Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice

Volume 11 | Issue 2 Article 4

4-1997

Conflict Collaboration: A Cautionary Tale

Judith Fueyo

Marianne Exum

Conflict Collaboration: A Cautionary Tale

by

Judith Fueyo and Marianne Exum

In Lily Tomlin's one-woman show, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (Wagner, 1986), Trudy, a bag lady, brings visitors from outer space to a Broadway play. Shortly after the theatre experience, the aliens depart our planet leaving this note: "Dear Trudy, thanks for making our stay here so jam-packed and fun-filled ... Just wanted you to know ... our ... experiences here on earth will remain with us always, but what we take with us into space that we cherish most is the 'goose bump' experience" (Wagner, 1986, p. 212). Trudy then explains that the aliens were confused by goosebumps. At the play, it seems that Trudy neglected to mention that theatre goers watch the stage, and the aliens had watched the audience! As Trudy put it, "Yeah, to see a group of strangers sitting together in the dark, laughing and crying about the same things ... that just knocked 'em out" (Wagner, 1986, p. 212).

Something like this happened in our research project, something "that just knocked [us] out." Midway through our year-long collaboration, Marianne, a doctoral student, and I, Judith, a university researcher, discovered that we, like Trudy and the aliens, were watching different things even though we were observing the same data. Hence, we have given the name "conflict collaboration" to our year-long experience in interpreting the same set of qualitative data.

Conflict collaboration is a new name for an old idea in qualitative research. It is our intentional oxymoron to highlight the value of conflict in reaching trustworthiness in our interpretations. According to Judith Green, "... when contradictory findings are identified, the researcher's task is ... to reenter the data and use the conflict point to reconsider and reexamine the phenomenon. The conflict in findings then can lead to new understandings ... The contrast, therefore, creates a point of tension that is productive and dynamic" (Green, 1992, p. 28).

We were not naive going into this project; we expected conflicting interpretations. What came as a surprise to us, however, was the site of our conflict. It was not so much in the data or in our theories of qualitative research, as in our relationship to overarching theories, especially theories of language and individual subjectivities surrounding the data.

We will share our "dialogical journey" (Smith, 1991), each of us speaking separately at times, to allow form to facilitate the meaning.

The Dialogical Journey

Judy: Our journey began in September when Marianne asked me for some raw data to use in a data analysis course she was taking. I gave her data I'd collected over the previous school year during which I was a participant observer in a 3/4 split level classroom, watching the development of portfolios. My overarching interest was in how the children were making sense of portfolios. Once a week I joined the class during their language arts time, taking notes, talking with the teacher and the students, interviewing them, and collecting copies of their portfolio selections and their written reflections. I had not yet analyzed the data until Marianne and I agreed to collaborate.

Over the months of our collaboration, gradually I sensed that we were positioned similar to Trudy and the aliens of Lily Tomlin's show: Marianne's attention was drawn to one thing, mine to another. Marianne paid strict attention to my data. She moved deftly through experts including Goetz and LeCompte, Merriam, Lincoln and Guba, Strauss and Corbin, Miles and Huberman. She arrived at our weekly Friday meetings armed with meticulously sorted stacks of index cards, separated for different purposes, lined with post-its. I arrived with marginal comments on fieldnotes, lists of coded data, their categories, and page locations, and several messy pages of tentative interpretations. And, like the aliens' surprising response to the Broadway show, Marianne's response to parts of the data was surprising to me. Indeed, the very data set I considered most telling was the set she had labeled "not related to research question."

I wondered if my analysis procedures would result in findings that appeared ungrounded. I told Marianne how differently disciplined her process appeared. I was used to immersing myself in the data, memorizing it unconsciously, so that episodes and meanings somehow coalesced in time, from which I wrote periodically. To which admission Marianne accused me of "playing God!" We were faced with articulating more specifically what we meant by "interpretation," "subjectivities," "theories of language," and, most importantly, "emergence."

Marianne: How well I remember the Friday early in the fall when I arrived with Judy's data, sorted and coded. I had unitized the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) on separate index cards, and had begun open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We were going over the codes together to check on agreement. Here is a critical moment in our tape-recorded conversation:

> *Marianne:* "Now, there are several things that I don't think are appropriate to the research question. I know this is a writing class and I know that it is language arts. But like the biome (science project) interviews, publication, the process of writing, the mini lessons ... All of these things are part of the class, but I don't see them as a high priority to the research question."
>
> *Judy:* "Isn't that interesting, because I found those were mirrors ... for example, the mini-lessons and the publications. Those were the places where the children's values were being developed so that what you saw them choosing to go into the portfolio was directly connected to the teaching ... I see them as crucial."

The literal manner in which I approached data analysis may seem somewhat simplistic to more experienced researchers, but it was the first of many layers of interpretation which was directly influenced by my position in the research at that time. To exercise care and caution in the analysis of the data meant to follow the rules of data collection very closely.

Judy: It was as if I'd been watching one scene of action and she another. Marianne did not find a relevance between the classroom discourse culture and the research question–How are children making sense of portfolios?–which I felt were reflections of one another. This disruption pushed us to redefine our work together. Originally we believed we were "triangulating analysts" (Patton, 1990). By triangulating analysts, Marianne and I would add additional layers of trustworthiness to the interpretation. We believed that by "triangulating analysts" we were moving through routine procedural hoops, responsibly double-checking one another's thinking.

Marianne: But when I labeled one category as "not related to the research question" the very category Judy had labeled as the "main finding," we questioned ourselves as qualitative

researchers. We joked that we weren't finding findings but making them. How could we have arrived at such different interpretations for one critical category when we agreed on the rest? What began as a validity check grew into genuine collaboration. It was out of conflicting interpretations that we were forced to dig for and articulate the tacit theories of language, subjectivities, theories of interpretation, and emergence surrounding the immediate study.

Judy: We were engaged in a meta-level analysis by now, an analysis less of the data and more of the theories each of us brought to it. Gradually, we came to see how our theories of language functioned as the driving forces behind our interpretations.

The Hermeneutical Interpretation: Finding and Telling the Stories

Marianne: We wondered what to call this meta-level analysis. We agreed that any qualitative theoretical framework "is a mini paradigm with its own qualitative assumptions ... and that no one theoretical framework is 'right'." Rather, one chooses that theoretical framework based upon what one wants to do and what one wants to focus on (Patton, 1990, p. 87). We discovered that our focus was on the historical who, what, where, when, and whys that went beyond the data piles in time and location. Inevitably, our discussions moved from a coded data set to stories–stories about the researchers' theories of language and stories about the broader context of the study, for example, the classroom teacher's history, the district's history with portfolios, stories that were connected to the research tangentially, stories that lay beyond the data piles, beyond the classroom in both time and space.

It was clear to me that Judy and I had begun a hermeneutical inquiry, exploring what we meant when we talked about portfolios (Smith, 1991). The term *hermeneutics* refers to a Greek technique for interpreting legends, stories, and other texts. To make sense of and interpret a text, it is important to know what the author wanted to communicate, to understand intended meanings, and to place documents in a historical and cultural context (Palmer, as cited in Patton, 1990).

Hermeneutics, for us, has been powerful in exposing the ways we have come to make sense of our interpretations. Gone is the modernist notion of knowledge being static and absolute. It is the interpretation of the data and not the data itself that has brought life and energy to this dialogical journey of ours (Smith, 1991). Hence, hermeneutics provided us with the open space we needed to grapple with the inconsistencies of our interpretations. Sites of conflict became productive areas for us to explore aspects of research which we initially thought we understood clearly. The following are terms and ideas we've come to deeper understandings of or have had to rethink:

By *emergence / interpretation* we mean the process by which internally consistent meanings arise from phenomena. Before conflict collaboration, we accepted these tenets of qualitative methodology and ideology too much on faith. After conflict collaboration we make our claims more cautiously, and more contextually. We now see emergence and interpretation as less of an unfolding and more of a creation. We now question our previous good-faith acceptance that "[P]atterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data" (Patton, 1990, p. 390), and that "the skilled analyst is able to get out of the way of the data to let the data tell its own story" (p. 393). Likewise LeCompte and Preissle (1993) concur that the data will reveal complex phenomena from within.

However, if data tells its own story, then how can that explain the different "stories," if you will, that emerged for the two of us? Is it a lack of experience that makes my understanding of the

data different from Judy's? Possibly. But I believe the reason for different interpretations is more complicated than that. For Judy to find overarching classroom practices more significant to the study than I calls to attention the impact of our theories of language on our data interpretation.

Wolcott (1994) describes interpretation as a transcendence of the data to a quest for meaning. Even though the patterns and themes emerge from the data, interpretation is necessary to make sense of the data, and that interpretation belongs to the individual researcher. "The researcher is the instrument of qualitative inquiry, so the quality of the research depends heavily on the qualities of that human being" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 433). Our earlier discussions reached a point of conflict because we did not allow our interpretations to assume a proper space in the data analysis. We put too much faith in emergence and too little faith in ourselves as research "instruments" coming from different perspectives.

Judy: By a *theory of language* we hold that language is inseparable from culture, that language is always contextual. When we ran into conflicting interpretations of critical data sets surrounding language for portfolio processes, we learned that we needed to take an anthropological perspective. We learned to honor the indivisibility of our interpretations from our cultures, our histories. We assigned different values to language uses because each of our positions in the research was different–mine being an insider, Marianne's being an outsider. I envisioned this situation as one where Marianne was looking in at the data from her position on the edge. I looked simultaneously toward and away from the data from my position of insider. At any rate, due to our conflicting interpretations, we began to tell our stories that previously seemed only tangential to the research.

By *subjectivity* we mean the way our class, gender, race, and education have influenced our experiences and our responses to them. Before conflict collaboration we believed that attention to subjectivity was navel gazing, too reflexive, too personal. Who'd care? What's scholarly? We believed less was more. After conflict collaboration we believe more is better.

"Subjectivity," according to Peshkin, "is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and nonresearch aspects of our life ..." (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Peshkin recommends that researchers, both qualitative and quantitative, "systematically identify their subjectivity ... and disclose to their readers where self and subject became joined ... [so that] they can ... write unshackled from orientations that they did not realize were intervening in their research process" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17).

Our collaboration helped us to "systematically identify" certain of our subjectivities. However, we will argue against the notion that we might now or ever "write unshackled from orientations that [we] did not realize were intervening in [our] research process." It seems more "true" to claim that we write through our orientations, because of our orientations. Rosaldo (1993) agrees that "the process of knowing involves the whole self ... Rather than uphold detachment as the unified standard of objectivity, [he calls for] the explicit recognition of multiple sources of knowledge in social analysis" (p. 181).

Writing research identifies "the bed-to-bed" genre, beloved by young children perhaps because of its automaticity. Bed-to-bed stories typically begin with waking up, describing everything, and ending at bedtime. Children write their stories chronologically, free from the burden of focusing. They just tell it all. Analogously, to examine my subjectivity in light of my research project, I'm tempted to tell a "bed-to-bed," to tell of my childhood passion to be a high-wire acrobat,

to write and direct plays for the neighborhood, to tell how I regret that my brother, the real acrobat, never seemed to find a niche in school while I did. But you don't want to watch me navel-gaze, you want to know what I studied. I studied portfolios ... for lots of reasons, some of which include a passion to make schools congenial places for all kinds of composing processes and productions. I studied portfolios because they might provide places for kids like me and my brother to show our stuff. Below, I'll outline three stories that situate my subjectivities closer to the data than stories about my brother–stories that ultimately rest on my theories of language. Marianne has her own stories which bring her into this conversation. She will share hers as well.

Judy's Stories

One Story–The Portfolio Course I Teach

Summers at my university I teach a course entitled "Exploring Portfolios." The operative term here is "exploring" because I am not sold on portfolios. I suspect that most classrooms will be faced with institutional guidelines that threaten to homogenize portfolios, making them merely new containers for old requirements. I "knew" this before I began my study, thus must admit to a bias against institutional guidelines that become the equivalent of standardization. The thrust of my portfolio course, then, is on student reflection, oral and written, that ultimately informs instruction. It is out of a culture of student reflection that portfolios take root.

By the end of the course, some teachers claim that they have to change their classroom practice in fundamental ways to allow children's voices more impact. In other words, reflection comes from somewhere deep inside classroom language practices. It is not an add-on. It is not "natural," but is embedded in the classroom culture. If student response and reflection are not at the heart of classroom culture, portfolios don't make sense.

Another Story–The Teacher Whose Classroom I Studied

Bob and I have a history. Within the two years before I worked in his classroom he took three courses with me, and I served as his graduate advisor. The first course with me was a writing course, the second was Exploring Portfolios, mentioned above, and the most recent was a teacher researcher course where he used his classroom portfolio work as his data. Hence, Bob and I are clearly not a random pairing. He was already an exemplary teacher when we met, and our work together provided fertile ground for new ideas.

Yet Another Story–My Relationship with Bob's School District and the State

The research site was selected partly because the district left much of the definition of portfolios up to classroom teachers and students. The notion of assessment was not included in the district's descriptions.

To better understand the state's position on portfolios, I joined the state portfolio committee and studied *Chapter 5*, the official document on assessment. *Chapter 5* describes portfolio development directly: Section 5.232(e) School District Assessment states that "The school district assessment system shall include provisions for developing and continually analyzing portfolios of student work" (*Pennsylvania Bulletin*, July 24, 1993). The most promising language was situated in the terms "the school district shall include provisions for developing and ... analyzing." The

jury is out on portfolios in this state. Still, I worried that whatever findings I might end up with could be co-opted by those whose intentions for assessment were alien to me.

Marianne's Stories

First Story–The Qualitative Data Analysis Course

As a prerequisite for a class on qualitative data analysis, I had to have raw data, data that had been approved by the university prior to the course, although it was not necessary for the data to be my own. I was aware that Judy had been observing children and researching portfolios during the previous year because she had shared information in her class. I was one of Judy's students and an advisee as well.

At first, Judy was hesitant to share the raw data because her study was not "finished." I assured her that, for my purposes, closure was not essential. The amount of data she had already generated was more than I could possibly use for the course. I also encouraged her to allow my fresh start on the data to open up the possibility of returning to her data.

Second Story–My Role in the Research

It was clear from the beginning that I was a secondary researcher, or a data analyst, to put it aptly. My role was simply to analyze the data in ways that we had practiced during the workshops in the class, with Judy collaborating with me somewhere in the middle of the process. As a young researcher, it was very important to follow the "rules" of data analysis carefully. I didn't want to miss a step in the process because I didn't want to do anything wrong. Thus, I was immersed in data analysis as a method of gleaning information. Looking back now, I believe that I approached qualitative data analysis from a very modernist, positivist perspective based on my previous educational experiences. All of my life I have been taught to follow procedure, listen to the voice of experience, learn from those who know best. I, myself, have not been a knowledge producer as much as a knowledge finder. Thus, my literal understanding of how to process the data may not have been intended by the course, but it was the first of many layers of interpretation. Assuredly, I was concentrating on method more than scope at the time our collaboration began.

At first, it seemed unfortunate that I did not personally collect the data I was analyzing. A researcher comes to the observation site with her own agenda. I know from previous data collection experiences that so much more is observed than that which is actually recorded. The researcher has ideas all along that she is focusing on, even intuitively, that do not surface in the raw data. Even though we had numerous conversations clarifying fuzzy sections, I was still coming from a very narrow position based on my role as data analyst. Yet, ironically, it was the disjuncture in our visions that created the conflict we now argue is important.

Our Cautionary Tale

Judy: Our stories serve as a cautionary tale to researchers: Tell us your stories, those that seem tangential to the data, so that we can bring more information to your interpretations. Savvy readers scan researchers' bibliographies to get the lay of the land. Researchers owe readers even more–their stories. We now believe researchers and research readers need to attend more carefully to the limitations of qualitative research. Surely we see what we are ready to see. Surely

our data is context specific. Surely we claim what we claim with disclaimers. And this is the way it needs to be.

Marianne: To conclude, we'd like to stress that all qualitative researchers need not enter into conflict collaboration. But, all qualitative researchers and consumers need to know such a collaboration could make explicit what may be implicit. That, if used, the issue of emergence would take on a more cautious role in qualitative research. Categories may well "emerge" more or less, but interpretations are created in relationship to our broader theories surrounding the research. As our colleague Jamie Myers argues, "Dialogue about contested meanings cannot be about the object meanings being contested but must delve into the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and experiences which contextualize and thus signify the focal objects in multiple ways" (Myers, 1995, p. 582). And that is not bad. Indeed, it is a strength of this work to explore one interpretation in depth. But it is only one perspective, not generalizable, not provable, just internally consistent.

While Judy and I probably agree in principle on fundamental issues about portfolio research, the scope of our positions was substantially different. I was looking for answers in a pile of text; Judy was seeing a much broader picture from within and beyond the text. The weight she gave the categories was contingent on her web of understandings, which in no way could I know explicitly. Whereas, the weight I gave the categories was based on my understandings of data analysis almost exclusively.

Judy: What does a researcher need to know in order to analyze data? The researcher must know where he/she is in the research. What are the conditions that bring us to where we are and how did they come to be that way? Tell us your stories ...

Researchers are always positioned within a cultural and historical context. Interpretation, then, is positioned likewise. The more we, as researchers, embrace our own subjectivities, the more trustworthy our findings become. We agree with Kneller that we "must interpret a text in light of [our] own situation" (as cited in Patton, 1990, p. 85).

What our experience suggests to us is caution in making claims. It will be in the collective of such interpretations that conclusions affecting school policy should be made. One qualitative study is a humble entity. We choose a qualitative research stance because its assumptions about "reality" come closer to our lived experiences than positivist, modernist cause-effect research stances. But, even qualitative research can get too big for its britches. It can take on the aspect of "truth" that so bedevils positivistic research. Even it can become reified.

We in qualitative research must go slowly in translating research findings into curricular policy. We must tread softly so that "truth" can emerge in its multiplicities.

References

Green, J. L. (1992). Multiple perspectives: Issues and directions. In R. Beach, J. L. Green, M. L. Kamil, & T. Shanahan (Eds.), *Multidisciplinary perspectives on literacy research*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

LeCompte, M. D., & Preissle, J. (1993). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research* (2nd ed.). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Myers, J. (1995). The value-laden assumptions of our interpretive practices. *Reading Research Quarterly, 30*(3), 582-587.
Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
Pennsylvania Bulletin, Part II. (1993, July 24). *23*(3). Harrisburg, PA.
Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity–one's own. *Educational Researcher, 17*(7), 17-22.
Rosaldo, R. (1993). *Culture and truth: The remaking of social analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Smith, D. G. (1991). Hermeneutic inquiry: The hermeneutic imagination and the pedagogic text. In E. C. Short (Ed.), *Forms of curriculum inquiry*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
Wagner, J. (1986). *The search for signs of intelligent life in the universe*. New York: Harper & Row.
Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.