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Making the Connection for Reading Teachers Between Authentic Assessment Practices and Qualitative Research Techniques

**Beth Hurst
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In the manuscript an attempt has been made to show a connection between many authentic assessment practices and qualitative research techniques in the hope that as reading teachers understand these connections, it may help them in their authentic assessment endeavors. Teachers may expand their usage of authentic assessment after discovering the similarities, or seek opportunities to learn more about qualitative research, thus capitalizing on the strengths of both. While we want to be careful not to betray the analytic complexity of qualitative research and confuse it with the practical complexity of teaching and authentic assessment, we believe that sometimes an awareness of an issue can change our paradigms thereby opening our minds to new ways of thinking. These new ways of thinking can then provide us with further explorations.

Many reading teachers today are making major attempts to incorporate authentic assessment measures in their classrooms. Perhaps these efforts might become somewhat easier for teachers to apply when they see a connection between their authentic assessment practices and the methodology of qualitative research. A consideration of these connections may provide teachers with specific techniques used in qualitative research to enhance their authentic assessment endeavors. They may expand their usage of authentic assessment after discovering the similarities, or seek opportunities to learn more about qualitative research, thus capitalizing on the strengths of both.

The connection between the two emerged for us as we began to see that many of the techniques we were using in qualitative research were somewhat similar in nature to our authentic assessment practices in our classrooms. While we want to be careful not to betray the analytic complexity of qualitative research and confuse it with the practical complexity of teaching and authentic assessment, we believe that sometimes an awareness of an issue can change our paradigms thereby opening our minds to new ways of thinking. These new ways of thinking can then provide us with further explorations. By making the analogy between authentic assessment and qualitative research, we hope teachers find this awareness as eye-opening and useful as it has been for us.

The first similarity we discovered was that both authentic assessment and qualitative research are based on the theory that more accurate and complete pictures of students or situations are obtained when multiple methods are used to collect information. Vacca and Vacca (1993) confirm that authentic assessment is "a continuous process that makes use of multiple methods of gathering relevant data for instructional purposes" (p. 337). The phrase "use of multiple methods of gathering relevant data" is the counterpart of qualitative researchers' data triangulation which Patton (1990) described as "the use of a variety of data sources in a study" (p. 187).

Data Triangulation

Techniques such as data triangulation which includes observation, interviewing and document collection are recognizable in literature about both authentic assessment and qualitative research. Data triangulation is an essential element of qualitative research. According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992), "three data gathering techniques dominate in qualitative inquiry: participant observation, interviewing, and document collection" (p. 24). Data triangulation offers a holistic accounting of a qualitative study. Observation in qualitative research centers around the actual witnessing of events taking place in the target environment. The second technique, interviewing, broadens the depth of the observation as well as provides additional information and verifies previously acquired data. Documentation,

the third component, involves securing additional sources, often providing new perspectives, continues clarification of data, and ultimately provides a written record of the research.

Authentic assessment resembles the data triangulation techniques of qualitative research in that teachers use a variety of methods to more thoroughly assess students. Paris, Lawton, Turner, and Roth (1991) state that "assessment should be multidimensional" (p. 18). Teachers who incorporate authentic assessment use the same three techniques of observation, interviewing, and document collecting that qualitative researchers use when collecting data. While a qualitative researcher might use the term "observation," a teacher might label the same process "kidwatching," a term popularized by Goodman (1986). The qualitative researcher talks about interviewing while a teacher might discuss conferencing. The qualitative researcher's data collecting is analogous to teachers accumulating samples of student work such as notes, anecdotal records, or portfolios.

Table 1

Data Triangulation Techniques Matched to Authentic Assessment Measures

Interviewing	Document Collecting	Observation
Student-Teacher Conferences	Anecdotal Records	Teacher Observation
Parent-Teacher Conferences	Portfolios (all kinds)	Kidwatching
Student-Student Conferences	Student Work	Class activities
Writing Conferences	Tests	Individuals
Dialogue Journals	Projects	Groups
Learning Logs	Inventories	Anecdotal Records
Any form of journaling in which dialogue occurs	Experiments	Plays
Class Discussions	Audio/Visuals	Oral Readings
Collaboration	Any written work	Class Presentations
Cooperative Learning	Checklists	Interaction with others
Situations	Notes	
	Profiles	

Note. This illustration of the similarities between authentic assessment and qualitative research categorizes the various techniques used in authentic assessment for gathering data under headings for data triangulation techniques of observation, interviewing, and document collecting.

While teachers are already using observation, interviewing, and document collection as mentioned above, the comparison of their assessment strategies to the techniques in qualitative research might help teachers see the significance of each process more clearly in their minds. Table 1 presents the data triangulation techniques of interviewing, document collecting and observation which have been used as descriptors for common authentic assessment procedures.

Peer Debriefing

In qualitative research, peer debriefing is a "process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 308). A "disinterested peer" is one who is knowledgeable about your subject matter, but who is not a stakeholder in your research study. The technique is used to help the researcher obtain a more definite understanding of personal interpretation through discussions with an outside party.

Within the realm of authentic assessment in the field of education, teachers use peer debriefing in the form of collaboration. Teachers make valuable use of "languaging" (Routman, 1991, p. 20) which is the sharing of information, ideas, plans, and additional classroom insights with a colleague, resource teacher, principal, parent, or even students. When collaborating "we expect to go out changed in the end, to become a different person" (Watson, Burke, and Harste, 1989, p. 65). This collaboration can result in either confirming the beliefs of the teacher or perhaps developing new awarenesses. Without this process of peer debriefing, teachers may lose "the benefit of the deeper understanding people gain when they share collective knowledge" (Allen, 1995, p. 89).

Peer debriefing among colleagues is often one of the greatest sources of information and support for teachers. By talking with each other about issues or concerns in their classrooms, teachers can be strengthened in their authentic assessment endeavors.

Member Checks

Member checks are used in qualitative research when "data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 314). Member checks occur continuously throughout qualitative research studies. For example, a researcher doing a case study of a teacher who is incorporating new teaching techniques might ask questions of the teacher throughout the observing, interviewing, and analyzing stages. Member checks help researchers either confirm or redefine their findings.

Conferencing techniques used in and out of the classroom setting are counterparts of member checks used in the authentic assessment process. According to Calkins (1994), "the important thing to realize is that our job, as teachers, is to listen to everything we see and know and hear about a child" (p. 225). Conferences with students clarify teacher understanding. This method of checking students' progress may come in the form of teacher-student conferences, teacher-parent conferences, and student-student conferences with the findings of these being reported to the teacher. Conferencing may also take a written shape in the form of interactive journal writing. Calkins wrote that "writing becomes a tool for thought" (p. 221) which allows the reader, whether the writer or others, to interpret the thoughts expressed on paper. Interactive writing offers another opportunity to analyze the written data provided by the student and offers insights into the progress being made. Additionally, writing is a way for us to relive our thinking and "outgrow ourselves" (p. 222).

While teachers are often comfortable talking to colleagues about issues in their classrooms, the idea of asking students how they perceive situations or classroom experiences is somewhat less familiar. Students need to be active participants in their own assessment; one of the ways teachers can encourage this is through frequent member checks.

Audit Trails

In qualitative research, an audit trail is used to provide an account of the data that has been collected and the inferences made as a result of the data, so that someone else could follow the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This trail is explicit and well organized. It offers a systematic review of work and findings employed by the researchers which can be understood and followed by other researchers.

Authentic assessment demands the use of effective data collection systems and careful documentation of assessment events. Authentic assessment, as defined by Jasmine (1993), is "the observation and scoring of the performance of a task in real life or, if that is impossible, in a situation that most closely matches the standards and challenges of real life" (p. F1). Teachers document students' activities and learnings through anecdotal records, portfolios, observations, and students' work. Accurate and complete records facilitate the teacher in assessing the gains made by individual learners. A broad range of assessment tools aid teachers in developing comprehensive pictures of students. In conferencing or making recommendations, an accurate recounting of the student's work through an audit trail similar to that in qualitative research aids teachers and others in making more appropriate decisions regarding students.

If teachers are aware of the benefits of an audit trail, they may be more careful to keep documentation to provide evidence of their teaching strategies and student outcomes. This record of events might also enhance the efforts of the teachers who begin to work with their students the following year. Audit trails, as such, are already in place as an important element in special education situations.

Types of Participation

In qualitative research, the researcher may be a passive participant or an active participant in the research study. A passive participant "is present at the scene of action but does not participate or interact with other people to any great extent" (p. 60) while the active participant "seeks to do what other people are doing" (Spradley, 1980, p. 59). According to Borg and

Gall (1989), "the researcher and the research subject interact to influence one another and are inseparably interconnected" (p. 384).

Because of the active involvement in the learning and assessing process in classrooms, teachers would normally be considered active participants. It would be helpful if they could occasionally become passive participants in order to step back and view their classroom situations and students in a different light, but this is a rare opportunity because of the nature of teaching.

Routman (1991) believes teachers who are more like directors in the classroom are passive teachers while those who are facilitators are active. She describes her change from passive to active teaching as moving "from teacher-as-director to teacher-as-facilitator ... As a co-learner I do more listening and less talking. I am an observer, encourager, participator, and respondent. I am a coach" (p. 18). Teachers become co-learners in the classroom when they actively participate in reading, writing, thinking, listening, and speaking activities with their students. Active teachers formatively assess students continuously in the learning environment. These teachers may employ methods such as dialogue journals, conferences, and class discussions to interact with their students.

Students who are actively involved in the learning process learn more and remember more. These students become engaged in learning when they are interested and motivated. Although at times students as well as teachers may be passive in the learning situation, providing opportunities for teachers and learners to be actively engaged will be beneficial to both parties as they interconnect and mutually influence each other.

Constant-Comparative Method

The constant-comparative method used in qualitative research, developed by Glaser and Strauss, "provides for alternate phases of data collection and analysis" (Parker and McDaniel, p. 101). This process occurs when "newly collected data are constantly compared to categories and hypotheses that emerged in earlier rounds of analysis, and those categories

and hypotheses are refined and elaborated or abandoned in light of the new data" (Parker and McDaniel, p. 101).

Teachers continuously collect and analyze data similar in nature to the constant-comparative method of qualitative research. Analyzing of data helps teachers make decisions about instruction. Using this method, teachers assess students on a moment-by-moment basis and alter instruction accordingly.

Reading teachers engaged in authentic assessment constantly collect and evaluate data received in the teaching situation from students' responses. This analysis of students' responses shapes teachers' decisions about instruction in the successful classroom. According to Routman (1991), educators need to change to a "process orientation" about instruction (p. 16). She contends "a process orientation refers to noticing and valuing what the student (and the teacher) does" (p. 16). The end product of learning still remains important, but the journey to the destination is also considered an essential component of learning. In valuing accomplishments in the classroom, teachers become ongoing evaluators and make continuous adjustments as the course of study evolves. Routman states that "evaluation is reflective" (p. 17). Teachers and students constantly observe themselves in the learning situation and revise previous ideas, predictions, and behaviors to meet new challenges.

Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation

Prolonged engagement, as used in qualitative research studies, refers to the "investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 301). These purposes include "learning the 'culture', testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or of the respondents, and building trust" (p. 301). Persistent observation, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), refers to staying in the field long enough to "identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail" (p. 304). They state that while "prolonged engagement

provides scope, persistent observation provides depth" to the study (p. 304).

The facets of prolonged engagement and persistent observation are inherently built into the traditional schedule of the public school classroom. Teachers and students grow, learn, and change individually and together within their community of learners. Most classes spend nine months together providing ample time for teachers and students to build rapport and an atmosphere needed to foster learning. Teachers need to become experts in evaluating who their students are, at what level, and where they need to go. Routman (1991) emphasizes that a holistic approach to evaluation assists teachers in this endeavor. According to Routman, a critical element of becoming expert evaluators is:

become excellent observers, or 'kidwatchers,' as Yetta Goodman calls it. Through kidwatching teachers begin to develop a stronger and more clearly articulated theory base ... We have to be able to recognize an individual student's learning patterns and use them to take the child further. We also have to know how to set up the learnings environment to maximize student development (p. 303)

Persistent observation leads to holistic evaluation of the learner. Prolonged engagement provides the teacher with the scope and depth of understanding of the learning environment.

Theoretical Sensitivity

Theoretical sensitivity in qualitative research refers to "the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 42). Three sources of theoretical sensitivity are literature, professional expertise, and personal experience. Strauss and Corbin believe that "the more professional experience, the richer the knowledge base and insight available to draw upon" (p. 42).

Theoretical sensitivity plays an important role in the growth and changing methodology and philosophy of classroom teachers. Teachers

use the knowledge gained through the three sources of theoretical sensitivity to make decisions in the classroom. In Harste's (1989) discussion about theory-to-practice to practical theory, he states:

Unlike the old model of educational research — in which the researcher gathers a great deal of data but the classroom stays the same — in these projects everyone grows. Often researcher and teacher exchange roles, each contributing what they know. Curriculum is collaboratively constructed by the researcher, teacher, and students involved. New policy guidelines must actively support the process of educators helping themselves ... as decision makers, and in that of their teachers as professionals. (p. 8)

As teachers grow in their knowledge base of both theory and practical experience and share in collaborative professional arenas, they begin to refine their own theoretical sensitivity. Educators build the depth of their knowledge by drawing from professional literature, conferences and seminars, teacher study groups, inservice and staff development, collaboration with peers, and classroom experience. This continuous process for individual growth will lead to better decision making in the classroom.

Final Thoughts

In the discussion of the similarities between authentic assessment and qualitative research, another comparison can be made. That relationship lies between standardized assessment and authentic assessment and between quantitative research and qualitative research. According to Vacca and Vacca (1993), "in a standardized approach to assessment, the test is the major tool; in a naturalistic approach, the teacher is the major tool" (p. 343). By the same comparison, with a quantitative research approach, the test is the major tool; while in a qualitative research approach, the researcher is the major tool. A conclusion could seem to be drawn that authentic assessment and qualitative research are somewhat similar in that the teacher and the researcher are extremely important components in the process of collecting and interpreting the data.

Perhaps if reading teachers understand some of the techniques used in qualitative research, they will more easily conceptualize some of the

steps for using authentic assessment in their classrooms. Or perhaps those teachers who incorporate authentic assessment in their classrooms already know a little bit more about qualitative research than they think they do.

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