

CURRICULUM INSTRUCTION & EVALUATION
ADVANCED STUDIES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
METHODS

Professor William Ayers
(312) 996-9689- office
bayers@uic.edu

* “The researcher’s stance becomes a dance of vigilance and improvisation.”

* “The researcher is the stranger, the one who must experience the newness, the awkwardness, the tentativeness that comes with approaching something unfamiliar, and must use the actors in the setting as guides, as authorities, as knowledge bearers. In qualitative inquiry this is a crucial shift of perspective and role between researcher and actor that has important implications for how the inquiry is approached and what is learned.”

Gwendolyn Brooks, who won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1954, and served as Poet Laureate of Illinois from 1985 until her death in 2000, never left her bustling and bracing neighborhood, and, perhaps more important, never left the commitments and concerns that animated her intelligence and her heart: the lives of the children and families, indeed, the experiences and concerns of all the ordinary people of Chicago's South Side. At a massive celebration of her life, one of her former students read this poem to her memory:

GWENDOLYN BROOKS
(1917-2000)

Sometimes I see in my mind's eye a four- or five-
year-old boy, coatless and wandering
a windblown and vacant lot or street in Chicago
on the windblown South Side. He disappears
but stays with me, staring and pronouncing
me guilty of an indifference more callous
than neglect, condescension as self-pity.

Then I see him again, at ten or fifteen, on the corner,
say, 47th and Martin Luther King, or in a group
of men surrounding a burning barrel off Lawndale,
everything surrounding vacant or for sale.
Sometimes I trace him on the train to Joliet
or Menard, such towns quickly becoming native
ground to these boys who seem to be nobody's
sons, these boys who are so hard to love, so hard
to see, except as case studies.

Poverty, pain, shame, one and a half million
dreams deemed fit only for the most internal
of exiles. That four-year-old wandering
the wind tunnels of Robert Taylor, of Cabrini
Green, wind chill of an as yet unplumbed degree—
a young boy she did not have to know to love.

—*Anthony Walton*

There's a dissent in this poem that mirrors the life and work of Gwendolyn Brooks—a refusal of received wisdom, a challenge to the policing proclivities of research and the social sciences, and an invitation to a possible way forward.

Sketching a familiar landscape, cycling back through the clichés we tend to attach so glibly to the city and city kids—coatless and wandering, the windblown streets and the vacant lots—Walton highlights the disciplining bent of so much of what we call social science research—“so hard/to see, except as case studies.” He points to us, questioning our innocence and reproaching our willed ignorance as he contextualizes and undermines

the orthodoxy that had slipped so easily into place a moment ago: “an indifference more callous/than neglect,” he writes, “condescension as self-pity.”

And then that sudden, surprising last line: “a young boy she did not have to know to love.” Indeed, here is the common faith of educators, not necessarily a distinct path, but a positive direction certainly.

In a concise and provocative way, this poem invites us—in the spirit of Gwendolyn Brooks—to open our eyes to our shared humanity, to challenge orthodoxy, (especially our own embedded dogma and received thinking) and to engage our world with more imagination and hope.

I begin with a poem to remind us of the centrality of the arts and of humanism as principle, guide, and source in our scholarly and intellectual pursuits—our lives as students, our efforts as teachers, our projects as researchers. Jane Hirshfield writes that, “Great poetry is not a donkey carrying obedient sentiment in pretty forms, it is a bird of prey tearing open whatever needs to be opened.” And Langston Hughes invents an entire vocabulary to underline the potential power of poetry to illuminate, to educate, to nourish the human core:

Poetry possesses the power of worriation. Poetry can both delight and disturb. It can interest folks. It can upset folks. Poetry can convey both pleasure and pain. And poetry can make people think. If poetry makes people think, it might make them think constructive thoughts, even thoughts about how to change themselves, their town and their state for the better. Some poems, like many of the great verses in the Bible, can make people think about changing all mankind, even the whole world. Poems, like prayers, possess power.

I turn to the arts in the spirit of Hughes and of his many descendents, including Gwendolyn Brooks: “Does man love art?” she asks to begin one of her poems. Her answer: “Man visits art but cringes. Art hurts. Art urges voyages.” I turn to the arts precisely because they urge voyages, voyages we must undertake with a sense of hope and urgency at this precise moment, voyages that might contribute to opening the desicated discourse on educational research and school improvement so dominant just now.

Humanism is built upon the idea that human life is indeterminate, expansive, and interconnected, that there exists a special human capacity for making meaning, for knowledge of who and what we are in the world. Humanism embraces all the things we make through our own labor, including history as an ongoing human construction, and all other forms of expression as well: research and language and every manner of goods and works and products. Indeed, every humanist is always a kind of researcher, drawn—in the spirit of cooperation, sharing, and being-in-common—to explore and expand. Because humanism invites the input and engagement of all, there is no obvious conflict between the practice of humanism and the pursuit of democracy—humanism, like democracy, unleashes an energy toward enlightenment and freedom.

All of this requires a leaning outward, a willingness to look at the peopled world, at the sufferings, the accomplishments, the perspectives and the concerns of others, at their twisty, dynamic movement through time, and an awareness—sometimes joyous, but just as often painful—of all that one finds. It requires, as well, a leaning inward toward self-knowledge, a sense of being alive and conscious in a going world.

In each direction the humanist/researcher acknowledges that every person is entangled and propelled, and sometimes made mute, by a social surround, that each also has a wild and vast inner life. And a story to tell; meanings to make and remake. We inhabit an infinite and dynamic world, a world in motion, and we are ourselves unfinished, unruly sparks of meaning-making energy. History, as always, charges relentlessly forward, and the world, as always, is in-process. Going inward without consciously connecting to a larger world leads to self-referencing and worse, narcissism as truth; traveling outward without noting your own embodied heart and mind can lead to ethical astigmatism, to seeing other three-dimensional human beings as case studies or data, their lived situations reduced to the “field.”

We struggle toward consciousness, but, of course, being conscious can never be *fully* conscious—we are all more-or-less conscious, contingently aware, and at the same time entirely incomplete. As researchers and humanists we must struggle to approach others as the active knowledge-creators and meaning-makers that they actually are, as agents and experts on their own lives; we approach ourselves as works-in-progress, too, both incomplete and provisional.

The humanist ambition is for every human being to reach a fuller measure of his or her own humanity. Any research grounded in humanism is necessarily a lively activity, a raucous and participatory pursuit—open to every background and class and condition in its perpetual asking of new questions, its continual discoveries, its ceaseless and essential reformulations and revisions and unique revelations.

But while acknowledging humanization as goal and purpose, we note that dehumanization can be both policy and practice; we enter, then, the contested space of school and society, of scholarship and intellectual life, of teaching and research.

* * *

The desire for certainty in an uncertain world is understandable. The desire to categorize, sort, label, and fix is powerful. But qualitative inquiry doesn't do its best work that way. That is, it is still fundamentally genre-blurring. Scratch a qualitative researcher and you might find a linguist, an historian, an anthropologist, a psychiatrist, a folk-lorist, a physician, a musicologist, an economist, or a philosopher. So what? Put another way I think Freud, Piaget, Geertz, Lomax, Mead, Hubbard, Weismann, and Chomsky have more in common than they do with many of their discipline-based comrades in the academy. And let's say we could assert with confidence that “Fine is a critical ethnographer”, “Peshkin is an educational anthropologist”, “Willis is a Marxist”, and “Paley is a personal narrative researcher”, what have we added to our understanding? To me it becomes a kind of elitist academic exercise. I'm interested in your being able to read all of this material critically, and, if you like, write it well. I'm interested in your own intellectual curiosity, restlessness and growth. I don't see these categories as helping much.

I think beginning researchers are more wrought up than they need to be about the “big split” in the academy between quantitative and qualitative researchers. The key issue is substantive focus, not good guys and bad guys, so the question is: what are you interested in? If your answer is some meaning made by actors in situations, some bounded life-world you can enter and find out what people make of it all, then you're tending toward a naturalistic and interpretive approach. If you're interested in

generalizing or in correlating things—as this occurs, that also tends to occur—then you tend toward a statistical study. In this sense, “the question determines the work” is correct. But remember: *method is not technique*, and multiple tactics might be useful. In any case, find out all you can, without arbitrary or phony limits.

Stephen Jay Gould asserts that “we live in a world of detail, and diversity just is.” Gould defends natural history as the painstaking work of observing and developing case studies, one by one. “You may view this as discouraging,” he goes on, “if your temperament be dark. You may also find in [it] the essence of freedom.”

Qualitative research is interested in a world of detail and diversity. It tends to a thick and nuanced narrative that describes a whole—an entire cultural universe—as it is experienced by participants. It further attempts to capture the *relationship* of this particular cultural universe, this whole unit, to the larger and smaller units in which it is embedded. It emphasizes *qualities* instead of *quantities*. It asks, “What the hell is going on?” “How do people make sense of life here?” As Clifford Geertz says, “The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.”

When natives in the Western Pacific cut down a tree to make a boat they apologize to the tree through prayer. That’s no more (nor less) culturally bounded and socially constructed than the sense that there are large numbers of poor families in Chicago who don’t care about their children.

It’s true that you begin every study without guarantees—you may not get anything of terrific value. You may come up empty. And yet there are things you can do to make your work more deliberate and worthwhile from the start. Your goal is to understand meaning, something that is always complex and generally elusive. You have to plan to spend a lot of time—watching, writing, observing, recording. You have to make yourself available to a phenomenon, and you have to wait. You can work away from the start: identifying the full range of relationship and meaning-perspectives; collecting lots of samples, instances, and details; tacking back and forth, up and down, from the tiniest detail to the most over-arching context. Observe for a while and then write up your notes. This takes a lot of time, but it is essential. You can also vary the focus, search for a wider range of perspectives, and identify disconfirming evidence.

What else can you do to from the start? What else taken together will add up to a believable (although not an objective nor a generalizable) study?

Our focus is life as it is *lived*, meaning as it is *constructed* by people in their circumstances—something not easily fitted into disciplines or departments. This leads us to story, to narrative, to life history—approaches that are person-centered, unapologetically subjective. Far from a weakness, the voice of the *person*, the subject’s own account, is the singular *achievement* of this work. These are actually ancient approaches to understanding human affairs, relatively new only to educational researchers.

Doing qualitative research is in the first place an act of intelligence and creativity. There simply is no substitute for these. That makes doing qualitative research risky, intimidating, and awesome as well.

This class will ask you to use your intelligence and creativity, your critical mind and ethical heart, because doing qualitative research requires it. There is no procedure nor any computer program to follow that will allow this work to take care of itself; there is no recipe; there is no technique nor set of techniques that are orderly, efficient, and pre-tested that will allow you to distance yourself from the phenomenon under study or from the process of inquiry itself. You will be out there with no substitute for your own mind, your own heart, your own ability to empathize, to touch and to feel, to recognize human life in its many unexpected guises. You will draw on judgment, experience, instinct, common sense, reflection, further study. And, of course, we will be out there together – planning, gathering information, interpreting, representing what we each find, and reporting back.

Before we become too enchanted, though, let's remember that qualitative research does not enjoy a particularly proud nor an entirely ethical record. Do you know the story of Ishi, "the last wild Indian," "a living relic of the Stone Age," who lived out his days inside the San Francisco Museum? Do you remember the "Venus Hottentot?" Or the character from *Beloved* called Schoolteacher? Check out who they were. Ethnographers accompanied the colonial armies, and "scientific curiosity" about other people served the conquerors and the masters. The eugenics movement grew alongside museums, exhibitions, world fairs, and anthropology. This reminds us that any attraction or identification we feel to this work should resist all romanticism. We must stay alert and aware, critical and engaged, or we are as likely as any other to lose our ways, and then our souls.

Qualitative research is interpretive in several senses—its substantive focus is on meaning for actors in their own lifeworlds (the interpretations of informants); it is conducted by someone who must struggle to render the meanings of others for an audience (the interpretation of the researcher); it is received by an audience trying to understand the researcher's interpretations of the participants' interpretations of a given social or cultural world (the interpretation of the reader). Keeping this straight is itself a challenge, but the point is that qualitative research is *shamelessly* interpretive. And its substantive core is this: *meaning for human beings in situations*. Keep this in the front of your mind as we proceed.

You will try to get to know a phenomenon, its meaning for actors, its most intimate details. You will try to reduce the phenomenon to something orderly, to put it in some sort of box. Then you will open the box again, and again. All of this is tough to assess in straight-forward ways, and so we will discover unique ways to determine quality.

We struggle to understand both the importance and the elusiveness of meaning for human beings – we understand, for example, that you can't get a joke by following

objective laws or logical progressions, nor can you grasp the reason for a rebellion or the workings of a school from a mathematical model. We know that knowledge is not – cannot be – a disembodied view from nowhere, something mechanically attained, free of perspective, point-of-view, or situation. We see knowledge as entangled, rooted, complex, and various. And we seek, therefore, consciousness, the root of meaning, rather than an unreasoning or automatic apparatus.

Because we see knowing as transactional and focused on lived experience, and we accept knowing as always and necessarily partial, incomplete, and contingent, there is always the danger of total relativity (maybe even indifference); on the other side lurks the danger of certainty, dogmatism, and authoritarianism. Our problem then is not so bad – there is always more to know, always something in reserve. We don't get harmony or a neat and total mushing together, but neither do we get barbed wire and electric currents. We're never exactly comfortable, but we're neither numb nor sleep-walking. What we get is a kind of arching forward – always reaching, pursuing, longing, opening, rethinking. Always contradiction, always contingency, always new vistas and open spaces. And critical reflection. And self-criticism.

That is why we try to tack back-and-forth between the most local of local detail and the larger concentric circles of context in which everyday life is lived. The purpose is to understand the lifeworlds of others – not to caricature nor so much to criticize. It is to expand our understanding of the sensible.

In order to tell the story you will try to tell in this type of work, you will realize that something is enabling and helping you to focus, to understand, to interpret. That something is often fetishized in the academy as a “theoretical framework,” and a “literature review” becomes a requirement. I prefer to think of this as a recognition that there is already an intellectual conversation underway, that that conversation is necessarily dynamic, multi-dimensional, and unfinished, and that in order to enter it you need to bring to the surface your understanding of where it is and how it's going. This, rather than an ERIC search, is the start of a literature review. Further, in order to make your utterance in that conversation significant, you will see that there is not a single story to tell, but a story embedded in many other stories. This opens you to a theoretical framework, but remember Paulo Freire's warning: “theory or introspection in the absence of social action is escapist idealism or wishful thinking.” It's complicated, of course, but also natural and necessary.

This class is a seminar, a place of dialogue. It will only work if you listen to others with the possibility of being changed, and speak up forcefully with the possibility of being heard. You must listen and speak, learn and teach. Without freedom of expression we are doomed to accept current dogma, received ideas, prejudice and popular stereotypes. In this class we will try to challenge intellectual complacency, easy belief, and received wisdom. We will be agnostics and skeptics, questioning the presuppositions and biases of others as well as of ourselves. We invite the clash of ideas. Some debates may be straight-forward, others may be full of emotion and fear and pain. We will create here the possibility of understanding the value of tolerating sharply different points

of view—an impossibility unless we allow and even encourage real differences of opinion.

If you attend class, read and write every week, and ask authentic questions you will receive a splendid grade. You don't have to write brilliantly but you have to write. Your presence in class every week is *REQUIRED* - missing class destroys the collective dialogue and weakens the learning community. Show up or be doomed!

Doing interpretive research is hard work. Many of you already know this, and for the rest, you are forewarned. You may feel (if you are like others who go down this path) overwhelmed, uncertain, and deeply confused and dislocated in turn. You will also, if you stay with it, likely find moments of relief, of exhilaration, of self-discovery, and even of joy.

POSSIBLE READINGS
 READ! READ! READ!

1. Ayers, *The Good Preschool Teacher**
2. Ayers, *A Kind and Just Parent**
3. Michie, *Holler If You Hear Me**
4. Michie, *See You When We Get There**
5. Heller, *Until We Are Strong Together**
6. Flores-Gonzalez, *School Kids/Street Kids**
5. Rathbone, *On the Outside Looking In*
6. Gourevitch, *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed*
7. Yonemura, *A Teacher at Work*
8. Peshkin, *God's Choice*
9. Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here*
10. Oyler, *Making Room for Students**
11. Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers*
12. Carger, *Of Borders and Dreams**
13. Willis, *Learning to Labor*
14. Foster, *Black Teachers on Teaching*
15. Blake, *She Say, He Say**
16. Duneier, *Slim's Table*
17. Duneier, *Sidewalk*
18. Fine, *Framing Dropouts*
19. Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*
20. Agar, *Ripping and Running*
21. Lightfoot, *The Good High School*
22. Finnegan, *Cold New World*
23. Lewis, *Race in the Schoolyard**
24. Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling*
25. Hagedorn, *People and Folks**
26. Richie, *Compelled to Crime**
27. Cintron, *Angel's Town**
28. Schaffner, *Teenage Runaways**
29. Perry, *Walking the Color Line**
30. Klinenberg. *Heat Wave*

Reading qualitative research—lots and lots of it—is a necessary part of becoming a qualitative researcher. You read to see how others faced the kinds of issues you face, solved the kinds of problems you must solve. But—you must learn to read as a peer and a critic, never as a consumer.

We can learn some from reading *about* qualitative research—this is no substitute for immersing yourself in the real thing, the work itself, but it can be useful. We will certainly read a couple of the following books in common: Glesne and Peshkin, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, Eisner, *The Enlightened Eye*, Eisner and Peshkin, *Qualitative Inquiry in Education*, Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, Fine, *Speed Bumps*, Geertz, *Words and Lives*, Agar, *The Professional Stranger*, Portelli, *The Death of Luigi*

Trastulli, Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think*, Coles, *Doing Documentary*. As you read these I urge you to take extensive notes on cards or in some loose-leaf form that you can access later.

You might want to read a couple of novels—Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*, Lee, *A Gesture Life*, Barker, *Regeneration* or *The Ghost Road* or *The Eye in the Door*, Ishiguro, *Artist of the Floating World*, Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Kincaid, *Lucy Mahfouz*, *Palace Walk*, Saramago, *Blindness*—or memoir—Peery, *Black Fire*, or Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, or Prejean, *Dead Man Walking*, or Rodriguez, *Always Running*, or Nabakov, *Speak, Memory*, or Balakian, *Black Dog of Fate*.

Think about how a world is evoked, how a story is told, and the role of writing in this work. While everyone's writing, I'm sure, could be improved, ask yourself what strengths and weaknesses characterize your writing now. Can you describe these? Writing is always an act of sacrifice and loss, but you must write. You can read and write—for catalyzing and empowering moments, inductively for emergent themes, reflectively through autobiographical inquiry, critically for insights into power, cooperatively with project partners, queerly against the grain, counter-intuitively. Write to discover and to learn.

You may want to consult one of the following on writing: *Bird by Bird*, *Wild Minds*, *Writing Well* or *Writing Down the Bones*. Furthermore, we probably ought to read: *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Review of Books* together every week.

Let's also see two of the following films together: "Paradise Lost", "Crumb", "Unzipped", "Fundí", "Seven Songs for Malcolm X," "Eye to Eye", "Brother's Keeper," "American Movie," "Black Is, Black Ain't," "The Big One," "The Farm: Angola, U.S.A.," "Gia," "To Have and To Be." We might try to listen to "Sound Prints" and "This American Life." The point is, we will immerse ourselves in the world of documentary and interpretation.

Reading is one thing, looking at films another, and doing research quite another. Like teaching, there is only so much you can talk about before plunging into the abyss, struggling to figure it out as you do it. Here each of us will do some work toward our inquiry project—we are each in a different place, so one may do a short proposal or think piece, another a literature review, a third a substantive piece of research—and this will become the heart of what we discuss together, what we analyze, what we learn from.

READING ASSIGNMENTS...

1. By next week (January 17) read *The Good Preschool Teacher* and *A Kind and Just Parent*. Based on those readings be prepared to discuss in class questions like: What are the purposes of research? What is the nature of knowledge? What is bias? What is the substantive focus of each? What is data? What is data analysis? What is the role of theory? What theory of human development does each embody? What ethical issues arise? What (if anything) distinguishes this work from fiction or journalism? Is research neutral? Is it beneficent? Always? Who does research serve? Who does it help? Can research be linked to advocacy? Should it be?
2. By week three (January 24) view one of the films on the syllabus. Whose meanings is the film after? How do the filmmakers try to get close to that meaning? What are the relevant contextual factors brought to the fore? Also on week three bring a one paragraph description of your learning agenda for this class. What would you like to do for a final project?
3. Beginning the following week (January 31) (and continuing for several weeks) bring two written questions (to be handed in) to class. These questions can be about readings, class discussions, or your work in progress.
4. Read any two of these authors by February 7: Michie, Schaffner, Lewis, Cintron, Richie, Hagedorn, Flores-Gonzalez, Carger
5. Read Fred Erickson (handout) by March 7.
6. Read a selected (agreed upon) text about research by March 28.
7. Read a novel of your choice by April 4.

scientist's ability to continue research, and in practice it entails the recasting of research results according to the public conventions of the scientific community. The inevitable result of such recasting is that the scientific text becomes, in part at least, something of a public relations exercise.

J.R. Durant

21

The goal is to produce an interpretation of the way a people lives which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch, nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their existence, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer.

Clifford Geertz

28

It wasn't literary. It couldn't be. That was the point of a Report of Investigation: its structures made embellishment difficult. If written correctly, it was gritty and hard. It put the center of gravity out there in the world, and shrank the subject to a vanishing still point. Its ideal—unrealizable—was to make the author disappear altogether, and that was also the source of its awkwardness, the forced grammar used to bury the I in the muffled passages of the passive voice or hide it under a disingenuous third person.

Josiah Thompson

March

7

Researchers have perhaps too often made persons (teachers and students) the objects of research. An alternative is to choose problems that interest and concern researchers, students, and teachers... Such research would be genuine research for teaching instead of simply research on teaching.

Nel Noddings

14

We live in a world of detail, and diversity just is. You may view this as discouraging, if your temperament be dark. You may also find in [it] the essence of freedom.

Stephen Jay Gould

21—NO CLASS—Spring Break

28

Philosophers have not been alone in claiming that science must be about universals. In a fit of severe physics envy, biologists, even evolutionary biologists concerned with the history of life on earth, have tried to construct their science as a set of universal "laws," acceding to the general intellectual disdain for the merely particular.

R.C. Lewontin

April

4

The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.

Clifford Geertz

11 [AERA]

...subjectivity has its own “objective” laws, structures and maps... They may be less tangible and universal than those of hard facts, but they can be reconstructed by means of appropriate scientific tools—which include an open mind and a willing imagination.

Allesandro Portelli

18

I think bias has been getting a bad rap. Neophyte researchers feel called upon either to show how they are controlling for bias or to swear that nothing so unseemingly would ever influence their research. Bias is essential to the conduct of research.

Harry Wolcott

25

A life history is a living thing. It is always a work in progress..

Allesandro Portelli