

Document Review Lessons

In addition to participant observation and interviewing, Bogdan and Biklen (1982) have identified several other sources of information in educational settings that are commonly used in qualitative inquiry. There are usually a large number of documents written by participants that are available to an educator in the school setting. The main task for an educator turned inquirer is to identify, locate, and gain access to such materials.

Be on the lookout for artifacts, documents, photographs, records, and so on that are available in your inquiry setting or that you, students, or others at your site could generate as part of their normal activities. Consider anything that might be used to explore a different perspective on the questions your inquiry raises and the tentative answers you are reaching through observations and interviews. Examples include journal entries by students and other staff members, records of attendance and performance on assignments and exams, video tapes and photographs of classroom interactions (produced by the inquirer or by the participants the inquirer is trying to understand), letters sent home to parents, portfolios of students' work, grade reports, logs teachers or others keep, official statistics, and so on. These "documents" can provide independent checks on your own perceptions and readings of what you hear and see. They are not necessarily more accurate or correct than your observations and interviews. But when they confirm your hunches, you will usually be more confident that you were listening and seeing insightfully. If the conclusions you draw from existing records or documents counter your ideas from other activities, you are more likely to look harder and listen more carefully before making final choices. As an insider in your school, you are likely to have access to many of these documents as part of your responsibilities there. Be sure to ask students and others for permission to read and share journal entries and other private documents, even if you have access to them as a staff member.

Judy read journals kept by the teachers for her project, looked at assigned work the students were generating during the period of the study, and reviewed the children's cumulative records. She could have been more open in discussing how she used these documents in this case; but she seemed to be reviewing them to see how closely they independently supported her conclusions.

Any literature on the topic you are interested in can be viewed as documents to include in your review. The documents do not have to be produced by people at your site. Often, other teachers, administrators, or educational researchers are dealing with some of the same issues as you. When you read accounts of their inquiries and recommendations, summaries should go into your field notes as you make mental connections between the academic and practical worlds. Conducting your own research in your educational setting can make you much more inquisitive about what others are doing and saying about the same issues as you. Relating what you read to what you are finding is a satisfying way to build confidence in your own inquiries. Judy had reviewed the literature extensively in preparation for conducting her dissertation. This literature turned out to be very relevant to what she observed and heard during data collection. She also became aware of other literature sources during data collection and responded to them in her reports. Using the literature is not often thought of as a data collection activity; but it serves that purpose well.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that other important sources of information, which are often overlooked, are "*unobtrusive informational residues*" which accumulate without anyone's intent that they be used as data. These can be collected in the absence of the person(s) who created them (as archeologists collect artifacts left by ancient cultures). The main challenge you face is discovering residues in your own particular setting, which might provide useful insight.

Lincoln and Guba give some examples of such traces that might be used by inquiring educators: “shortcuts across lawns as indicators of preferred traffic patterns, . . . worn and smudged condition of books as indicators of their use, number of discarded liquor bottles as indicators of the level of alcoholism in an apartment complex, number of cigarettes in an ashtray as an indicator of nervous tension, amount of paperwork that accumulates in the “in” basket as an indicator of work load, number of books in a personal library as an indicator of humaneness, presence of bulletin board displays in a schoolroom as an indicator of the teacher’s concern with children’s creativity, and many others.”



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