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Doctoral Research into Worldviews: Qualitative methodology

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This article gives a condensed account of the methodology used in my doctoral research. The citations should be especially useful for anyone involved in qualitative research in education.

The doctorate compares Thai, Japanese and Australian worldviews and investigates the implications these had for education. The research process involved a literature review to determine the beliefs in the various countries, and then initial interviews to identify important worldviews held by the subjects. This was followed by extensive further research (especially further literature review and consultation with experts) to examine and critique the worldviews. The findings from these sources were synthesized with my own interpretations, reflections, experiences, and thoughts.

Methodology

Over the last two decades, researchers in education have embraced the qualitative and interpretive research approaches that originated in anthropology. Cobern (1991) notes that the most common approach used in education is “interpretative” (p.107); that worldview

research “requires innovative techniques” (p.110); and that it “can only be pursued qualitatively” (p.97). However, qualitative approaches, because of their subjective nature, can present a biased view. To help to overcome this potential defect, and to enhance the credibility of the research, the study uses three means of data collection (i.e. triangulation; see Cohen and Manion, 2000 an extensive review of the literature; interviews; and consultation with experts in the field. Guba and Lincoln (1989, p.237) suggest that prolonged involvement is needed “to establish the rapport and build the trust necessary to uncover constructions, and to facilitate immersing oneself in and understanding the context’s culture” and persistent observation is needed “to add depth to the scope which prolonged engagement affords”. In my case this involved living in the three countries, and ‘immersion’ would be a fair term to describe my experiences.

Denzin & Lincoln (1998) write of the 3rd moment in the history of qualitative research as being characterized by “blurred genres”. Their (Denzin and Lincoln, *ibid.* pp.2-3) images of qualitative research as a work of bricolage: a complex, dense, reflexive, work using whatever tools and strategies are available is useful in understanding how this research project was carried out (see also Weinstein and Weinstein, 1992).

Erikson (1986, p.156) explains interpretative research as involving “deliberate scrutiny of his or her own

interpretative point of view, and of its sources in formal theory, culturally learned ways of seeing, and personal value commitments. As the participant learns more about the world out there he or she learns more about himself or herself”. This sums up exactly my experience during the process of research. I chose this philosophical area because I expected that I would increase my self-understanding and have not been disappointed.

Qualitative or quantitative methods?

Some studies of worldviews have relied on the statistical analysis of responses to questionnaires. While it is not denied that such techniques are useful in many contexts, I argue their value is limited when investigating worldviews. They are not one-dimensional entities; rather they are quite complex and need the innovative methods allowed by a qualitative study.

However, Tobin & Scholar (1998) note that while the last decade has seen an increasing acceptance of interpretative research education, questions remain as to whether the quality of the research is equal to that of traditional quantitative studies. They write that there must be sufficient evidence to support every assertion made and that “efforts have been made to refute all assertions; and that a negative case analysis of discrepant data has been conducted” (1998, p.44). They suggest that this process leads to a continual process of revising the themes and assertions in the study, with a continual

search for both discrepancies and linkages in the data. This was my own experience over the course of the research.

Conclusion

Finally, I believe that a rigid following of even the best methodology can lead to obscurity of the content of the research, termed “methodolatry” by Janesick (1994). In the search for understanding we should be prepared

to use any methods that work. Whatever methodology we use to get to a point becomes, finally, less important than evaluation of the knowledge produced—which must be rigorous. In short I tried to achieve a suitable balance between substance and method. This study would, no doubt, have been easier if there was a clear step-by-step method that could be followed. But, as Cobern (1991, p.13) notes, “there are no worldview research manuals.”

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