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ABSTRACT

This symposium paper reports on developing biographical qualitative research methods, mixing personal narrative and conceptualization. The section on "Learning To Do" begins with an autobiographical report on a study of an urban classroom during which the author developed his early techniques for qualitative research, including the partnership of the teacher (the influential participant observer) and the researcher (a non-participant observer). This section continues with observations on a personal experience in preparing the biography of Nora Barlow, the granddaughter of Charles Darwin. The second part of the presentation on "Learning To Do" focuses on a description and interpretation of several issues in curriculum, teaching, and learning. The teaching strategies and course activities of a three-semester sequence are described, taking students from an introduction to qualitative methods to dissertation research, followed by reactions from a former student to the action research curriculum. The paper concludes with several observations, including: the importance of qualitative research to the author's professional life; learning to do qualitative inquiry is a kind of long independent study; and developing an interrelated series--graduate course, seminar, and independent study and dissertation research--focused the author's teaching life and provided students with a major cumulative set of opportunities. (Contains 17 references.) (ND)

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ED 409 314

# Biography: Learning to Do, Teaching to Do

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S. M. Smith

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## 1. Introduction

In this symposium on teaching and learning qualitative methods, and especially with the assignment regarding biographical method, one approach that seems reasonable is to tell a brief story of how I learned to do this kind of work and then to tell another brief story of how I have tried to teach these methods to students. Mixed in will be an attempt at more general concepts, hunches, and perhaps miniature theories of methodology. The nature and amount of mixing of narrative and conceptualization is an important choice in qualitative research, one demanding a rationale of its own. Unpacking the "what works" part of the charge involves a complex valuational judgment as well. A student comment or two will have to suffice for the moment.

## 2. Learning to Do

### 2.1 Complexities

This personal world of qualitative research began for me when William Geoffrey and I initiated and carried out a study of his classroom, **The Complexities of an Urban Classroom** (1968). We learned how to do this by reading, modeling, and trying to follow and build on the work of George Homans and Howard Becker. Explicitly we wanted to do an educational case study to go with the half dozen Homans reported on and conceptualized in his **The Human Group**. In a sense we were improvising off of a model of a classic piece of social science inquiry and writing. I believe that that is a very important idea. Also we had more than a little help from colleagues Sandy Charters and Larry Iannaccone. Though we did not see it that way at the time, our book might be described as an auto/biographical episode in Geoffrey's life as a teacher and in my life as a qualitative inquirer. That also I believe is an important idea. Subsequently I was involved

in a number of edu-ethnographic studies of classrooms, curricula, schools, and school districts.

In this first study we fumbled along and created a number of ideas and procedures that were to stay with me for several decades. We found funding through the U.S. Office of Education's Small Contract Program. That program was a godsend for individuals doing off-beat kinds of investigations. For those in educational policy positions I would argue for you to look closely at the "small contracts" idea. . We have returned to that kind of funding several times over the years. Most recently (1996) Jeri Changar and I started with a novel idea, wrote a short proposal, and have received a mini-grant from the Action Research Collaborative (ARC) of the Danforth Foundation for our project **Jewelry Designer with Beads: An Action Research Inquiry into Creativity**.

Almost inadvertently Geoffrey and I created special roles, what we called "the insider-outsider relationship." He was the teacher, the influential participant observer, and I was a university investigator, a non-participant observer. Without realizing it we were in the middle of a kind of symbolic interactionist perspective, and we had a special solution to the twin stances of involvement and detachment. This, too, we have used in subsequent studies. Most recently, Wilma Wells and I have just finished **Urban Parent Education: Dilemmas and Resolutions** (1997); she was an important staff member in the St. Louis Parents as Teachers program and I was an outside formative evaluator. What I thought initially was an idiosyncratic stance I now believe is a major and important variant of qualitative inquiry.

Along the way, in Geoffrey's classroom, the confusions in kinds of data got sorted out into several categories. Field notes taken on a yellow pad of paper in situ, that is while I sat on one side of the classroom, toward the back, were fairly traditional. But we elaborated within these, with bracketed notes, what we came to call "interpretive asides," bright ideas included in the field notes. These aside often made a theoretical point or raised a puzzling conceptual question. Later they would be very important as we built our larger

analysis and interpretation. Interpretations and analyses go better when the notes are saturated with these asides.

While driving to and from the Washington School I was restive with all kinds of impressions that had not gotten reported or elaborated in the field notes. I bought a portable tape recorder and dictated "summary observations and interpretations" as I drove to and fro. They varied in how tied to specific events and how free associational and speculative they were. As yet we have not tried to understand these notes in comparison with psychoanalytic approaches to reflections in therapy. We didn't tape our regular daily conversations. They entered the field notes and the summary observations. Now I would record them.

With the aid of Hans Zetterberg's powerful little book, **Theory and Verification in Sociology** (3rd Ed., 1965) we found a theoretical model for ordering our conceptualizations. At the time we found that positivist camp compatible with our overall perspective. In spite of the shifts to post modernism, contextualism, and perhaps critical theory I still can't totally shake that earlier point of view, even as we have tried alternative meta-theoretical stances. Perhaps I remain something of a "closet positivist" as some of my colleagues maintain.

A final thought from this early study and a major methodological point I would make is that each new project carries continuity with earlier projects and adds what might be called new wrinkles germane to the new project, its setting, and its participants. Now I would call this self study a kind of action research or a kind of reflective practice. In sum, **Complexities** remains a fertile opening gambit into the qualitative world.

### 2.2 Anatomy and Kensington Revisited

The Kensington Elementary School and the Milford School District came into my professional life early and returned later.

Initially, we were "running the methodology," as we explored the first year in the life of an innovative school (Smith and Keith, **Anatomy of Educational Innovation:**

**An Organizational Analysis of an Innovative School,** 1971). I discovered functional sociology, the "Merton, Blau, Gouldner, Selznick, and Lipset tradition" of case studies of organizations. Their books remain an important part of my perspective, as do the concrete problems of school organization, educational innovation, open education, and school reform. Qualitative methods seemed appropriate for inquiry beyond classrooms and traditional teaching and curriculum. The larger target of a school and its organizational structure and processes came into view.

Fifteen years later we returned to Kensington and Milford to study the mid to long term nature of educational innovation. Initially we called that inquiry "Kensington Revisited." Later there would be a trilogy of books reflecting the expansion of ideas about educational innovation, school reform, and educational utopias. In returning to the Kensington School in the Milford School District for a follow up of the school and its faculty, my colleagues Paul Kleine, David Dwyer, and John Prunty, and I expanded our methodological repertoire beyond ethnography and moved directly into life histories of teachers and the history of a school and a school district. Some of this was unplanned at the start and all of it involved "learning along the way" as we did the project. **Educational Innovators: Then and Now** (1986) was the life history volume from that study. **The Fate of an Innovative School: The History and Present Status of the Kensington School** (1987) and **Innovation and Change in Schooling: History, Politics, and Agency** (1988) were more historically focused. Methodologically they were earth shaking experiences for me as biography and history opened up new and huge domains of qualitative inquiry. Doing new kinds of inquiry, planned or unplanned at the beginning, reflecting upon doing, reading about what others have said, and doing and reflecting some more enlarges one's "problem and methods" beyond one's time and energy, if not one's talents also.

### 2.3 The Move to Biography

At that time when we were finishing Kensington Revisited, I knew that one of the next pieces of inquiry I wanted to do would be a "for real" biography rather than the shorter life histories of the Kensington/Milford teachers and administrators. Through a long, convoluted, and relatively serendipitous process I discovered Nora Barlow, granddaughter of Charles Darwin, and made arrangements to do her biography, **Nora Barlow and the Darwin Legacy**. That has involved me for almost a decade. Hopefully, as I have been commenting for several years, I am toward the end of that now. Several long and interesting stories lurk within this experience.

### 2.4 Extrapolations and Codification

Along the way, in all of the qualitative inquiry I have engaged in, I have developed a number of methodological pieces to extend the learning that was accruing. Now, once again "along the way," I have done these methodological excursions with biographical method. One part of this was the notion of "building a point of view" about biography, autobiography, and historical method as well - similar to the one I had built regarding ethnography. A number of AERA and other conference presentations, articles, and book chapters, such as "The Voyage of the Beagle: Field Work Lessons from Charles Darwin" and "Notes Toward Theory in Biography" contributed toward the perspective. In addition, this goal led me to accept an invitation to do a profile of B.F. Skinner for a UNESCO publication, a retrospective review of Homans' **The Human Group**, a book I had taught from for years, and a long account of a sabbatical semester I spent in Cambridge working on the biography. I called that essay **Doing Ethnography Biography: A Reflective Practitioner At Work in Cambridge** (1992). The capstone of this methodological "edifice" was a chapter on "Biographical Method" in the Denzin and Lincoln **Handbook of Qualitative Research** (1994). One of the biggest generalizations from this experience was how little I knew and how much there was to know.. Books by Bowen, Edel, and Clifford, to only mention a few, were major additions to elaborating my point of view. That quest continues apace.

In a sense, I see myself as a working artisan qua reflective practitioner, continuing to practice his craft - hopefully with some skill, a little creativity, and considerable pleasure. It has evolved into a life style, one that is important and one I feel comfortable with.

## 3. Teaching to Do

For our purposes in this symposium, this "learning to do" set of comments is one approach toward getting prepared and carrying out the "teaching to do" biographical method. I continue to be struck with how little of all this was a part of my formal Ph.D. education in the psychology department at the University of Minnesota some four or five decades ago. In the form of a series of brief statements, the second part of my presentation involves a description and interpretation of several issues in curriculum, teaching, and learning.

### 3.1 Curriculum

My teaching over the last couple of decades has involved a three semester sequence: a course called "The Classroom as a Social System," a seminar "Qualitative Inquiry: Ethnography, History, and Biography," and thirdly, a semester or more of "Independent Study" or dissertation research. At one time I believed that this was just an idiosyncratic personal teaching arrangement which seemed to make sense and which I enjoyed. Now I believe that it is a much more important and generalizable solution to teaching students to do qualitative inquiry. To begin with a general introductory course where the students read, I harangued a bit, and they discovered if they could do and enjoy qualitative inquiry seemed to make sense. My question and quest was whether they could make qualitative methods work creatively for themselves. Later, I selected and they self selected into the seminar where the inquiry continued and we tended to build toward a "theory of methodology," one sufficient to meet the criticisms and demands in defending the inquiry with individuals and groups who were committed to alternative strategies and methods. This was a major and continuing problem. Finally, when dissertation research began they

had accomplished already a small project or two with the kind of experience and confidence that bode well for their larger effort.

### 3.2 Students

The students are a mix of Ph.D. and post doctoral students from all over the metropolitan area and from a variety of disciplines, although mostly education. They are very bright, creative, and highly motivated. Typically they are looking for alternative ways to inquire, something other than the "quantitative, experimental, and positivist" traditions of their institutions. In my more fun loving moments I refer to the group as a "real zoo," and I was like the character Gerald McGrew in Seuss' delightful book, **If I Ran the Zoo**. To quote the opening stanzas:

"It's a pretty good zoo,"
Said young Gerald McGrew,
"And the fellow who runs it
Seems, proud of it too."

"But if *I* ran the zoo,"
Said young Gerald McGrew,
"I'd make a few changes.
That's just what I'd do ..."

The lions and tigers and that kind of stuff
They have up here now are not *quite* good enough.
You see things like these in just any old zoo.
They're awfully old-fashioned. I want something *new!*

So I'd open each cage. I'd unlock every pen,
Let the animals go, and start over again.

And, somehow or other, I think I could find

Some beasts of a much more un-usual kind.

The pictures and the stories are priceless. I won't even begin the creative translation of my students, their home institutions, and the reasons they came into the people and places he creates. For those of you without children or grandchildren, I brought the book along for you to glance through.

**3.3 Teaching**

More seriously, each semester, the major curriculum, evaluation, and teaching strategy is that each will do a qualitative inquiry "project," (long live Dewey, Kilpatrick, and Collings), which should culminate in a 25 to 40 page report. Initially that seemed to some a long and difficult exercise, but few ended with that brief length as their self selected topics and their creativity were engaged.

We read and discuss mixed combinations of the earlier mentioned references and many others depending on the group and the individual projects. Glaser and Strauss, Miles and Huberman, Guba, Eisner and Peshkin, and Denzin and Lincoln suggest some of that variety. The growth of this literature over the last three decades I find to be truly astounding.

I bring my current work for illustrations, discussion, and critical commentary. If anyone enters who is shy about critiquing a professor, they seen get over it very quickly. The ideas, decisions, and practices we have used are examined for how they might help each individual with his or her project. The students bring their projects for discussion and critique. One of the personal joys in having done a fair number of varied projects is that almost every question raised would trigger several pertinent illustrations of how we handled similar problems in one investigation or another.

Those who are doing "action research" in their own classrooms or schools often provide a major linkage into "auto/biography," to use Stanley's labeling. I believe that is an important way of framing action research. Valery's powerful quote "There is no theory

that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography" implicates and stimulates everyone. Think on that: **"There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography."** If that quote is not enough by itself juxtapose that with the task of doing a "profile" of B.F. Skinner and reading his three volume autobiography, plus his multiple experiments, essays and books. Some detail on recent dissertations by local Ph.D. students makes concrete and elaborates these arguments at further length.

Somewhere along the way in all this I discovered a couple of interrelated principles that seemed to work themselves out in the teaching and the classroom discussions. As students reported some descriptive event, I would write in red ink on their papers or raise in class the question "What do you make of this?" Without realizing at the time, I was asking for a more latent, genotypic, general, abstract set of meanings that might be in their data and initial stories. Later this became formalized a step further with my asking "What is your (Ms. A's) theory of X?" Initially, I guess, I expected each student to have a theory that became increasingly articulated. Still later, I would find a widely recognized expert in the student's problem area, such as Arthur Gates in reading, and ask "What do you know about reading comprehension that Arthur Gates didn't know in the 1920's, 30's, or 40's?" If you haven't tried that exercise in your area of inquiry you will find that it is a very difficult kind of question. Later this question got generalized to the possibility of a dialogue - "What does Arthur Gates know that you don't know? and What do you know that Arthur Gates doesn't know?" That dialogue then led into the positioning of the literature review in the study - a little up front for the general topography of the area and a lot later as one attempted to add one's creative contributions to a synthesis of the field at large.

Overall these activities make for exciting but fatiguing teaching. Keeping up with their projects, disciplines (medicine to educational administration), paradigmatic perspectives (symbolic interactionism to critical theory of multiple kinds), norms of their

home departments and institutions, and alternative beliefs of their advisors, committees, and assorted deans is a huge agenda for all of us and especially for me as teacher. Lots of long and interesting stories reside here.

### 3.4 A Student's Reaction

Over the years one gets multiple kinds and amounts of feedback on one's teaching. Perhaps the strongest data come from the several dozen Ph.D. students who have finished their qualitative dissertations and gone on to various kinds of work settings. Recently, one of my former students, Kathleen Sullivan Brown, interviewed me at some length on the history of ARC, the local Action Research Collaborative. She put a five paragraph "epilogue" at the close of the transcribed interview. My reaction was that it was a "too flattering, but lovely conclusion." With her permission I quote it here for another perspective on what my teaching tried to do. In her words:

> This conversation focused on Lou's role with A.R.C. and his connections to action research in other national and international contexts. We succeeded in providing some details of that story. More important to me, however, is Lou's role in developing teacher-researchers, particularly those who have remained to teach in the St. Louis area. That story, it seems to me can only be told by one of those students. In hindsight, it was the reason I proposed this interview with him as part of the ARC Evaluation. Briefly I would like to "tie a ribbon around it" this way, with a brief story of how Lou Smith taught me and others to become "action researchers."
>
> He mentions during our interview that ARC and its conferences allowed him to see former students and colleagues who were "working on interesting problems." This is also how he always described and conducted his courses at Washington University. He led a seminar on the "Classroom as a Pedagogical System" and "Qualitative Research." In these classes,

twenty or so students would sit around a large table. Students came from Washington University, of course, but they also came from the University of Missouri, St. Louis and other local consortium schools and the also came from other more distant places such as UM-Columbia and the University of Illinois, where they were finishing dissertations. Frequently the group included masters and undergraduate students, and doctoral students from other departments of the university.

Taking turns, we would describe our thoughts about "an interesting problem" that we might work on that semester. He did not provide a list of topics. Often, he did not provide a reading list until he knew "what we were about." We would figuratively "put our issue out on the table" and then examine it from our individual points of view around the table. Then we would "turn the problem over, around and inside/out." We would "see" the same problem from the perspectives of other roles: teacher, parent, social worker, teacher-educator, student. Like an art teacher, Lou would ask us to look at the object of study in different lights, from many sides. As we practiced articulating our ideas and making them public, our "objects of study" transformed into our selves.

Lou's gift as a teacher is in gradually drawing out each person's thoughts on their own work, their own vision. Through a lot of discussion, a little argumentation, and much soul searching about ethics in traditional and action research, each inquirer came to value the perspectives others can bring to issues on the table. At the same time, each one begins to appreciate the power and creativity in his or her own unique "take" on the problem. Like apprentice sculptors, we admired the work of the master and set out on

our own halting attempts, the mimetic and the transformative cycling through the semester in our individual heads as we talked, pushed and pulled, shared, challenged and stretched. We celebrated our uniqueness within our learning community.

This is the essence, as I understand it, of Action Research. Action Research is personal and idiosyncratic yet shared and public, detail-rich and context bound with universal implications for teaching, solutions-oriented yet reflective, practical and theoretical, informed by empirical data as well as intuition, judgment and experience. Action Research itself and the Action Research Collaborative "mixes the personal and the professional." This work integrates people of different races and cultures, teachers at various levels of education, teaching styles, and experience. Action Research challenges us to examine and live out our professional beliefs in the day-to-day life of our classrooms and institutions. These lessons I learned with and from Lou Smith, and the lessons continue to be practiced and reinforced through my association with the Action Research Collaborative. In my own work, colleagues and I still take up the challenge of "doing action research on interesting problems of teaching." (KSB 12/5/96)

As I indicated to Kathleen, it is "a too flattering, but lovely conclusion." It does reflect what I am trying for, and on my good days maybe even accomplishing.

### 4. A Concluding Thought or Two

A number of relatively simple conclusions seem to follow on these remarks.

First, I hope it is clear how important this qualitative research strategy has been to my professional life. Over several decades it has been the core of my inquiry, and because my teaching has been based heavily on the inquiry I do, qualitative inquiry has been at the core of my teaching. A major kind of integration exists in my professional life. I don't

know show generalizable this is to other academicians, but I believe it has been very important for me.

Second, and perhaps not as pronounced in these remarks as in my life more generally, a major intertwining of the personal and the professional has occurred. Many of the friendships my wife and I have are with individuals who have been students and colleagues. My wife and I have gone together to conferences, meetings and sabbatical jaunts around the country and all over the world - United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, Germany, and Israel. Cambridge, England holds a special spot in our hearts.

Third, learning to do qualitative inquiry has been a kind of long independent study program. With a kind of naive optimism, I seemed to get into situations that someone wiser and more careful would have stayed away from, but they were situations that proved to be extremely productive. Early on it was George Homans' **The Human Group** that provided multiple models that I could understand at least partially, and use as a guide. And, much later and more recently, Denzin and Lincoln's **Handbook of Qualitative Research** is the volume I turn to. In-between, settings of primary and secondary teaching, school innovation and reform, curriculum development, innovative curriculum evaluation and school organization all tumbled together. And I tried to understand them. Eventually, action research, life history, biography, autobiography, and history flowed into the stream of independent learning - new strands of qualitative inquiry.

Fourth, the idealism, intellectuality, and collegiality of the GIE, the Graduate Institute of Education as it was called for much of my forty years, and more recently the Department of Education, as it is now called, has been a resource beyond my expectations and hopes as an academic. Talk, conversations and discussions were never ending. The academic freedom to inquire and teach what seemed important and to develop courses to formalize ideas and experiences for students seemed to know few boundaries.

Fifth, developing an interrelated series: graduate course, seminar, and independent study and dissertation research focused my teaching life and provided students with a major

cumulating set of opportunities. I found a teaching style that seemed to fit me and to meet the needs of many students - a discussion oriented, self selected individual project activity, and some common readings, and perhaps a too heavy dose of Smith's struggles with his own projects seems to capture most of that.

The words of another student and colleague, "This is my world and welcome to it." suggests another view of what I have been trying to do over the years and what I wanted to say here today.

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