

Story Reading Through Analysis, Synthesis and Interpretation

In her excellent review of qualitative inquiry and analysis, Renata Tesch (1990) reviewed 26 different approaches to qualitative research she identified in the literature. She organized these approaches around four research interests: exploration of characteristics of language, the discovery of regularities, the comprehension of the meaning of text or action, and reflection. She noted that although there is overlap among these approaches in terms of how the inquirer interprets or makes sense of information gathered, there is not a consensus on how to analyze, synthesize, and interpret information. In fact, as new assumptions about what knowledge is and how we learn are employed, as different kinds of questions are asked, as different purposes for doing inquiry evolve, and as different people participate as inquirers, more and more kinds of interpretation are developing. This fact can be discouraging if you were hoping to find the one right way to make sense of information you are gathering. But it is also very liberating to know that inquirers can come up with their own interpretive procedures to fit their particular study needs.

Another way to think about these issues is in terms of stories. Storytelling and story hearing or story reading are some of the most ancient of human activities. When someone is telling a story, they are interpreting or making meaning of some event, activity, or experience. The telling of a story involves “making sense” of experience and making sense could involve analysis, synthesis, and/or interpretation. These story-telling interpretive activities can take infinite forms. For example, a child sitting on the back row of a classroom with filthy clothing, who is disruptive or seems depressed and is not involved in the class activities is telling her teacher a story about her background, needs, and challenges. Students tell stories about their interpretations of life, school, subject matter, etc. through their test performance, homework completion, social behavior, artistic expression, writing, the books they read, responses to questions, and on and on.

In Chapter One, Steve (the student who was expelled from the high school program) was telling his teachers and student teachers a story through his smoking behavior on the ski trip as well as through his comments to them in their office after the trip. Jimmy was telling Kyleen a story through all of his activities, which she documented in the study reported in Appendix C. The first graders who were held back were trying to tell their stories to the administrators and teachers described by Judy in her report in Appendix E. Marné was trying to read stories of several students and herself as a journal-writing teacher in Appendix B. Gary was doing the same thing as a school superintendent by reading stories being lived out by teachers and administrators from his district in his report in Appendix F.

Thinking even more broadly, we find that living and all experience generally can be usefully thought of as interpretation. If I respond to people brusquely or kindly, I am expressing an interpretation of them and my relationships with them. If I stay in bed all day or get up and work hard when I have a cold, I am interpreting that malady differently. Almost anything one does or says or *is* can be considered an expression of meaning or point of view by the actor. We are telling our stories by our presence, our aura, our clothing, our physical stance, how we locate ourselves in a group, by our faces, by all that we are. If this is so, everyone is constantly telling stories or expressing interpretations of all their experiences. And anyone who is interested in hearing those stories has more than enough to listen for. Educators face many storytellers daily.

In a slightly more restricted sense, there are many different ways we *actively* or *deliberately* interpret experience “reflectively” or “thoughtfully” (as opposed to simply living out our interpretations of life’s events). Some of these interpretations are done in relative solitude while others are interactive. Interactive interpretations can be with people

we are close to or with relative strangers. Thinking about these deliberate interpretations as “readings” of the stories people are telling us through their lives or readings of our lived experience may open up some new ways of making sense of qualitative inquiry activities. Some examples of deliberate forms of interpretation, which allow the interpreter to get a new “reading” are:

- Letting an experience or idea “sink in” to our sub-conscious and seeing where it leads.
- Literally reading others’ writings and letting their interpretations spark new connections in the reader.
- Writing (journals, memos, letters, poetry, field notes, and others) helps the writer to clarify *her or his* thinking and perspective.
- Making summary statements about an experience, receiving critical feedback from others regarding those summaries, and defending the summaries with an open mind.
- Responding to a request to summarize the key learning or insights obtained during a study.
- Therapeutic talking with a counselor, a friend, or a support group about experiences.
- Meditating in various forms (while running, dreaming, engaging in martial arts, practicing Zen, praying, and so on) allows the participant to step back from the experience and get a different reading.
- Using any of the common art forms (such as painting, drawing, dance, music, and story telling itself) can help the artist to “read” an experience in a different way, to interpret it.

Educators who think of themselves primarily as learners are constantly seeking for better and better ways to read the stories others are telling through their lives. This is deliberate interpretation. Teachers face entire rooms full of students who are telling stories that may be very foreign to the teachers’ experiences. They face the challenge of helping the students integrate parts of those stories into a coherent classroom story that everyone can share, but which does not threaten or destroy the story elements unique to each member of the class. And of course, teachers have their own stories to merge with the students’ and class’s stories. Administrators face the same challenge at building and institution levels. Part of the challenge of qualitative inquiry and of education generally is to learn to read the stories others are telling, to understand them, to have compassion for them.

In a sense then, this whole book on qualitative inquiry is about helping educators invite the people they work with and themselves to tell their stories more powerfully. It is also about helping educators find better ways to hear or “read” those stories and to share what they learn through those readings with people they want to help. Chapter Nine focuses on the sharing of story-readings. *This* chapter provides an opportunity to look in more depth at a few of the many ways of reading or interpreting people’s stories to give you a sense of what is possible. You are invited to take this closer look by:

1. exploring how you are already interpreting or telling stories of *your* experience through the way you are living,
2. exploring how you are already reading or interpreting others’ interpretations or stories, and
3. considering some additional ways you might read others’ stories through qualitative inquiry and various associated approaches to analysis, synthesis, and interpretation.





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