, there are questions in the original research proposal to frame the research project, sub-questions to make the research more focused or manageable, questions to collect data, questions to analyse data, questions to critique the research strategy and outcomes and reflexive questions to guide researcher learning.

The questions posed in the research proposal may be broad, circumscribing the research topic. They are usually a useful tool to indicate the research area and guide the initial research approach. In most cases, these originally posed questions differ from the final, more refined research questions that are submitted for peer review.

In general, it is good practice to start with a primary overarching research question. However, the research process can be enhanced and made more manageable by a set of sub-questions. In most studies a description of the researched phenomenon is essential. Therefore it is permissible to pose, for example, descriptive or variant sub-questions within a hermeneutics study. The following questions are taken from Ajjawi (2006):

Primary question:

How do experienced physiotherapists learn to communicate clinical reasoning with patients and with novice physiotherapists?

Sub-questions (descriptive question):

How do experienced physiotherapists understand and perform reasoning?

How do they communicate their reasoning?

How do they learn to reason?

The questions posed to collect research data form a separate set. Commonly in qualitative research these questions include interview or focus group questions. They may be informational, instrumental, descriptive, interpretive and critical in nature, depending on the purpose of the inquiry, the philosophical stance and the research orientation. These questions frame the content and flow of the data collection methodology.

Throughout data analysis different questions are posed to generate new meaning and insights from the collected research data. These questions depend again on the research orientation. Data analysis questions reflect the chosen analysis lenses used to interpret data.

During and towards the end of the research it is important to critically appraise the research through questioning. How well are my interviews going? Do I need to adjust my data collection questions? Am I enacting my research authentically?

Reflexive questions address such matters as how well the researcher understands the research strategy.

In Table 2.3 various forms of questions are explored in relation to different topics, research paradigms and strategies.

Table 2.3. The interrelationships between questions, paradigms and methods

| Topic 1: Reflective practice in teacher education | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| Research approach and data collection | Research question | Data collection questions | Data analysis questions |
| Hermeneutic phenomenology Interviews and observations | What is the lived experience of reflective practice by teachers? | What is it like being a reflective practitioner? | What factors influence people’s attempts to be a reflective practitioner? |
| Philosophical hermeneutics Interviews | What are students’ perceptions of the practical value of applying reflection in practice? | From your perspective what is the connection between reflective practice and teacher education? Can you give an example how reflective practice is useful or useless? | How do participants make sense of reflective practice? What do they understand of reflective practice? |
| Critical hermeneutics Critical dialogue, debate | What is the value of reflective practice? | How do you know whether reflective practice is valuable or not? What are the biggest challenges of reflective practice? | What are the interests and values that inform participants’ current understanding of reflective practice? How could current understandings be transformed? What is needed to facilitate change? |
| <i>Table 2.3. Continued</i> | | | |
| Collaborative inquiry | What is the shared understanding of reflective practice in teacher education? | How do we as teachers pursue reflective practice in our work? | How do co-researchers’ interpretations of reflective practice compare with literature and theoretical portrayals of reflective practice? |
| Topic 2: Living with chronic lung disease | | | |
| Phenomenology of practice Observations and interviews | How do practitioners and clients collaborate in a pulmonary rehabilitation program? | What part do you play in this pulmonary rehabilitation program? | What influenced the acceptance of their roles? |
| Philosophical hermeneutics Interviews | How do people with chronic lung disease make sense of their diagnosis and changing lives? | What does it mean to live with emphysema/chronic bronchitis? Does emphysema/chronic bronchitis have an impact on your life? | What personal and cultural aspects and traditions shape people’s way of understanding their chronic lung disease? |
| Narrative | What are the life | What is it like living with | How do people with |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| inquiry Interviews | stories of people with chronic lung disease? | chronic lung disease? Describe your daily routine. | chronic lung disease make sense of their life events? |
| Research approach and data collection | Research question | Data collection questions | Data analysis questions |
| Participatory action research Collective debates and focus groups | How can the interests and needs of clients and their families inform and transform a pulmonary rehabilitation program? | What are the current local issues and aspirations of clients, families and practitioners? | How does current understanding of chronic pulmonary disease influence program design? |
| Topic 3: Developing socially responsive graduates | | | |
| Ethnography Field notes, observations | How do international students define a socially responsive graduate? | What are the attributes of a socially responsive graduate from your perspective? | What cultural traditions and values inform the understanding of a socially responsive graduate? |
| Philosophical hermeneutics Interviews | What do students understand about social responsibility? | From your perspective, what is social responsibility? How do you know that you are acting socially responsibly? | What are students' interpretations of social responsibility? |
| Critical hermeneutics | | | |
| Series of interviews or focus groups | | | |
| What are the values and limitations in developing social responsibility in graduates? | | | |
| What value do you place on social responsibility compared to other skills you learn during your | | | |
| <i>Table 2.3. Continued</i> | | | |
| focus groups | graduates? | Why would you want (or not want) to identify as a socially responsible graduate? | barriers and opportunities to developing socially responsible graduates? |
| Critical practice inquiry (Trede & Higgs, 2008) | How is the development of socially responsive graduates currently supported in our curricula and how could this support be improved? | What works well and what doesn't in the development of socially responsible graduates? | What opportunities and public spaces exist that currently promote the development of socially responsive graduates? What other opportunities should be created to advance the development of socially responsible graduates? |
| Topic 4: The role of song in community development | | | |
| Descriptive phenomenology Observations, interviews | How do choir members describe their "choir lives"? | What is it like singing and belonging to a community choir? | What are the factors that describe the phenomenon of collective singing? |
| Philosophical | What is the | What is your perceived role | What is the historical |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| hermeneutics Interviews | perceived role of song in community development? | in the choir? | and social context of this choir? |
| Research approach and data collection | Research question | Data collection questions | Data analysis questions |
| Critical hermeneutics Focus groups | What is the value of song in community development? | What motivates you to attend a community choir? | How does collective singing contribute to learning? What are the aspects of singing that foster possibilities for liberation and change? What difference does the choir make to the local community? |
| Action research Starting a community choir, focus groups | What is the power of song in community development? | Collectively discuss critical moments of your choir experience. How have these moments transformed the choir? | What was the nature of collective discussion that led to change? Did these changes emancipate people and if yes, in what way? |

CONCLUSION

Research questions are key elements in setting the research project’s agenda, boundaries and structure. The word “framing” encompasses three ideas: (a) that the questions are framed by broader choices, (b) that the questions shape subsequent decisions, and (c) that the questions themselves need to be appropriately framed to be answered successfully and to accomplish their intended goal and task.

Research questions are the keys that link all components of the research design together. It is worthwhile spending time on framing and reframing research questions. They are in an interdependent relationship and their connection is a two-way street where one informs the other.

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Franziska Trede PhD
The Education for Practice Institute
Charles Sturt University, Australia

Joy Higgs AM PhD
The Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning & Education
The Education for Practice Institute
Charles Sturt University, Australia