

ISSUE-BASED VIGNETTES AS DATA TO SUPPORT ASSERTIONS

As indicated by Erickson (1986) major findings of case study research are often expressed as assertions. These assertions summarize the researcher's final understandings about issues around which the study was developed. Even when a researcher works hard to help readers draw their own conclusions, assertions are made. Often a vignette or two are presented to illustrate the issue and assertions. Let us define these terms and give examples.

An issue is an important unsettled matter. It often is a highly contextual circumstance. People disagree about the issue. The issue often refers to a condition causing certain consequences. The consequences are valued differently by different people. They disagree as to whether and how the condition should be changed.

A vignette is a verbal illustration of one facet of an issue, not necessarily generalizable, usually poignant. It might be a wisp of dialogue. Sometimes it grows beyond the size of anecdote into something of a short story. It may be but the trace of action, such as the shadow of lip prints on a photo on the piano. Momentarily it is "figure" but shades off into the larger meanings of the issue.

An assertion is a statement summarizing what has been learned about the issue. It may be based on observations and documentary data. Evidence and counter evidence have been made available to the reader, then come assertions that summarize the evidence. Sometimes an assertion will be merely the declarative form of an issue question.

Example of an Issue in Transition Programs: Not all the community's young adults with handicaps can be fitted into the program. Some selectivity must occur. Different people have argued for giving priority to (1) those most recently out of high school; (2) those with most severe handicaps; (3) those predicted to show greatest gains on the program's instruction; (4) those most eager to participate and (5) those most distant from social services. A project director says it is easiest to appear successful by enrolling students with the least handicap. What should be the admissions criteria?

Example of a Vignette: There is one opening in the program. Amie is a possibility. After leaving school, Amie has lived with her parents, without a job but helping at home. She shows some interest in the Transition Project but it is 25 miles away. The rural girls have been less likely than rural boys to remain in training and to take a job. Her parents worry that Amie's wages will cut their welfare payments. Amie has been on the "eligibles" list for six months. Frank is new to the community, wants work badly, is unable to find a job for himself, appears to take the situation seriously. On a first come, first served basis, Amie is invited to join up.

Example of an Assertion: Concern for program success sometimes runs counter to equity. According to the equity principle all eligible persons shall have equal access. Action based on this principle can be costly. A project honoring the principle is not only likely to appear less successful in training, placing trainees into employment, and keeping them employed, but the public treasury is likely to be diminished by expenditures for efforts and encouragement was unequally distributed among those who showed low and high likelihood of succeeding,

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