

The Test of Curriculum: A Single-Case Study of How Early Educational Experiences Enable Agency Throughout Life

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ABSTRACT: This single-case study uses the narratives of a 75 year-old participant to understand something about the ways in which educational experiences influence a person's decision-making processes throughout life. For the purpose of this study, educational experiences are learning experiences made both in a formal school setting and out of school. The findings of this study point to how curriculum can be utilized to enable relational self-understanding, which is an understanding of the self in terms of one's capability to design a meaningful social life. Further, the findings show how this kind of understanding is a prerequisite for agency. As such, this study contributes to the conversation about what the purpose of school is and what it means to be an educated person.

Keywords: curriculum theory, narrativity, philosophy, self-understanding, agency

RÉSUMÉ : Cette étude de cas utilise les récits d'un participant âgé de 75 ans pour comprendre la manière dont les expériences éducatives influencent le processus de prise de décisions d'une personne tout au long de sa vie. Pour l'objectif de la présente étude, les expériences éducatives sont des expériences d'apprentissage faites à la fois dans un cadre scolaire formel et en dehors de l'école. Les résultats de cette étude montrent que le curriculum peut être utilisé pour permettre la compréhension du soi relationnelle, ce qui est une compréhension de soi en termes de capacité à concevoir une vie sociale significative. De plus, les résultats montrent à quel point ce type de compréhension est une condition préalable à l'agentivité. En tant que telle, cette étude contribue à la discussion sur le but de l'école et sur ce que signifie être une personne instruite.

Mots-clés : théorie du curriculum, narrativité, philosophie, compréhension de soi, agentivité

Purpose

This study uses the narratives of Thomas to understand something about how early educational experiences influence a person's impetus for decision-making throughout life. Thomas is a 75 year-old artist who teaches art and design at a university in the northern United States. His age

allows him to think about his life with particular retrospect and introspect. For the purpose of this single-case study, early educational experiences are considered all experiences that contributed to Thomas' relational self-understanding regardless of whether they took place in an academic or non-academic setting.

The findings of this study show that relational self-understanding is a person's ability to grasp which part the self plays in the world, which is a prerequisite for agency. Further, Thomas' case clarifies under which conditions curriculum enables relational self-understanding. With that, the findings contribute to the conversation about what the purpose of school is and what it means to be an educated person. As data is represented through Thomas' narratives, the reader will be able to draw his/her own conclusions about how curriculum can be used to enable life-long agency.

This paper begins with a brief review of the theoretical and methodological frameworks. The main part is the analytical representation of qualitative data and a discussion of the findings followed by the implications for curriculum theory and praxis. This paper concludes with a short story – *Obligations* - that uses the findings to explore questions about the purpose of school in an arts-based approach to educational research (Barone & Eisner, 1997).

Curriculum, Self, and Society

American education is situated in the space between political decisions on one side and scholarly voices on the other, and these two factions approach the purpose of school with different agendas. While curriculum scholars think about education with regard to what human beings are capable of in terms of living meaningful social lives (Kincheloe, 2008), polities and policies are focused on enabling so-called 21st century skills to be competitive in a global economy (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This resulted in the current hyper-reductionist accountability system that centers on competitive ethics. The scholarship of the past decade has shown how this is counter-productive to what it means to be an educated person because societal needs are broader than getting high school students ready for college or career; hence, the purpose of education cannot be reduced to economic gains.

Thomas received his official schooling 60 years ago. Despite the many changes curriculum studies and educational policies have undergone since then, the similarities between curriculum praxis in the 1950s and today are striking: the curriculum is defined by a priori objectives; it is created with focus on results rather than on humans; and it is implemented hierarchically. The major difference is that in the 1950s, curriculum design still sought teachers' input whereas today it is test-driven and designed by people far removed from classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2016; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995). This ends-means approach to

educational experiences stands in contrast to Dewey's (1938) progressivism, which focuses on the quality of educational experiences made through social interactions. For Dewey (1938) the purpose of school was not to prepare students for later life but to understand the experiences made in school as part of life. This includes an understanding of how one fits into the world. Thomas' story represents an in-depth look at how early educational experiences reiteratively influence this understanding. McIntyre (2002) explained,

The test of curriculum is what our children become, not only in the workplace but also in being able to think about themselves and their society imaginatively and constructively, able to use the resources provided by the past in order to envisage and implement new possibilities. (p. 15)

In other words, the question *Who am I?* Changes to *Why am I?* Thinking about one's existence in these dialectical terms makes it possible to visualize purpose with meaning beyond the self. Hence, the curriculum must afford experiences that don't focus on competitiveness but on purpose instead. Curricular experiences then have the potential to enable students to design purpose for themselves so that they consciously choose the communities they are part of, local and global, and design ways to contribute to them meaningfully. If this relational self-understanding is part of the purpose of school, education bears the possibility of life-long agency.

Methods of Inquiry and Data Sources

Research Design

This is a single-case study using narrative analysis as the methodological framework. It was conducted over a period of six months with one purposefully selected participant (Glesne, 2011; Patton, 2002) to illustrate in depth and with real-life context (Green, Camilli, and Elmore, 2006) under which circumstances early educational experiences enable relational self-understanding and agency. Thomas' official schooling was framed by the difficulties his undiagnosed dyslexia and dyscalculia presented - conditions that were poorly understood at the time and, in Thomas' case, not diagnosed until much later in life. Data was collected from diverse sources to allow for crystallization (Richardson, 2008). According to Richardson (2008), the idea of crystallization implies the notion of multidimensionality and transmutation (Richardson, 2008). Instead of searching for a fixed point, as is the connotation the term "triangulation" carries, and to explore possible findings from different angles, I opted to "see" how the narratives, like prisms, offer different perspectives of themselves. Thus, in addition to different types of interviews, artifacts, and documents, I incorporated researcher's reflections, member check interviews, and peer reviews (see Table 1 Data Inventory). This multidimensional data allows for crystallization while assuring

trustworthiness and academic rigor. This research project and all aspects of its design have been approved by an IRB.

Data Analysis

The data analysis framework for this study is narrativity, which is the idea that people lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). This fundamentally constructionist view rests on the notion that human beings construct their own meanings and themselves. Dewey (1934) noted, “The sense of an extensive underlying whole is the context of every experience and it is the essence of sanity” (p. 202). This means a person understands, creates, and communicates himself by weaving together the stories of his life into a meaningful whole that reflects who he is. It is done by arranging events in a pattern that, like a story, has a beginning, a middle, an end, and a conflict or moral (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Glesne, 2011; Phoenix, 2008). In choosing this arrangement, which is not primarily chronological but driven by the elected conflict, the author reveals a structure that was inherent in the story all along and signals the point of the story (Phoenix, 2008; White, 1980). The idea of narrativity is that through our individual stories we create our personal grand narrative – the story of us, which reflects who we perceive ourselves to be. At the same time, by placing individual stories into the greater picture, we are creating our self. The narrative of our life is the story of our past and present, which projects into our future. This view presupposes that we understand the self as a temporal being and as a narrative being. Understanding the self as a temporal being means to know that we are emergent. Huebner (1967/1999) stated,

The very notion of time arises out of man's existence, which is an emergent. The future is man facing himself in anticipation of his own potentiality for being. The past is finding himself already thrown into the world. It is the having-been which makes possible the projection of his potentiality. The present is the moment of vision when Dasein ... projects its own potentiality for being. (p. 138)

In other words, our present results from our past but not arbitrarily because we are not just thrown into some situation; we have created potentiality for ourselves. Our potentiality for being in the here and now exists in our interpretation of our past. Sarup (in Pinar, 2004/2012) explained, “It is the way in which we understand our past which determines how it determines us” (p. 126). Our potentiality projects into our future through our meaning-making of the past-present. To understand the self as a temporal being means to live in the past-present-future simultaneously. In other words, we collapse our past and our future into our present through our interpretations of the past and our decisions for the future. In terms of narrativity, we create the stories of us not with focus on their chronology but with focus on our potentiality, which is independent of time and directly related to our

interpretations. Our interpretations result from our understanding of self in relation to all we have been part of. Hence, understanding man's temporality in this particular way presupposes relational self-understanding.

Data Representation

Thomas' narratives are presented in present tense through in vivo quotes, which are words and phrases from the actual language of the participants in qualitative data (Saldaña, 2009). I chose to represent the data in this way because this shifts the focus of the data collection, - analysis, and - representation from being result-oriented to being process-oriented, which better reflects the iterative processes of meaning-making.

To further facilitate the reader's individual interpretations, I also used arts-based educational research (ABER) to analyze and represent the data. A fundamental idea of ABER is that instead of focusing on bottom line findings, the data and the educational issues under study are explored from a different angle (Barone & Eisner, 1997). This paper ends with *Obligations* - a short story whose protagonist reflects Thomas' agency and what I believe education "ought to" enable. ABER allows the researcher to look at issues from the inside rather than the outside (Denzin, 2003). In that way, it can be likened to a kaleidoscope that shows a pattern made of a handful of pearls. Each time the kaleidoscope is turned, a new pattern emerges made up of the exact same pearls. The patterns are unexpected and come about by combining the same parts in new and different ways.

Writing the World in Terms of Your Own Vision

I met Thomas through a mutual acquaintance of ours who introduced me to the *School Stories Project* (Rose & Griffith, n.d.) - a collection of memories of early school experiences of 18 highly successful, mature men. Under Thomas' guidance, these memories were later collected into a book-like art piece titled *Where Do We Start?* (Rose & Schilling, 2004) (Figure 2), which is exhibited in the Library of Congress and other art galleries. A major theme of this project was that participants had made it in life not *because* of school but *in spite* of it. I had read Thomas' memoir of his grammar school experiences, a short, autobiographical story specifically composed for that project. He writes, "As soon as regular hell got out, I was to start at the next lower level of hell." He is referring to the summer after fourth grade when he had to attend summer school to finally learn how to read. Picturing Thomas as an elementary student, I was reminded of a Tears for Fears song, *Mad World* (Orzabal, 1982, B-side):

Children waiting for the day they feel good
Happy birthday, happy birthday
And to feel the way that every child should
Sit and listen, sit and listen

Went to school and I was very nervous
No one knew me, no one knew me
Hello teacher tell me, what's my lesson?
Look right through me, look right through me.

So I am surprised when he tells me, “I was a happy kid. I had a really great childhood.” Thomas smiles mischievously when he recalls how he played outside of school with the neighborhood kids, hanging out at the railroad yards and being gone from morning until night getting in all sorts of trouble his parents would never find out about. He says that this is how he learns and knows – by doing. Today Thomas is a visual artist who works with metal and glass and through photography. I am looking through his online exhibitions, and I’m intimidated because I have always felt that I don’t understand art well. One exhibit stands out because at first sight it looks familiar – a table. Its four icy silver legs are topped with a thick frosted glass plate, seemingly floating in the air, holding two rectangular prisms, one vertical and one horizontal, fixed on a metal rail (Figure 1). We are Skyping, and I apologize for not understanding his projects. He asks me about the painting that hangs behind me in my home office. I tell him it’s a Rothko, my favorite painter, whom I also positively do not understand but love because his paintings make me feel either absolutely jubilant or incredibly sad. “You’re the perfect consumer then,” Thomas explains, “because art is not meant to be understood; it’s to be experienced.”

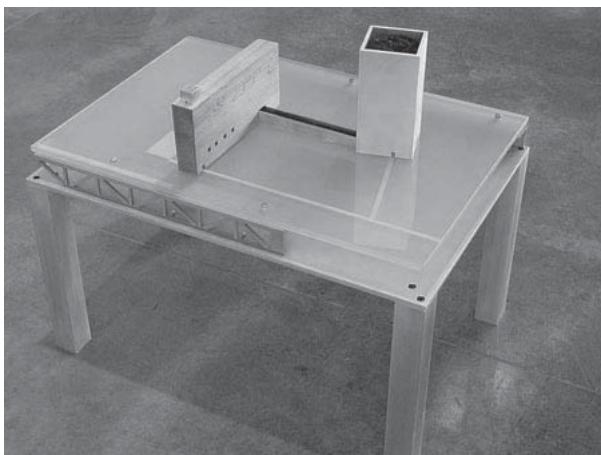


Figure 1 Sites

And suddenly something is starting to make sense to me. Thomas had sent me the art piece he designed for the *School Stories Project* (Rose & Griffith, n.d.). He referred to it as a book that’s meant to reflect the often intimidating and desolate nature of the early educational experiences of the participants of that project (Figure 2). I remember just trying to open this

three-dimensional object was an altogether confusing affair because nothing worked as I expected. As I turned the dark red hard cover, the contents of the book came lose. I was shocked knowing that what I was holding in my hands was an expensive art piece that is not even for sale but exhibited in major art galleries across the country. When I turned the first page, I landed somewhere deep inside the book, unable to find the beginning. Pages started to open from the bottom, and I messed the thing up like I do when I try to put a map back together. Nothing about this book made sense to me. But when Thomas says that art is to be experienced, I understand that this is what school must have been like for him – confusing, intimidating, as if he had missed the introductory lesson in which they taught everything.

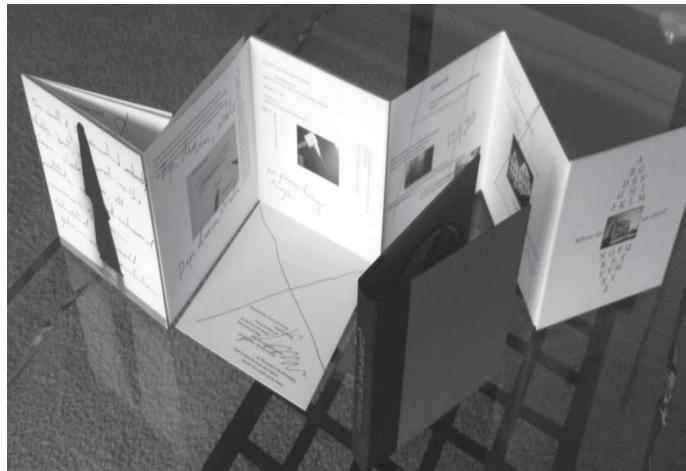


Figure 2 Where Do We Start?

He remembers that he often felt vulnerable and exposed, which is the feeling I got from his memoir. Although he had good teachers in grammar school, he spent a lot of time worrying about school. Thomas' early educational experiences took place mainly during the 1950s, a time before conditions like dyslexia and dyscalculia were recognized. He describes himself as having "some dyslexia" and says that he sometimes doesn't remember well, especially numbers. He muses, "I'd be the worst spy ever because I'd always have to write everything down!" And I understand that Thomas is nothing like the Tears for Fears song.

The seeming discrepancy between a great childhood and having spent much of it worrying about school, which Thomas referred to as "regular hell" in his memoir, is dispelled by his interpretations of those memories: "Those things we all go through and survive. I mean those are the inevitable disappointments of childhood. Nobody, no matter what system, can avoid them. Those hurtful things often cause us to overcome." This

notion is the thread that runs through the narratives of Thomas' life. He describes learning as an awareness rather than knowledge, which, according to him, can be brought about only by experiencing something.

As one of the most significant experiences of academic learning, Thomas recalls his summer school experience described in the *School Stories Project*, when he finally started to uncover the mysteries of the written word. I ask him about the "next lower level of hell," as he had referred to it in his memoir, and he remembers,

The epiphany came when I came out of that school and I had some sense that I had actually learned something. I couldn't verify, at that time, what it was. All I knew was that I felt differently about it. I felt better. I was aware that I had learned something. That in and of itself was rather amazing.

When I read the memoir, it elicited a mood of desolation and darkness with the possibility of hope when Thomas was beginning to read. But in our conversation about this experience, he interprets it as an epiphany, which he explains as something that happens when two or more experiences are perceived as making sense with each other and create a new idea in the individual, which he can then act upon in the future.

Thomas' description of this learning experience reflects Huebner's (1993/1999) definition of learning as the journey of the self. To learn means to change. It follows that to teach means to enable change. Learning as a change is reflected and observable (not measurable) in our social relationships, which necessitate relational self-understanding.

When I ask Thomas what words or phrases he would use to describe himself, his immediate answer is, "Happy, positive, enthusiastic." I wait several seconds for an elaboration, but none is coming. I offer my next question in reply: was there ever a time in his life when those words would not have applied to him. He answers simply, "No, probably not." At the time of the interview, I am still trying to find the synthesis between the worried grade school boy and the contented man I am talking to, so I bluntly probe for what might be the bridge that divided the two in my perception. Thomas' insights are profound:

Sometimes it's a matter of how we remember [experiences] or how we write about them. ... It's great to be unpopular, nerdy or whatever early on and then you sort of grow into the size of your feet and you become something as a result. You just become more mature and you're ready for it.

With "it" Thomas means life or, more precisely, the next experience. He uses the phrase "more mature" to refer to the self-trust one gains through an added understanding of oneself. And it feels as if he uses the word "feet" instead of "shoes" as a metaphor for what one is, for the "self." To me, feet are something I come with, something that is part of me; shoes are something external and exchangeable. I grow into me as the result of not rendering my self to an experience, of not becoming someone different.

Thomas tells me that the best teachers he had were the ones that left him alone to figure things out for himself because this allowed him to learn what he is interested in and concerned with. He explains,

You're in a sense trying to write the world in terms of your own vision, and so, to some extent, it takes a while to figure out, well, who am I? And what is the nature of my voice? What is it that I particularly want to explore or explain or deal with? And that takes a certain amount of being on your own.

Thomas' early educational experiences, as they pertained to classroom learning, sent a clear message to him – you are inadequate. He says it took him until he was 50 to not care whether others thought his comments were “stupid.” While I was working with Thomas, there was a period when I thought how easy it would have been for him to think of himself as someone who has overcome almost insurmountable obstacles. But the more we talked, the clearer it became that nothing could be further from the theme of Thomas' personal grand narrative. During one of our last conversations, he says, “I don't believe in public memorials very much. I think there's a lot of things that people should just forget or move on. Well, you can remember it, but essentially you keep going.” It seems that the tension the experiences of Otherness carried forced him to continuously deal with questions as those above. Hegel (1816/2010) describes these tensions as the dialectic contradictions manifested in the mind, which are one's impetus to reaching a higher level or, plainly, to become. The alternative to becoming would be to surrender the existential self. Because of the recursive nature of self-perception, it follows that I emerge on a higher level of self-understanding and being. In short, experiences of tension contribute to my becoming by affording me to know what it means “to be myself.”

One aspect of crafting the protagonist of one's individual grand narrative is the particular way in which one makes sense of the experiences it is composed of, which happens in a series of reflective iterations of one's social existence during which one decides upon the significance of an experience and the place it occupies in one's story. These decisions are the foundation for consequent choices and actions. In Thomas' case, they play a profound role in his existence as a teacher. He shares that he has had many students with difficult backgrounds whom he is trying to help by simultaneously ameliorating their academic anxieties while challenging them in positive ways. He explains,

There are some kids that are smarter, there are some kids that are better looking, there are some kids that are richer or poorer or whatever and to some extent it's the idea that they are together, and in some way they learn something from each other by being together and by being involved. And I think what a teacher can do is try to bring kids together and involve them in each other's lives on some level so that they learn something of what the other one is thinking, what the other one is feeling or experiencing.

This view of student-teacher relationships is reminiscent of Huebner (1966/1999), who refers to classroom encounters as a fraternity of mankind. This makes the classrooms a space for an encounter of people, a space in which their epistemologies, their ways of knowing the world, are valued. In fact, this view of the student-teacher relationship makes each of them necessary for the other in their journey of the self. According to Huebner (1985/1999), I am who I am in the ways in which I am not the other. This makes my being as I am a possibility for the other, without whom I cannot be me. The possibility exists because our encounter presents the question why we each are the way we are and how that is. In other words, the individual ways in which we both know the world are not just valued but essential to a dialectical understanding of self/other and self/world. When I allow for these questions, I make relational self-understanding in the classroom possible.

In Thomas' case, it is clear how his relational self-understanding is grounded in his early educational experiences, formal and informal. Their conflicting nature drives the theme of his personal grand narrative. As he weaves together the individual stories of his life, he does not arrange them chronologically but by the significance he assigns to them. In the ways in which he chooses the moral or point of each, he has created possibility for himself, which arises out of the tensions they presented him with. In his current work as an educator, Thomas re-enacts his narrative by making sense of how his stories fit with the narratives of those with whom they become intertwined. What I learned when working with Thomas is that it is not primarily the nature of the experience that matters. The significance of an experience consists first of all in the fact that one has made it and second in the way in which one makes sense of it. In this process of continuous self-understanding one writes and rewrites one's personal grand narrative. The impetus for this process is the becoming of the existential self; the foundation is relational self-understanding.

Implications for Curriculum Theory And Praxis

Thomas narrated his early educational experiences as an awareness that enabled him to locate himself within his relations to self, Other, and world. In the process, and as a result of it, he designed his individual ways to exist in the world, no thanks to the system that schooled him but regardless of it. But this is precisely what education should make possible. At the moment, we educate for conformity and consensus. Deresiewicz (2014) poignantly noted that we are raising excellent sheep. While this is not useful, understanding the consensus is essential. That is, it is crucial to understand the metanarratives that form the structure of the institutions one exists in. This means to enable students to see the ways in which their beliefs are rooted in their culture and traditions so they can question the very roots and imagine different possibilities for themselves and for the

world of which they are makers. Carlson (2002) explained, “The self only finds itself in the play of difference, in being different from others ... [T]he Zarathustra myth suggests a pedagogy designed to promote difference rather than conformity or uniformity” (p. 101 f.).

Nietzsche’s (1883/1978) Zarathustra speaks of the three metamorphoses of the spirit - “how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, the child” (p. 25). The camel bends down to load itself with knowledge and tradition. It understands the consensus communicated through the metanarratives. It learns as much as it possibly can about what is considered true and virtuous by those who decide on the dominant truths. But the camel cannot act upon its knowledge. It must turn into a lion to question these truths and the power of those who constituted them. And just like the camel could not doubt existing paradigms, the lion cannot create new ones. For that, it needs to become the child, who dreams up new possibilities and speaks “a sacred ‘Yes’” (Nietzsche, 1883/1978, p. 27). The “yes” is an affirmation of one’s awareness as a maker of the world. Further, it affirms one’s beliefs in the possibility to create change. The lion and the camel are still part of the child because the metamorphoses are not unidirectional events. They are a constant, never-ending process, which means one must always seek to become the camel, the lion and the child again.

Thomas’ story reflects that his second and third metamorphoses occurred consciously only after graduation from high school when curriculum must be utilized, rather than implemented, as a means to induce these metamorphoses. For this to be possible, we must think of ourselves as creators of, not as participants in, the local and global communities we are part of. The fact is that, even if I am unaware of it, I am already involved. Hence, I have a duty to make decisions, which presupposes an understanding of my self in relation to all I am part of.

However one chooses to approach questions about the purpose of school, it needs to include that education must enable people to think of themselves as makers of the world who design conditional, ever-unfolding answers about what we want to make of our world. Then learning makes relational self-understanding possible and education bears the potential for a life characterized by one’s agency.

To me, this kind of agency might take the form of the protagonist’s actions in the short fiction story below. *Obligations* are what the theorized and perhaps broad findings could look like when transferred into the realm of daily life.

Obligations

Another thunder was rumbling as he paid for his food. The truck stop waitress looked tired, but because of the generous tip he was leaving, she felt obligated to make conversation.

“So you’re a truck driver, Mister?
 “No, Ma’am. I don’t even have a car.”
 “Then how did you get here?”
 “Walked, took the bus, hitched a couple of rides.”
 “Hm … Well, where’re you going?”
 “That way. I think,” said the stranger, pointing to his right.
 “You *think*? Well, where’re you headed?” asked the waitress, puzzled.
 “I’m not sure,” the stranger replied thoughtfully.
 “Then how do you know that you got there when you did?” she inquired with some exasperation.
 “I’ll just know,” the stranger answered.
 The diner door opened, and a man walked in. He wiped the rain off his jacket before hanging it on the coat rack.
 “Hi there, Johnny! Is it raining yet? What can I getcha? The usual?”
 “The usual would be great, Bessy. How are ya?” The man sat into an empty booth.
 “Doin’ good, Johnny. Doin’ real good.” The waitress turned her attention back to the stranger. “Now look here, Mister, you seem like a nice enough guy, and I’d hate to see you out there in the rain getting all soaked and all. That there is my friend Johnny. Real nice fella. He just finished his round and is headed home. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind giving you a lift. Would ya, Johnny?”
 “Not one bit. I’d like the company.”
 The stranger asked, “Where’s home for Johnny?”
 “About 20 miles west.”
 The stranger finished his coffee, got up, and walked over to the coat rack. He retrieved his jacket from behind Johnny’s. Then he turned around,
 “Much obliged, Ma’am, Sir. But that’s the wrong direction.”
 He zipped up his jacket and stepped out into the rain.

Table 1 *Data Inventory*

Data Source	Frequency	Pages	Total
Historical documents (memoirs)	2 documents	About 2 pages per document	4
Current documents (email conversations, text messages)	continuous	About $\frac{1}{2}$ page per week for 24 weeks	12
Artifact	1 object-elicitation	2 pages per object-elicitation	2
Photograph	1 photo-elicitation	1 page per photo-elicitation	1
Informal interviews	2 thirty-minute interviews	2 pages summary per interview	4
Structured and semi-structured interviews	2 one-hour interviews	About 40 pages per interview	80

Member check interviews	2 one-hour interviews	About 40 pages per interview	80
Researcher's reflections	continuous	About 5 pages per week for 24 weeks	120
Peer reviews	7 reviews	2 pages per review	14
		Approx. 317 pages	

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