



Qualitative Research

STUDYING HOW THINGS WORK

Robert E. Stake

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ROBERT E. STAKE



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Introduction

Make Yourself Comfortable

In writing this book, I wanted to help create good teaching and learning situations. I wanted to make your class or your reading a better experience. There is much more to teaching and learning than a good textbook, but the experience is better if the book nestles into what you are trying to do. Of course, other teachers and learners are different from you, so this book will nestle with some better than others.

If you are an instructor, you have your content to teach, teaching the way you want to teach, some with lectures—perhaps PowerPointed, maybe with clickers—and maybe small-group discussions. Possibly some blended, maybe all of it online. Were we closer together, I could have written the book better for you. There is content here that needs your explanation, as well as mine. I have built in lots of chocks (a tying place on a boat) for tying in your explanations and examples and questions for the students. I hope you like to assign them large projects, because I think that what I have written becomes more meaningful when projects are being worked on. I have tried to write this book with you in mind—two of us side by side, at safe and reasonable speeds.

If you are a student, you are committing yourself to learning quite a bit more about qualitative research methods. You already know quite a bit. It hasn't been proven yet whether your learning of these things began at conception or at birth, but it really starts early. And it never ends.

Some of what you will want to know will arrive through still-to-happen personal experiences. Like interviewing. You have been asking questions all your life, but for research projects, you probably need to be more disciplined—not necessarily more formal, but more tied into the themes of your study. You can read about it in these chapters and in other writings, but your skill at research interviewing will increase as you do it for real. You need to study and practice, practice and study, back and forth. For that reason, I hope you will be working on a research project while you are reading this book.

If you are a lone reader, pretty much on your own, without instructor and classmates, I feel bad about it, because a lot of this learning is a social experience. And a shared hot chocolate lubricates the mind better than one solo. (As you see, my style here is to try to engage you personally. I know it doesn't always work. I, too, am still trying to figure out how things work.)

This book is about how an understanding of the social and professional worlds around us comes from paying attention to what people are doing and what they are saying. Some of what they do and say is unproductive and silly, but we need to know that, too. A lot of what people do is motivated by their love for their families and a desire to help people, and we need to know that, too. We won't just ask them. We will look closely to see how their productivity and love are manifested.

I put “Studying How Things Work” in the title, not intending to lead you to how things ought to work nor to what factors cause them to work as they do, but intending to help you improve your ability to examine how things are working. Most of the things I have in mind are small things—small but not simple, such as classrooms and offices and committees. But also gerundial things, nursing and mainstreaming and fund-raising, in particular situations. And some special things, such as ordering chairs for a classroom, and “labor and delivery,” and personal privacy. Usually, we here will dig into how something particular is working somewhere much more often than into how things work in general. Working toward broad generalizations requires broad studies, most of which need both qualitative and quantitative methods. A dissertation can be a broad study; not all are. What qualitative studies are best at is examining the actual, ongoing ways that persons or organizations are doing their thing.

In writing this book, I chose to emphasize understanding what is currently happening much more than improving what is happening. I am

aware that quite a few of you have had your fill of what is happening and want to waste no more time before trying to make things work better. Quite a bit of qualitative research is directed at the problems of professional practice. It looks at poverty and discrimination and standardized testing, and those are good problems for critical study. All of them are complex problems capable of being interpreted differently in different situations. I fear that the problems will be treated superficially if the complexities are not understood. We can speak out against the problem while we are doing the research, but taking an early position for a particular remedy sometimes steers the research away from important insights. You have to do it your way, but the chapters to follow will beg for your patience while you become more expert on how the thing works.

My intention in writing this book is to arrange an experience for you with qualitative research. I care a lot about the words we choose and the methods we use, but it is expanding your experiential knowledge that I prioritize here. Reading, talking, visualizing, being skeptical, working on projects, reflecting—these are important experiences this book will help you with. You will build new ways on top of the ways you already use to figure out how things work. (It is not my intent to make people as much alike as possible. You will run into my skepticism about standardization in the pages ahead.) The grand experience here is contemplating research—not so much handling data, which is important, but thinking through a study from beginning to end.

Your experiences with this book depend, of course, on the words and concepts. To build the experience, I urge you to read right through the unfamiliar words. Otherwise, they may get in the way of the bigger concepts. Hasn't it worked for you all your life? When you need it, there is a glossary just before the bibliography.

The concepts of this book are shaped by my many years as an educational program evaluator. I started my professional career long ago as a teacher, instructional researcher, and developer of educational tests. I found that my quantitative methods failed to answer too many of the questions of program developers and training specialists, so gradually I changed emphasis toward qualitative research methods. I continue to mix quantitative thinking into my designs, but, over the weeks and years, maybe 90% of my research and teaching has emphasized detailed activities of people, experiential inquiry, and close attention to the context of the action. I try to avoid stereotypes, and this includes how I think about you and myself.

PROJECTS

Here are several projects that should help you try out some of the concepts and methods of the dozen chapters ahead.

Project A

From now on, if you do not already do so, keep a journal. It is an extremely important project for you as a qualitative researcher. Make it partly a record of what is happening to your thinking—observations, references, and personal musings—as you experience them. Keep anything worth writing down, stuff like e-mail addresses and book titles. You should start now and carry the journal (laptops don't whip out as easily) with you. From time to time, when an idea is particularly provocative, develop it into a paragraph or more, perhaps making an assertion. You are writing for yourself for now, but you will use some of what you write, later, for others.

Project B

Read at least one classic book by a qualitative writer. Think about what the writer has done to be able to write it. Think about planning, access, fieldwork, distractions, triangulation, barriers to writing. Here are some books that I think of as classics:

Henry Adams: *The Education of Henry Adams* (autobiography)
 Howard Becker: *Boys in White* (medical school)
 Ronald Blythe: *Akenfield* (English village)
 Bruce Chatwin: *The Songlines* (aboriginal territories)
 Robert Coles: *Children of Crisis* (urban education)
 Ivan Doig: *Winter Brothers* (social expansion of the Northwest)
 Mitchell Duneier: *Slim's Table* (poor black men)
 Elizabeth Eddy: *Becoming a Teacher* (teacher education)
 Robert Edgerton: *Cloak of Competence* (special education)
 David Halberstam: *The Coldest Winter* (the Korean War)
 Jonathan Harr: *A Civil Action* (legal activism)
 Diana Kelly-Byrne: *A Child's Play Life* (preschools)
 A. L. Kennedy: *On Bullfighting* (cultural values)
 Jonathan Kozol: *Savage Inequalities* (urban schools)
 Saville Kushner: *A Musical Education* (a conservatoire)

Halldor Laxness: *Under the Glacier* (church administration)
 Oscar Lewis: *La Vida* (a Mexican family)
 Elliot Liebow: *Tally's Corner* (gangs)
 Sarah Lightfoot: *The Good High School* (portraiture of education)
 Barry MacDonald and Saville Kushner: *Bread and Dreams* (school desegregation)
 John McPhee: *The Headmaster* (biography)
 Alan Peshkin: *God's Choice* (community and education)
 Eric Redman: *The Dance of Legislation* (federal lawmaking)
 Margit Rowell: *Brancusi vs. United States* (defining art)
 Louis Smith and William Geoffrey: *Complexities of an Urban Classroom* (teaching)
 Studs Terkel: *Working* (interviews with working people)
 James Watson: *The Double Helix* (scientific discovery)
 Harry Wolcott: *The Man in the Principal's Office: An Ethnography* (management)

Examine the conceptual structure of the book you choose. Consider what cannot be learned about the conceptual structure of the research behind the book from what is reported. Note tactics of writing that you might refer to in the future. Write about it in your journal.

Project C

After reading “The Case of the Missing Chairs” (Box 2.1), go back over it and look for bias that David Hamilton, the researcher, might have had. Write a few paragraphs about that possible bias. Put your writing away until you have read Section 9.4 on bias. Then write another few paragraphs reviewing your original analysis of Hamilton’s possible bias.

Project D

Make an observation of at least 3 hours of a large, organized social event (e.g., a family reunion, a festival, a memorial service, a workshop) of professional interest to you. If you cannot observe the entire event, figure out how to learn what happened when you were not there. Learn as much as you can about the planning and running of it. Presume that your report might be used to help people far away understand what happened. Identify one or more issues of concern. Discuss this activity and its issues with someone. Prepare a report, perhaps of 1,000 words.

Project E

After reflecting on Project D (perhaps using no more than a single page), generate at least six rules or reminders for making such a field observation suitable for inclusion in a larger report. Show in the way you write it that you have given it some reflection.

Project F

View the feature-length 2003 film *Kitchen Stories*. What is the message about personal relationships between researchers and the people they study?

Project G

In small groups, discuss: Why should the three items at the end of Section 5.4 be combined into a single score? And why should they not?

Project H

Read Chapter 5 and become familiar with the National Youth Sports Program (NYSP) as it was at the time. Suppose that one of the research team members returns from Metropolis Campus, one of the host campuses, and submits a summary of the program there (Table I.1). The team members get together to decide how this report fits with the other information about NYSP presented in Chapter 5. Study this information, then meet in a small group and talk about what should be done. Prepare a one-page report to the director of the evaluation project, suggesting what should be done.

Project J

Prepare a brief proposal, but at least 800 words long, for carrying out a qualitative research project on a topic of high interest to you. State carefully the research question, one or two issues or additional foreshadowing questions, the relevant contexts, the data to be gathered, the sources from which they will be gathered, other research activities anticipated, two or three most relevant writings that you may build from, the schedule, and the budget. Think carefully about the information most needed by your advisor or host.

TABLE I.1. Summary of the National Youth Sports Program at Metropolis Campus

Prespecified characteristics	Need	Rating	Weight	Merit points
Youth and children				
Quality of experience for youth	High	8	8	64
Knowledge gained by youth				
Sports	Moderate	3	6	18
Personal health	High	3	7	21
Campus/community	Moderate	6	6	36
Staff				
Competence for tasks assigned	High	4	6	24
Dedication, loyalty of staff	High	9	4	36
Quality of staff–student interaction	High	8	9	72
Commitment to structure, discipline	Moderate	9	7	63
Management				
Coordination of activities	High	6	8	48
Compliance with NYSP regulations	High	8	4	32
Responsive to sponsors, parents	High	7	5	35
Coping with emergencies	High	8	6	48
Staff development, supervision	Moderate	3	5	15
Involving staff in management	Low	3	4	12
Attention to kids with special needs	Moderate	5	5	25
Dealing with supplemental costs	Moderate	7	3	21
Bookkeeping	Moderate	6	3	18
Totals			96	588

Note. Ratings scaled 0–10, with 10 high. The summary evaluation score for Metropolis Campus was 588. With the scores of all 170 programs as the reference group, Metropolis Campus scored at the 45th percentile and was identified with 84 other programs in a group called “Commendable with opportunity for enhancement.”

Project K

Spend maybe less than an hour sketching out two concept maps, one on “community of practice” and one on “old boys’ network” (or two other multiple-reality concepts). Then write a short essay on similarities and differences between the two concepts.

Project L

Write out a qualitative research question of interest to you. Construct five questions that will become part of an interview of one key person to further your understanding of or an assertion about the research ques-

tion. Presume that it is not his or her feelings or opinions that you need but that his or her experience, observations, or relationships should help you understand. One of the five should be an exhibit question. Think very carefully as you develop the five questions that should try to make the issue more understandable, possibly leading to some resolution of an issue. Presume that other questions will be added later to describe the interviewee as a key person. Think of possible responses by the interviewee and how you would probe them. Try out your five questions on a role-playing helper, then revise the questions. When satisfied with the five, interview someone who has pertinent experience or can role-play it. Make a report showing both the questions planned and the questions asked. Reexamine your questions to see what more you could have done to advance understanding of the issue. Write maybe 500 words about your effort, specifying the issue, the questions, and what you learned here about interviewing.

Project M

Suppose you were including the bubble gum experiment, as described in Section 8.2, in a report, and you were told you could include four photographs to help the reader understand this bubble gum patch. Presume that all the photographs have been provided. Which four scenes might you select?

Project N

Find instances in the Ukraine study (Sections 10.2 and 11.2) that exemplify each of the main characteristics of qualitative research that are identified in Box 1.2.

Project P

Write up a vignette from your own observation or interview data. In a brief accompanying note, identify the issue the vignette develops and an assertion that it might help you make.

Project Q

Suppose a researcher had included in his or her report the vignette of Ana and Issam appearing in Section 12.7. The purpose would be to illus-