

Shifting Priorities: Reflections on Teaching Qualitative Research Methods

Keonya C. Booker

University of North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina USA

The purpose of this paper is to describe pedagogical approaches to qualitative methodology by an instructor of educational psychology at a large research university. The essay begins with an overview of how my graduate training influenced my orientation to empirical study. Next, I will focus on the obstacles encountered when instructing graduate students who are currently practicing school teachers, counselors, and administrators. Specifically, I will detail how I approach teaching qualitative research methods, ways I deal with resistance from students, and methods for introducing apprehensive learners to the ways of interpretist design. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how I use my classroom as a rich training ground for future qualitative researchers.

Key Words: Pedagogy, Learning, Graduate Students, and Qualitative Research Methods

Introduction

I am a young, African American, female professor of educational research at a large research university in the southeastern United States. As a product of a middle-class upbringing, completing college and post-graduate education were both non-negotiable expectations. In particular, being the daughter of two educators, the influence was particularly strong to “do well” academically, professionally, and personally. My professional interests led me to complete a doctorate in educational psychology and evaluation with a focus on the academic experiences of African American high school and college students.

The basis of my doctoral research training was quantitative in nature. I am well versed in t- and f-statistics, confidence intervals, variable loadings, and effect sizes. When I began to develop my own research studies, I was conflicted in the adoption of my methodological approach. On the one hand, I was taught the importance of generalizability and replication which, to this day, I believe are valuable research goals. However, the population that I study, along with the issues they face, better matched a qualitative paradigm. Specifically, for many years, minority students have been compared statistically to majority students with little attention to measurement equivalence or content validity (McLoyd & Steinberg, 1998). I wanted to incorporate a method to study these teens in a way that highlights the complexity and unique experiences they encounter. Although at my doctoral institution the push was strong to adopt a primarily quantitative methodological approach to research, the pull to qualitative research, with its emphasis on individual meaning and participant voice, was too strong for this researcher to ignore.

The Course

Currently, I teach a course in introductory qualitative research methodology. The course is designed into two major sections. The first part of the course centers on theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research. In short, I introduce what it is and “why” we do it. The second part of the course allows students to explore the “how” of qualitative research (e.g., specific methodological tools such as observation and interviewing). Because this is the first in a series of qualitative research courses, the information is presented in a survey method, with the expectation that those who are planning to complete qualitative dissertations or theses will continue in the sequence. As envisioned, the learning objectives of the class are simple. I want my students to leave the course being superior consumers and producers of qualitative research and, by extension, all research.

The majority of my students are White, middle-class, masters and doctoral students in a top-tier school of education. Their fields of interest vary from teacher education, to higher education student affairs, to instructional technology, and to social foundations. Many students are practitioners having recently returned to graduate school from long stints in the field. Others are full time graduate students who have not yet entered the workforce or are at the beginning of their varied careers. All of my students are participants in a discipline in which high stakes testing and accountability are progressively more focused on deductive, quantified, and measurable results. Considering this quandary, the need for qualitative research in this socio-political context can be viewed as an *un-priority* in light of a decidedly positivist educational research climate.

At the beginning of each semester, I probe and ask students why they are taking my course. Many report that the class is “strongly recommended” by their advisors [read: required]. I know that very few students take my course for the sake of pure research knowledge, but rather to fulfill program requirements. Therefore, it is critically important that I present qualitative theory and design in a way that will give them insight into the evolution of the field and, hopefully, sustain their interest in its promise for the work of educators.

Resistance

Because most of my students are not familiar with qualitative methodology, I encounter resistance. Most of this conflict is subtle, but some is overt. Students who are resigned to the absolute benefits of quantitative research have difficulty shifting gears and taking an equally empirical view of qualitative design. They come from fields that are traditionally characterized with a positivist orientation. The urge is to deduce, test theory, and observe measurable outcomes. They claim that qualitative research is too subjective. There are no preordained designs or operationalized variables. Furthermore, many argue the data collection and analytical tools employed in qualitative research are too time consuming. Finally, and most difficult to reconcile for several students, there can be little generalizability of findings.

In light of these issues, my task as their professor is quite daunting. An axiom in educational psychology is to “connect new knowledge to old knowledge.” In this current state, however, my students have little old knowledge (of qualitative theory and design)

on which to build their subsequent comprehension. My goal is to make those connections quickly and then couch the qualitative paradigm, not as a research outsider, but rather as a complement to other forms of empirical inquiry. This is especially difficult in a field that is heavily populated by those students who are also practitioners in the field and are familiar with pass/fail rates, graduation trends, and policy demands.

Qualitative research, by design, allows for the interpreted construction of social reality and the exploration and description of individual lived experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As developed, my course is designed to give students a foundation in qualitative theory and the philosophical assumptions that are the basis for the method. As many are familiar with quantitative research designs, it is important to juxtapose quantitative and qualitative methodologies. I do not like to be a dichotomist, setting up the long-held qualitative vs. quantitative debate. Rather, I show students how both research orientations have many similarities in common with one another. We discuss conventional methodologies used in both qualitative and quantitative research, and how the approaches are equally rigorous by empirical design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This connection early on allows students once again to connect old information with new information. The next step is shifting gears to *think* qualitatively.

Students are advised to critically analyze existing qualitative research and apply appropriate interpretist methodologies when designing their own final projects in the course. They are exposed to major qualitative theories and approaches such as phenomenology, critical race theory, feminist theory, grounded theory, and the case study approach. Each of these orientations to qualitative research is presented in terms of purposeful theory and couched in the larger discourse of ways to conceptualize educational research.

We explore how the field of phenomenology has changed education with its philosophical focus on individual experience and in-depth description (Way, 2005). When discussing grounded theory, pedagogy demands that the idea of bottom-up theory development be addressed as a valuable conjectural approach. This viewpoint is in stark contrast to most methodologies that initiate empirical inquiry from the top-down (Franklin, 1996). Students learn the advantages of using smaller scale observations and interviews to create significant and valid theories of learning and development. Some students have a harder time than others making the paradigm shift in their minds to an interpretist orientation. I see this especially with those in administrative positions, who somehow have to make broad decisions based on limited data. Their inclination is to reduce highly voluminous qualitative data to bullet points for school boards, superintendents, parents, and other constituent groups.

In many of our class discussions we broach the topic of power that can be inherent in certain research studies with marginalized groups. Probing students to examine their own notions of privilege, access, power, and equity can prove to be a discomfiting exercise for some. As a minority educator, facilitating large group discussions of how to provide voice to marginalized groups is fundamental in how I structure my course. We need more contextual data about these populations in the educational arena. Using the peer debriefing process and having students keep reflective notes of their time in the field helps with this process.

Case studies allow students to utilize multiple data collection methods to disentangle the nuances that can affect the experiences of various individuals, people, and organizations (Merriam, 1998). One of my students studied organizational change at three women's colleges using a case study design and was quite enlightened by the power of in-depth analysis and interpretation in making educational policy decisions. This revelation did not come without many trying attempts at overcoming the "g" effect; the desire to generalize her findings. When this inclination arises, normally in the face of student resistance, I explain to students that even though traditional qualitative research does not *primarily* aim to generalize, qualitative researchers still argue for how their work is transferable in other contexts and domains.

As the field of qualitative research is varied and evolving, so are my pedagogical methods. My instructional techniques range from small group work to experiential activities to reflective writings. Because qualitative research is marked by attention to context, voice, and meaning (Tillman, 2002), students are encouraged to compose a role as researcher statement. In this essay, a student must explore how they arrived at said research topic, the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs they have that may have affected the inquiry process, and why that disclosure is important to the research experience. This reflexive exercise is where I find most students display a reconciliation of their past quantitative leanings with the knowledge gained from the class. Students emphasize how they, as a research instrument, affected the richness of their work. It is especially compelling to see these transformations in students that were previously deeply entrenched in positivist thinking.

Work with Student-Practitioners

As aforementioned, a significant number of students in this introductory course are currently teachers and administrators in the field. They represent the entire spectrum of K-12 education and also higher education. For this group of students it is especially imperative that the course be relevant to topics and issues they face every day in their work. Because these students possess dual roles as a learner and professional, there is a powerful instructional demand on me to make meaning and sense of the qualitative research paradigm in a practical way. One powerful example of this is evident with a graduate student in higher education student affairs, whose research interests were in women's leadership during the undergraduate experience. As a professional working with this group of young women on a regular basis, it was important for her to use her research as a vehicle to discover more about the experiences of the students in her program. She used the methods in my course to complete an inquisitive report on the limited leadership opportunities for undergraduate women and has since successfully proposed a dissertation on the same topic.

Over the years, student projects have crossed the continuum from a novice teacher examining innovative pedagogical practices in special education to a veteran administrator exploring the perceived benefits and disadvantages of block scheduling at an area high school. Students invariably select a topic that is meaningful to them and then systematically learn the advantages that a qualitative methodology can provide in investigating a particular topic. My instructional approach is to give my students the

theoretical tools and knowledge to explore their interests in a rigorous and empirically unassailable manner.

I have taught research methods courses for several years. In this vein, I have discovered that dealing with student resistance in graduate-level research courses is a two-step process. First, a successful instructor must have an awareness and appreciation of the origin of the resistance. Many graduate students in education are coming from previous social science backgrounds. Several have had statistics as undergraduates, so they come to my course with an experience and familiarity with quantitative methods. As a teacher, being sensitive to this existing comfort level is an important first step in the process.

The second component in effectively overcoming resistance is to provide students with an equally strong foundation in qualitative theory and method. In my course I do this by imparting in-depth opportunities for student field work and analysis. I also offer a space for students to express discomfort with the process and their reticence at making sense of “so much data.” By offering a solid training in interpretist philosophy and designing the class as an interactive and reflective process, I achieve the goals I have established for the students.

Student feedback from the course reflects this sentiment in the following statements: “The observations and interview assignments were useful in preparing for the final projects. Putting together the entire final project was a good learning experience.” Another student reported, “Group and hands-on learning at the end of each class allowed us to practice what we were learning right away.” Finally, one student asserted, “This was a wonderful course. I was a quantitative person and now I’m considering a mixed methods dissertation.” Not exactly a slam dunk, but a basket nonetheless.

Discussion

Much of my personal research focuses on student perceptions of the classroom as a community. In fact, the majority of my work, on school belonging and achievement takes a decidedly qualitative bend. As a result, I encourage my students to feel as if they are a small, closely connected group of scholars aiming to uncover deeper meaning as agents in the realm of qualitative methodology. They work with a peer debriefer to review their data analysis, writing, and other issues that occur in the scope of a well-designed research study. They learn to synthesize, construe, and explain human experience as it pertains to educational problems and policy. As an educator and researcher, it is important for me to present my students with a multitude of methodologies by which they can answer a specific research question. Qualitative research, with its keen eye on the powerful meaning of human experience, allows me to do this with students who otherwise might have never taken the journey.

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Author Note

Dr. Keonya Booker has primary research interests in school belonging and academic performance for African American high school and college students. She teaches courses in qualitative research methods, child development, and adolescent development. The author can be contacted at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, College of Education, 9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, North Carolina 28223; Telephone: (704) 687-8873; Fax (704) 687-3493; E-mail: kbooker3@uncc.edu

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