Exploring meaning in VET research

Meaning can be located by exploring subjectivities, comparative values, and by observing behaviour patterns which form the layers of social interaction. Schein (1995) proposes that social meaning is embedded in the beliefs and assumptions individuals hold about the way the world works. These beliefs are formed from interactions and dialectic experiences, where surrounding discourses and cultures within communities mediate existing beliefs. These beliefs influence perception and the values that are placed upon relations, activity, artefacts and knowledges. These values may be observable by the options taken in practice, but it is the continued actions of practice and discursive exchange that provide patterns of behaviour from which such inferences can be made.

Assumptions > Beliefs > Values in action

Research can attempt to mine meaning at each level, but must use differing approaches and instruments. Often it is necessary to approach subjects for direct confirmation and to observe action for independent interpretation. The table indicates the difficulty of gaining and interpreting subject data at each of the levels.

Table1: Exploring meaning through different investigation processes

	Beliefs and Assumptions	Values	Behaviour and action in practice
Mode of Data Collection	Structured reflection Deep Interviews	Observation/ Card sorts/Interviews	Observation Recording
Research imperatives	Trust of actors and reflective space	Access and organisational space	Access to observe form within practice
Data Collection process	Difficult to extract even with deep interaction	Requires complex subject interaction	Directly observable
Interpretation	Direct subjectivity provided by the participant	Provides an indication of underlying belief and potential action	Considerable subjective analysis necessary – incorporates researcher bias
Coding	Sole meaning	Paradoxical meaning	Multiple meaning categories determined by researcher
Validity	Maybe produced to please social setting Needs cross checking with behaviour patterns	Maybe produced to please social setting	Observation may be incorrectly inferred Needs cross checking with behaviour patterns
Reliability	Needs cross checking for consistency of response		Needs multiple observations and diverse subjects

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