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*Concerns and aspirations for qualitative  
research in the new millennium*

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This essay describes some of my concerns and aspirations for qualitative research as we move into the next millennium. The exploration and promotion of qualitative research has been an important focus of my intellectual life. In fact, it has been a part of my intellectual life long before I became a doctoral student at the University of Chicago in the late 1950s. My interest in qualitative matters started in elementary school when I discovered that I had developed a love affair with art. That love affair eventually led me to a part-time position working with inner-city children as a teacher of arts and crafts, and from there to the study of education and the role of the arts in its promotion. In this transition, the arts and other qualitative considerations were deeply integrated into my way of thinking about education.

The Department of Education at the University of Chicago, at the time I enrolled, did not offer courses in qualitative methods. I cannot remember ever hearing the term 'qualitative research'. The Department at Chicago was a part of the division of the social sciences and its relationship with the social science division of the university was cherished and protected by the faculty. Research was what the faculty was to do and research meant doing the kind of work that *real* social scientists did. This meant doing work that used statistical methods to measure the effects of experiments, correlational studies to determine the magnitude of association among variables, and that employed assumptions about the 'discovery of knowledge' that were standard fare in the social sciences. Indeed, my own doctoral dissertation was a factor analytic study that used a Univac computer the size of a small room to perform varimax rotations and to calculate eigenvectors in order to discover types of creativity elementary-school students displayed in their drawings and sculptures (Eisner, 1965). The university socialized me in social science methods but, alas, that socialization could not really compete with the inclinations of my heart or with the intellectual convictions that my immersion in the visual arts had generated, first as a painter and later as a

teacher of art. That brief personal history is, as they say, to let you know where I am coming from.

To describe my aspirations and concerns about the future of qualitative research, I begin with the visual arts and the parallels that can be drawn between the visual arts and qualitative research.

If the visual arts are focused on anything, they are focused on the creation, selection and organization of visual qualities. By 'qualities' I mean phenomena that can be experienced by the senses; for example, the unique quality of experience that a particular shade of blue engenders, or the relationship between that shade of blue and, say, a field of gray on which it is situated. Artists in general and visual artists in particular pay attention to the nuanced qualities of the particular to create work having aesthetic value. This interest is revealed in the way in which a painter like Pierre Bonnard treats a sunlit interior, the way Mark Rothko creates the particular ethereal qualities of light that seem to radiate from behind his canvas, or Edward Hopper captures the loneliness of a rural roadside garage. Artists concern themselves with such nuances because in doing so they draw attention to particulars. In doing so they slow down perception and invite exploration (Dewey, 1934).

Another feature of the visual arts is that they are used to communicate the way something feels, that is, its emotional character. Picasso's 'Guernica', one of the great visual achievements of the 20th century, does not merely tell us about the bombing of a small Basque town by the Nazis on 26 April 1937; it shows it and in showing it it makes empathy possible. 'Guernica' conveys to the competent percipient what destruction feels like. Rembrandt does the same to reveal the feel and character of the sitter in his portraits. In literature Hemingway does this with his novels, Tennyson with his poems. Artists convey the sense of a situation, they create and organize qualities that make those situations palpable.

But that's not all that artists do. Artists also invent fresh ways to show us aspects of the world we had not noticed; they release us from the stupor of the familiar. The process they employ is called defamiliarization. In ethnography this is called making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. As Dewey put it, "The arts remove the veils that keep the eyes from seeing and in that sense", he added, "the arts are more moral than morality" (Dewey, 1934: 325).

The practice and products of qualitative research have much in common with the practices used in the arts; consider the features I have already mentioned: qualitative researchers pay careful attention to highly nuanced qualities in both their uptake and their output, they are focused on cases, that is, on the particular; they use forms of communication that are intended to do more than tell, but to show, that is, to convey a sense or feeling of person or place. Qualitative research has much to do with making vivid what had been obscure. Like the arts themselves, good qualitative research contributes

to what Maxine Greene (1995) calls 'wide awakeness'. Nuance, particularity, emotion and perceptual freshness characteristic of the arts are also critically important features of good qualitative research.

It seems odd to talk about research as having parallels with the arts. Research is thought to belong to science and art and science are usually believed to reside in different worlds (Snow, 1993). The sciences deal with abstraction, truth, the literal and the quantitative. The arts deal with the concrete, the persuasive, the metaphorical, and with the qualitative. The pursuit of truth belongs to science, the pursuit of the good to morality, and the creation of the beautiful to the arts. It is best that we do not confound their functions. Research is a scientific enterprise, art is something else entirely. This is what I was led to believe as a graduate student, if not in so many words, by example and by being introduced to unexamined assumptions about what was regarded as legitimate method.

As we all know, times have changed. The separation between the arts and sciences is nowhere near as wide as it once was. Of course, there are still places where the division is kept tidy, places where graduate students are discouraged from building connections, exploring alternatives, or even 'blurring the genres', as Clifford Geertz (2000) might say. And, if truth be told, there are still editorial boards and proposal review committees that look at all forms of qualitative research as reconnaissance efforts that precede 'real' research. But, on the whole, the movement over the past 30 years has been to problematize, gradually to be sure, the old unexamined assumptions about research and to push into new ways of thinking about how and who will do research. Why the change?

One of the reasons for change is that scholars have become attracted to the idea of getting close to practice, to getting a first-hand sense of what actually goes on in classrooms, schools, hospitals and communities. That kind of knowledge takes time. The one-shot commando raid as a way to get the data and get out no longer seems attractive. You need to be there. A clean research design with tight experimental controls might be right for some kinds of research, but not for all kinds.

Two early examples of research that got close to practice are found in two books published in the same year: Philip Jackson's *Life in Classrooms* (1968) and Lou Smith's *The Complexities of an Urban Classroom* (1968). These books provided powerful models of what such research might look like. Indeed, even though the first half of Jackson's book presented conventional quantitative research data collected during his year-long stay in classrooms, it was his narrative that was most revealing. Jackson and Smith broke new ground for those of us in education.

Jackson and Smith were not alone. Joseph Schwab (1969) also called for the study of practice and, following Aristotle's lead, built his argument on epistemological grounds; practical knowledge, Schwab argued, required attention to particulars, to contingencies and to moral virtues. It was a form

of knowledge different in kind from that produced by testing hypotheses. Schwab was followed by scholars such as Lee J. Cronbach (1975), Robert Stake (1978) and Egon Guba (1978) – all three quantitatively oriented psychologists who discovered other stars to guide them on the road to Damascus. These scholars, and others too numerous for me to name here, made a difference in the historical course of qualitative research.

The second reason for change is that the past 30 years have seen a growing interest in, and acceptance of, pluralism in our social life. We are less certain about the virtues of homogeneity than we once were. Feminists have taught us about the multiple ways in which the world can be experienced and have uncovered assumptions and values in our so-called value neutral research practices that make them seem less neutral than we once believed they were. Put another way, the politics of method became visible (Eisner, 1988).

Third, traditional research practices have been less of a stunning success than we hoped for and some of the disappointment has motivated some scholars to seek other models of inquiry. Qualitative research is one of the alternatives. It is an alternative that has commanded greater interest year after year. Although I have not made a specific count, I would estimate that at least half of all the dissertations done in the School of Education at Stanford are qualitative. The paper topic categories listed in the index of the American Educational Research Association annual meeting program indicates that papers on qualitative methods are the fifth or sixth largest category. There are now five journals, two handbooks and I can't count the number of books and articles on qualitative research methods. This is a domain that is vibrant and growing.

Fourth, we have come to realize that research predicated on a problem-solving model of practice is, at best, itself problematic. Researchers concerned with human relationships do not solve problems, they cope with situations. Sometimes we resolve situations – and then only temporarily. What this means is that our situations are in a dynamic state and that while the actions we take may temporarily resolve them – if we are lucky – almost assuredly, our resolutions will generate other situations that will need further resolution. In addition, in the context of practice we cannot hold conditions constant. Qualitative research deals more easily with such dynamics than its traditional counterpart. We are trying to invent neither the equivalent of spaceship Discovery nor are we going to capture reality in a bag. We are trying to develop some insights we can work with.

Fifth, there has been a growing realization among researchers of something that artists have long known in their bones; namely, that form matters, that content and form cannot be separated, that how one says something is part and parcel of what is said. This idea in wider terms was the core idea in my Presidential address to the American Educational Research Association in 1992 (Eisner, 1993). The title of that address was, 'Forms of Understanding and the Future of Educational Research'. My aim was to

convey the idea that the form of representation one uses has something to do with the form of understanding one secures. Once this idea penetrated the research community, the form used to inquire and to express what one had learned was no minor consideration. This idea, the idea that different forms could convey different meanings, that form and content cannot be separated, has led to the exploration of new modes of research (Barone and Eisner, 1997). This exploration has been the most daring and difficult part of the research picture in the qualitative research community for it eventually leads to basic questions as to what will count as research. In fact, it reminds me of Cole Porter's lyric: 'In olden days a hint of stocking was looked on as something shocking, now heaven knows, anything goes. Good authors too who once knew better words now only use four-letter words – writing prose. Anything goes.'

I doubt that anyone really believes that anything goes, but we often find it difficult to define the standards – if standards is the right term – to determine what does go (Dewey, 1934). And this brings me to another part of my remarks. It brings me to my concerns about some of the efforts I have encountered to invent new approaches to educational research.

One of those concerns pertains to the connection or lack thereof between the form a research project takes and the degree to which it informs someone about something. One of the virtues of propositional discourse is that it has the capacity, when well used, to describe situations in reasonably precise terms. To be sure, it is not free from ambiguity, but it can be used to communicate in ways that promote mutual understanding. I regard that as a virtue. By contrast, I have seen at conferences presentations conceived of as examples of the new wave in qualitative research that appeared to me to have more to do with novelty than with an effort to inform. One presentation I saw used a coffin accompanied by a bevy of pallbearers to illustrate a theme whose point escaped me. The presentation was novel, the image vivid, but in the end uninformative. It is critical that there be sufficient clarity to render a work useful to someone. Put another way, researchers who employ inventive ways of presenting what has been learned have the obligation to create something that a reader or viewer will find meaningful.

In the arts two sources are called upon to evoke meaning. One of these is what is called *sense*, the other *reference* (Jackson, 1998). Sense refers to the feel a form evokes, the emotional state or quality of experience the work engenders. For example, the form of the visual qualities Picasso employed in 'Guernica' engenders in most a particular sense of horror. The black, gray and white newspaper-like colors of 'Guernica', its sharp flat shapes, its oblique composition express such feeling.

Reference refers to something the work refers to; the scream of a wounded horse, the cry of a mother holding her dead child have reference to destruction and pain. The integration of sense and reference is used by artists to communicate. In the arts the scope for ambiguity may be wider than in the

research community. Mind you I am not implying that we fall back to literal word or number, only that we should not become so enchanted with novelty that we forget about matters of meaning and the need to communicate.

The tension between ambiguity and precision with respect to reference may be very difficult to alleviate. We have cultural expectations regarding how reliable information is to be secured and provided. Science is the paradigm. Will people accept forms of research that are non-scientific for making consequential decisions? If they will not, does this mean that we will be limited to what scientific forms of representation can describe or explain? I have no issue to take with science, social or otherwise, but scientific frameworks do not exhaust the ways in which we experience the world or render our experience of it public. Bias, ironically, comes not only from commission, but also from omission. Science, like the arts, omits as well as includes. In that sense, all forms of representation are biased.

At the same time, in our ordinary life we do use novels, films and exhibitions to learn about matters we care about. The film 'Hoop Dreams' (Joravsky, 1995), for example, is a stunning example of what can be revealed through film, in this case a film about two African-American adolescents, about their families, about competitive sports, about ambition, about failure and success. What it presents through both sense and reference informs in distinctive and powerful ways.

To make such a film requires skills that most researchers do not have. That lack is an impediment, but not an unmovable one. It is a problem that can be addressed. The more critical question is whether people will accept films like this as an example of research. Will people who see the educational equivalent of 'Hoop Dreams' treat it as fiction or as fact? Will it be seen as a source of insight and understanding or only as entertainment?

In making the distinction between fact and fiction I know I'm on slippery ice. I am reminded of an interview with the important American writer, Wallace Stegner, that I heard on National Public Radio. Stegner was being interviewed about his writing. Near the end of the interview, the interviewer asked, 'Mr. Stegner we have been talking a lot about writing fiction. Before we close can you tell us what a work of fiction must have to be really great.' Stegner paused and then said, 'To be great fiction has to be true.' What an oxymoronic idea! Fiction had to be true to be great. I don't think I will ever forget that line. That's why I said I'm on slippery ice in making the distinction between fact and fiction. Yet, while there is a sense in which great fiction is true – the way in which the work of Chekov is true, or Mark Twain, or Charlotte Bronte, or Wallace Stegner – true in the way it displays the universal in the particular, there is a sense in which fiction is not true. It's not true in the literal sense. Can fiction count as a genre of research? I believe it can *if* it is true in the former sense. Whether people will regard it as such will depend on the quality of their education. Can we provide that kind of education in our schools?

Another concern I have pertains to the role of theory in qualitative research, especially arts-based research. Some argue that the arts need no theoretical accoutrements, that they were made to stand alone, no screen, no confessor, only direct contact with the work. By analogy the same argument is made by some when it comes to qualitative research. Theory, for some, is an interloper. I don't see it that way. I believe qualitative researchers should not only use theory when they can to account for what they have described, they ought to use the careful attention they pay to particular situations to generate concepts and to formulate, if not theories, then theorets: theorets are small theories!

Theory is important not only because it satisfies aspects of our rationality, it also distills particulars in ways that foster generalizability. Although theory loses some local color when particulars are left behind, theory makes distinctions and packages thematic relationships so that they will travel well; when we distill, we come away from a research site with ideas that can sensitize us to situations and events like the ones from which theory was derived. For example, if I know that teachers and students in a high school I have studied often engage in a form of collusion in order to survive the unrealistic demands the particular school imposes upon them, I can look at other situations to determine if the collusion I discovered in one school can be found elsewhere (Powell, et al., 1985). This anticipatory schemata is a form of generalization. The generalizations derived from qualitative case studies are essentially heuristic devices intended to sharpen perception so that our patterns of seeking and seeing are more acute. We don't use the generalizations drawn from the specific case to draw conclusions about other situations but, rather, we use them to search those situations more efficiently.

Another concern emanates from one of qualitative research's strengths, its capacity to particularize. As we get better and better at making vivid the distinctive features of the situations we wish to understand and improve, we may diminish our ability to make meaningful comparisons among them. To the extent to which qualitative researchers reveal what is distinctive, we distance ourselves from the comparative. That is why Dewey once commented that nowhere are comparisons more odious than in the arts (Dewey, 1934). Qualitative research, like the arts, gives a premium to the distinctive. We don't really put works of art on a comparative scale. We try to see them on their own terms.

Yet we live in a culture that is predicated upon comparison: we rate people, we rank them, we assign them to league tables, we put them into stanines, quartiles, we apply cut-off levels, we run them down the same track and see who wins. All of these practices depend upon comparison. We are a meritocracy (or aspire to be one) and we determine merit comparatively. In the process, as my colleague Ray McDermott points out, we not only create successes, we produce failures (Varenne and McDermott, 1998).

Will the kind of work that, at its best, qualitative research yields satisfy our

culturally voracious appetite for comparisons? If not, will it be seen as useful?

There is a way to think about the productive, if somewhat ironic functions of comparison that can give us comfort. The comparative analysis of student work can awaken us to what is distinctive about any individual's work. It can do this *if* the tasks that students are asked to engage in are sufficiently opened to allow their individuality to be expressed *and* if the appraisal of their performance employs criteria that suit the work to be assessed. Let me illustrate what I mean through examples of assessment in sports.

In a mile race all runners run the same track from the same start line. The assessment task is to measure the time it takes to complete the race. Given this criterion, and as long as runners break no rules, how this is accomplished is irrelevant. Differences among runners are represented by performance on a single dimension: time. Consider now high diving. If the divers are to perform a half-gainer with a full twist, the assessment task is to determine the extent to which the performance matches a standardized model of perfection in the minds of judges. Judges look for discrepancies and assign a score based on an approximation to an ideal. The point of the assessment is to determine which diver comes closest to the model. Again, the criterion is held constant, but a larger array of differences in the way approximation to criterion is achieved is taken into account than in the mile race. In a third example, say improvisational ice dancing, there is a special interest in the individual character of each performance. Time is not a consideration nor is approximation to a fixed model. Comparisons among performers can illuminate the differences among them and, if asked, judges may be expected to justify their judgments by referring to these distinctive features. In this third example, the task for the performer is wide open and the distinctive qualities of each performance are sought by judges.

This comparative process promotes fine-grained attention to distinctive features. Through comparative analysis, qualities that constitute uniqueness can be identified, bringing us to what is, paradoxically, non-comparable. Attention to what is distinctive is complex, subtle and time-consuming, but it is also central to educational purposes. My concern is that these purposes may be undermined by our desire to put students and schools on a common scale and in the process lose sight of what is special about them.

But what about the future? Let me turn to my hopes rather than to matters of prediction. Let the wish be the parent of the deed.

What do I hope for? These are my hopes. I hope that educational policy makers and others who shape policies impacting the lives of people use qualitative research to understand the impact of those policies on the people and institutions they are trying to influence. I emphasize this point because so much policy in education is based upon a desire to increase test scores and utterly neglects their side effects. The cost to student health, the increased incidence of cheating, the displacement of intrinsic satisfactions of learning for extrinsic rewards, the kinds of compromises that students and teachers

are forced to make in order to survive, these consequences need to be known. Horace Smith in *Horace's Compromise* (Sizer, 1992) really did have to compromise. Policy makers need to know about the side effects of their policies. At present they do not.

I hope that the experience students have in school becomes a major subject of study. Experience is the medium of education but surprisingly studies of student experience in school are rare (Intrator, 1999; Pope, 1998). What do students make of their school experience? What is their school experience? Where do their epiphanies come from? Do they have any? Where do their frustrations reside? How do they deal with them? What kind of relationships do they have with their teachers? Have they learned to adapt to the pressures of schooling without being changed? What are the deep lessons they are learning? In short, we need to know much more about the meaning schooling has for students; we operate now largely in the blind.

I hope that, increasingly, qualitative research is seen as one of the legitimate ways of studying the people and institutions we care about. The past 30 years have been marked by enormous progress in developing and strengthening qualitative research. But I receive enough letters and email from graduate students in the United States and Canada seeking advice and comfort to know that we still have a way to go. There is still a good deal of prejudice out there, especially for forms of qualitative research that do not look like conventional ethnography. We need to walk the line between the risks inherent in innovation and the need to do work that has the quality it needs to be persuasive.

I hope that somehow the public's understanding of education becomes sufficiently complex to realize that many of the most important outcomes and features of schooling will require what only qualitative research is likely to provide. I speak here of dispositional outcomes – the desire to want to continue to learn about what schooling has introduced, for example, the kind place school is, the values that it covertly promulgates, the intellectual courage that it promotes, what the school as an institution takes pride in, the range and variety of what it acknowledges as important. When you consider that students spend more time with their teachers than with their parents, these matters matter. Qualitative research can inform us here.

I hope that graduate students wishing to pursue new ways of studying education are given the support and guidance they need to do it well. As I said, I receive many requests for guidance and support from graduate students I never met; their problem is usually related to their advisor or to the difficulty of putting a committee together. In too many universities there seems to be too little support. Yet we are moving along. I wish the trip was faster and that the rails went to more destinations.

I hope that in universities there will be opportunities for students to develop the skills needed to use new forms of representation to conduct qualitative research. To work effectively in the arts at least four human abilities are

critical. You need refined sensibilities, you need an idea, you need imagination, and you need technical skills. Without refined sensibilities the ability to read the subtleties of the world, including the subtleties of one's own work, is impaired. Without an idea of importance whatever is created is likely to be trivial. Without imagination the work produced will be pedestrian, unable to catch and hold the reader's interest. Without technical skills all the sensibility, ideas and imagination in the world will remain hopeless aspiration. While these qualities are critical in the arts, they are also important for doing good qualitative research.

If we cannot see the situations we look at, we will have nothing to say about them. If we don't have an idea that matters, what we say will not be worth reading. If we can't use our imagination to give it form, it will not capture the reader's attention, and if we don't have the technical skills to work within the constraints and affordances of a medium, our intentions will go unrealized. The good news is that these abilities can be developed. Universities need the appetite to do so.

Finally, I hope that the outlets for qualitative research expand so that it is not confined to the limits of the print media. Currently we are largely restricted to what publishers and journals can print. This format is too limiting. Here I have hopes for the computer. It will make sound and images possible in ways that now exist only for commercial media. That realm needs to expand so that it includes the results of scholarly inquiry. Someday it will. Think about what this will mean for teaching research methods, for working with students, for reviewing work for publication and tenure. The prospects are, from a technical perspective, endless. The next millennium may very well bring them in.

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