
Article

Naturalistic inquiry in e-learning research

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Abstract

In this article, the author explains how and why one particular qualitative research approach, the naturalistic inquiry paradigm, was implemented in an e-learning research study that investigated the use of the World Wide Web technology in higher education. A framework is presented that situates the research study within the qualitative research literature. The author then justifies how the study was compliant with naturalistic inquiry and concludes by presenting a model for judging the quality of such research. The purpose of this article is to provide an example of how naturalistic inquiry can be implemented in e-learning research that can serve as a guide for researchers undertaking this form of qualitative inquiry. As such, the focus of the article is to illustrate how methodological issues pertaining to naturalistic inquiry were addressed and justified to represent a rigorous research approach rather than presenting the results of the research study.

Keywords: computers in education, qualitative research, Internet, quality, electronic learning

Introduction

Qualitative research means many things to many people. This complex and evolving field of inquiry embraces a wide array of approaches, methods, and techniques, and is accompanied by ongoing debate over what constitutes quality and rigor. It is complex, because it embraces multiple perspectives from the human disciplines, and as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) concluded, "An embarrassment of choices now characterizes the field of qualitative research. There have never been so many paradigms, strategies of inquiry, or methods of analysis for researchers to draw upon and utilize" (p. 18). It is an evolving field of inquiry due to its relatively short history in comparison to conventional scientific research (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Paradoxically, the field of qualitative research will remain to evolve by the very nature of its underpinning philosophy from which its definition is derived. Denzin and Lincoln categorized the current phase of the historical evolution of qualitative research as "a moment of discovery and

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