

Gathering Through Observations, Interviews and Documents

You have probably already conducted some interview or observation sessions for the study you are doing in connection with your reading of this book, because you cannot help doing so if you are involved at all in doing a study. Gathering information is what most people normally think of as doing research. Hopefully, by the time you read this chapter, you will agree with the theme of the book, that none of the inquiry activities stands alone. The acts of observing, interviewing, and using documents or artifacts involve all the other activities too—

- asking questions,
- interpreting experience,
- sharing what is learned with others,
- building on relationships with others,
- keeping a record,
- acting out assumptions and beliefs about the nature of the world, and
- developing your unique inquirer's role.

This presentation will focus on the explicit data collection activities of observing, interviewing, and reviewing documents. But please keep the holo-movement metaphor, outlined in Chapter One and rehearsed in every other chapter, in mind as you read this chapter.

Many authors have written about ways of collecting information in schools and other educational settings from “outsider” and professional researcher perspectives. Books by Gay (1987) and Borg and Gall (1983) include chapters on the use of questionnaires, tests, and experimental design, in addition to observation, interviewing, and document review. Their audiences are usually evaluators and researchers. Other authors (e.g., Bogden and Biklen (1982), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Spradley (1979 and 1980)) have focused on the latter three gathering approaches which are more “qualitative” but they too have rarely assumed that the teachers, principals, or other “insiders” who are not professional researchers in the school where the research is being done would be the main inquirers.

There has been an increasing number of authors (see Boody, 1992 and Burgess, 1985 for several references) who have promoted the notions of “action research” and “reflective practice,” which are very compatible with the practitioner-as-learner approach to inquiry being promoted in this book. These authors seem to agree that practitioners should use data gathering techniques that are compatible with their regular activities and which will yield information and experiences they can use to improve their practice. Although many of the methods reviewed by general texts on research *could* be used by practitioners to yield useful information, the need for specialized skills in test and questionnaire design and selection, statistical analysis, and manipulation of curriculum and instruction are often prohibitive for busy educators and other practitioners. Therefore, the focus of this book is on those procedures that seem most natural for practitioners— observation, interviewing, and review of documents.

The challenge for many practitioners is to translate the good ideas for collecting information that professional researchers promote into procedures that are workable for practitioners-as-inquirers, in concert with all the other activities they engage in. We will take this challenge by showing an example of one educator who used her position, relationships, and purposes as an assistant principal to invite others in the school to join her in conducting a research

study. This study, in conjunction with the others illustrated throughout the book will be used to note several practical ways educators and other practitioners can adapt the data collection procedures of qualitative inquiry by full time researchers to their unique purposes. I hope you will see these as possibilities, not boundaries on ways you could collect information in your own setting.



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