

TITLE OF PAPER: Researching the Tutor in Online Practice: Reflections on appropriate research methodology

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Abstract

This paper arises out of an inquiry into the online tutor's practice and raises issues about the relationship between the researcher and participant. In addition it highlights how the relationship between researcher and participant influences the research methods and outcomes and describes how the research was of mutual benefit to both parties. In this study the research method emerged from discussions between the researcher and participant.

The methodology for the study drew on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Erhlandson et al (1993). The data collected for the study was 2 interviews and an autobiographical account. Consistent with naturalistic inquiry, the study was to some extent participant-led in that participant and researcher were co-constructors of the interview and the participant decided on the focus/structure of the autobiographical account. One interview was semi-structured, the topics were suggested by the researcher, and the second was structured with the questions written by the researcher but drawn from the previous interview and the participant's autobiography.

After the data gathering, the accounts collected were used to create different interpretations (Winter 1989). Both researcher and participant wrote separate accounts of their interpretations of the data. These interpretations were exchanged and discussed and then a joint commentary was written.

The conclusion reached was that the research experience was of mutual benefit to both parties. It was agreed that the humanistic style of research, which respected the views of both parties and, to some extent, shared decision-making about the direction of the research and the methods used, was an important feature. Moreover, it was agreed that reading the other's interpretation was helpful in gaining new insights into the data. Finally it was concluded that that the methods used could be developed in a future study where, having established an agenda, the

research would continue in a more equitable way with researcher and participant in conversation exploring each other's practice.

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