

Documentation can never be neutral: From hermeneutic perspective

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Abstract: Documentation does not belong to traditional child observation. Traditional child observation assumes an objective, external truth that can be recorded and accurately represented. However, documentation stresses on the responsibility of the observer for her or his observation, descriptions, interpretations and explanations. Meaning does not come from seeing or observation alone. It comes from the acts of interpretation. Documentation is not about assessing whether a child is conforming to a set of standards. By contrast, it is mainly about trying to see and understand what is going on in the pedagogical work and what the child is capable of without any predetermined framework of expectations and norms. Processes of observation and documentation are never objective and hence not neutral. Objectivity is a subject's false view that observing can take place without him. We have to realize and admit that documentation always holds our own subjective feelings, wishes and values which should not be seen as something negative but rather as something positive, not something to avoid but rather to understand how these enter into the process of documentation.

Key words: documentation; hermeneutic; observation

1. "Documentation" is not traditional "observation"

This paper puts forward the concept of "documentation" is to illustrate the new significance within this word.

1.1 What is traditional "observing children"

"Observing children" assumes there is an outer objective truth. This truth can be recorded and presented accurately. This is the view of traditional objectivists and rationalists. They believe world is independently existing and knowledge is the reflection of the world. It pursues that observers should discard his subjectivity and observe the object as objective as possible.

"Observing children" assumes that what is observed has its inherent essential characteristics. Even when we observe children. The relationship between observer and child is the relationship between "I" and "it", not "I" and "you". In English, we use "it" to indicate a baby. Does it not reflect this idea?

"Observing children" assumes that it is possible to eliminate the subjectivity. In fact, "Objectivity is a subject's false view that observing can take place without him" (Dahiberg, et al., 1999). The process of observation and documentation is neither objective nor neutral. We must realize and admit that documentation always holds our own subjective feeling, will and values which should not be seen as something negative but rather as something positive.

The purpose of "observing children" is to evaluate the psychological development of children. It defines how a child should be like according to his age, classifies children according to their developmental stage and level. It becomes a set of standard techniques to a great extent.

1.2 Why the rationality of "observing children" is so dominant

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When we trace back to the origin, we find that, from Plato, western philosophy is founded on the division of subjectivity and objectivity. This epistemology, after industrialization, consistent with the popular admired objective values on knowledge. That is, the process of cognition is a reflection of the objective materials, just like the mirror reflect things. It stresses on the objectivity of knowledge. Knowledge can be universal and holds neutral values. Newton and Descartes' views on world and Bacon's "knowledge is power", influences human's whole industrial history. Even today, we are still influenced by this epistemology. What's more, owing to its great and prosperous social outcomes, human just blindly worship and chasing the objectivity of knowledge.

In the 19th century, positivism became dominant. Objective research method of natural sciences became a universal law of research. Then, it was a tide that positivism was transplanted into social sciences. Positivism methodology deeply influences social sciences and contributes to their development. However, it denies the particularity of human social sciences, makes human an object.

In this situation, "scientific" and "objective" become the substitute name of "correct" and "right". Social studies, such as pedagogy and psychology, try hard to paste themselves the label of "science", to pursue objective and quantitative method and unwilling to think how lively and complicated their researches are.

However, is science really the substitute name of objectivity and accuracy? The emergence of quanta theory brought a revolution in science field. "The nature we observe and research is a world that we perceive. On one hand, people always try to obtain complete and accurate knowledge about the nature. On the other hand, it is impossible that people can avoid interfering nature. So, the knowledge we obtained is definitely involved our participation and influence. People want to get pure and accurate knowledge about nature, but the unavoidable interference by human just makes this hope become an illusion. This is the new notion that the quanta theory brings to us" (HU Rou-ren, 1995).

1.3 Transition of educational research paradigm

In fact, just like Husserl said, the world of our daily life is the only true world. We make a garment for it, that is, the so-called objective scientific garment of truth. This conceptual garment makes us feel that this method is the true existence. We forget that it is designed by us. This conceptual garment concealed the real meaning of our daily world (LIU Fang-tong, 1990).

When we probe the educational history, we find that pedagogy have been walking on the "scientific" road stumblingly after the 17th century. It emphasizes on "objectivity", "universal" and "neutral values". "After the 1970's, educational research field make a great 'paradigm transition', that is, from exploring universal educational rules to seeking contextual educational meanings" (David Jeffery Smith, 2000). As regards the research methodology, the transition is: from the traditional positivism and prescribed pattern to a phenomenological, describing and hermeneutic pattern. This transition has its profound social, cultural and philosophical background (JU Yu-cui, 2003).

Hermeneutic educational theory believes that the meaning of text is not in itself, but in the dialogue between the text and the interpreter; meaning of the text depends on the understanding of interpreter; meaning of curriculum of any culture varies owing to the change of era and interpreter. Any comprehension is the individual's creative comprehension. Comprehension is the integration of social culture and individual personality. Education is the construction of meanings (ZOU Jin, 1992).

2. Documentation: From hermeneutic perspective

The concept of “documentation” in this paper is just under this background. It is a method to improve teaching, assessment and research.

Documentation is not an exact statement of what happened. What we document is not the direct presentation of children’ words and thought. We select and edit. We see to conform to our beliefs about what sort of world we live in. Teachers document what they believe valuable. Documentation expresses a choice, a choice among many possibilities. Meanwhile, what we don’t choose is also a choice. The concept we use, the description we make and the understanding of what happened, these are all choices when we document. There is never a statement that can be called “true”. “Past memories are not true description of the past facts, because our memory chooses materials; present situations are not always understood clearly, because our attention is influenced by our benefits; future results are not always what we expect, because they are the outcomes of many other forces besides our hope and endeavors” (FEI Xiao-tong, 2003).

Documentation inevitably holds documenter’s subjectivity. Every documenter has her own background, experiences, ideas, interests and benefit, everyone will choose different things when they document.

In one training program, there was an activity: a chair was set in the center of the classroom. A rag baby was sitting on the chair. Teachers circled around. Every teacher was asked to draw a picture of the chair and the rag baby from her own perspective. The pictures they handed in vary dramatically. Some were big, some were small; some demonstrated many details, some were drawn briefly; some showed the whole rag baby; some showed the side of the chair and the hand of rag baby (Judy Harris Helm, Sallee Beneke & Kathy Steinheimer, 1998).

Therefore, teachers are different individuals. They look things from different perspectives. When they look the living children, holding their own beliefs, surely different teacher will see different aspects.

Nowadays, when you carry a camera to take photos; when you press the button, snap, documentation seems an impersonal business. However, the scene, which every person chooses is different. Camera can not replace person. To look is not equal to see. Seeing is the capability that God gives to us. It need we actively open our heart, see with patience, focus our attention on and try to stand in another person’s shoes. What’s more, what we observe are not still object, but the children, who are dramatically varied, continuously changing, and interacting with human and environment.

Documentation emphasizes on the construction characteristic of knowledge. It emphasizes that the cognition is related to the subject, the process of cognition is full of the subject’s active meaning-construction. The explorer is an initiative observer. It stresses on the responsibility of the observer. Even the interpretations of the same documentation vary dramatically. In one thousand people, there are one thousand Hamlets. A same X-ray photograph, different people will see different things owing to their diverse professional and educational background. The patient only sees some shadows and some vague cloudy stripes. The doctor may find whether there is a cancer or artery choke etc.

In the same way, when seeing a child sucking thumb, behaviorists may think how to correct this behavior through some outer method, but humanists may think that how to satisfy the child’s needs. Then, their actions are different. Behaviorists may put something at the thumb, make it look terrible or taste terrible, let the child feel unhappy when he suck thumb, in this way to stop the child’s behavior like this. However, humanists may wash the child’s hand, make it clean, do not interrupt him, or give him some other things to suck, and at the same time, satisfy the child’s needs, let him feel safe, satisfactory, and has new interests. Then, they hope the child can stop sucking thumb naturally. So “documentation” is not to avoid subjectivity, but to understand how it comes into the process of documentation. I totally admit the subjective characteristic of “documentation”. And I welcome,

celebrate this subjectivity. All the subjective documentations and interpretations are like various kinds of light projected to the object. Some are like laser light, penetrate; some are like the light of flashlight, wide, make us can see many aspects of the object. All these different kinds of light make us can research the object better.

Documentation pursue the “meaning in context”, not the general and abstract rules. It pursues “meaning”. “Meaning” does not come from seeing or observing. It is not lying on the ground and waiting you to pick up. It is constructed. It is generated from the activity of interpretation. When we document, we are constructing the relationship between teachers and children. In this aspect, the practice of documentation can not exist without our involvement in the process. We choose scene, which is closely relating to the context. When we document, we should consider the complicated situations of the teaching context, understand the unique, haphazard and unpredictable characteristics of teaching. It is not like drawing a map. You can not draw the social reality. Observing is a process, which is rooted in the local context, is a process of co-construction. We need to change our idea. Observing is not from outer, from a third person’s view, but an inner behavior, from the second person’s view.

Documentation is not to evaluate children, whether they conform to a set of standard, but the other way round. It tries to see, to understand what is happening during the pedagogical process. What the children have done and how the teaching advanced are all content of documentation. Notes, videos, photos, pictures and children’s works, teachers’ log, reflection are all the means of documentation. However, what is more important is the process. How teachers use these materials to reflect and improve their teaching? How children get the feeling of achievement and happiness? These determine whether the documentation is good or not.

Documentation makes children see what they did. They will find the meaning of their work from the documentation. They will feel that they are paid attention to. They find the existence of themselves, they also find what they said and did are important and listened, noted and accepted by others. What’s more, during this process, the uniqueness of individual child is paid attention to. It is not circumscribed by standard requirement.

Documentation not only reveals children’s learning, but also reveals the teachers’ growth. We believe teachers’ capability should be defined as a set of understanding but not pure knowledge.

Documentation is a kind of invitation, a kind of guidance. It unfolds issues and makes people thinking. It invites us to join the contexts, to experience and understand. It makes the world out of ECE institutes can see our job and its significance. It promotes the involvement of other institutions. It makes itself a part of public discourse, accepted and supported by public.

Documentation makes us reflecting. It makes us see how we understand the practical events, because we apply the thoughts and behavior what we believe valuable into our pedagogical practice. By documentation, we can look at issues in a researching mind, can discuss and adjust openly, and can look children from different perspectives. Documentation, as a learning process, and meanwhile as a communicating process, the precondition is to create an explorative, reflective, communicating culture. In this culture, the voices of children, parents, officers, teachers etc. can all involved and be heard. In this way, it can assure us to analyze from different perspectives, and offer more opportunities to people. We can not think that “other people have problem, I am the person who solve the problem”. We should discard the thought that we ourselves are judges, grand interpreters and the lords of truth.

Documentation makes us realize that we don’t present the facts, we just choose from the discourses. It can make us feel easier to analyze critically, and can find a way to resist the rule of dominant discourse. By documentation, we can uncover the mask of dominant discourse. So, documentation can be a tool to open a

critical, reflective practice movement, challenge the dominant discourse and construct a more multiple voice system, make it possible to reflect and liberate ourselves.

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