Teaching Qualitative Research to Undergraduate Students

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Often, undergraduates ask sophisticated questions without having the language or methodological knowledge to really explore the questions most important to them. Equipping undergraduates with knowledge of constructivist world views, and qualitative methods can help those students, whose questions may be exploratory in nature, seeking to understand how we construct the world around us. A crucial component of a good researcher is the spark that happens when passion meets scholarship. We often encounter undergraduates who are passionate about qualitative inquiry. The goal of this chapter is to provide a first step for instructors in psychology to incorporate qualitative design and method into their curriculum.

On the first day of a Research Methods class, before any material is presented on research design or hypotheses, we asked students to write down a research question of interest. Some example questions include: How do parents deal with autistic children? Why do men and women think differently about sex? Another student spoke up reporting she wanted to ask 'what is the meaning of life,' but thought you couldn't test that. And, my favorite one: Why do we work so hard before we die? As this was a Quantitative Research Methods and Statistics course, these were all qualitative questions that needed to be reworked into testable empirical hypotheses. But, throughout the course I found myself returning to their original qualitative questions.

Conducting qualitative research with undergraduates requires instructors to not only teach the methods involved, but place the methods within a framework, often in contrast with quantitative research. Introducing the method is an obvious place to begin. Should this be done like one would introduce an acquaintance, a friend, or a stranger; each calling for a different level of familiarity, language and length? We advocate for introducing qualitative work with undergraduates with the familiarity of an acquaintance for two primary reasons: First, it is a method of inquiry not entirely unlike the scientific method and empirical methods that most undergraduates are required to take. Familiarity already exists. Unlike an ANOVA or a regression analysis, students have an intuitive sense of the utility of an interview, or an observation. Second, qualitative methodology and the constructivist worldview that accompanies it feel, to some students, like a warm blanket in a Nebraska winter. Face it; qualitative researchers are sometimes different from quantitative researchers, in temperament, in worldview, in marked ways. Students disclose that they feel like they were meant to do this kind of work (Glesne, 1999). We often use Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) definition of qualitative research to begin the discussion.

> Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studies use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives. (p. 2).

Creswell (1998) uses much of this definition, but adds the goal of creating a 'complex, holistic picture' of the phenomena.

But how do qualitative methods fit into the scientific method that our undergraduates have been taught since grade school? Introducing worldviews and knowledge claims has served as a valuable tool that grounds students by bringing research methodology to them as a choice that can be made based on a larger belief system about the people or events, or phenomena in which they are interested in. Most research methods taught at most universities follows positivist knowledge claims. This position has been referred to as the 'scientific method' but it

also covers quantitative research, empirical science, and postpositivism (Creswell, 2003).

Constructivists, on the other hand, use another set of assumptions about knowledge. Crotty (1998) identified several assumptions in constructivist research. First, meaning is constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Second, we engage with the world and make sense of it based on our historical and social perspectives. Qualitative researchers, thus, seek to understand the context or setting of the participants. Third, meaning is always social and arises out of interaction with a human community. The process of qualitative research is, by in large, inductive, with the researcher generating meaning from the data collected in the field. By introducing ways of knowing and constructivism, students are prepared then to move on to methodology. Table 1 shows both post positivist and constructivist knowledge claims.

Table 1

Worldviews and knowledge claims

Postpositivism	Constructivism
Determinism	Understanding
Reductionism	Multiple participant meanings
Empirical observation	Social and historical construction
Measurement	Theory generation
Theory verification	

Adapted from Creswell (2003) Research Design. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA. p. 6.

Historically, research outlines qualitative methodology in Sociology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), Geography (Ley, 1992; Pile, 1992), Education and Educational Psychology (Creswell, 2003; Lancy, 1993), and Anthropology (Bernal, 2002; Wolcott, 1999). On the whole, Psychology has been slower to warm up to qualitative methods. Phenomenological research may be the one exception (Moustakas, 1994). Top psychology journals like Developmental Psychology; have only in the last few years opened their journals to mixed methodology that includes qualitative components. Disciplines that are more exclusively qualitative (e.g. anthropology) have a rich literature on methodology (see Bernal, 2002 for review).

Although the literature on teaching qualitative methodology in psychology is sparse, the handful of published accounts addressing the subject provide valuable insights to teachers interested in either incorporating qualitative approaches into their current research methods coursework or in implementing new courses dedicated solely to qualitative methods. A common theme in the literature is the emphasis on moving qualitative coursework out of the classroom and into the community where students are given the unique opportunity to learn by doing (Pile, 1992; Rippetoe, 1977; Schmid, 1992). Although there is near consensus on the value of field-based projects (see Ley, 1992), there are varying opinions as to the appropriate scale for such projects.

Qualitative Research in Practice

Most field-based courses employ group projects as semester-long individual projects are seen as too challenging and unrealistic be successful in the context of an undergraduate course (Nyden, 1991), but may be an effective way to teach specific qualitative skills such as oral-history interviewing (Pile, 1992). Teachers employing the group project format in their qualitative courses have at times used small groups consisting of several students (Steckler et al., 2001), large or whole-class groups (Gondolf, 1980; Keen, 1996; Nyden, 1991; Takata & Leiting, 1987), or whole-class groups in the context of an ongoing project (Schmid, 1992). Whereas all of the examples cited here have been successful both in the views of instructors and students, there are trade-offs based on group size that prospective teachers must consider when designing their own course. As group size increases, it becomes increasingly difficult to assign grades and cater to the specific interests of students, but at the same time, larger groups allow for more streamlined navigation though project design and implementation and also contributing to a more efficient use of class time as all students are engaged in the same research questions. In addition to the practical benefits of whole-class groups, there remains the possibility that with proper guidance and hard work the research project could result in publication even in the context of an undergraduate course (for example see Nyden, 1991).

The literature on teaching qualitative research also includes suggestions for in-class exercises that would be used either in place of or in addition to field-based learning. Hood (2006) gives examples of assignments and discussion questions what she has used in past qualitative methods courses. She begins her classes by challenging the folk knowledge that words are less precise than numbers and interpretations of qualitative data are more subjective than the interpretations of quantitative data. She transitions into discussions about bias, making bias explicit rather than assuming qualitative researchers

are bias free. She then asks students to identify and write about their own biases in regards to their chosen topic. Talley and Timmer (1992) use teacher evaluation forms to launch a discussion of subjective meaning and the social construction of reality as a way to introduce qualitative methods to their students. Pile (1992) has his students practice mock oral history interviews before going into the field to conduct their own research projects, and dedicates class time to discussing different writing styles and note-taking techniques. The examples of these authors should assist new teachers of qualitative methods in designing their own courses and assisting their students' growth as competent researchers.

Scholars of qualitative research identify different methods of qualitative inquiry (Lancey, 1993; Creswell, 1998). Whereas most agree on around five to seven methods, we prefer using the following five methods: 1) A case study is a study that is bound in space and time and can be a single case or multiple cases. This process sets out to define the case, identify themes and then make interpretive assertions (Stake, 1995). Robert Stake's *The Art of Case Study* is a manageable text for undergraduates. 2) Phenomenology is the study of the human lived experience and is based on the philosophical assumptions of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). We recommend Moustakas's (1994) method of phenomenology. Methodologically, it looks for significant statements then moves to textual and structural descriptions, ending with the essence of the experience. 3) Life History Interviews have evolved from oral history and ethnographic methods and gathers information on the subjective essence of a person's entire life. We recommend Robert Atkinson's book, *The Life Story Interview* (1998). 4) Grounded theory research aims to generate or discover a theory through inductive means. Researchers typically interview until they reach saturation (no longer finding information that adds to the study). Strauss & Corbin (1998) have written the definitive book on grounded theory. 5) Finally, ethnography is the study and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system. It is characterized by prolonged time in the field and participant observation, among other techniques. Many good anthropological texts exist and offer different techniques. We like the work of Wolcott (1999), an educational anthropologist.

Throughout the semester of teaching empirical methods we asked the students to reshape their initial questions into testable quantitative hypotheses. They consistently have successfully met this requirement. We question whether a strong empirical background carefully whittles down our research questions into small branches until the beauty and grandeur of the tree is lost. Teaching methods from a constructivist or pragmatic viewpoint helps these students retain their sense of the tree as a tree. We believe successful undergraduate education can provide students' opportunities to articulate their worldview and develop and hone research skills that reflect their deepest questions.

Challenges to Teaching Qualitative Methods

There are practical difficulties to teaching qualitative methods. First of all, the time commitment involved in planning, conducting, analyzing and writing up a qualitative study is substantial and often times outside the restrictions of a semester class. Conducting a whole-class group projects might make it possible to end the semester with a finished product. Whether you choose a whole-class or individual project, if the manuscript will be submitted for publication then IRB approval is required. We have experiences where a quarter of the class had to take an incomplete because their IRB was not approved until late in the semester. Not requiring IRB is an option. Another option is as the instructor you can submit an IRB prior to the start of class. Some institutions will allow for blanket IRB for small class projects. It is always best to check with your institution's IRB regarding projects that might fall in between research to be disseminated and class projects. Grading individual qualitative assignments and manuscripts can also be time consuming and beyond the capabilities of busy instructors.

Conclusion

Norman Cousins (1982) said "ultimately, it is the physician's respect for the human soul that determines the worth of his science." (p. 589). We can easily replace physicians with researchers and more easily understand that the complex holistic picture that qualitative research adds to our psychological understanding can be done with respect for our most human side. We hope to use this insight when proposing, educating, and shaping the next generation of psychological researchers.

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