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Researchers Who Surf: Riding the Waves of Analysis in Self-Study Research

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Abstract

In this paper, two beginning qualitative researchers describe the challenges and successes of conducting a collaborative self-study. For two academic years, the authors wrote and analyzed personal narratives related to their experiences as a lesbian and a gay man, respectively, in educational contexts. This article addresses the data analysis phase of the research process. The authors attempt to make visible their analytic process in hopes that their struggles might be useful to those who conduct similar research. They rely on the metaphor of waves to capture what it was like to engage in their analytic work. Their experience demonstrates the importance of viewing data analysis as a fluid process that involves reflexivity, perseverance, and flexibility.

Introduction

As I transitioned from teaching middle schoolers to teaching undergraduates, I expected many of my anxieties as a gay teacher to subside. I assumed that my lesbian identity would be much less of an issue in the latter context and that I'd feel "safer" and more supported. Yet, within my first few weeks as a teaching assistant I felt deeply conflicted about whether or not to come out to my classes. Would I subtly use "we" and then drop a feminine pronoun in conversation? Or, should I come out more overtly and directly? I felt obliged to take a stand and a desire to break the silence that I had found so stifling as a school teacher...

The excerpt above is representative of the kinds of autobiographical narratives that we collected as part of a self-study research project. Over the course of two academic years, we recollected and documented personal stories through journal writing. We wanted to explore how our sexual identities had shaped our experiences in educational contexts. We collected stories related to our experiences as school children, teacher candidates, professional teachers, and graduate students. These personal narratives contained stories ranging from playground bullying to heterosexism in the workplace. As a gay male teacher with rural roots and a lesbian teacher from an urban background, our stories varied greatly, yet overlapped in surprising places. Our narratives crossed contexts and involved both internal and external conflict. For instance, in the narrative above, Lesley articulates her inner struggle with the coming-out process as she moved from public school teaching to postsecondary teaching. Consistently, we found ourselves telling stories and articulating feelings that had long been neglected both personally and professionally.

Previous research suggests heterosexual teachers lack knowledge about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and

questioning (LGBTQ) issues and are ill-equipped to construct pedagogies and practices that are supportive of LGBTQ youth and families (Chasnoff, 2005; Conley, 2005; Gallavan, 2005; Lipkin, 1999). As teacher educators with hopes of helping heterosexual preservice teachers develop greater LGBTQ competencies, we were acutely aware of the need for us to interrogate our own experiences and beliefs. We realized that, even as sexual minorities ourselves, we had failed to adequately examine the nature and impact of homophobia in school settings. Additionally, as beginning qualitative researchers we were anxious to delve into the rigorous work of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. However, transforming our lived experience into data caused visible uneasiness for us. Similarly, the analysis process caused us to question our assumed understanding of ourselves, our lives, and our methodology.

Kirsch (1999) indicates that feminist research has "invited those on the margins to come to the center of research, both as participants who can make their voices heard and as researchers in their own right who can study their own communities and cultures" (p. 15). In this spirit, we ventured into a project as both researchers and participants seeking voice and community through self-study. We expected the problems of interpretation and representation to be relatively minimal. However, as we tried to carve out a method of data analysis, we had to face the untidiness of personal narrative, the inadequacy of our methods, and the complexities of qualitative inquiry. This paper describes our foray into data analysis as co-researchers and offers insight into the lessons we learned about this dimension of qualitative research.

Meeting the Ways at Dawn: Framing Our Work

Our stories are the masks through which we can be seen, and with every telling we stop the flood and swirl of thought so someone can get a glimpse of us, and maybe catch us if they can. (Grumet, 1991, p. 69)

Grumet testifies to the power and significance of autobiographical narratives and to the challenges those who make use of them in research endeavors may face. Increasingly, educational research has relied on narrative inquiry as a means to access the interior lives of teachers and learners. The growing popularity of narrative inquiry in education has been well documented (Adalberto, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Sharkey, 2004; Zeichner, 1999). Based on their review of the use of narrative inquiry in educational studies, Clandinin and Connelly (1994) explain that narrative is a vehicle to study the ways humans experience the world. Carter (1993) adds that stories have become a “central focus for conducting research in the field of education” (p. 5). In considering narrative as an object of inquiry, it must be noted that story knowledge contains rich and nuanced meaning and intrinsic multiplicity. Narrative knowing stands apart from singular or paradigmatic knowing by helping to organize knowledge and create frameworks for interpretation.

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) state, “people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives” (p. 416). These authors suggest that life experiences not only structure the stories we tell, but stories, in turn, function reciprocally to shape our experiences. In other words, personal experiences count as a bona fide source of knowledge. For the purposes of our self-study, we wanted to interrogate our personal experiences related to our sexual identities. As Stroobants (2005) explains, “telling life stories is an infinite process of reconstructing experiences, events, and choices” (p. 51). We told our stories as a harassed elementary school student, a fearful teacher, a young lesbian feminist activist, and empowered graduate students. Each story embodies who we are today and who we were through our pasts. Each story, obviously, is only a partial telling, a bit of the truth, a foregrounding of one identity at the cost of another. Indeed, the “glimpse” that Grumet speaks of is elusive and poses dilemmas regarding data analysis. Hankins (2003) speaks to this dilemma, noting a “thin and hazy” line between narrative as data and narrative as method (p. 14). She argues that data and method are inseparable and fluid. Accordingly, we found ourselves learning as much about methods of analysis as we did about the stories themselves.

Recently, scholars have argued that more openness is needed in qualitative studies (Anfara, 2002; Harry, Klingner, & Sturges, 2005; Peshkin, 2000). They recognize the need for qualitative researchers to carefully describe their methodology in order to make their processes more transparent. Certainly, analysis of qualitative data will never lend itself to a scripted formula, but by encouraging “open debate and dialogue” in our research reports we can learn from each other and discover more effective ways to reach our research goals (Harry et al., 2005, p. 12). As Stroobants (2005) explains, “the story of the research must be argued for and be open to justified critique” (p. 57).

This paper, then, presents the story of our research process. Throughout this report, we use examples from our

data to illuminate our methodological learning. We describe our three distinct approaches to analysis metaphorically as *waves* in order to capture the fluidity and choppy nature of the process. Like our analysis itself, waves ebb and flow, gain strength, crash, and return. As co-analysts navigating data analysis, we allowed ourselves to be carried along by these waves in order to see where they would take us. The first wave involved locating our stories through labeling and classifying significant topics. The second wave consisted of a focused narrative analysis. The third wave relied on dialogue and collaboration. Through these three distinct but epistemologically intertwined waves of analysis, we began to question ourselves, our stories, and the analytic process. Each wave brought to the surface distinct interpretations and demanded a different kind of intimacy and engagement with our stories. This paper provides a portrayal of our journey through those waves.

We begin by offering an overview of our inquiry project because it is important that readers have a grasp of our epistemological stance, the questions, and our data corpus. After this brief introduction, we proceed to describe our waves of analysis by sharing the personal narratives under scrutiny and detailing our analytic work. We conclude by exploring our methodological learnings and the importance of making the analytic process available to others.

Hitting the Surf: Overview of the Study

We entered this project with the intention of making our voices heard and studying our own identities and experiences. As participants telling our stories through journal entries and dialogue with each other, we felt empowered both personally and academically. Because the data was representative of our lived experience, we assumed the task of analysis would come naturally. We chose self-study, in part, to avoid some of the problematic power dynamics that usually characterize researcher-participant interactions, but soon found that we had not alleviated ourselves of these complications. As researchers with social justice agendas, autobiographical work provided a good place to enter into a feminist inquiry project. According to Kirsch (1999), feminist research often involves an “interactive, respectful, and collaborative relationship” (p. 6). These principles characterized our working relationship and informed our methods of analysis. Grounding our relationship in these principles prepared us to take on the challenges, risks, and confusions of the analytic phase of qualitative inquiry. Because of the personal nature of this inquiry, it was essential that we recall, retell, and rethink who we are/were in order to better understand our experiences. This process is familiar to those in the feminist movement where a similar model has been used to facilitate education and empowerment (Richardson, 1997).

Storytelling as a form of empowerment is also echoed by hooks (1989). hooks takes the idea of finding voice even further, describing it as a form of resistance. hooks asserts that through telling stories and speaking of one’s life in the form

of subject rather than object, tellers engage in what she calls “talking back” (p. 16). Talking back entails finding speech that compels listeners and gives voice to what has previously been nameless and silent. The telling of our stories allows us to peel back layers of silence in order to begin the process of understanding ourselves across time as students, teacher candidates, teachers, and graduate students.

As study participants, we began sharing stories informally as we became friends during doctoral course work. Professors asked for reflective writings for various assignments, and we found ourselves intrigued by the social and political implications of how our personal histories were revealed in that work. In addition, other self-studies by GLBT educators inspired us (Letts & Sears, 1999; Kissen, 2002). Thus, we decided to pursue a narrative self-study in order to afford ourselves the opportunity to explore those stories in more depth. Questions focused on homophobia and heterosexism in educational contexts. Initial, guiding questions included:

- What has characterized our educational experiences as LGBTQ learners and teachers?
- What beliefs do we hold about what it means to be an LGBTQ educator?
- What potential does self-study hold for self-revelation and empowerment?

We set a schedule for ourselves and developed prompts for journal writing and story sharing. We met weekly to share our stories and select new tasks for writing. Our writing prompts were topical, historical, and literary. We started with topical prompts that were thematic, such as accepting oneself and workplace conflicts. Chronology appealed to us, causing us to locate our stories temporally. Matthew, for instance, suggested we write about our earliest memories from childhood, while Lesley proposed stories from our undergraduate years. We also explored diverse forms such as metaphor and poetry. Our data corpus, then, was comprised primarily of journal entries that we composed in the context of our ongoing reflective conversations. Our journals covered a wide range of topics from harassment in middle school to seeking advocacy as elementary teachers. In the end we were left with dozens of personal stories—some written and rewritten many times.

Data collection was ongoing and continued once analysis began. However, we reached a point at which we dramatically shifted our focus from generating stories to analyzing stories. As novice researchers data analysis was still a mystery to us, but we were determined to make this experience meaningful and productive for us as both researchers and participants. Additionally, we were motivated by our desire to examine this tacit stage of the research process (Harry et al., 2005; Peshkin, 2000). While it is impossible for us to separate our exploration of our data from our exploration of the research process, in the sections that follow we delineate the processes and practices that were the most generative.

This Wet Suit Doesn't Fit: First Wave of Analysis

From the outset it is important to note that, in addition to being fellow doctoral students and beginning qualitative researchers, we were also close friends. That is, we entered analysis trusting each other and valuing one another's perspectives and insights. Our friendship allowed us not only to be more critical of each other's stories, but also to be more flexible and less guarded with each other than a typical collegial relationship allows. However, being friends did not mean we entered analysis at the same place. For example, Matthew initially thought the stories would be somewhat self-explanatory and seemed to desire quick closure. Lesley, conversely, seemed to want to question everything and struggled more with the sheer enormity of the data corpus. Although we entered analysis with differing expectations, we shared a strong desire to investigate the significance of our stories. As collaborative analysts, then, our first task was to carve out a jointly owned process that would enable us to make meaning from the data.

As doctoral students, we had been exposed to various techniques for data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Richardson, 2000). Yet, we had not come across specific guidelines or methods of analysis that would work for *our* data. Inexperience only heightened our anxiety. As a first attempt to get on our metaphorical surfboard, each of the authors/participants coded the narratives individually and brought their initial interpretations to the table. Following the advice of many qualitative researchers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), we first made a series of iterative passes through the data in order to become intimately familiar with our text set. Accordingly, we read and reread our stories, gave titles to our stories, looked for descriptive labels, and cursorily examined the content of each narrative. This “idiosyncratic enterprise” (Glesne, 1999, p. 136) led us down a path of sorting our stories under headings such as “coming out stories,” “safe and dangerous spaces,” and “finding voice.” These initial headings emerged from our earnest attempts to find cohesive patterns that might lead to sound conclusions. Our work on one of Matthew's stories reveals the nature of this initial analytic wave. (Note: Our analytic notes are in bold).

[Title: Homophobia in the College Classroom]

So there I was in a master's level course. The conversation drifted from the topic at hand to our experiences as undergraduates—particularly life in the dorms. We each shared some sort of horrible roommate story [personal in play]. Tricia shared her story of moving into the dorms as a freshman. She had hoped that she and her new college roommate would grow to be best friends. However, by the end of their first afternoon together, her roommate confided that she was a lesbian [naming sexuality]. Simultaneously, Tricia, fellow students, and my professor said, “Eeeeeeww” in a disgusted, turned-off

tone [demonstrated homophobia]. The other members of our class either held a similar view or did not have the courage to speak up and voice a different opinion [group dynamics]—namely, “Shouldn’t we all question our homophobia here?” . . .

[Researcher Memo: In this story, homophobia is not only accepted, but affirmed. This compromised Matthew’s comfort level as a student. What does this say about classroom power dynamics and heteronormativity in classroom contexts?]

As this example demonstrates, our first wave of analysis helped us categorize our data. We examined each story for literary themes and general content. We identified broadly what we thought were the most significant aspects of our data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) have called this step of the analytic process “open coding.” The purpose of open coding is to “uncover, name, and develop concepts [in order to] expose the thoughts, ideas, and meanings contained therein” (p. 102). Events in our lives and interactions with others were identified, labeled, and categorized. This systematic examination enabled us to locate our data in terms of time, place, range of emotion, and intention. We also wrote detailed researcher memos at the end of each journal entry as a way to capture our initial understandings of the narratives.

* * * * *

This first wave of analysis enabled us to synthesize our data. Our first wave of analysis assisted us in delineating the content of our journals and organizing that content into

more manageable *emergent themes* (see figure 1). Our work related to theme involved (re)organizing our data based on refined definitions of our initial classifications. We arrived at these emergent themes through a process that we irreverently called “data dumping.” Data dumping entailed making multiple copies of each journal entry and highlighting the interpretations we had made during our first analytic wave. Next, we literally took scissors to these copies, cutting apart salient sentences and paragraphs. We found that some stories were cut to shreds three and four times, while other stories remained relatively intact. Subsequently, we physically organized the “piles” of cut data into initial categories and arranged those categories thematically.¹ The end result of our first analytic wave is displayed in Figure 1.

In hindsight, we see how this first wave of analysis helped us capture the most salient points from our journals. It pushed us to examine the broader themes of our stories. It was a necessary step on our analytic path. At the time, however, we were somewhat frustrated. As we rode our boards back to the shore and examined more closely what we had

¹ Initially, we created 17 thematic categories. Through analysis, we adapted our 17 original categories into the ten consolidated themes above. We collapsed, for example, “Multiplicity” into “Self,” and converted “Taking a Stand” and “Finding Voice” into “Power.” We then began “dumping” data excerpts into equivalently named folders. Surprisingly, a folder initially labeled “Closure/Endings” remained empty during this round of analysis, even though we believed this concept would generate significant findings.

Yet, we had nothing to snip—no neat clipping—to represent this concept. For this reason alone—recognizing that we could not account for all our data—we termed our initial findings *Emergent Themes*.

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- Classroom Spaces:** absence or presence of sexuality, affirmed or feeling threatened, assumed heterosexuality, conflict, group dynamics, group size, personal in play, safe/dangerous spaces, threats of violence, visibility/invisibility
 - Coming Out:** community building/contexts, control, critical stance, deliberate/strategic, honesty, intimacy, ownership, self-motivated versus forced, place and time
 - Community:** advocates, authorities, characteristics of, honoring our lives, isolation, marginality, mentoring, need for, ownership, solidarity/alliances, types
 - Coping Strategies:** avoidance, coming out, conforming, constant preparation, denials, language choices, omissions, passing, self-preservation
 - Histories:** family influence, gender difference, identities, lasting memories, socioeconomic markers, urban/rural
 - Media:** in context, responses to, role models, starting points, affirmations, distortions
 - Power:** abuses of, among peers, dealing with authorities, finding voice, fear and anxiety, language issues, taking a stand, silence
 - Relationships:** advocacy, alliances, assumed heterosexuality, avoidance, developing trust, power dynamics
 - Responses to Homophobia:** anger, anxiety, fear, isolation, panic, rationalizations, silence
 - Self:** being “read” by others, constant preparation, denial, fixed versus fluid identities, honesty, internal conflict, multiplicity, positioning

Figure 1. Emergent Themes

accomplished, we realized we had not learned anything new! That is, this first wave of analysis did not alter significantly our understanding of the data. Given the fact that we were researchers studying our own lives, we expected the categories/themes we arrived at to be generated easily enough. And, indeed, they were. We, after all, had close, albeit unexamined, familiarity with the data. We discovered that the labels, titles, and categories we had attached to our data were helpful in developing emergent themes. Yet, we felt as if we were merely restating the obvious, reinscribing our own ideologies, and ignoring the complexities of our data.

Upon further reflection, we speculated that we were too close to our stories to engage in productive analytic work. The lesson we learned from this first wave of analysis was that the stories would not speak for themselves. Indeed, as researchers, we would have to face the onus of interpretive responsibility.

Buying a New Wet Suit: Second Wave of Analysis

After the first wave of analysis, we surmised that we were experiencing what Strauss and Corbin (1998) have termed an “analytic rut.” We realized the need for diverse and multiple approaches to data interpretation—approaches that would move us beyond our preconceived understandings of the data. Indeed, it seemed clear that we would have to find an approach that would push us to examine our stories more critically. However, as students of qualitative analysis, we were frustrated with our inability to find the “right” analytic tool or interpretative device to apply to our data. Harry et al. (2005) capture this frustration: “Students often feel that they are too much on their own in analyzing their data and that, unlike their peers who engage in quantitative studies, they suffer from the absence of clear-cut formulas” (p. 12). We realized we would have to dig deeper to transform our understanding of the data. Because of the personal nature of our stories—and of our relationship as friends and analysts—we sought out what we thought at the time to be a clear-cut formula that might offer us not only a systematic method to further analyze our data but some needed distance, even detachment.

Leaning on the work of folklorists such as A. Shuman (personal communication, September 5, 2002) and Berger (1997), we decided to utilize the tools of narrative analysis in our project. Narrative analysis provided a more concrete point of entry into our stories. We considered several narrative devices, including *reported speech*, *evaluation*, and *frame*. Reported speech is an internal structure of narrative in which the writer directly quotes herself or other players in the story. The use of evaluation in narrative often conveys the point of the story or demonstrates why—from the teller’s perspective—the story is worth telling. Frame serves the purpose of orienting readers through deliberate efforts at introduction and closure. Linde (1993) explains that through such devices tellers and listeners are made more aware of

the gap between the “taleworld” (the world of the story) and the “storyrealm” (the real time and place of the telling/writing). When we reread our stories with narrative criteria such as these in mind, we were forced to look at structure over content.

Reviewing our narratives based on structural components offered a new perspective on the stories and the interpretative process. In analyzing our stories based on narrative structure, we were struck by the importance of reported speech. Reported speech makes present the scene of the story and builds up emotional intensity. Through reported speech, more than one voice can be heard in a story. The use of direct quotes brings the reader closer to the actual event and builds credibility and authenticity. Reported speech also more dramatically reveals the teller’s position in the taleworld by bringing the audience into the moment. In the excerpt below, Matthew describes a colleague’s subtle and implicit support for him as a gay teacher in his rural school setting. (Note: Our second-wave markings also are in bold print.)

[Title: Teaching and Heterosexism]

While teaching elementary school in a conservative, rural area [frame/intro], my principal called me into her office. She didn’t close the door but said she wanted to talk to me about something personal. I was terrified [evaluation]. I lived in fear that an administrator or parent would find out I was gay and that I would lose my job [breaking frame]. I was expecting the worse. I expected to be outed [evaluation]. Instead, she proceeded to ask me to go out on a date with her niece. She offered me Michelle’s phone number and gave me some movie passes. I didn’t know what to say. I was expecting her to question my sexuality. Instead, she was trying to fix me up with a woman. I walked out of her office shaking [evaluation]. Waiting just outside the door was Pat, a veteran preschool teacher in our building whose son was also gay. She grabbed me by both hands and said, “Hon, you just shake that off” [reported speech]. She smiled at me and headed into the workroom. I never talked to Pat about my sexuality, but I was convinced that she knew [breaking frame].

[Researcher Memo: In this story, Matthew emotionally describes how he negotiated his identity in a professional setting. Fear is present in his writing. Assumptions of heterosexuality are in play. Why only one direct quote?]

In this researcher’s memo, we questioned Matthew’s use of direct quotes to capture his colleague’s response to assumptions of heterosexuality. In this example, Matthew’s colleague, Pat, offered support though a collusive response. Matthew does not quote himself or his principal—just Pat, the supportive ally. Reported speech provides an emotional spark that engages the reader and reveals the subtleties of language related to heterosexism. In addition, Matthew breaks

frame several times in order to let the audience know what he is feeling and thinking. This technique aligns the audience with the teller, adding to the story's impact. Matthew also captures his feelings and thoughts through the use of evaluative language. These persuasive statements manipulate the audience by bringing the events to life. Pinpointing the use of these structural features offered new insights into moments of tension and salient issues in our narratives.

Looking at these structural components created a new, more-distanced interpretative lens for us. This distance enabled us to gain alternative perspectives on our stories as both vested participants and interpretive, accountable researchers. As we broke each journal entry into discrete structural components, narrative analysis freed us to think about our stories differently. By taking the stories out of context—dissecting them line by line—we were able to think about why we told the stories the way we did. This allowed for a more systematic analysis the data. In a way, we began to see through the stories—almost as if from a third-person perspective.

This method opened up unforeseen possibilities for interpretation. For example, we were able to detect and study the persuasive devices and stylistic techniques in our stories, making them more transparent. Narrative tools helped us tear down the layers of intimacy and familiarity we had constructed as both authors and analysts. The result was a depersonalization—at least momentarily—of our stories. This process ultimately subjected our stories to harsher criticism. The stories became less taken for granted, and as researchers, we became more willing to question each other's stories with greater focus.

As we tried to draw conclusions from our second wave of analysis, we found ourselves engaged in heated dialogue about the stories and the perceived shortcomings of our analytic process. At the time, we seemed to be seeking some sort of validation we were on the right track. Yet, the only possible next step we could imagine was to return again to the stories.

Catching a Primo Groundswell: Third Wave of Analysis

As we caught our third wave, we began to see the data analysis process to be just that—a process. After the first two waves, we were convinced we had done good work. Certainly, we had made progress. We knew the data better and from varied perspectives. Although our first two waves of analysis could not be described as complete “wipeouts,” they were insufficient in moving us toward theory building. We were aware that our analytic work was far from complete. However, we were frustrated with how mundane the process seemed and how ambiguous our initial findings appeared. At this point, we struggled with how to elevate our preliminary discoveries to a more theoretical analysis. How would we make the necessary interpretative leaps? Now what?

Our frustration caused us to question each other and the entire process. Questioning soon deteriorated into contentious

debate. We lost confidence in our analytic work. We lost faith in the relevance of our stories and what they might mean. Because of this dissatisfaction, we found ourselves interrogating the work of the previous two waves. For instance, Lesley was concerned that the structural analysis had led us too far astray, while Matthew worried that we had begun to confuse and conflate several key themes. We questioned each other about our understandings of the themes then began to question the relevance and adequacy of those themes. We even began to question whether our stories still supported these themes. Despite how argumentative and confrontational this stage of the process initially seemed, we soon determined that negotiating our differing views about the same stories was surprisingly generative.

Therefore, we decided to apply this practice of debating and questioning as an analytic technique. Our dialogic process entailed revisiting every story and eventually led us back to the emergent themes (figure 1). Next, we reread each other's stories with both our emergent themes (Wave I) and narrative elements (Wave II) in mind. We relied on critical questioning to filter our stories through each of our earlier emergent themes. In this way we were able to formally and systematically test all of our stories against all of the themes. Specifically, each of us developed questions about the other's stories based on our knowledge of the stories from the previous waves of analysis. We interrogated each story by holding the author accountable for his/her telling. We also held ourselves accountable as interpreters of those stories. We did not hold back when questioning each other or scrutinizing the themes. Rather, we debated and argued points back and forth. Because of our collaborative relationship, we were able to push each other beyond our taken-for-granted understandings. The dialogue that took place during this wave did not constitute an isolated coding event; instead, this analytic work reflected our ongoing conversations and confrontations. These efforts relied on and were influenced by the previous waves; at times expanding and at other times narrowing our focus. Yet, we understood that all of our analytic efforts were “constructions in need of deconstruction” (Talbur, 2000, p. 233). As researchers and surfers, we were “stoked” at the possibilities this kind of analysis might provide.

Below, we provide an example of how we used dialogic theme testing in our third wave. In the following story, Lesley describes her first, public coming out as a doctoral student. Analyzing this data through the lens of our emergent themes alerted us to several overlooked aspects of this story, particularly with regard to the significance of the theme of classroom spaces. We describe in detail how one story was reconceptualized, leading not only to new discoveries about the story, but to more nuanced understandings of the theme itself. (Note: The questions Matthew developed in dialogue with Lesley are in bold.)

[Title: Coming Out in Doctoral Program]

It was the first evening of my first doctoral class and the professor asked us to explain “how we got here.” We used poster board, markers, and magazine clip-

pings to create a graphic showing significant life experiences. The goal was to help us learn about each other and start thinking about what we bring with us to the profession. I sat on the floor with my paper and markers and Bethany, another new student. **[Who was Bethany to you . . . a potential new friend, a mere professional colleague?]** Bethany and I were working together as supervisors and had started to get to know each other. She had told me about her recent engagement and I'd come out to her **[So it was Bethany's introduction of sexuality that prompted your disclosure? You write about this rather nonchalantly. What was it about this "space" that made coming out necessary/(un)comfortable/ unavoidable?]**

I decided to create a Venn diagram to show how different aspects of my life intersect **[Why did you set it up this way? Were you seeking conflict?]**. I remember including a cross and question marks to represent my struggles with my Catholic upbringing **[Here you are naming religious affiliation. This also brings the personal in to play. Did you know Bethany was also Catholic from your prior conversations? Did a common religious upbringing create a shared sense of community between you and Bethany? Did this make the classroom space easier for you to come out?]**. Additionally, I documented my years as a teacher in two states and my experiences in higher education. But the poster board was still quite empty. I was nervous and unsure about including my sexual orientation on the poster. I looked around the room and noticed that it was a relatively small group (14). **[How is coming out impacted/influenced by group dynamics? Did the smaller classroom space foster more intimate personal exchanges?]** Plus, Bethany knew, and there was another student in the class I thought might be gay, so I decided to come out. I do not know for sure why I felt comfortable enough to do this on my first day in the program. Yet, given the goals of the class as set forth by the professor and my interactions with two peers, I decided to get it out of the way. **[How unusual is it for you to come out on the first night of a class?]**

Based on the work of previous waves, we had located the above story broadly as a fairly apolitical coming out story. In fact, in Wave I, we classified it with other predictable and familiar stories of coming out of the closet. During the second wave, we attended to Lesley's neutral tone and lack of emotion. As we looked at this story yet again in the third wave, we questioned Lesley's decision-making process. Clearly, Lesley had to make a decision about what aspects of her identity to disclose for this class assignment. How that decision was made was far more complicated than our two preliminary analytic efforts revealed.

During our third wave, Matthew questioned Lesley's motivations for coming out by noting how Bethany casually inserted her own sexuality into the official curriculum. While Lesley was silently grappling with whether and if so, eventually how to represent her partner on her display, Bethany was asserting her heterosexual privilege by nonchalantly including her fiancé's name on her poster. Though it is not directly stated in the story, Lesley was reacting to this perceived unfairness. As a result of our open debate related to this story, Lesley was forced to acknowledge her frustration with how effortlessly Bethany included personal aspects of her life on her display. Thus, scrutiny and dialogue revealed that Lesley's coming out was not based on honesty or a desire to build community. Instead, we came to believe that she was responding to heterosexual privilege and feelings of marginalization. We identified this dimension of the story only through intense debate and critical questioning.

This work of debating and questioning not only allowed us to reach a deeper understanding of each story, it also enabled us to rethink our themes. For example, the third-wave process of testing the theme *classroom spaces* led us to build on and complicate it. Figure 2 below captures how this particular theme was clarified and expanded. We came to see how factors such as class size, personal history, and the absence or presence of sexuality functioned as intervening factors. Classroom spaces, therefore, are not static. It was not simply that Lesley had to assess the safety of the environment for coming out during the first class of her doctoral program. Rather, as in any classroom space, identities are affirmed and/

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- Sexuality in Educational Context
 - ◊ absence/presence of sexuality
 - ◊ heterosexual privilege
 - ◊ official curriculum/lived curriculum (personal engagement)
 - Negotiating Identity
 - ◊ assumed heterosexuality (coming out)
 - ◊ gender markers (race, as well?)
 - ◊ personal history/personal agenda (willingness/readiness)
 - Group Size/Dynamics
 - ◊ intimacy (potential for/avoiding)
 - ◊ expectations of/assumptions about others
 - ◊ accountability (small numbers)
 - Settings
 - ◊ elementary school
 - ◊ middle/high school
 - ◊ college classrooms
 - ◊ graduate school
-

Figure 2. Refined and Expanded Theme of Classroom Spaces

or diminished as official curriculum becomes lived curriculum. As classroom spaces are created and perceived, various forces collide—inviting both conflict and community.

As we talked through the stories and brought each theme to bear on each one, we gained new perspective and gained confidence in our analytic process. Dialoguing allowed to extend our existing themes but ultimately caused us to interpret our stories in new ways. Dialoguing made transparent the ways in which our data were not self-explanatory. Instead, dialoguing exposed the subtle nuances, hidden contexts, and tacit motivations contained in our writings. Accordingly, our questioning “produced different knowledge and produced knowledge differently” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 1). Ultimately, we constructed meaning not only from the data itself, but also from our engagement with the data. Explaining her own method of analysis, Talburt (2000) points out that “theme may indeed facilitate understanding and the creation of meaning, but theme does not express and cannot impose essence on what are interpretations of interpretations of lived experience” (p. 233). Indeed, during the work of the first two waves, our findings felt like “interpretations of interpretations.” While we were not necessarily seeking to “impose essence” through analysis, we were seeking some measure of verisimilitude and more confidence in our findings. Accordingly, in Wave III we succeeded in transforming our original, surface themes into more sophisticated, refined ones. For us, meaningful themes evolved over the course of many readings and re-readings, collaborative debate, and probing conversations.

Calling It a Gnarly Day at the Beach

To be forthcoming and honest about how we work as researchers is to develop a reflective awareness that, I believe, contributes to enhancing the quality of our interpretive acts. (Peshkin, 2000, p. 9)

Throughout this paper we have tried to be forthcoming and honest about the work we did as co-analysts. We have responded to the call for greater methodological transparency by describing our efforts at data analysis. We have come to believe that the quality of our work depended on our willingness to explore multiple approaches to analysis. While utilizing these varying approaches, we also gained a better understanding of the importance of reflexivity. We learned to be critical of both ourselves and our methods. We did not want to blindly assume that we had chosen the “right” methods; nor did we want to allow ourselves to overconfidently reach conclusions without adequately critiquing our methods. As Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) state, “in self-studies, conclusions are hard-won, elusive, are generally more tentative than not. The aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle” (p. 21). This statement accurately describes our experiences as researchers and participants in this project. Our research has allowed us to gain insight into how to analyze content and generalize theory from autobiographical stories. Each wave of analysis

helped us think more critically about the importance of finding a methodology that fits our epistemological stance.

As doctoral students, we entered this project aware that we would have to make difficult methodological choices. Because of the narrative style and personal nature of our data, we knew it could be a struggle to find the right analytic tool. As we began data analysis, we were eager to apply the skills we had learned in our graduate research courses. Accordingly, through each wave of analysis, we developed analytic memos and detailed responses to each journal. In the first wave, we established basic categories by sorting and classifying stories. In the second wave, our work addressed the importance of structural components, thus illuminating our motivations and intentions. During the more collaborative third wave, we experienced a methodological breakthrough. Finally, we began to feel as though our analytic efforts contributed to the creation of meaning. The work of each wave showed us that our stories featured a richly contextualized set of ideas with properties and dimensions that overlapped. It became obvious to us that no singular method of qualitative analysis would make it possible for us to “account for all aspects of the data” (Harry et al., 2005, p. 9). There was no one right method of analysis, no method we could trust completely. We had to trust ourselves to accept the fluid and ever-changing nature of analysis.

With each wave, we gained a deeper glimpse into the complexities of the stories and the subtleties of meanings. As we delved into the data analysis process, we found ourselves simultaneously drawn closer to and pushed farther away from our data. Obviously, the personal nature of these stories made it difficult for us to distance ourselves. Yet, the nature of data analysis both demanded and resulted in some level of distancing. Similarly, the data analysis process forced us to get closer to our stories than we imagined possible. To some, the analysis of our stories may seem almost intuitive, loosely formulated, and unreasonably grounded in the perspective of the teller. However, the very nature of self-study demands a different kind of work on the part of the researcher. As researchers and participants, we felt we “owned” this study. Yet, our seemingly endless and circular efforts toward reflexivity made visible unanticipated challenges and methodological tensions. Through our three waves of analysis, we have come to realize that interpretations and implications from self-study research is always limited. Throughout this study—from data collection to write-up—we grappled with how to get “out of the way” of the data, even though we were inextricably “in the way.” Our data and interpretations reveal both the possibilities and limitations of autobiographical studies by exposing the complications of analysis, contradictions of personal narrative, and complexities of the research process. We began this project searching for a method of analysis, trying to catch that perfect wave. In the end, the task of engaging with our narratives and exploring methods of analysis taught us more about our data and ourselves, intensifying our understanding of the research process and leaving an indelible mark on our lives.

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