

Narrative Inquiry and Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

The kind of research conducted by communities of practice may be related to preliminary investigations of subjects that may not have been extensively investigated in the past. Alternatively, communities of practice may be formed to expand previous investigations into relatively under-researched areas. In either case the approach to conducting these preliminary investigations may be qualitative in nature. An approach that facilitates qualitative investigations is *Narrative Inquiry*.

BACKGROUND

Narrative Inquiry documents “a segment of one’s life that is of interest to the narrator and researcher” (Girden, 2001, p. 49) and includes “the symbolic presentation of a sequence of events connected by subject matter and related by time” (Scholes, 1981, p. 205). The documentation represents the story told by the research participant that is both contextually rich and temporally bounded. A story is contextually rich when it has been experienced firsthand by the research participant (Tulving, 1972; Swap, Leonard, Shields & Abrams, 2001). Stories that have a beginning and an end are temporally bounded and follow a chronological sequence of events (Bruner, 1990; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Vendelo, 1998).

In order to add structure to a Narrative Inquiry interview, the Long Interview Technique (McCracken, 1988) may be incorporated. To begin, “grand tour” (McCracken, 1988) questions are addressed which are general and provide a context for the following more detailed discussion. Questions are posed during the interview which relate specifically to the area under investigation. In response to an answer, a “floating prompt” (McCracken, 1988) may be employed so that the researcher may delve into more detail. Near the end of the interview, “planned prompts” may be used to ensure issues are

addressed which may have arisen from a literature search or previous interviews.

Data analysis involves searching for emerging themes, first within an interview and then across a series of interviews. The search for emerging themes is common practice in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and involves the interplay between both the data and the emerging themes. The process begins with a careful reading of the transcript, where noteworthy phrases or sentences are highlighted. Passages that seem conceptually linked are then considered together, and descriptions of the theme or pattern that the groupings share are developed. Subsequently, the data are reread to identify further evidence that supports or challenges the emerging themes. This second review process can lead to the identification of new themes, new classification of themes, or reclassification of data from one theme to another. Eventually, a consolidated interpretation of the data is achieved.

CONCLUSION

Narrative Inquiry allows research participants to relate stories of their own experiences. The Long Interview Technique provides structure to the process which identifies the underlying concepts of research participants’ perspectives within the context of the individual. This approach should facilitate the type of preliminary investigations conducted by groups involved in communities of practice.

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KEY TERMS

Contextually Rich: A story that has been experienced firsthand.

Narrative Inquiry: An approach to documenting a research participant's story about an area of interest.

Temporally Bound: A story that has a beginning, an end, and a chronological sequence.

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