

Donna E. Alvermann

*University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, USA*

David G. O'Brien

Deborah R. Dillon

*Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA*

## On writing qualitative research

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This article began with a conversation that included just the three of us, but from the start we have envisioned a greatly expanded dialogue—one that would embrace the thinking of many of you, should you accept our invitation to join the discussion. We think the need for a dialogue about writing qualitative research has never been greater. We say this because we are aware through our continuing conversations and readings that literacy researchers, like others in the social sciences, are beginning to push in exciting and new ways at boundaries that once separated quite clearly the genres of qualitative writing (e.g., ethnographies and life histories) from other genres such as narratives of the self, fiction, poetry, and performance texts.

In the wake of such activity have come critiques of writing formats which, admittedly, the three of us have grown quite comfortable in using over the years. It was through examining the substance of these critiques in relation to our own work that this article began to take shape. To focus our conversations, we assigned ourselves the task of thinking about the writing of qualitative research from three perspectives: as a writer, as a reviewer for refereed journals, and as a reader of published articles.

Working separately, we each generated a written list of issues or challenges that we face in writing up our own qualitative research findings. Next, we examined the reviews we had written for journal editors to identify the struggles other writers faced, and we made a sepa-

rate list for them. Then, we selected published qualitative literacy research articles that we found particularly appealing in terms of how they were written, and we created a list of things we liked about each piece. Finally, we each made copies of our three lists and exchanged them. Prior to our next meeting we analyzed the lists to identify patterns and overlapping issues in our responses. We also indicated works in the literature on qualitative research that would be helpful in addressing those issues. Four key issues were identified: (a) problems in distinguishing between levels of theory, (b) holistic and microlevel issues in methodology, (c) crises in representation and legitimation, and (d) differences in the writing and write-up processes.

In talking through these issues, we collaboratively discussed a plan for writing about them. That was the easy part. The struggle came in deciding how we would maintain the spirit of our conversations on paper. We wrote our first drafts in the first-person singular and shared them. Although we agreed it would be easy enough to change every *I* to *we* and write as one voice (except in the few instances where we differed in our views), this approach didn't work. Not surprisingly, the attempt to merge our three voices into one produced a voice that none of us recognized. Consequently, to be more fully present in our writing (as we were in the lively talks that shaped this piece), we retain our individual identities even though the ideas we express reflect our collective thinking.

## Theory

### David:

The importance and role of theory in writing qualitative research are confusing. According to Wolcott (1992), “ultimately, everything can be subsumed under theory, even the theory implicit in empiricism that holds sensory experience to be the only source of knowledge” (p. 16). This statement highlights the irony of using traditional notions of theory in qualitative studies, many of which generate theories. I have often wondered how much I should be depending on theory to direct a study versus hoping that theory will evolve from my ongoing data analysis. Anxiety is my constant companion when I wonder how much I should write about theory directing the questions, data collection, and analysis.

I have always considered my work to be theoretical in terms of the substantive theory to which my questions and purposes have been linked. Before I do research, I demonstrate that I understand relevant work and have formulated a problem based upon a corpus of research in a discipline. I started to think differently, albeit more ambiguously, about the role of theory in writing qualitative research when I read Glaser and Strauss's (1967) discussion of grounded theory. They discuss substantive theories, which inform a given field or embody conceptual work. They also give license to well-established and fledgling researchers alike to generate theories.

Eleven years after reading my first pieces on theory and theorizing in qualitative research, I find it difficult to distinguish among levels of theorizing. From my early reading until the present, I have adhered to two rules when doing qualitative research and writing it up. First, I have tried to embed my research in the substantive work of a discipline (e.g., the predominant ideas, connections among those ideas, and ways of representing them). Second, I have strived to include a theoretical framework or lens that ultimately influences topic selection and methodological issues such as research design and analysis (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). I have typically based my work on symbolic interactionism because I study the social organization of classrooms and how students and teachers work within the organizational structure of secondary schools.

In order to include both levels of theory, I have sometimes viewed them as equally necessary but serving different functions. Lately, I have thought and read more about how the two levels reciprocally influence each other. Wolcott (1992) caused me to think more about how useful and friendly theories can be. He noted theories shouldn't be moral imperatives that take the form of the question, “What is your theory?” An expected re-

sponse like “symbolic interactionism” shows that I am familiar with big theories, paradigms (Patton, 1990), or traditions (Jacob, 1988). Wolcott freed me from using theoretical frameworks in this perfunctory way. He grants researchers their rights to more genuine theories like “little theories” or “hunches” (1992, p. 8). I look at my hunches as my personal angles on more formal substantive theories that are also compatible with my theoretical lens. For example, my current study of at-risk high school students is informed by substantive theories including work on achievement motivation, goal and attribution theory, affective perspectives on literacy learning, and historical and cultural research on schooling. My personal hunch is that, to a large extent, the failure of so-called at-risk students can be attributed to the organizational culture of secondary schools. Using symbolic interactionism and phenomenology as my theoretical lenses, I write about how students construct their culture within the larger school culture and how they view their experiences within the system. I am working to generate a grounded theory that elaborates on how the students' school lives set them up for academic failure.

When I review qualitative articles, I look for substantive theories ranging from widely articulated and formally researched theories (e.g., schema theory) to simply stated concepts or “ideas of all shapes and sizes” (Wolcott, 1992, p. 11). Formal labels are useful if researchers understand how the traditions behind the labels inform their research. I like informal theories if researchers state clearly what their hunches are and where they come from. I like to see papers in which researchers show the role of theory in shaping their ideas, design, and methods.

For about 10 years, through two revisions of their qualitative methodology book, LeCompte and Preissle (1993) have provided guidance for incorporating theory and theorizing in qualitative work. I query myself based on the reasons they state for why theory is important. Do I use theory to help me sort out my worldview and to guide how I study people and settings? Do I show how my background, disciplinary bent, and biases are related to the design of my research? Is it clear in my research report how my work is embedded in substantive theory in my field and how my hunches and biases might have influenced how I conducted the study?

I do not use the above questions to establish hard criteria for theory in my research. There are always thorny issues surrounding the questions. Here are a few I ask myself when looking at the role of theory in the write-up: If I have chosen to generate a theory, how can I represent it and clarify its relationship to existing theory? To what extent do I need to write about substantive theory if I generate a theory? Finally, and perhaps most

crucial, does my theoretical bent slant my perspective too much? This last question makes me think of Eisner's (1993) statement that theory "not only reveals, it conceals" (p. viii).

## *Methodology*

### **Deborah:**

When I read a piece of qualitative research, I read the text on two levels, asking myself the following questions: From a microlevel, are the important components of a qualitative research study discussed in enough detail to indicate that the study was carefully constructed and rigorously carried out? From a holistic perspective, is the information written in a complete, coherent, and interesting manner? In short, is the piece insightful? When a piece does not address both the microlevel and holistic perspective, I have reservations about the credibility of the work.

At the *microlevel*, one of the first things I look for is the author's statement of purpose and the questions that guided the study. Does the author wish to help a reader understand descriptive processes and relationships, interpret old knowledge in new ways, verify existing theories, or assist in the evaluation of a given policy or practice (Peshkin, 1993)? Further, when I examine the research questions, I expect to see that there is an emphasis on understanding the phenomena under study as a complex whole. In sum, the purpose statement and questions serve to focus the reader. They also serve as springboards for conducting and writing about the study's design, methodology, analysis, and interpretation.

In reading about the design of a study, I want to know if the researcher has spent an extended time in the field, has had personal contact with the participants in the study, and has not attempted to manipulate the phenomena under investigation (acknowledging, of course, that all researchers influence events and actions merely by their presence). One aspect of qualitative research designs that I do not often see addressed in articles, and one that I find problematic in my own work, is an explanation of when and why the original research questions may have shifted during the study and how this shift may have affected the design, methods, and findings.

As I continue reading a manuscript, I look for evidence that an author has attended to the research questions concerning decisions about appropriate data collection and analysis strategies. For example, if the research questions focused on reading groups as opposed to individual readers, were data collected and analyzed in ways that provide an understanding of group processes and products as well as individual efforts within the group?

Other methodological concerns that I expect to see addressed include site and sampling rationales. I am especially interested in knowing the criteria a researcher used in selecting the site and the participants, and how these criteria helped to address the research questions.

One neglected component of methodology sections in many qualitative studies is an explanation of the role, perspectives, and biases of the researcher. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) remind us, qualitative researchers can never overlook the fact that they are gendered, multiculturally situated, and theoretically inclined to view phenomena in ways that influence what questions get asked and what methodology is used to answer those questions. It is important to know what perspective the researcher used to capture the participants' experiences and perspectives in the various social, historical, and temporal contexts (Patton, 1990) in which they occurred. I am also interested in knowing how daily events and interactions with participants shape the lenses used by researchers as they engage in ongoing data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Incorporating this information in a written report is critical to a reader's understanding of the research, yet I have found it is difficult to accomplish. For example, I remember my own struggles when my co-researchers and I (Dillon, O'Brien, & Ruhl, 1989) tried to build a collaborative relationship and then write about how our evolving relationship shaped certain research events and the interpretation of those events.

Finally, in looking over a methodology section that I have written, I like to ask myself this question: Have I fallen victim to "methodolatry—a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual substance of the story being told?" (Janesick, 1994, p. 215). Or have I merely mentioned the data collection and analysis strategies used (e.g., "I used constant comparative analysis"), with little explanation of the specific processes I engaged in when constructing categories or patterns of findings? What I look for is a thorough description of the researcher's analytic processes throughout the study and how these processes shaped the patterns generated from the data. For example, I appreciate authors who allow me, as the reader, to shadow them as they detail how they grappled with understanding events. I have no rule of thumb that I can offer here in terms of balance between too little or too much detail. However, in the qualitative pieces that I enjoy reading, approximately the first third of an article is devoted to the rationale and methodology. That leaves the other two thirds for the presentation of the data, interpretation, discussion, and conclusions.

From a *holistic perspective*, merely having all the components of a qualitative study in place does not en-

sure that the article will read as a credible, coherent, insightful, or interesting piece. What matters is how the author approaches the writing of the article—including the formulation of an argument with threads that run throughout the piece and hold it together. As a writer, and later as a reader, I often move backward and forward through a manuscript to determine if I have accomplished several goals. First, I want to provide a clear outline of what information will be presented in the manuscript and the order of presentation. With complex and interrelated findings, it is crucial to assist readers with structural overviews as they move through the material. Second, it is important to present clearly the overall assertions and supporting categories and then provide evidence in support of them. It is also useful to revisit the assertions and categories after the entire case has been presented. To help the reader with this process, I encourage researchers to use maps and charts to show the big picture (assertions), the parts (categories), and how everything fits together (e.g., see Moje, 1994). By developing maps and moving backward and forward through a manuscript, I can see where my story is incomplete, or where it doesn't hold together. I can also see where transitions between sections are needed, or where I have tried to tell too much or too little.

Beyond demonstrating that a manuscript is coherent and that all of the important components of the study are discussed, writers of qualitative research are faced with the Catch-22 of trying to write in a manner that is both interesting and credible. I believe that it's not a matter of being one or the other—both are important. To achieve both, authors of qualitative studies need flexibility in crafting a compelling story. In support of this notion, Janesick (1994) states that writers of qualitative research are like choreographers who make statements by creating dances: “For the researcher, the story told is the dance in all its complexity, context, originality, and passion” (p. 218). What is clear to me as a reader and writer is that researchers must construct a well-designed story that involves the reader along the way and results in a compelling message. This message may strike an important chord in readers that influences them to nod in agreement, pause in reflection, or take action. My goal is to make a difference in an intellectual and emotional way. Perhaps this is my attempt to integrate art and science.

### ***Representation and legitimation***

#### **Donna:**

One of the principal things researchers do is write. We write to represent what we have come to understand through our research. What we write, of course, is an in-

complete or partial translation of the reality of others' lived experiences. In fact, some (e.g., Brodkey, 1987; Denzin, 1994; Lather, 1991) would argue that we create those experiences through the texts we write. In a nutshell, this argument and the assumptions that underlie qualitative researchers' attempts to make a direct link between the texts they write and others' lived experiences is what poststructuralists refer to as the *crisis of representation*. It is accompanied by a second *crisis of legitimation*, which involves challenges to many of the criteria (e.g., credibility, comprehensiveness, and coherence) that qualitative researchers use in evaluating the trustworthiness of their own writing and that of others. The importance of these intersecting crises centers on the tensions they produce for us as writers and readers of qualitative research.

As a writer or reviewer of qualitative research I struggle with issues of representation. How do I represent the actions and interactions of the individuals I study, how do I position myself, and how do both of these figure into the interpretations I construct? As a writer of my own research or a reader of someone else's, I am continuously interpreting or (re)presenting earlier representations of the data. To write (or to read) is to interpret, to tell stories. As I have come to learn, like it or not, the interpreting I do as a writer (or reviewer) tells as much about me as it does about the *others* whose stories are being told. Why is this so?

Because I write (or read) from perspectives informed by my personal history, by what I believe counts as knowledge, and by how willing I am to accept a text on its own terms, I can never separate my own experiences from the experiences of those I write (or read) about. Nor would I want to, mainly because I believe that the more multiple experiences represented, the more meaningful the text. This belief leads me to treat every text I create or review as partial and in the process of becoming.

For example, I am currently collecting and analyzing data for a study that explores how four teachers, including myself, come to know and alter discursive practices that are counterproductive to students' engagement in discussions of their assigned texts. As part of this process, I am writing multiple narratives about each teacher's experiences. One narrative is titled “Donna's story about Sally.” The other two narratives are titled “Donna's story about ‘Michelle's story about Sally’ ” and “Donna's story about ‘Josephine's story about Sally.’ ” Sally is also keeping a journal of her experiences. While these multiple layerings of interpretation can enrich the research process and guide further data collection and analysis, they do not permit us to make any final statements about Sally. For in writing about our own and

others' experiences, we create (rather than simply mirror) those experiences. Clearly, then, as Denzin (1994) argues, "there can never be a final, accurate representation of what was meant or said, only different textual representations of different experiences" (p. 296).

Issues of representation and legitimation invariably lead to questions of practical concern for me as a writer and a reviewer. For example, under what circumstances does the convention of situating the researcher-as-writer in the text become a problem? When are multiple examples necessary and when are they too much? How can I present the many complexities of a qualitative study in a cogent manner and still stay within a journal's editorial guidelines on manuscript length? As a writer, I take these concerns seriously and force myself to make difficult decisions, knowing full well that if I don't, journal reviewers and editors will make them for me.

First of all, situating myself in qualitative studies that I write up is not as straightforward or easy as it might seem. In struggling to account for the influences that shape my role as researcher and writer, a tension is created as I strive for a balance between inserting myself in the text and preserving the spotlight for other participants. Even if I am successful in achieving such a balance, there is a tension in knowing that disclosures about my personal self, the problems I encountered in doing the research, and the contingencies I dealt with in writing it up do not vouch for the text's credibility. As I have argued elsewhere (Alvermann, 1993), one simply cannot count on such behind-the-scenes prose to neutralize the power differentials that exist between the knower (the researcher) and the known (the researched).

A second concern—that of knowing when multiple examples are necessary and when they are too much—can be traced to the tension I feel as a writer when I attempt to be comprehensive without inundating or boring my readers. Achieving a balance between giving space to participants' firsthand (re)presentations of their experiences and making room for my own interpretations of those experiences becomes less problematic when I recall Geertz's (1973) advice that "it is not necessary to know everything in order to know something" (p. 20). Still, I find myself vacillating when it comes to making decisions about which examples to include and which to exclude. For instance, I tend to include too many examples to illustrate a particular point because I see important nuances in multiple examples of the same event. At the same time I know from experience that what may seem like a subtle, but important, difference to me is often lost on those who review my work. More than once I have had a reviewer tell me that I should cut back on the number of examples I give. One way of doing that, I find, is to keep the purpose of the study foremost in

mind when making decisions about what stays and what gets cut. Focusing on the purpose helps me to do more than just limit the number of examples; it also provides guidance in determining which examples are the most salient of those that pertain to the purpose.

Third, presenting the complexities of a qualitative study in a cogent manner while staying within a journal's editorial guidelines on manuscript length is another tension that I experience, both when I write and when I review the writings of others. Although I know of no hard and fast rule on how to resolve this tension, I like the common sense appeal of Wolcott's (1990) oft-quoted aphorism, "Do less, more thoroughly" (p. 62). It reminds me that emphasis is important, that in featuring certain descriptive accounts of the data I will necessarily be downplaying others. What matters is that I am thorough in reporting the data I choose to emphasize. Among other things, this involves presenting triangulated evidence in support of the points I am trying to make as well as any discrepant cases that might provide greater insight into the phenomena under study. As a reviewer, I am especially interested in knowing how an author attempted to make sense of the data that did not fit an evolving interpretation. This does not mean that I expect to be informed of all discrepant details, but rather just those that have the potential to influence my interpretation of the event being emphasized.

I do not need to read lengthy descriptions of procedures used in conducting member checks to establish a written report's credibility. As a reviewer and writer, I find myself agreeing with Riessman (1993) who questions the legitimacy of relying too heavily upon participants and other informants to affirm the interpretations we draw as researchers. If we have learned anything from the crisis of representation, it is that personal accounts can change over time as consciousness is raised and new meanings are attached to old experiences. Having said as much, I still value the opportunity to learn from member checks, especially if they are written concisely and presented in a manner that achieves balance in reporting. Achieving this balance means including information that reveals differences as well as similarities in the participants' and researchers' perspectives. Tightly woven interpretations that show little sign of human differences are less interesting and believable to me than those that are less impeccably portrayed.

### *Writing and write-up*

#### **David:**

I find it helpful to think of *writing* before *write-up*. When writing research reports, I typically think about

the product of my efforts and the appropriate audience for the product. I ask myself, "Where should I send the manuscript? Which journal has reviewers on the review board who are most interested in my thesis and the methods portrayed in the manuscript?" *Write-up* focuses on final representation. I am concerned about how I represented the participants and setting, or a slice of life or culture that supports my themes or assertions. Ironically, the focus on the final product, the manuscript, neglects the more important issue of how writing shapes the representation.

The tenet that supports this shaping aspect of writing in qualitative research is familiar to literacy researchers: "Writing is a form of thinking" (Wolcott, 1990, p. 21). When I first encountered the quote in Wolcott (who cites Becker {1986}, who in turn cites Flower {1979} and Flower and Hayes {1981}), I reacted with a combination of enthusiasm and embarrassment. Of course, but literacy scholars *know* that writing is a form of thinking. Yet, up to the point of encountering Wolcott's reminder, I thought of my qualitative research in terms of write-up. Now I follow Wolcott's advice and write early—I write as soon as I find something interesting to say. If I am not writing, I don't have anything interesting to say and I think about why. As I write to shape various representations of a study, I can see ultimately how the pieces fit together, but I keep changing them.

For example, I have been collecting fieldnotes for about 400 hours of participant observation on a current project. As I write fieldnotes, or in most cases write via dictation into my tape recorder on my way back to the university, I write description, commentary, thoughts about my role and methods, or memos about a theory I am working on. As I transcribe the tapes, I write extended discourse, which has taken the form of some individual cases of at-risk students. However, as I write the cases, I am thinking about various ways of constructing them and reasons for constructing them. They have evolved from surface descriptions of interesting at-risk students to more purposefully constructed commentaries on the disengagement from learning that support the evolving theory. Writing is clearly a way to shape the eventual representation. What is more, it may be the only way to flesh out things that may otherwise elude me. Van Manen (1990) amplified my excitement about writing as thinking to shape representation. He stated that writing is method: Writing is reflection; writing is a way to separate the knower from the known; writing enables us to move out beyond the immediate study to universals as the text takes on a life of its own. We use writing to distance ourselves from the participants and their world so we can use the write-up to bring us back into the participants' world. Van Manen reminds us that *research re-*

*port* suggests a contrived separation between the process of research and the report that makes it public.

In sum, the writing process shapes the representation in the write-up because it provides us with a way to reflect on what our research means. Moreover, as method, writing allows us to think about how we will make public both the representation of the participants we study and the way we study them. Like many researchers, I used to focus on write-up because I viewed it as the object that will be scrutinized by reviewers, editors, and other colleagues. What I've learned is that if I use writing to shape the representation, the final product will be much improved as an embodiment of my reflection about the data and how I want to represent my method.

### Summary

The intent of this article is to extend a conversation we began several months ago in response to issues we identified in our own work as writers of qualitative research and in the work of others that we read. If in considering how writing up your own work is influenced by these or similar issues you are moved to enter the discussion, our purpose in writing this article will have been achieved. More importantly, however, by joining the conversation literacy researchers stand to enrich their own and others' understandings of how writing as a method of inquiry—as a way of *knowing* the human experience in all its complex and diverse representations—constantly creates and recreates that experience. This point is not lost on Richardson (1990) who reminds us, therefore, that "how we write lives is important, theoretically and practically" (p. 63).

*Editors' note:* We see this as the beginning of a Conversation. We hope you agree and join the discussion.

JER  
DMB

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