

7 Bruce Transcript Summary

0.03 Bruce, have you always been in research and academia?

Yes, to varying degrees.

0.59 (2 Type) What kind of researcher are you?

Jokey response. Core areas of linguistics, but has moved for varying reasons (which sound like they are related to work-place dissatisfaction) into education and broader social science of anthropology and social science. He refers to a need to get paid employment.

2.07 Can you say a bit more about the need of getting paid employment?

He refers to his career trajectory as crashing down, as he fell foul of Universities in his senior executive type roles, and says is probably ended up lacking commitment. But on more than one occasion he was in a position of no immediate plans and a need to pay the mortgage and that is how he came into researcher education.

4.00 (4 First qual) Would you like to tell me about your first forays into qualitative research and how that's developed over your career?

Coming from a pure linguist background, which he thinks is unreflexive of its own paradigms, he was wondering how he might answer this question if asked. It was in course of working as a manager in Aboriginal areas and moved away from pure linguistics into education and Aboriginal studies and multi-disciplinary areas that he became aware that he hadn't thought about the nature of qualitative work and worked with PhD students and others to fill out his understanding.

06.49 (23 You changed) Were there any particular incidents or experiences that kind of started that thinking as you went along?

He was always interested in politics and social theories, growing up in the 60s and 70s. He was interested in the social nature of language, but felt increasingly that the scientific approach wasn't explaining many things. Even within linguistics he was thinking about social theories that would be relevant. Developing honours degrees and PhD programmes for his department pushed him to engage with lots of social theories. His linguistic background is rigorous about evidence and what it takes for evidence, and what is taken in argument. He felt very confronted when working with others in these wider social disciplines and what counts as good evidence and advancing knowledge, rather than just an expression of preferred philosophy. He wonders if he has answered my question.

09.52 (23 You changed) Most people's awareness of qualitative research come to this kind of understanding of qualitative research, through doing the research, whereas it sounds like for you, it was more through your management of research projects.

He hadn't thought about it before, but agreed that being in a position where you have to confront other people's judgements (like on PhD reviews) really got him thinking about how do we know if what we are doing is worthwhile. He jokes and rejects the use of word 'correct'.

12.01 (3 In what ways has this changed)

Without prompting he revisits his early career as an undergraduate and his experience of majoring in English Literature. He was aghast at the criteria that his lecturers were using to assess a piece of literature, and couldn't understand how they were assessing value and not value. He felt that it was just scholarship for the sake of it and it but was 'un-reflected subjectivity'.

13.37 So the scholarship for the sake of scholarship, well, what else is there in scholarship?

His lecturer who knew everything there was to know about Pope (for example) and the social context, but could never say what was worthwhile about studying Pope. What kind of difference does it make? What kind of contribution did this make to the sum of the world's knowledge, understandings? What kind of difference does it make? How do we know or feel something more about our lives or being human or being in this world, as a result of reading Pope's work? He wanted to know the answers to these, what he calls naïve, but legitimate questions.

He finds himself contradicting himself, on one hand valuing disinterested intellectual enquiry regardless of whether they had any value or relevance to anything; Metrics are not always required. But is bothered if the research has any value at all. He uses the example of all the linguistic books disappearing over-night, and what difference it would make, if any. He goes round in circles. He mentions that fact that he is a baby boomer and identifies with others of his generation who like him were on the streets protesting against Apartheid and war in Vietnam; who wanted to have a useful purpose in creating social justice and a better society. He feels he got into qualitative research in his meandering way because he was looking to see if qualitative research could put together a way of providing coherent answers. He encourages all his students these days to think carefully about their frameworks and rigour.

20.09 And you can't have rigour without a decent framework?

He's a bit taken aback by this question. Yes you can, in terms of interpretation, an analysis, an argument and conclusion. The logic and flow of what you're saying. That's the messy bit of qualitative research, and the very point of it. Frameworks keep you on safer ground and help your direction.

21.48 I'm really kind of keen to hear of any empirical work that you've done and your experience of work in the field.

He was first confronted with the empirical qualitative work when he needed to a job and sort of fell into it. He realised quickly that in this area he needed to work out and declare where he stood epistemologically. Generally labelled as general qualitative inquiry, with semi-structured interviews and looking for prominent themes, especially in the process of doctoral education.

24.50 (7,8 Teaching, 9 Who) Do you teach qualitative research methodology, or did you?

He taught it for many years, mostly in the context of Masters and PhD education programmes and the arts faculty, with students from all sorts of areas.

25.39 (10 Aspects) Were there particular aspects that you taught?

He was working with people already engaged in their own research and who were frequently at a point of wider reflection on the paradigm and frameworks beyond the received wisdom of their current context.

The way he taught it (and I can't help but reflect that his audience and his approach is similar to mine) was to give people the chance to explore what they said they were employing; general qualitative inquiry, ground theory and phenomenological approaches were common, but most education graduates seemed to be doing action research or were in to critical theory in topics with a clear agenda; social change or social justice – application to improve education.

28.53 ... were they the things that the students themselves came to?

Most of them had taken an assumed framework (from departments or supervisors) that they were going to adopt and hadn't explored in any detail what it meant for their methods, or the alternatives. He thinks they found it a useful exercise to explore with an open mind.

31.52...I often find that students come on my generic courses for an assurance that they're doing it 'right'.

Bruce agrees and asks me if I find assurances hard to give, as we can compartmentalise the theory, but in practice most people are drawing from different frameworks and it works. He finds it hard to express, but points to the ideal of epistemology but the reality of the world in practice.

33.40

Bruce agrees emphatically and says it comes down to being able to marshal and organise the data in a way that is rigorous and has logical flow having used a method that works best for attempting to answer appropriate questions, not just learning a particular method.

35.21 (15 Stories, 11 Enjoy teaching) So do you use any stories or examples or particular cases that you use over the years to illustrate points for your students?

Bruce jokes about avoid the question and I invite him to go where he likes with the story.

He gives an example from the London riots of 2011. He was teaching a full semester Masters unit on qual research. He used 2 minutes of UK news footage of burning, rioting with police, looting, ambulances, and commentary from suited august individuals pronouncing the undesirability of such uncivilised behaviour. He over-dubbed part of it with Sex Pistols' *Anarchy in the UK*, a favourite song of his. He invites them to consider how they would study it, and presents different theories by which to examine, and notes that the data itself affect those perspectives.

Again he jokes that he's not answering the question (I think he is), but he prefers to give them something they can imagining themselves being involved in.

Bruce continues, you can ask them to look at it as an ethnographer, or as a phenomenologist etc. and what they would do or couldn't do. He really enjoys provoking the students to think. He muted the background sound and then cranked up the *Sex Pistols*. It certainly provoked and he says there were complaints to the executive board, but he had fun with it.

43.35 (16 Cautionary tales) Are there any cautionary tales that you might share?

He shares his work in Aboriginal communities and his ethical obligation to warn students about the things they should and shouldn't do. It's a high priority, but he'd set this practical concern aside from his thoughts on qualitative frameworks. He seems them as different, but says he may need to change his attitude to that with his current education students. They need to understand how people talk in the real world and how easy it is to offend or be too inquisitive. There is a lot to pass on. But he gives no specific tale.

47.27 Can you give any example?

Making interviewing seem natural needs practice

48.25 So I wonder if you've got any kind of illuminating comments on practicing the niceties of qualitative research?

He talks about the difficulty of how to be present in a society as an observer; having the interpersonal skills to unself-consciously relate to others.

50.46 (27 Advice) Can you think of a time when you did something in the field to ensure that your presence wasn't as intrusive as it might have been otherwise?

He wants to be seen as a contributing guest; have a role as a human being, not just because of the research. You need to be part of the relationship system in Aboriginal societies. He usually sought to contribute to gathering with women and the hunting or fishing with the men.

54.17 (26 Process favourite) Have you got a favourite bits of the process?

Bruce describes himself as too old to be a digital native and describes research as tedious; writing up lots in notebooks, and spending sweaty mosquito-ridden nights in tents trying to get data out. But that's the process. But he loves the joy of finding in his notebook that someone has said something out of left-field, that doesn't fit the pattern but could be a whole new insight.

These odd moments are rare gems and take time to work out whether they are just noise.

Bruce agrees that there is nothing quite like going through the data and transcribing it yourself. It's tedious and boring, but worth it.

1.00.49 (26 Process favourite) I seek to clarify that he loves spending time with the data.

He loves it!

1.01.34 (28 Voice) Is there anything in particular that you perhaps thought, I really want to have this thing heard'.

He thinks it's really important that all qualitative researchers to engage and reflect on the worth and rigour of what they are doing.

1.02.59 (27 Advice) If you were to give your younger self a piece of advice, what would that be?

Keep revisiting the data and revising initial conclusions. It gets murkier and more wonderful as you progress. It is uncomfortable and we have to learn to love it a little bit. He describes it a cliché but we have to enjoy the journey, knowing we never arrive at the final destination.