

The Interconnection Between Interpretivist Paradigm and Qualitative Methods in Education

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Abstract

This study examines the interconnection between interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methods, and this is illustrated by some relevant points of the author's PhD thesis in education. Taking account from a number of scholars, the paper shows that, interpretivism is a trend of research approach, and it prefers using qualitative methods in data collection. There is a tight connection between interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methodology as one is a methodological approach and one is a means in collecting data. Researchers who are using interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methods often seek experiences, understandings and perceptions of individuals for their data to uncover reality rather than rely on numbers of statistics.

Keywords

Interpretivist Paradigm, Qualitative Methods, Research in Education

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1. Introduction

The term paradigm has been understood differently by various scholars. MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford (2001) explain that a research paradigm comprises three elements: a belief about the nature of knowledge, a methodology and criteria for validity. Whereas, Neuman (2000) & Creswell (2003) refer to the paradigm as: epistemology or ontology, or even research methodology. In different understandings, Mackenzie & Knipe (2006) classify variable theoretical paradigms as positivist (post-positivist), constructivist, interpretivist, transformative, emancipatory, critical, pragmatism and deconstructivist, postpositivist or interpretivist. In the postpositivist paradigm, the philosophy is determined by cause and effect (Creswell, 2003). In contrast, interpretivist researchers understand "the world of human experience" (Cohen & Manion, 1994: p36). Consistent with Cohen & Manion's view, Creswell (2003) and Yanow & Schwartz-Shea (2011) claim that interpretivist researchers discover reality through participant's views, their own

background and experiences. In a minor scope, this paper does not aim to investigate all sorts of research approaches and methods, instead, it mainly focuses on the interconnection between interpretivism and qualitative methods in the field of education.

2. Interpretivism on the Line of Opposition with Postpositivism

Taking account from various scholars, it is theoretically understood that interpretive paradigm allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants. In seeking the answers for research, the investigator who follows interpretive paradigm uses those experiences to construct and interpret his understanding from gathered data. Specifically, interpretivism supported scholars in terms of exploring their world by interpreting the understanding of individuals. My study is seeking to explore the experiences of Vietnamese students studying at one

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Australian university with the purpose of uncovering the reality of learning development in Vietnamese students when they are required to shift from a traditional educational environment to a new one. To support the use of an interpretive paradigm, more characteristics of interpretivism are further clarified.

Although the interpretive paradigm is not a dominant model of research, it is gaining considerable influence, because it can accommodate multiple perspectives and versions of truths.

Interpretivists believe an understanding of the context in which any form of research is conducted is critical to the interpretation of data gathered.

(Willis, 2007: p.4)

According to Willis (2007), interpretivism usually seeks to understand a particular context, and the core belief of the interpretive paradigm is that reality is socially constructed. Since most research is constructed within a Western paradigm the context of their transition between cultures is important and so Willis' statement supports the choice of interpretation for education researchers who purpose to investigate a phenomenon in a group of students or a particular school. Postpositivism often looks for the discovery of universal and critical theory or rules. Interpretivism on the other hand includes "accepting and seeking multiple perspectives, being open to change, practicing iterative and emergent data collection techniques, promoting participatory and holistic research, and going beyond the inductive and deductive approach" (p.583) Sabharwal commenting on Willis (2007). In order to explore understandings of participants, an interpretive methodology provides a context that allows me to examine what the participants in my study have to say about their experiences.

Interpretive research is more subjective than objective. Willis (2007) argues that the goal of interpretivism is to value subjectivity, and "interpretivists eschew the idea that objective research on human behaviour is possible" (p.110). Following from Willis's points, Smith (1993) believes that interpretivists are 'anti-foundationalists', because "there is no particular right or correct path to knowledge, no special method that automatically leads to intellectual progress" (p.120). Proponents of interpretivism do not accept the existence of universal standards for research, instead the standards guiding research are "products of a particular group or culture" (Smith, 1993 p.5). Interpretive researchers do not seek the answers for their studies in rigid ways. Instead, they approach the reality from subjects, typically from people who own their experiences and are of a particular group or culture.

Differing from positivists who often accept only one correct answer, interpretivism is much more inclusive, because it accepts multiple viewpoints of different individuals from different groups. Willis (2007) asserts that the leading viewpoints of each nation, region or ethnic group are often founded in different experiences and perspectives of individuals. Hence, it could be interpreted that the national characters are usually determined by characteristics of those individuals who direct their groups' view. As indicated above, the interpretive paradigm often seeks answers for research by forming and underpinning multiple understandings of the individual's worldview. According to Willis (2007) the idea of multiple perspectives arises from the belief that external reality is variable. Willis goes on to indicate that "different people and different groups have different perceptions of the world" (p.194). The acceptance of multiple perspectives in interpretivism often leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the situation (Klein & Meyers, 1998; Morehouse, 2011). This will significantly facilitate educational researchers when they need 'in-depth' and 'insight' information from population rather than numbers by statistics. Along the lines of these perspectives, I am gathering data for my study from a group of Vietnamese students who come from different educational, social and economic backgrounds to obtain more diverse and multi-faceted information.

3. The Cohesion of Interpretivist Paradigm and Qualitative Methods

Researchers believe that the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm predominantly uses qualitative methods (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Silverman, 2000; McQueen, 2002; Thomas, 2003; Willis, 2007; Nind & Todd, 2011). Willis (2007) asserts that "interpretivists tend to favour qualitative methods such as case studies and ethnography" (p.90). As explained by Willis, qualitative approaches often give rich reports that are necessary for interpretivists to fully understand contexts. Consistent with Willis's ideas, Thomas (2003) maintains that qualitative methods are usually supported by interpretivists, because the interpretive paradigm "portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing..." (p.6). The characteristic of interpretivism, in terms of adopting qualitative methods to approach reality, contrasts with the positivist paradigm. According to Glesne & Peshkin (1992), with the tendency of viewing the world through observable and measurable facts, the positivist paradigm often supports quantitative methods. Expounding the use of the qualitative in the interpretive paradigm, McQueen (2002) states that:

Interpretivist researchers seek methods that enable them to understand in depth the relationship of human beings to their environment and the part those people play in creating the social fabric of which they are a part.

(McQueen (2002: p.17)

Hence, interpretivists do not prefer using the methods that offer objective or precise information. Instead, according to McQueen (2002), interpretivists view the world through a “series of individual eyes” and choose participants who “have their own interpretations of reality” to “encompass the worldview (p.16) and quantitative methods are not the preferred mode of interpretivism. Instead, according to defenders of interpretivism, qualitative methods are approachable means for examining reality.

Following the above points, Creswell (2009) states that “qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p.4). Hence, in educational research, if a scholar seeks understandings and experiences of a group of students or teachers, qualitative methods are likely to be the best-suited methods. In the interpretive paradigm, the crucial purposes of researchers are to get ‘insight’ and ‘in-depth’ information. In that case, using quantitative research, which describes the world in numbers and measures instead of words, is not likely to be productive. It is unlikely that I will gather ‘depth’ and ‘insight’ via the statistics that are frequently used in quantitative methods. In addition, one of the reasons why qualitative data is rich and in-depth is that researchers often capture data through the process of ‘deep attentiveness, of empathetic understanding’ (Punch, 2009).

The above evaluations of the scholars have expanded my understanding of the connection between interpretivism and qualitative methods. Following the nature of the interpretive paradigm, I am conducting a study which to elaborate and explore the adaptation of Vietnamese students when they are required to shift from a traditional educational background to a new teaching and learning environment. This transition will be examined based on the understandings, and experiences of one cohort of through a series of interviews.

Marguerite, Dean, and Katherine (2006) present the following characteristics of qualitative research.

Studies are carried out in a naturalistic setting.

Researchers ask broad research questions designed to explore, interpret, or understand the social context.

Participants are selected through non-random methods based on whether the individuals have information vital to the questions being asked.

Data collection techniques involve observation and

interviewing that bring the researcher in close contact with the participants.

The researcher is likely to take an interactive role where she or he gets to know the participants and the social context in which they live.

Hypotheses are formed after the researcher begins data collection and are modified throughout the study as new data are collected and analysed.

The study reports data in narrative form.

(Marguerite, Dean, and Katherine (2006: p.21)

The above characteristics of qualitative are more likely to be suitable to my intended study which investigates on experiences and perception of a group of students. In my study I am not including all these characteristics because of limits of time. The most important omission is gathering data in more than one form. In fact these relationships became important as we are talking about our shared experiences as students in a foreign country.

On reflections of the researchers’ implications, in my intended study, I would be working within the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach in this study. As a researcher I want to understand the world of my participants (Cohen and Manion, 1994) through gaining insight into their backgrounds, beliefs and experiences (Cresswell, 2003; Yanow and Schwartz-She, 2011).

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the conjunction between interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methods. As clarified by a number of scholars, interpretivism is a trend of research approach, and it prefers using qualitative methods for data collection. There is a tight connection between interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methodology as one is a methodological approach and one is a means in collecting data. Researchers who are using interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methods often seek experiences and perceptions of individuals for their data rather than rely on numbers of statistics.

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