

# CHAPTER 5

## The Creative Habit ■

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*Being creative is not a once-in-a-while sort of thing. Being creative is an everyday thing, a job with its own routines. That's why writers, for example, like to establish a routine for themselves. The most productive ones get started early in the morning when the phones aren't ringing and their minds are rested and not yet polluted by other people's words. They might set a goal—1,500 words or stay at their desk until noon—but the real secret is that they do this every day. They do not waver. After a while, it becomes a habit.*

Twyla Tharp (2003), *Choreographer*  
The Creative Habit

In the field of dance, creativity is valued and practiced on a regular basis, thus a habit is formed. In qualitative research, it is also helpful to focus on this habit and practice creativity. In this section are exercises I have adapted for allowing learners to develop techniques in interpretation and for defining the role of the researcher. The practice of narrative techniques can only assist the researcher in training. Modern dance, as an art form, is characterized by a language of movement, and no one speaker makes quite the same statement. Likewise, the dancer explores new ways of moving, which include creative experiences and interpretation. Similarly, in yoga, as the practitioner begins, he or she needs to explore the postures in order to reorganize the spine. In yoga, too, one must acknowledge all the inner systems of the body in order to use the mind more fully. In working with mostly graduate students in education and human services, who have spent many

years in bureaucratic settings, these are the exercises that cause the greatest disequilibrium. At the same time, they offer the practitioner the most opportunity for self-awareness. In fact, many individuals came to the realization that qualitative methods were much too demanding for them, and they would prefer to work in another paradigm. This is, of course, a creative awakening in itself. Just as everyone in dance must end up asking the question, "do I really want to be a dancer?" the prospective qualitative researcher must ask the question, "do I want to be a qualitative researcher?" Nevertheless, as a teacher, I see these exercises as a beginning point for self-identification and, consequently, valuable tools for any researcher. For the prospective qualitative researcher, these exercises help to instill an awareness of the importance of the role of the researcher. In each qualitative research project, the researcher must explain fully the role of the researcher. I require potential qualitative researchers to be able to describe and explain their own roles in their individual projects. We begin with a seemingly simple exercise, again modified from my days as a student of drawing. The exercises in this section are framed within John Dewey's notion of the development of habits of mind and the aesthetic as part of everyday experience. In Dewey's time, there was a prevailing modernistic dualism that separated the aesthetic from the world of ordinary experience. In this postmodern time, I have constructed these exercises to help the individual address this dualism and engage in ordinary experience as aesthetic experience. Be sure to write in your researcher reflective journal, describing what you did, how you completed these exercises, visual images of the exercises, and what you learned as a writer.

### ■ The Role of the Researcher and the Researcher Reflective Journal

The following series of exercises are focused on developing your role as a researcher in order to understand yourself in deeper ways of knowing. In order to do that more fully, I emphasize the importance of the researcher reflective journal. By putting journal writing into a historical context and understanding that there are multiple types of journal writing, the learner may be more definitive in understanding the self and the researcher as a research instrument. In conducting a dissertation study or any research, the value of keeping a substantive journal is that it may be used as a data set to complement other techniques. We begin with the most personal of exercises, that of writing your name in new ways.

## Exercise 5.1 ■

### Variations on Writing Your Name ■

**Purpose:** To write your name as many times and in as many ways as possible on a sheet of 8½" × 11" paper.

1. First, write your name with each hand—left hand first, then the right hand.
2. Next, write your name upside down.
3. Then, write your name diagonally, in the shape of an X.
4. Now, write your name from right to left, as many cultures do.
5. Now, write your name as you usually do.
6. Now, close your eyes and write your name.

Discuss and compare your reactions to writing your name in these varied formats. Pair up with someone in class and view each other's writing. Discuss and share your reactions.

**Problem:** To liberate yourself from the usual writing of your name. To jog your multiple intelligences. To stimulate the right side of your brain.

**Note:** I recently took a drawing class, and the teacher used some of these variations. This reminded me of Betty Edwards's (1986) *Drawing on the Artist Within*, which was a follow-up to her renowned earlier works, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (1979) and *The New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (1999). I encourage all my students to read these texts or a reasonable equivalent.

**Time:** Take as much time as needed.

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*Activity:* Create a visual representation of one's own name.

*Aim:* The purpose here is to give the person the opportunity to break away from the typical expression of writing his or her name. This is so personal an exercise and produces such confusion for some because it is the first time in a long time that they have put creativity into action. I also see this as the beginning step, a first step, in recognizing the active nature of the role of the researcher. The researcher is not passive. The prospective researcher must begin to recognize his or her own investment in the research project and how critical the definition of his or her role in the project remains. This exercise generates a great deal of discussion and makes the individual learner respond to something often overlooked—the way we write our names. Overall, the goal is to sharpen awareness. Notice how you, as a learner, approach each of these phases of writing your name. Which one was most difficult?

*Discussion:*

1. How did you approach this exercise?
2. What was most difficult for you in each of these phases of name writing?
3. What have you learned from this?
4. What have you learned thus far about your skill as an observer? A researcher?

*Evaluation:* Continue working on self-evaluation for your researcher reflective journal and portfolio.

In this second exercise, the learner progresses from the internal to the external arena by using a camera to document a familiar social setting.

## Exercise 5.2 ■

### ***The Camera as an Extension of the Eye, the Eye as an Extension of the Soul*** ■

*Purpose:* Take photographs of any area of campus or your workplace over 1 hour.

*Problem:* To document some portions of a familiar setting.

*Materials:* Individuals need a camera. Those who do not have a camera need to purchase a disposable camera, available for under \$10.

*Activity:* Document as many different aspects of the environment as possible with your photos. Select your five best to share with the group. If working outside a class situation, find someone with whom to discuss your work.

Of all the exercises I use with learners, this one seems to inspire the most confidence, an awareness of one's limitations, and the most enthusiasm for finding out what kind of qualitative researcher one might become.

*Evaluation:* Continue on self-evaluation for your journal and portfolio.

## Exercise 5.3 ■

### ***Building a Collage: My Role as a Researcher*** ■

- Purpose:* To design and construct a collage that represents your role as a researcher in the project you are developing for study.
- Problem:* To capture your perspective on your role as accurately as possible.
- Time:* 2 to 3 weeks.
- Activity:* Construct a collage on a piece of poster board that is a manageable size for display and discussion in class. A suggested size is 24 inches by 36 inches. Use any media you wish—printed text, photographs, magazine ads, newspaper headlines, objects, and so on.
- Discussion:*
1. How did you approach this activity?
  2. What issues and ideas about your role as a researcher are emerging as you construct your collage?
  3. What was the most challenging part of the activity for you?
- Evaluation:* Continue on your self-evaluation and overall evaluation for your portfolio.
- Rationale:* Students who select this activity become actively involved in representing their own feelings and ideas about their roles as researchers.

## Exercise 5.4 ■

### **Constructing a YaYa Box or Making a Quilt Patch ■**

*Purpose:* To design and construct a YaYa box. This is adapted from the field of art therapy. A YaYa box is designed to represent a person's innermost self on the inside of the box and the outward self on the outside. If you would rather make a quilt patch, the patch will represent some part of your inner self as a researcher.

*Problem:* To capture yourself as you are now in terms of your current role in your research project.

*Time:* Take as many weeks as you need to develop, create, and construct this, with the presentation of the box at the last class meeting.

*Activity:* Find a box of any manageable size, from a cigar box to a steamer trunk. Use multimedia to build your box. The inside of the box will depict your innermost feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about who you are as you participate in your research project. The outside of the box will represent your outer self or how your participants see you. Use any objects, text, decorations, and so on that you want to convey your idea of your role as the researcher. If you select a quilt patch, use a 12-inch-by-12-inch patch with any materials of your choice.

In less than two pages, describe the contents, decorations, and meaning of your YaYa box or quilt patch to accompany the finished artwork.

*Discussion:*

1. How did you approach this project?
2. What issues about the role of the researcher confronted you as you began and implemented this project?
3. What was the most difficult part of this activity for you?

*Evaluation:* Continue with self-evaluation and overall evaluation for your portfolio.

*Rationale:* Individuals become intensely absorbed with this activity and focus on deconstructing their own roles in their research projects. The ability of learners to go deeply into reflection on their roles and their effects on research projects is evident.

These activities lead to the next, most soul-searching of activities, that of writing the researcher reflective journal.

### ■ The Qualitative Researcher as User of All of One's Senses, Including the Intuitive Sense

One of the amazing strengths of the qualitative researcher, as I have written previously (Janesick, 2001), is the ability to use all the senses to undertake the research act. Sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste often must be used to collect data. After living in the field with participants over time, the researcher also uses intuition—informed hunches, if you prefer—to plan the mode of inquiry, undertake the inquiry, and develop a way of “seeing” what is evident in the social setting. The role of the qualitative researcher demands total involvement and commitment in a way that requires, much like the artist or dancer, a total immersion of the senses in the experience. Like Dewey advises, art is the bridge between the experience of individuals and the community. So, too, the qualitative researcher is someone who must establish a bridge as a part of the community under study. The qualitative researcher takes on the implicit task of working in a given community and



does not have the luxury of being distant, apart from the experience under study, or “objective.” I only wish to point out that the role of the qualitative researcher is a role that embraces subjectivity in the sense that the researcher is aware of his or her own self, in tune with his or her senses, and fully conscious of what is taking place in the research project. Subjectivity is something to be acknowledged and understood. Without understanding where one is situated in the research act, it is impossible to claim consciousness and impossible to interpret one’s data fully. Meaning is constructed in the ongoing social relationship between the researcher and the participants in the study. It is no longer an option to research and run. The researcher is connected to the participants in a most profound way, and that is how trust is established. This trust then allows for greater access to sources and ensures involvement from participants, which enables them to tell their respective stories. Those of us who have conducted long-term qualitative studies know that participants want their voices to be heard and do not want to be abandoned after the research project. My field, education, has a long history of researchers who come into a school, collect data, and flee. Thankfully, this is changing in terms of researchers’ sensitivity to maintaining contact and a relationship with participants in their studies in order to maintain that sense of community that is part of any qualitative research project. This relationship remains as part of the research context throughout a significant period of time well beyond the end of data collection.

As I mentioned earlier, the senses are used in an intelligent way. Although sight and hearing are obvious senses employed in doing observations and interviews, the other senses may be used while conducting research at various sites. For example, the researcher may need to interview a participant at a restaurant or coffee shop. Once, while interviewing a blind and deaf research project participant, I had to sign into the person’s hand, thus using touch in a way I never had before. Beyond this, however, all researchers use a sixth sense, an intuitive sense, to follow through on hunches that emerge from observing and interviewing in a particular social context. Researchers ought to have the opportunity in their training and in practice to sharpen their intuitive skills, which often open up avenues of data previously unknown or hidden. In exercises that I give my students to become better listeners and better observers, I often see the prospective researcher refine some of those intuitive skills so needed in research and life. The next two exercises are for practicing the use of all your senses.

## Exercise 5.5

### *Writing About Your Favorite Vegetable*

#### **Incorporating Sight, Touch, Smell, Sound, and Taste**

In this exercise, select your favorite vegetable. Hold it in your hand to feel its texture. Smell this vegetable. Now write two pages describing this vegetable. Recall how it tastes, or taste it. Write another page just about its taste. Next, write another page about your favorite meal incorporating this vegetable. Now, construct a metaphor about this vegetable, and write about that for another page. Find a partner in class or at home to read your description. Ask for feedback, and rewrite your narrative on this, your favorite vegetable. Now, write your thoughts in the reflective journal about what you learned from this exercise. Can you tie this to your role as a researcher?

#### ■ **Serendipity**

So, too, the qualitative researcher often stumbles onto something in the course of a research project that leads to a rich course of inquiry and was unplanned in the original design. In other words, one builds in a type of latent flexibility that enables the researcher to find, through serendipity, a tremendous amount of meaningful data for a fuller picture of the study. The qualitative researcher should expect to uncover some information through informed hunches, intuition, and serendipitous occurrences that, in turn, will lead to a richer and more powerful explanation of the setting, context, and participants in any given study. The qualitative researcher is in touch with all of his or her senses, including the intuitive sense, or informed hunches, based on key incidents and data from the research project. Furthermore, the qualitative researcher may expect the unexpected. For the qualitative researcher, the role becomes expanded in that the number of options for coming upon new data is enlarged, because one can always count on serendipity, contradictions, and surprises in everyday life, the true

domain of the qualitative researcher. Furthermore, the qualitative researcher describes and explains these occurrences as part of the discussion of the research process and the researcher's role.

Analysis of data, like the dancer moving across the floor with floor exercises, consists of the actual *doing* of the work. For the researcher in progress, the researcher sifts through mounds of data; looks for emerging themes, ideas, issues, conflicts, and tension; and checks back with participants to verify the accuracy of these points in the journey. After the researcher has sifted through the data transcripts, field notes, and other documents, the good analyst uses the following guide to move on to reporting and interpreting data.

## ■ Intuition and Creativity in Research

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
 Are of imagination all compact . . .  
 The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,  
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
 And as imagination bodies forth  
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
 Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
 A local habitation and a name.

—William Shakespeare

A Midsummer Night's Dream (5.1)

Here, I would like to discuss the nature of intuition and creativity as key components of qualitative research projects. By discussing intuition and creativity, I hope to initiate a conversation that may illuminate how we view the role of the qualitative researcher and how we may better explain that role. I will once again use the metaphor of dance (Janesick, 2000), and in this case, I see intuition and creativity as a *pas de deux*. In dance, the *pas de deux* is designed for two dancers with the idea that they move as one. They are totally connected to the final product, whatever the meaningful movement is to be and however it is to be articulated. For our purposes here, I define intuition as immediate apprehension or cognition. Intuition is a way of knowing about the world through insight and exercising one's imagination. Likewise, I define creativity in its generic sense, that is, having the sense or quality of being created rather than imitated. In other words,

I am trying to shift the conversation about qualitative research methodology and design from the linear approach to method and design to an understanding of the intuitive and the creative.

Doctoral students often discuss with me the ways in which intuition has manifested itself in their research projects. They often want to go further in exploring how they came to probe in interviews, how they decided to go back to social settings on given days, or how they revisited their interview transcripts. This is the phenomenon we seek, the act of using intuition and creativity. Historically, over the past 40 to 50 years, we have been writing and thinking a great deal about the design of qualitative research projects and about technique. Although design and technique are critical, I want to shift this conversation to go beyond technique. I would like to pause and look to writers from art, science, literature, and dance to make my key points.

I begin with the words of the Chinese master painter and teacher Lu Ch'ai, from the 1701 classic on painting, *The Tao of Painting*:

Some get great value on method, while others pride themselves on dispensing with method. To be without method is deplorable, but to depend on method entirely is worse. You must first learn to observe the rules faithfully; afterwards modify them according to your intelligence and capacity. The end of all method is to have no method. (Chuan, 1963, p. 17)

Although Lu Ch'ai codified these remarks and the entire text in the 18th century, it is actually a formal text put together from material spanning the previous 11 centuries. The advice is relevant here to the work of the qualitative researcher. Have we not found, as we teach our classes, that learners begin with an almost slavish adherence to rules? Have we not seen, in the many methods texts, advice on how to do observations, interviews, journal writing, archival retrieval of evidence, and the like? This advice, almost prescriptive in nature to assist beginners, must be extended to include rules of thumb or information on technique, much as choreographers and stage directors do. In the case of dance, for example, mastering the rules of technique is critical but only a beginning. The dancer continues to practice those techniques daily, which eventually allows him or her to modify and interrupt movement and technique. The result is a creative act. The creative act relies on the dancer's intuition as much as physical technique, endurance, and stamina.

Likewise, the qualitative researcher may benefit from exercising creativity by being awake to the intuitive inclinations ever present in fieldwork. In

thinking about and investigating what has been written about intuition and creativity, I turn now to analyzing some current writing as well as reviewing work that touches on intuition and creativity. In addition, the role of the qualitative researcher is of critical importance because the researcher is the research instrument. If we can help describe how we use our intuition and creativity in our research projects, all of us benefit. In fact, most doctoral students in the social and behavioral sciences fully explain their particular roles in their research projects in their dissertations in a section on methodology and may revisit their roles in a later chapter. For those who might be using this book outside a class setting, these basics also apply. Like the artist who uses paint and brushes or the dancer who uses movement, the qualitative researcher uses many techniques as tools to ultimately tell a story. For us, words and the power of the narrative are essential. By understanding how we use intuition and creativity, we may widen our vocabularies to understand the role of the qualitative researcher.

I want to address some of the key points in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) work as reported in his major text, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. Csikszentmihalyi was awarded a grant from the Spencer Foundation to study creativity as a lifelong process. In beginning the project, Csikszentmihalyi found no systematic studies of living, creative individuals aside from biographies and autobiographies. He ventured to design a 4-year interview and observation study of 91 creative individuals in the fields of literature, art, physics, and biology (although, I am sorry to say, no one from dance). Csikszentmihalyi found three ways to look at creativity:

1. The first way to approach creativity is the way we normally do in ordinary conversation. Here, we refer to those who express unusual thoughts, are interesting and stimulating, and are bright people with quick minds as brilliant. These are people with curious and original minds.
2. A second view—personal creativity—refers to people who experience the world in novel and original ways. They make important discoveries, but only they know of the discoveries.
3. The third view of creativity refers to individuals who have changed our culture in some way. For example, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein, Arthur Miller, Martha Graham, Pablo Picasso, Charles Dickens, Leonard Bernstein, and Virginia Woolf would fall into this category. Viewing creativity in this way, the individual must

publicize in some form the idea that makes a shift or change in culture. Likewise, the qualitative researcher must publish or at least disseminate his or her findings from a study.

What Csikszentmihalyi (1996) found as major themes are those that qualitative researchers often discuss, describe, and explain. Creative people, he pointed out, are constantly surprised and always find new ways of looking at a given problem. He labeled their ability problem finding. I would go a step further and say that good qualitative researchers are indeed problem finders, but they are also problem posers. In any given study, a new way of looking at a setting can also be a way of posing and constructing something new. In fact, qualitative researchers are often coresearchers with the participants in a given study, and the participants open up new ways of looking at the social setting.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) went on to say that he found that creative individuals exhibited curiosity and interest in their worlds not limited to their content expertise. They often read both outside and inside their own field. Of course, they were all content experts in various fields, such as literature, physics, biology, and music, and were curious about moving forward in their fields. In addition, they were curious about the world around them and how that related to their worlds, their fields of expertise, and their lives.

Threads of continuity from childhood to later life were another valuable finding of Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) study. Some followed convoluted and unpredictable routes to where they stood. Yet most, such as Linus Pauling, always knew they were the artist or scientist in the making. Pauling worked in his father's drugstore as a child, which sparked his interest in chemistry. Likewise, Frank Offner, the famed electrical engineer and inventor, recalled:

I know that I always wanted to play and make things like mechanical sets. . . . When I was 6 or 7 years old, we were in New York, and I remember at the Museum of Natural History, there was a seismograph which had a stylus working across the smoked drum, and there were a couple of heavy weights, and I asked my father how it worked and he said, "I don't know." And that was the first time . . . you know, like all kids do, I thought my father knew everything. . . . So I was interested in how that worked, and I figured it out. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 99)

Offner went on to make many discoveries. He developed transistorized measuring devices, the differential amplifier, and medical instrumentation.

He figured out how to make the measurements with an electrocardiogram, electroencephalogram, and the electromyogram. Some of his greatest inventions involved a stylus moving across a drum. So, there was a very long thread of continuity in his case.

Another example of continuity can be found in C. Vann Woodward's interest in the history of the South:

That interest was born out of a personal experience of growing up there and feeling strongly about it, one way or another. I have always told my students, "if you are not really interested in this subject and do not feel strongly about it, don't go into it." And of course much of my writing was concerned with those controversies and struggles that were going on at the time and what their background and origins and their history were.

The place I grew up was important. The environment and the time following the Civil War and Reconstruction. . . . It is the defeated who really think about a war, not the victors. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 216)

For Woodward, again, the interest in his work began early in childhood. Likewise, Ellen Lanyon recalled her first feeling of destiny and creativity related to her grandfather's death. Her maternal grandfather came to the United States from Yorkshire, England, for the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. She always believed that she would follow in her grandfather's footsteps:

And when I was about 12 years old, my grandfather died. My father and mother put together his equipment that was left plus new tubes of paint, etcetera, and it was presented to me on my 12th birthday . . . and so I started painting. . . . I can absolutely remember the room, the place, you know, everything. I don't know what happened to the painting . . . but that's the kind of beginning that sets a pattern for a person. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 220)

What these creative individuals show us can help us, as qualitative researchers, to dig deeply into our roles and go further in explaining the beginnings of our interest in the work we do. This can help illuminate more clearly the role of the researcher in qualitative research projects.

### ■ **The *Pas de Deux* of Intuition and Creativity: Lessons for Today**

At this point, you may be wondering about the lessons we might learn from this long-term study on intuition and creativity. Like the two dancers in a *pas de deux*, intuition and creativity seem almost as one. Like yoga, body and mind are one. They embolden our discoveries and questions, whether in art, music, literature, the sciences, or everyday life. Intuition is connected to creativity, for intuition is the seed, so to speak, of the creative act. Qualitative researchers spend a great deal of time and energy inquiring into social settings and the meanings of the actors' lives in those settings. If we take the time to carve out some space to understand the place of intuition and creativity in our work, like the dancers of the *pas de deux*, we present a more complete, holistic, and authentic study of our own roles as storytellers and artist-scientists. For qualitative researchers, the story is paramount. And nothing is so important to the story as the words we use, both intuitively and creatively. A good way to document the story is for you as the qualitative researcher to keep the story going and writing in your researcher reflective journal.

### ■ **Writing the Researcher Reflective Journal**

In working with prospective qualitative researchers, one of my goals is to inspire my students to keep a journal in order to use that as a data set in the dissertation or thesis. Along with the interview transcripts, documents from the study, and photos, now the learner adds sections of the researcher reflective journal. They read *At a Journal Workshop: Writing to Access the Power of the Unconscious and Evoke Creative Ability* by Ira Progoff (1992). This text offers an extremely sophisticated and challenging approach to deepening one's self-awareness. In my view and Progoff's, deepening self-awareness helps to sharpen one's reflections, writing, thinking, and ability to communicate. Thus, for the qualitative researcher, the meditative focus of journal writing can only help to refine the researcher as a research instrument. The ideal situation would be to work through every component of the text, which I see as a lifelong task. Because we are limited in our class to only 16 weeks together, I have adapted some of Progoff's ideas into a workable routine for my students and myself. Progoff writes about journalizing as a *life history log*. The following framework is adapted to make the student a better researcher.



### **Writing as Pedagogical and Research Practice: Introducing the Researcher Reflective Journal**

The reader may remember that field note writing, journal writing, and descriptive vignettes in general have been part of the exercises described in this text. I have always been struck by the power and place of writing in my career as an educator. In fact, as I wrote earlier (Janesick, 1995), most of my life consists of writing, reading other people's writing, editing, and rewriting and evaluating the writing of myself or others. What is ironic to me is that in research programs of doctoral students, so little emphasis is placed on writing as a pedagogical tool and as a preeminent focus of research dissemination. In my classes in research, students often express amazement at the amount of reading and writing required to be a good researcher, yet months or years later, they express gratitude for having that opportunity to realize that writing is a chief component of qualitative research. Earlier in this text, I introduced the notion of the *dialogue journal* based on the Progoff model. That was for the purpose of the researcher coming to an awareness of self. Now, we turn to the reflective journal during the research process to go further and come to an awareness of how your participants think, feel, and behave.

Furthermore, writing that is accompanied by reflection on that writing often leads to new questions about the research act, the study being reported, and questions in general about society, social justice, and responsibility. When learners reflect on this within the framework of their research, they often remark on a feeling of empowerment. When individuals keep journals of their own thoughts on the research process, or interactive journals with the participants in their studies, or write letters to me or other researchers, they discover and articulate their own theories about their research practices.

What results is a kind of active learning from one another so that power is decentered and the research process is demystified. In addition, writing is one of the acts of democratization of the research process. Writing engages, educates, and inspires, which can only be helpful in trying to understand what qualitative researchers do in their respective research projects.

### **On the Importance of Journal Writing for the Qualitative Researcher**

A journal may be used as a qualitative research technique in long-term qualitative studies. For qualitative researchers, the act of journal writing

may be incorporated into the research process to provide a data set of the researcher's reflections on the research act. Participants in qualitative studies may also use journals to refine ideas, beliefs, and their own responses to the research in progress. Finally, journal writing between participants and researcher may offer the qualitative researcher yet another opportunity for triangulation of data sets at multiple levels. Journal writing has a long and reliable history in the arts and humanities, and qualitative researchers may learn a great deal from this. It is not by accident that artists, writers, musicians, dancers, therapists, physicians, poets, architects, saints, chefs, scientists, and educators use journal writing in their lives. In virtually every field, one can find exemplars who have kept detailed and lengthy journals regarding their everyday lives and their beliefs, hopes, and dreams. I see journal writing as a powerful heuristic tool and research technique and will discuss reasons for using journals within qualitative research projects in order to do the following:

1. Refine the understanding of the role of the researcher through reflection and writing, much as an artist might do
2. Refine the understanding of the responses of participants in the study, much as a physician or health care worker might do
3. Use a journal as an interactive tool of communication between the researcher and participants in the study
4. View journal writing as a type of connoisseurship by which individuals become connoisseurs of their own thinking and reflection patterns and, indeed, their own understanding of their work as qualitative researchers

The notion of a comprehensive reflective journal to address the researcher's self is critical in qualitative work because of the fact that the researcher is the research instrument. In reviewing the literature in this area, journal writing, although an ancient technique, is only now being used and talked about as a serious component in qualitative research projects. I have always seen journal writing as a major source of data. It is a data set that contains the researcher's reflection on the role of the researcher, for example. It is a great vehicle for coming to terms with exactly what one is doing as the qualitative researcher. Often, qualitative researchers are criticized for not being precise about what they do. I offer journal writing as one technique to accomplish the description and explanation of the researcher's role in the project. Qualitative researchers may use a reflective journal to

write about problems that come up on a regular basis. Examples of problems include representation of interviews and field notes, coconstruction of meaning with participants in the project who also keep journals, and issues related to the interpretation of each other's data. Often, we qualitative researchers are positioned outside the very people and situations about which we write. Journal writing personalizes representation in a way that forces the researcher to confront issues of how a story from a person's life becomes a public text, which in turn tells a story. Furthermore, how are we to make sense of this story?

Basically, the art of journal writing and subsequent interpretations of journal writing produce meaning and understanding that are shaped by genre, the narrative form used, and personal cultural and paradigmatic conventions of the writer, who is also the researcher and participant. As Progoff (1992), my favorite teacher about journal writing, notes, journal writing is ultimately a way of getting feedback from ourselves. It enables us to experience in a full and open-ended way the movement of our lives as a whole and the meaning that follows from reflecting on that life.

Issues to be considered by the qualitative researcher include movement from the field to the text to the final, public research report and problems of interpretation, meaning, and representation. Interactive journal writing between researcher and participants is another way of understanding a given study. I have written earlier about journal writing (1999) and then wrote of the lengthy history of journal writing. All periods of history have benefited from journal writing. After all, journals are texts that record dreams, hopes, visions, fantasies, feelings, and innermost thoughts. Today, one can look to the incredible work of Edward Robb Ellis (1995). Ellis was a diary writer who kept a journal from 1927 to 1995. He was born in 1911 and kept a journal for 67 years, or more than 24,000 days. His descriptions provide amazing coverage of the events he lived through personally, but he also describes societal changes.

Yet, literary and historical figures are not the only journal writers. The field of psychology has long made use of journal writing as a therapeutic aid. The cathartic function of journal writing has been widely recommended by many schools of therapy. Therapists view the journal as an attempt to bring order to one's experience and a sense of coherence to one's life. Behaviorists, cognitive therapists, and Jungian analysts have used journals in the process of therapy. The journal is seen as a natural outgrowth of the clinical situation in which the client speaks to the self. Most recently, Progoff (1992) has written of an intensive journal. Progoff developed a set of techniques that provides a structure for keeping a journal and a springboard for development.

As a therapist himself, he has conducted workshops and trained a network of individuals to do workshops on keeping an intensive journal for unlocking one's creativity and coming to terms with one's self. The intensive journal method is a reflective, in-depth process of writing, speaking what is written, and in some cases, sharing what is written with others. Feedback is an operative principle for the Progoff method. The individual needs to draw upon inner resources to arrive at the understanding of the whole person. The journal is a tool to reopen the possibilities of learning and living. Progoff advocates the following:

1. Make regular entries in the journal in the form of dialogue with one's self.
2. Maintain the journal as an intensive psychological workbook in order to record all encounters of one's existence.
3. Attempt some type of sharing of this growth through journal writing with others.

The method makes use of a special, bound notebook or computer file divided into definite categories that include the following: dreams, stepping stones, dialogues with people, events, work, and the body. The writer is asked to reflect, free-associate, meditate, and imagine what relates to immediate experience. Currently, one only has to walk through the display aisles of the major bookstores, such as Borders or Barnes & Noble, to see the many examples of recently published journals. Recently, I found the following:

- The journal of an Iraqi war survivor
- The Andy Warhol journals
- The journal of a surgeon
- The journal of an army veteran

The point is that this genre is alive and well, and qualitative researchers should not be afraid of trying to keep journals. In fact, journal writing is so prevalent now that one only has to surf the Internet to see thousands of journal resources, examples, and personal histories online. For example, there is an online course on journal writing offered by Via Creativa, a website entirely devoted to Progoff's Intensive Journal Workshop, chat rooms on journal writing, exemplars of diaries and journal writing, and literally thousands of resources. In general, the common

thread that unites all of these resources on the Internet is the agreement that journal writing is a way of getting in touch with yourself in terms of reflection, catharsis, remembrance, creation, exploration, problem solving, problem posing, and personal growth. I see all of these as part of the research process. For qualitative researchers, journal writing offers a way to document the researcher's role, triangulate data by entering the journal itself as a data set, and use the journal with participants in the study as a communicative act.

### **Why Journal Writing?**

Students and colleagues have often asked me why they should invest time in journal writing. To this, I can only reply that journal writing allows one to reflect—to dig deeper, if you will—into the heart of the words, beliefs, and behaviors we describe. It allows one to reflect on the tapes and interview transcripts from our research endeavors. If participants also keep journals, it offers a way to triangulate data and pursue interpretations in a dialogical manner. It is a type of member check of one's own thinking done on paper. The clarity of writing down one's thoughts will allow for stepping into one's inner mind and reaching further into interpretations of the behaviors, beliefs, and words we write. Not everyone finds it easy to keep up with the demands of journal writing. The discipline and desire involved nearly outweigh some individuals' abilities or time. On the other hand, can this not be an option for all who are interested in becoming better researchers, writers, thinkers, and scholars? How does one set time apart for journal writing? I recall the teacher who said she had only 20 minutes after school to write in her journal, and that was that. Then, she ultimately decided she needed to keep a journal at home as well, because once she started to write, she found that she was staying at school and writing for at least an hour each day. She got up an hour earlier than anyone in her house and started writing in the early morning hours, a technique advocated by many writers. Many writers of journals have directly or indirectly stated how journal writing can assist one in developing creativity. The focus and energy demanded of one who writes a journal can be instructive for qualitative researchers. See Ranier (1978) for her categories below:

1. *Travelers*. People who keep a written record during a special time, such as a vacation or a trip
2. *Pilgrims*. People who want to discover who they really are

3. *Creators*. People who write to sketch out ideas and inventions in art or science
4. *Apologists*. People who write to justify something they have done and plead their case before all who read the journal
5. *Confessors*. People who conduct ritual unburdenings with the promise of secrecy or anonymity
6. *Prisoners*. People who must live their lives in prisons or who may be invalids, and as a result, must live their lives through keeping a journal

Of course, any writer might be a combination of any of these categories, but this might be useful as a tool to understand different approaches to keeping a journal. Progoff (1992) gives numerous examples of individuals who fall into these categories to illustrate the importance of keeping a journal. In fact, he got interested in writing his book because he himself has kept a journal for more than 30 years. I share that interest with him.

Rainer's (1978) book, *The New Diary*, contains superb examples of journal writing. I agree with her use of the terms *journal* and *diary* interchangeably. She describes seven techniques for journal writing, some very similar to Progoff's techniques. Her list is one that qualitative researchers may recognize as being used regularly in the arts and humanities.

### **Rainer's Seven Techniques**

1. *Lists*. This technique allows for a person to write lists of activities, such as things to do, things that upset a person, things that are problematic, and so forth. It allows a writer to capture the pace of his or her activities and can be a good beginning for a journal writer who may go back and fill in the story in narrative form regarding all of the entries on the list.
2. *Portraits*. This allows the writer to describe a person or any number of people. The portrait is never really finished for the qualitative researcher. It evolves and takes on a life of its own throughout the project, and the writer may add to and subtract from it as the work takes shape.

3. *Maps of consciousness.* This technique is borrowed from the arts, and it involves actually drawing a map of what one is thinking. Rainer advocates using stick figures, lines, or shapeless blobs. It is a way to free up one's thoughts and put them to paper in another format.
4. *Guided imagery.* This technique is borrowed from the field of psychology, which advises that daydreaming images allow for an individual to start writing about any given topic.
5. *Altered point of view.* In this technique, the writer takes a different perspective on any given activity. For the qualitative researcher, for example, one might write about something in an observation or interview from another person's viewpoint, not the researcher's viewpoint. Many beginning researchers find it hard to write in the first person, and they talk about their projects in a third-person voice. It is a way of looking at something from the outside. For Rainer, looking from the outside might aid in getting to the inside of a topic.
6. *Unsent letters.* Obviously, this is about writing a letter to someone without any intention of showing it to that person. In a research situation, the researcher may write to one of the participants in the study, for example.
7. *Dialogues.* This is the technique Progoff suggests, and many writers use this effectively.

As I finish this section, the major ideas I want to punctuate have to do with journal writing as a technique used in the arts that resonates with the qualitative researcher. Writing down what we think and feel helps in the journey to improve our research practice, for example. Some of the personal examples used in the body of this text may serve to illustrate the individual writer's thinking processes and the willingness to analyze, rethink, and go deeper into a critical stance about one's life and work. Progoff calls this the scope of personal renewal. Others call it reflection. Still others, myself included, see journal writing as a tangible way to evaluate our experiences, improve and clarify our thinking, and become better writers and scholars. The researcher reflective journal, used while conducting qualitative research projects, helps the researcher with the following:

1. Helps to focus the study
2. Helps set the groundwork for analysis and interpretation
3. Serves as a tool for revisiting notes and transcripts
4. Serves as a tool to awaken the imagination
5. Helps to keep the written record of thoughts, feelings, and facts

We are talking about examining our own thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. Many will say that helps only the writer. Still, if that were the only outcome of writing a journal, I would say that this continuing self-reflection is a first, vital step in modeling this for our students. Journal writing is a powerful research technique for the researcher and the participants in a given study. The definitions of the roles of the researcher and participants in a study are clarified through the reflection and the writing process involved in journal writing. Because the researcher is the research instrument, keeping a journal is a check and balance during the entire course of a qualitative research project. Likewise, keeping a journal during the course of a research project is a way to practice interdisciplinary triangulation. In order to get students to begin this project, I suggest the following exercise.

### **An Activity to Enrich Your Researcher Reflective Journal**

Think about the points listed here before you begin this activity.

- Examining the familiar
  - Observing the details
  - Exploring positions
  - Investigating issues
  - Revealing current thoughts
  - Reflecting your own direction
1. Write one sentence that indicates something you already know about journal writing.
  2. Write one sentence that indicates what you would like to know about journal writing.



This gets things started.

Next, we have volunteers read to the class their first sentence and then their second sentence. Then, we begin a journal writing exercise.

## Exercise 5.6 ■

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### *Your Journey* ■

Position yourself in this present moment. Describe your journey to this class. How did you come to this class today? This program? What prompted you to select this area of study? What were your obstacles? Expectations? Write about yourself and your goals. How can this class make you a better researcher?

As you can see, this inspires quite a bit of writing. Next, we pair up and read to one another for 30 minutes. When we return to the larger group, volunteers read sections of their first journal entries. Learners are delighted that many in the group have similar interests and backgrounds. Many are inspired to write more. But overall, everyone writes and rewrites. In the next class meeting, we continue to save 15 minutes per class for journal writing.

At the end of each session, I ask all to do the following:

*Please write three things that you learned about journal writing today.*

This keeps learners focused on writing, writing, writing. In fact, students tell me that they run home and continue to write in their journals. For many, it is a liberating activity. (See Appendix B for multiple examples of journal writing.)

## ■ Future Directions

In speculating on the future of this useful technique of journal writing, I think that researchers in training may benefit from the practice of journal writing as a qualitative research technique for the following reasons:

1. Journal writing allows the writer to be more reflective.
2. Journal writing offers the writer an opportunity to write without interruption and to be totally focused on the point at hand.
3. Journal writing is a technique well used in the arts and humanities that may offer social science researchers an opportunity to cross borders, so to speak.
4. Journal writing allows for deepening knowledge.
5. Journal writing allows participants in a research project an active voice.
6. Journal writing may allow researchers and participants the opportunity to write cooperatively and interactively as needed.
7. Journal writing provides an additional data set to outline, describe, and explain the exact role of the researcher in any given project.

In concluding this section, I recall these words for thought:

There was so much to write. He had seen the world change; not just the events; although he had seen many of them and watched the people, but he had seen the subtler change and he could remember how the people were at different times. He had been in it and he had watched it and it was his duty to write of it.

—*Ernest Hemingway*

*The Snows of Kilimanjaro (1995)*

## Exercise 5.7 ■

### ***Reflective Journal Writing Practice in Dialogue Form*** ■

*Purpose:* To keep a journal in dialogue form over the length of the semester. Set aside a minimum of 15 minutes each day for writing.

*Problem:* The individual records minialogues with the self in the present, focusing on the following areas.

#### **People**

Focus on dialogues with key people in your own life: best friends, lovers, partners. What have you discovered about the person you are today as a result of these dialogues?

#### **Work or Projects**

Focus on a dialogue about significant projects or work that take up a great deal of your energy. Which projects succeeded? Which failed? What have you discovered about yourself as a result of these projects?

*(Continued)*

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### **The Body**

Focus on your view of your own body. How have you cared for it? How do you treat it today? Are there moments in your life history where you mistreated your body? What have you discovered about yourself as a result of awareness of your body?

### **Society**

Focus on your relationship to social groups. Of which groups are you a member? How do you describe your own ethnic and racial identity? Are you aware of your political beliefs? Are you reconsidering how you relate to groups? What have you discovered about yourself as a result of awareness of your relationship to society?

### **Major Life Event(s)**

Focus on one or more life events that have had a profound effect on the person you are today. What have you discovered from reflecting on this?

For many learners, keeping a journal is a new experience, and by reading about journal writing and doing it as an activity, learners begin to reflect more deeply on their roles as researchers and as human beings. The journal is kept throughout the class to show evidence of one's progress on the journey of developing as a qualitative researcher. It is an opportunity to think in a new way. In addition to keeping a journal, the student is asked to include some poetry indicative of or using one of the techniques practiced in class.

## Exercise 5.8 ■

### ***Haiku and Any Form of Poetry on the Role of the Researcher*** ■

*Purpose:* To write a poem in any style, including haiku, about the role of the researcher or one that reflects some skill in describing an object, place, person, or setting.

*Problem:* To capture the essence of the individual's role in a particular study undertaken during the semester or as part of a larger project.

*Activity:* The student is introduced to haiku, which is 17-syllable Japanese poetry in its classic form with 5–7–5, or 5 syllables in Line 1, 7 in Line 2, and 5 in Line 3. Also introduced is the 14- to 17-syllable form. Haiku is the poetic form most like qualitative work because it takes its imagery from careful observations. Many complain that they are unable to write poetry, so I give them some of my own samples of haiku as well as other students' work. Amazingly, they seem to feel exhilarated after seeing that they are, indeed, able to do this. Recently, students took up writing poetry on their own about doing their dissertation projects. So, I expanded this exercise to include any form of poetry. The point is to capture in another idiom—poetry—something of what occurred in the study, either about the role of the researcher or the participants in the study. Here are some examples.

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

## **Poems Written While Experiencing the Writing of the Dissertation**

By Ruth Slotnick (2010), doctoral candidate in higher education

### **Uncovering**

Draped in nuances  
where lines blur  
suddenly become clear  
revealed in utterances  
where truth arises  
the themes emerge  
and transformation ensues  
A balance is restored  
life deepens; enriches as  
possibilities unfold  
This is a process  
no number can reveal  
what shadows conceal—  
stirred out of dormancy  
waiting to be told  
This is our passion  
Our destiny

### **When Analysis Eludes (on Writing the Dissertation)**

Foggy place  
Burry space  
Clarity desired  
Tired and mired  
  
Not a number  
Nuances asunder

Unable to unscramble  
Barbs and bramble

Unpuzzled daily  
Though today, not gaily  
Start over, retract  
Intuition out of whack

Emerge, emerge!!  
Frustration, purge  
Constructing lines  
Weave symbol and sign

### **Analysis Breakthrough**

Rummaging  
Repeatedly  
Revisiting  
Rhythms  
Revising  
Realities  
Reasoning  
Representations  
Reframing  
Results

By Pat Williams-Boyd, Professor, Eastern Michigan University

### **This Woman**

A woman of many seasons sits on a corroded metal lawn-chair  
as a sentinel protecting her wealth.

Her head is covered with a frayed babushka, tied securely under  
her chins, refuting the

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

windless 90-degree California sun.

Her unmatched men's shoes are tied on with black laces,  
and

her stockings are rolled down to her ankles.

Her simple blue and white cotton wash dress sparkles in the  
reflection of the piercing brown eyes, which  
study everything yet nothing from behind a weather-beaten  
face.

Her hands, gnarled yet powerful, rest calmly in her bountiful  
lap.

A tabby cat sits on her shoulder as if an epaulet  
adorning her brown, mended, long-sleeved sweater.

I have watched her unnoticed from a distance for some  
time.

She has neither moved nor altered her gaze  
from the red brick house, which sits brazenly across the street.

Where her yard is blanketed by sand and debris,  
her neighbor's is lushly green, splashed with  
rosebushes and October pumpkin designs.

But, I sense her vision is not of this world  
separated by so random a stretch of asphalt  
but of a world in which she was part of the earth.

Her eyes are of a distant time, and she sees neither me, nor her  
dreams.

I am not here.



## Exercise 5.9 ■

### ***Framed Photograph and Narrative Writing Exercise*** ■

*Purpose:* These two exercises combine description and narrative writing. Describe a framed photograph of a familiar person. Then, pair up with someone and exchange photographs, and each of you describes the other person's selected framed photograph. Then, write about your partner's photo as though you were a reporter telling that person's story.

*Problem:*

1. Individuals think about and use time to describe the framed photograph they themselves bring to class.
2. Next, they pair off and exchange their own framed photographs with their partners. After receiving the partner's photograph, each describes the partner's photograph.
3. Partners stop to share and discuss their descriptions. Each group of two has two descriptions to review and find differences and similarities. This is designed to prepare learners for analysis of data exercises later.
4. Next, everyone stops to write about this as if they were reporters trying to tell a person's story. This writing entry is of course to be considered for the researcher reflective journal.

*Time:* At least 15 minutes for each of the two descriptions. At least an additional 15 minutes for discussion. At least 30 minutes for writing and rewriting.

*Activity:* This activity serves to sharpen awareness of the role of the researcher by working with a familiar artifact, a

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

framed photograph of someone dear to the learner. At the same time, it extends and reviews observation expertise by moving to the description of an unfamiliar photograph. By pairing off, learners have the opportunity to practice communicating with another researcher about something in common, which is how to approach both descriptions and how to compare and contrast descriptions, thus establishing a collaborative habit. This is a precursor to the next round of exercises, which include practice in interviewing individuals and analyzing interview data. In addition, the writing exercise continues the habit of writing and, beyond that, writing for the researcher reflective journal.

Although, strictly speaking, this exercise forces the individual to observe and could fit in the observation cycle, this activity allows for a transition to interviewing and analysis of data and focuses on discovery of the role of the researcher and writing in the reflective journal.

*Discussion:* Following the exercise, individuals are asked as a group to respond to the following questions:

1. How did you approach the first part of the activity?  
The second part?
2. What differences did you find in your own thinking as you approached each description?
3. What was the most challenging part of the exercise for you?
4. Would you read a sample of your description?
5. Could you write in your researcher reflective journals on this experience?

*Rationale:* This exercise again is part of the practice of disciplined inquiry designed to make the researcher more reflective, establish and strengthen writing habits, and encourage collaboration. Reflection on the actual

(Continued)

mechanics of approaching the description of the photographs is the first part of the activity. In the second part, individuals are forced to reflect on their own roles as researchers. By discussing this with other people, members see similarities and differences as part of the scope of disciplined inquiry. The habit of writing in the researcher reflective journal and contributing to the portfolio is enhanced. Creativity is the underlying theme in all these exercises. Creativity is a habit that is practiced and learned.

## ■ Summary of Chapter 5: The Creative Habit

Due to the fact that the researcher is the research instrument in a qualitative research project and that creativity and intuition are part of the role of the qualitative researcher, these exercises have been designed to sharpen one's creative habit and awareness of the role of the researcher. This can be traced to the 17th-century text, *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, which was part of a larger work, *The Tao of Painting*, by Lu Ch'ai. Nearly everything written by the Chinese master painters was aimed not just at the technique of painting but also at the painter's spiritual resources in order to express the spirit, or *chi*, the breath of Tao. The *chi* is looked upon as an underlying harmony. Likewise, in dance, the spirit of the dance must emerge as part of movement. These exercises are akin to the *chi* meaning of painting and the spirit of the dancer's movement. In order to stretch, the qualitative researcher must be able to articulate creativity and the role of the researcher as the underlying harmony or spirit of the study. The qualitative researcher is always dealing with lived experience and must be awake to and for that experience. By acknowledging and articulating the complexity of need for creativity, defining the role of the researcher, and keeping a reflective journal, we are now able to begin the next cycle of exercises in the next series, the analysis cycle.

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