**Some Common Assumptions**

Assumptions and beliefs of the educator-inquirer influence all inquiry activities and interpretations. In this chapter, I will explore some of the assumptions commonly made by educators who think they might want to use naturalistic inquiry in their teaching and learning as a means to wonder about the experiences they and their associates are having.

Several of these assumptions are illustrated in a teacher preparation project I have been involved with at Orem High School through a special program called Unified Studies. This program emphasizes a naturalistic inquiry approach to learning, teaching, and teacher training. A report based on the inquiry I have been conducting in conjunction with this project is presented in Appendix A: A Sample Study, using NI to examine a teacher education program. This report illustrates one way of sharing what is learned through naturalistic inquiry with other educators. Many assumptions associated with naturalistic inquiry are illustrated in this report as well.

Before turning to the example though, some of the assumptions traditionally made by naturalistic inquirers from several fields are presented briefly here:

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**Some Common Assumptions**

Naturalistic inquiry is *not* a new idea. This methodology has a long history in several disciplines and has a variety of names. Anthropologists have developed their ethnographic methods for many years, into a rigorous and well-accepted science. Sociologists have likewise combined surveying techniques with naturalistic approaches to develop the participant observation approach of fieldwork. Folklorists, psychologists, linguists, ethnomusicologists, and many others have likewise used and improved this approach to understanding and knowing, using terms such as case study, interpretive inquiry, and phenomenology to label their approach. In literature, hermeneutics, constructivism, and narrative are terms used to reflect this same paradigm.
However, interest in this approach has developed slowly in educational inquiry. Only in the last 15 to 20 years have discussions over the relative strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods gained enough interest to actually effect the practice of researchers and evaluators. Teachers and administrators have used some of the activities associated with naturalistic inquiry without thinking they were doing research. More recently, though, educators have begun to realize that the distinction should not be between qualitative and quantitative methods, but between paradigms for inquiry. Paradigms represent conceptualizations of the nature of reality, the relationship between the person trying to know something and the thing they are trying to know, the role of values in inquiry, and other such variables. They go far beyond the mere distinction between the description and definition of qualities (qualitative inquiry) and the quantification of those qualities (quantitative inquiry).

Therefore, another term that captures these larger distinctions will be used. Rather than discuss qualitative methods, we will investigate the concept and associated methods of naturalistic inquiry. This is a broad term which captures the variety of approaches developed by other disciplines (ethnography, participant observation, etc.) and includes both qualitative and quantitative methods. It is a term that reflects a unique paradigm for inquiry which departs substantially from paradigms most commonly used in educational research and evaluation until recently.

Simply put, naturalistic inquiry is disciplined inquiry conducted in natural settings (in the field of interest, not in laboratories), using natural methods (observation, interviewing, thinking, reading, writing) in natural ways by people who have natural interests in what they are studying (practitioners such as teachers, counselors, and administrators as well as full time researchers and evaluators). The term, disciplined inquiry was coined by Cronbach and Suppes (1969) in *Research for tomorrow's schools* (New York: Macmillan) to encompass several different types of paradigms which may differ significantly in the methods they use and the conceptualizations of reality they represent, but which meet certain critical standards. Some of these characteristics are summarized by Smith and Glass (1987, page 25 in *Research and evaluation in education and the social sciences* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall) as follows:

1. meaningful topics are addressed [not trivial];

2. the researchers employ systematic, clearly described procedures so that the reader can closely follow the logic of the study and assess the validity [credibility] of the conclusions;
3. the researchers are sensitive to the errors that are associated with their methods and seek to control them or consider how the errors influence the results;

4. empirical verification and sound logic are valued; and

5. plausible alternative explanations for results are sought.

It is difficult to argue with any of these points. Most naturalistic inquirers want to meet these standards to produce results that are disciplined. Criteria have been developed for conducting a naturalistic study so that it meets these standards (discussed in Chapter Three). However, each inquirer must decide how closely they will follow these criteria in light of their circumstances and other assumptions.

Please read the report in e. When would you use it instead of other kinds of research? f. Is it reliable? g. How is it different from quantitative methods?

Suggested Activities

1. Look at the vignette you wrote for Chapter One, Activity #3 describing an event in your classroom (or elsewhere). Ponder the assumptions underlying what you observed and your observation of it. These questions might help: What did you expect to see? Of all the things you could have seen why was your attention drawn to this way of seeing it? What was your agenda? What were the other participants’ agendas? Why did you do what you did? Why do you t`ink the other participants did what they did?

2. Work your way through these issues in writing. Designate this as being separate from the observations. [I use OC for Observer Comment.]

3. What questions did this chapter raise for you?

Go to the next Chapter