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Voices from the Perch: An Orchestrated Response to Davis

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ABSTRACT. The editor of this journal sent me an advance copy of Wesley's Davis' article asking if I would be interested in writing a response, no doubt since my voice was one of those "pronouncements from an awesomely elevated professorial perch" that Mr. Davis apparently found so irksome. In the spirit of one of the best attributes of a particular form of qualitative research, ethnography, in that it seeks to construct meaning from a multitude of voices, I have chosen to include the voices of my students enrolled in a course I taught in the summer of 1993, *Advanced Methods of Qualitative Research*. Their thoughtful comments and insights are a better testament to how this research paradigm leads to a greater understanding of schools and children's learning than any I can provide. Mr. Davis' worst fears about teachers conducting research may be alleviated since several students in the class were teachers (past and present) who are using their knowledge of classrooms as a basis for formulating their research questions. This article is a compilation of voices who strongly contest Mr. Davis' contentions; my role in this rebuttal is to act as an interlocutor to selected portions of the students' responses. Since qualitative research often features the organization of data by thematic categories, the students' responses are organized into four major themes: the nature of research, the construction of meaning, the question of validity, and textual strategies for writing up social science research.

The nature of research

Since a major portion of the course was devoted to helping students learn how to analyze their empirical data from different theoretical perspectives, one assertion that took us all aback was the one that qualitative research is not "real'

research, that it masquerades as some "feel good" activity designed to make classrooms teachers feel they are accomplishing a valued task. Several students had especially strong opinions on the presumed dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research. David, a doctoral student in higher education, asserted that:

> Davis's assertion that naturalistic inquiry is not "real" research borders on the absurd. Tuckman (1989), who is by no means an apologist for qualitative methods, states that research at its core is simply the systematic attempt to provide answers to questions about the relationship between two or more variables. It seems reasonable that such a systematic attempt can be undertaken in either a qualitative or quantitative fashion. Beyond that, Davis's distinction between research conducted under the positivistic and naturalistic paradigms as simply "quantitative" and "qualitative" is unsatisfactory. The differences lie not in the presence or absence of quantification *per se*. After all, assigning a number to represent the degree of presence of a certain trait is essentially a qualitative decision, and ethnographers often count things. As Owens (1987), Krathwohl (1993), and others have suggested, more appropriate distinctions lie in the kinds of questions asked by researchers and how they go about collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data.

Kathleen, a doctoral student in counselor education, suggested the emphasis on method was misplaced:

> Certainly there is a place for both types of research designs in education. However, the choice of design should be driven by the research question. Shulman (1988) observed that because education is a field of study rather than a singular discipline, inquiry does not need to be limited by doctrine. In fact, knowledge may be lost when following a restrictive mode of inquiry. Shulman quoted the British philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, who said: *Some of the major disasters of mankind have been produced by the narrowness of men with a good methodology ... to set limits to speculation is treason to the future.*

A third student, Michael, a doctoral student in mathematics education, took issue with Mr. Davis's assertion that qualitative research lacks precise measures and empirical verification. He noted that:

> From his treatment of the term measurement, it appears that Mr. Davis is suffering from the delusion that measurements are exact. On

> the contrary, a measurement is simply an observed numeric approximation. Note the word *observed*, which is an implicit recognition of the indispensability of the observer. Qualitative research openly recognizes the critical role of the observer, while quantitative analyses seeks to reduce the role of the observer to insignificance through the use of reified terms such as 'objective' and 'control.' ... Frequently associated with terms like 'measurement' and 'objectivity' is the term 'systematic inquiry.' For myself it is a very broad term but Davis sees it as synonymous with empirical research interwoven with "clear rules and procedures." This perception is inconsistent with the Einsteinian/Deweyian view of science in that science is whatever it is scientists do (Nagle, 1950).

A last comment on this presumed dichotomy was offered by Lynda, a doctoral student in physical education, who stated that:

> ... what Davis refers to as the "time honored tradition" of scientific research contradicts the "softness" implied as detrimental to the credibility and meaning of qualitative research. Davis's implication that qualitative research should be more closely aligned with quantitative procedures suggests that positivism is a worthy competitor against which to formulate an alternative research paradigm. ... Both quantitative and qualitative research are influenced by the pressures of an imperfect world combined with variations in human nature and experience. As evidenced by the demise of positivism, variations in human nature within this imperfect world should be studied as possible legitimate "causal" explanations regardless of the method of scientific inquiry applied to the research process. Perhaps those who insist on fueling the dying quantitative/qualitative debate have failed to realize how small the epistemological gap has become between the two research methodologies.

The construction of meaning

A second aspect of Mr. Davis's article that especially caught several students' attention was his almost complete lack of knowledge of the various traditions of qualitative research, and how these traditions would apply to the study of human behavior. Karen, another doctoral student in higher education, had this reaction:

> In response to your erroneous statement in the initial portion of the essay that qualitative research is not really research, let me assist you by recommending a good tutorial: *Qualitative Research Traditions: A Review* by Evelyn Jacob (1987). This article illustrates various qualitative traditions amenable to quantitative analysis. In all fairness however, I am sympathetic to your plight to acknowledge value in any methodology which deviates from the positivistic traditions and experimental models. As a physiologist, I was raised on the experimental model, but I have learned that human beings do not interact with the environment with the same level of conformity as laboratory rats.

The idea that people are not "laboratory rats" was echoed by a doctoral student in early childhood education, Jane, who was concerned that positivistic forms of research have left many significant questions unanswered. She raised these issues:

> How do children, practitioners, and educational groups make meaning of their lives? Researchers have entered classrooms and come out with numbers, graphs, and charts. Where is the meaning? Have we really looked and listened to what is going on with the people in that setting?

The voice of one classroom teacher is heard in Janet's reply, a doctoral student in elementary education, who will return to teaching fifth grade this fall. She chose this statement, "happy teachers make for happy kids," to express her indignation:

> What makes a classroom full of happy kids? If we were answering this question from a quantitative stance, singular variables would be drawn out, treated, and measured. While these findings may provide validation of one kind, could the underlying dynamics of classroom behavior have possibly been overlooked? Does the validity of numbers denote the human condition? I say no! Intuition, when coupled with pedagogy and observation, are the teacher's greatest tools. Qualitative study affords the teacher-researcher the "room" to observe and describe what she/he "sees." The narrative gives voice to the intuition's whispers. The study "reads" like a Dickens' novel, replete with observations which describe the bursts of color from the book held in small hands, the smells of paints being applied lavishly to thematic art, the sounds of pencils moving noisily over paper, excited voices sharing ideas, and yes, happy faces that could not be

> described quantitatively with the richness they so deserve. Why settle for a short story, focusing on a singular piece or detail, when you could write a novel?

Another former middle school teacher, Gary, who is now a doctoral student in science education, chided Mr. Davis for the way he negated teachers' professional judgment:

> In reading this article, I question where is your respect for education and educators. It seems to me that you are bashing teachers and university instructors. Are you equating all teachers to clowns who try to make education enjoyable? Quite a metaphor! Should education be synonymous with drudgery, a workplace where students cannot enjoy what they are learning nor look forward to attending class? ... Having been a middle school teacher, graduate student, and university education instructor, I have had many opportunities to collaborate with several prospective and practicing teachers. I have never heard a teacher proclaim nor would I adopt the notion that fun is all that counts, or that students just be allowed to do what "feels good." ... Teachers are continually confronted with issues and questions concerning practice and theory, pedagogical and content knowledge. Through action research and case studies teachers are better able to understand their practice and are encouraged to be more innovative and creative. Qualitative research makes it possible for the researcher, the researched, and reader to reconceptualize theories and beliefs, and to be reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983), all of which enhance professional growth and development.

Establishing validity

The perennial question of what makes a research study valid was addressed by many students. Mr. Davis's comments concerning the validity of qualitative research provoked strong opinions. Ann, a fifteen year veteran teacher, was incensed over the assumption that her research was based only on her opinion of how students felt. She offered this defense of "classroom research":

> Qualitative methods are used to acquire understanding about the motives, values, beliefs, attitudes, and commitments which lie behind the events which are observed in class or in school. An example of such research would include monitoring the impact of new standards on potential at-risk students or identifying characteristics associated with successful education of at-risk or gifted students in program

> development. To check the validity of data, I use a process called triangulation. Triangulation is a process by which the researcher cross-checks the information acquired to be sure that it is not just (a) their own misperceptions or beliefs, (b) misinformation which they have acquired, (c) the results of their own limitations, biases or desires (Gallagher, 1984; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1987). In simple terms, this means comparing observational data with other types of data; it means comparing what students say in public with what they say and do in private, and it means checking the consistency of what people say and do over time. Qualitative classroom research has to do with detail, with the subtle and unique things that make a difference beyond the points on a standardized scale. It is a question of meaning. Answers to such questions require detailed, in-depth, holistic descriptions that represent people in their own terms. Does this count as data or a sermon? It is very clear to me that this is data that leads to making inferences and drawing conclusions.

Linda, a doctoral student in special education, also noted that validity in qualitative research extends beyond just accepting what people say at face value:

> Davis also states that he assumes the response to the question of validity is "satisfied through consensual agreement among multiple observers." He fails to take into account that careful formulation of questions and perceptive interpretation of answers is a more accurate way to ensure the data are valid. Through participant observation, formal and informal interviewing, the researcher and interviewee become increasingly more comfortable with each other, which tends to increase the validity and reliability of information obtained during the interviews. This also helps the researcher produce a more rounded picture of the situation than could an isolated pure researcher.

Joyce, a doctoral student in higher education, noted that the criteria for establishing validity differed greatly between the two paradigms:

> The traditional methods used in quantitative research to determine rigor and trustworthiness are internal validity, external validity, generalizability, reliability and objectivity. In contrast, Lincoln (1985) identified criteria that should be used to measure the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative or naturalistic studies. Analogous criteria for qualitative studies are credibility, transferability,

> dependability, and confirmability. Credibility can be achieved through persistent observations, triangulation, and member checks. Transferability is used to describe the applicability or relevance of the findings to other contexts. Consistency of the study is measured by dependability in qualitative studies. Dependability can be increased by maintaining an audit trail or a retrievable data base. In qualitative studies, neutrality of the study is determined by confirmability. Confirmability can be determined by checking the evidence presented by the researcher and the actual raw data.

The last comment on validity was made by Lilia, a doctoral student in science education from Columbia, South America, who echoed Joyce's comments with this observation:

> Maxwell (1992), following Harry Wolcott's idea that "understanding is more fundamental concept for qualitative research than validity," explains validity as derived from the understanding gained from qualitative inquiry. He notes that Guba and Lincoln (1989) view validity as a positivist notion and propose to substitute for this the concept of "authenticity" in qualitative research. As he says, the attempt to extend the dominant experimental/quantitative model of validity to qualitative research is "misguided."

Textual strategies

Finally, we come to an issue closest to one of my interests, the rhetorical strategies used by researchers to discuss their findings. Several students picked up on the idea of underlying metaphors present in Davis' article, beginning with the opening paragraph. As one student, Rosemary, a doctoral student in adult education, noted:

> I agree that battle is an unfortunate choice of metaphor for the quantitative/qualitative dialogue because it presents the two approaches to research as though one approach must be superior to the other in order to "win" the battle. In fact, each methodological approach has its own strengths as well as having its own weaknesses. For many years educators seemingly have defined research as reducing observed data (students/people) to something measurable and thus have come to believe, perhaps, that numbers equal objectivity. As a result people have been reduced to objects and the effect of contextual variation in the lives of human beings has been ignored. Other disciplines--sociology and anthropology for example--have

> developed and used qualitative research approaches as a means to understand behavior, attitudes, and social processes. If we in education insist on using only one tool (quantitative methods), we restrict the problems we can explore and, perhaps even more importantly, the questions we can ask.

Maureen, a doctoral student in social studies education, pointed out that the textual strategies used by Davis to present his arguments against qualitative research negate the very point he wishes to make:

> Davis proceeds, with both barrels, to denounce qualitative research as nothing but "what feels right" business. His denouncing style, though, is of issue here. It would have better served his argument if he had written and developed this piece as a systematic inquiry, following the clear rules and procedures of empirical, experimental, and positivistic research. Davis posits that quantitative research is conducted in a format including: "The instrumentation, the characteristics of the subjects in the sample, the design, the method of data collection and what level of measurements they represent, the statistical analyses, the inferences and conclusions, etc." Where does he name and number the universities in which this data was collected? What was the subject population? Were his generalized remarks collected via survey, questionnaire, interview? This essay should have been cloaked in a valid data collection scheme and should have been empirically grounded. By writing his own piece in such a time-honored traditional manner he would have evidenced better the validity for conducting quantitative research. His subjectivity lies revealed in the voluminous and sometimes inappropriate mishmash of literary license, scrambled metaphors of gun, bible, pie, birds, circus, as well as the personification of debate itself in the opening paragraph. Unfortunately, this leaves objectivity gone with the wind and "... is also an affront to the spirit and tradition of William James" he mentions.

My view is that there can be no objectivity of thought apart from the language used to create meaning, and that use of a particular discourse structure is always subjectively bound within "webs of meaning," to use Clifford Geertz's (1973, p. 5) apt phrase. Marshall and Barritt (1990) argued that the rhetorical choices of social scientists cannot mimic those of the natural sciences since the social world is constituted by human interaction and language that is always grounded in specific cultural contexts. From their perspective, adhering to conventional forms (the politics of citation, the careful use of prior research and

statistical data to buttress arguments) loses sight of the fact that all researchers become rhetoricians, whose claims are no more substantive than those who use other rhetorical strategies.

Another student, Judy, who is a doctoral student in international education, shared Rosemary's thoughts on the 'research is war' motif. She began her response by quoting Dewey: "Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities" (1938, p. 17), and then continued:

> The letter you write begins with a metaphor of battle, with images of you firing a volley and the reader firing back and this notion of warfare continues throughout your letter. The perspective which you set up, then, of active combat sets the stage for the competitive rivalry, in your view, between quantitative and qualitative researchers. The positivist tradition, you claim, needs to reassert its claim to control of the world of educational research. ... This dispute, a fairly simple case of opposition to you, is one that many view as multi-dimensional. In today's complex, rapidly changing world, few would assert that there is a single right way to understand or to assess the lives of others.

Her last point was to quote Guba and Lincoln that "rather than perpetuating the notion of competition between these two research paradigms, perhaps it is time to begin engaging in dialectic discussion that will result in a new construction with which all can agree, not because the new construction is "truer" than other of its predecessors but because it is better informed and more sophisticated" (1989, p. 115).

Summary

In closing, I speak for all of us when I say that we will not do battle with you, Mr. Davis, but we will agree to meet you on common ground of mutual respect and tolerance for the diverse ways in which the complexities and richness of human behavior can be studied. Since Mr. Davis ended his article with an aphorism from the "wise old owl" (and what, pray tell, is a "feely spider"? - an operational definition is sorely needed here), it is only fitting to end this article with a poem Judy used that was quoted by David Krathwohl, one of the past presidents of the American Educational Research Association:

There once was a hen from Nantasket
Who put all her eggs in one basket.
The basket was deep, with colors replete,
And filled up with eggs qualitatively sweet.

Along came a hen from Lanerick
Whose eggs were in baskets numeric.
In measures exact it was clear she could revel
With small standard error and confidence level.

Qualities, quantities, which is the better?
Let us decide to use them together!
Qualities show us holistic missions;
Quantities measure effects of conditions.

D. Berdie (cited in Krathwohl, 1993, p. 617)

Notes

[1] This article is a jointly constructed text from both my students' responses and my commentary on them. Since current journalistic assumptions about authorship do not easily adapt to multiple authors beyond a selected few, their names need to be listed in a note. The students who responded in the order they appear in the text are: David Wright, Kathleen Sparrow, Michael Hardy, Lynda Nilges, Karen Smith, Jane McClelland, Janet McKenzie, Gary Nabib, Ann Johnson, Linda Gessner, Joyce Coleman, Lilia Reyes, Rosemary Closson, Maureen Robinson, and Judy Munter.

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