Teaching Qualitative Research

Cases and Issues

By

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CHAPTER 1

HOW SUCH A BOOK AROSE AND ASSOCIATED ISSUES

WHY A NEED FOR THIS BOOK?

My interest in examining the teaching of Qualitative Research (QR) began as a result of needing to take a class of Post-Graduate QR students at a university in Australia. Before that I had only gathered and analysed qualitative data for research and evaluations in various national, state and local settings. But then, just over a decade ago, I was asked to teach QR as a component of a Post-Graduate Diploma in Evaluation as well as in several Master of Education and Doctoral programs. As my teaching experience had originally been concerned with secondary school Geography and French, this new situation meant I had to face a different teaching 'method' about which I knew little. Consequently, to guide my initial forays into this different teaching activity, I decided to find out: what particular course elements would have to be considered; how to devise an appropriate curriculum; what issues might be faced; and what kinds of reactions students were likely to display in relation to different approaches. However, to my dismay, there was no such assistance available for, while there were increasing numbers of books dealing with qualitative data management, there was virtually nothing written, at the time, about teaching QR, except for a few introspective reflections by individuals. This still seems to be the case, for Colon et al. agree with me that: "Teaching qualitative research can be difficult. As relative newcomers (we) found that the literature is scant on approaches to teaching qualitative methods" (2000: 1).

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: A RELATIVELY NEW DISCIPLINE

This lack of information, perhaps, should not have been surprising for, in comparison with other disciplines, the teaching of QR across applied social sciences is, relatively speaking, in its infancy. Even though this type of research approach has been used in Sociology and Anthropology for at least a century the formal teaching of the subject designated 'Qualitative Methods' or 'Qualitative Research' is a much more recent phenomenon. The reason for this is that between the mid 1920s and 1970s there was a marked and dramatic shift towards the dominance of positivist, number-based, survey approaches in social research. However, by the 1970s there were the first rumblings of disenchantment with the predominant use of positivism and the beginnings of a renewed interest in qualitative approaches. This led to a regeneration of teaching and learning QR
within tertiary institutions, especially for post-graduate work. It began first with Sociology and Anthropology and then other disciplines such as Education, Evaluation and Criminology followed suit. As a result, books such as *Beyond the Numbers Game* (Hamilton, 1977) and *Towards a Science of the Singular* (Simons, 1980) began to appear and journals such as the *Harvard Educational Review* began to publish articles on qualitative research from the 1970s onwards (although in the late 1990s members of the American Educational Research Association, during a taped session at an AERA conference concerning the teaching of QR, were still bemoaning the fact that various education faculties around America were resistant to qualitative research, had few qualified staff to teach it, and favoured the use of statistical approaches).

Other disciplines, however, have taken even longer to embrace the approach. For instance, Locke, in an introductory article about QR for physical education teachers, wrote that: "only a few in my imagined audience will be familiar with the research literature which makes extensive use of qualitative enquiry" (Locke, 1989: 2). Sage (1989) corroborated this statement saying that:

> My hunch is that for a great many readers Locke's article will be their first in-depth exposure to this form of research inquiry. I say this because traditional research methods courses in physical education have typically taught students a positivistic version of knowledge production as the only legitimate way to research; qualitative methodology, if it is mentioned at all, is usually short-changed. (Sage, 1989: 25)

This remains so for several other more 'scientific' disciplines, such as Psychology and Medicine, for they are still going through the throes of perceiving qualitative research as a legitimate approach. For instance, in reference to oversubscribed, annual Qualitative Methods workshops run specifically for student psychologists in the mid 1990s, Richardson (1996) noted:

> In many cases where psych students were engaged in research that involved Qualitative Methods (QM), their supervisors did not possess the experience or expertise to train them in the use of such methods. Indeed it was apparent that in some cases the appointed supervisors showed little or no appreciation of the contributions of QM to research ... Many students attending also reported the use of QM had not been covered in degree courses and that it was generally discouraged in post-graduate work. Also there were no competent senior psychologists qualified to mark QM theses and there were no suitable QM textbooks applied to the discipline of psychology. (Richardson, 1996: 4-5)

Indeed, this is still a world-wide concern. For example, Rennie et al. (2000) found that few Canadian academic psychologists engage in qualitative research and in England Gough et al. (2003) reported that:

> According to students and supervisors, (psychology) students receive little or no instruction in qualitative research methods... We feel that qualitative
HOW SUCH A BOOK AROSE

methods should be given more priority in degree programs involving psychology, and we began to wonder how colleagues in other institutions advised students about their projects. (Gough, 2003: 5)

Such trends continue, for in 2004 I was asked to teach a QR course to medical and neuroscience students in Australia: "because we are all number crunchers here and our staff have not carried out such research and know nothing about it" (personal communication, Feb 2004).

Nevertheless, recognition of QR has grown particularly rapidly over the last twenty-five years and is now a subject taught to growing numbers of students, across ever-increasing numbers of disciplines around the world. As acceptance has occurred, QR texts have appeared with increasing momentum to cater for students and researchers from particular disciplines. For example, books have been produced specifically for:

- Sociology: (Filatotchev, 1970, Marvasti, 2004);
- Evaluation: (Cook and Reichardt, 1979, Parnon, 2002, Shaw, 1999);
- Communications: (Berger, 2000, Jensen & Jankowski, 1991);
- Social Work: (Padgett, 1998, Riessman, 1994);
- Marketing: (Carson et al, 2001, Marmampeisky, 2001, Sayre, 2001);
- Criminology: (Noakes & Wincup, 2004, Pogrebin, 2003);
- Psychology: (Richardson, 1996, Ratner, 1997).

Even so, as early as 1988, Sherman & Webb pointed out that due to the extremely complex nature of the discipline, there can be no definitive texts [except perhaps something like Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) encyclopaedic Handbook of Qualitative Research that would be a difficult text for novices], and so lecturers need to use a great range of resource materials and readings.

With this growth in interest, though, it has to be recognised that the majority of lecturers around the world are relatively new to the teaching of QR, even if they have been teaching other subjects for many years. Clark is a case in point. He is typical of an experienced lecturer who is still 'feeling his way when it comes teaching QR'. He explained:

I belong to a generation-based segment of sociologists who were not formally trained in qualitative research, much less qualitative data analysis. My graduate education had given me a solid background in quantitative, statistical analysis and this served me well as a teacher and researcher for nearly twenty years. Introduced to teaching qualitative methods is a story involving my anxiety...For instance, where in the curriculum, if at all, do we
CHAPTER I

introduce qualitative data analysis? How do we introduce students to it? (Clark and Lang, 2002: 348-349)

Consequently, even established lecturers can feel tentative while creating, evolving and experimenting with QR courses with the result that "many of us are trying to improve instruction in Qualitative Methods courses as we teach them a second or third time" (Glesne & Webb, 1993). As a result, there is no long-term teaching tradition for lecturers to 'hook into', there has been no serious review of teaching approaches in the area and, therefore, no substantial body of literature from which to draw for guidance.1

Adding to this difficulty, there is a strong likelihood that there will be no other staff with whom to consult in regard to any QR teaching problems that may arise. Unlike other subject areas, the QR lecturer often works in isolation; that is, he may be the only person teaching QR in a course, a faculty or indeed an institution. I was such a lecturer but had met several others who were also commencing, or trialling, new forms of QR course and who also felt they were 'working somewhat in the dark'. These lecturers encouraged me to study and write about QR teaching, saying that there was an urgent need for such work, particularly if it contained some kind of comparative overview. Between them the message was conveyed that: "The time is ripe!"

OTHER INITIAL ISSUES

What is Qualitative Research?

It is important, at this point, to determine what the term 'qualitative research' encompasses as this in itself is problematic and presents the first issue for teachers of QR. Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 1) say that qualitative research comprises a "complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts and assumptions." They go on to note that this complex and, at times contradictory, 'family' has arisen because it is informed by a variety of intellectual traditions including: a reaction against positivism (which views scientific methods as a way of producing knowledge, that reflects an objective, empirical world); post structuralism which stresses the indeterminacy of language and meaning and looks for meanings that are taken-for-granted and suppressed; and interpretative studies of culture, symbolism and texts.

This 'complexity' and 'contradiction' can be seen throughout the qualitative methodology literature. For instance, an important, but contested, examination of applied qualitative research traditions was described by Jacob (1987). She presented a fivefold division of qualitative approaches: ecological psychology;

1 For example, regarding pedagogical literature, the journal Teaching Sociology published only six articles in the 1990s that addressed the teaching of qualitative research methods. (Charmaz, 1991, Keen, 1996, Nyden, 1991, Ostrower, 1998, Schmid, 1992, Snyder, 1995.)
Campbell (1988), on the other hand went on to provide a whole host of other labels because:

**Appearing in various forms qualitative research has revealed itself as 'qualitative sociology', 'phenomenology', 'ethnography', 'ethnomethodology', or 'grounded theory' and are different ways to confront empirical reality from the perspective of those being studied.** (Campbell, 1988: 59)

Then Tesch (1990) grappled further with the varying, underlying philosophical bases and claimed that QR is derived from twenty-seven different schools of thought. To illuminate this, she produced a ‘map’ of how some of these approaches are grouped into those associated with; interests in language, the discovery of regular patterns, the understanding of text, or reflection (Figure 1).


However, even with such attempts at clarification, there remain disputes regarding exact definitions and interpretations concerning the various methodologies. For example, there are multiple ‘schools’ of phenomenology which have diverged from the original writings on the approach (see Husserl, 1965) and action research, to some, means a way of empowering the (normally) powerless, while for others it just means a way of facilitating reflective practice in the workplace.

Not only do lecturers have to confront and convey to students such a mass of terms, complexities and confusions associated with the source and understandings behind the qualitative approach, but they also have to face the difficulty that the words ‘qualitative methods’ have come to incorporate three quite separate and complex, yet related, aspects. These are: epistemology (issues about an adequate theory of knowledge); methodology (an underlying philosophical theory and analysis of how research should proceed); and method (tool/technique for gathering and analysing evidence). Indeed, Cowper (1993) points out that there exists a great deal of confusion, both within the literature and in people’s minds, about these three aspects, because discussion tends to lump the terms together or intertwine them. One consequence of this has been a muddying of the methodology and method ‘waters’ so that some terms such as participant observation and case study are written about either as a methodology (an overarching approach) or as a method (way of collecting information). Another form of muddying is where the words ‘qualitative research’ and ‘qualitative methods’ have become synonymous with the traditions of feminist research, critical ethnography, action research, historical research and case study. Yet, there is no reason why quantitative techniques, or mixed methods approaches, should not be used within any of these research forms.

In addition, unlike quantitative methods, procedures for QR (and therefore, for teaching about it) are not clear-cut. Quantitative methods are generally guided by rules of logic and procedure whereby the process follows a hypo-deductive model
in a relatively linear mode. This progresses through creation of a hypothesis operationalisation of variables, data collection, choice of a suitable form of analysis, reporting of results and drawing a conclusion that accepts or rejects the hypothesis. This allows for more rule-bound teaching.

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<th>RESEARCH CONCERNS:</th>
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Figure 1. A Classification of Types of Qualitative Research (after Tesch, 1990)
Qualitative approaches, on the other hand, offer no such neat, standard procedures but are more likely to create implicit and explicit issues. For instance, the researcher is part of the research process and, in dealing with other human beings, aspects such as the researcher’s, race, gender, age and status always affect the research arena. As a result, Borg and Gall (1989) feel that qualitative research is more difficult to convey and carry out well than quantitative research because the data is affected totally by investigator qualities and decisions. Therefore, before one can conduct qualitative research effectively, extensive training and practice are necessary.

In addition, because of the necessity to work in context, the researcher is usually expected to go out into the field and so there are issues associated with: access; social structures that keep moving as the researcher and the researched constantly negotiate and renegotiate courses of action; and the fact that design elements such as the research question, data collection, analysis and writing are totally integrated. By necessity then, qualitative research designs have to be flexible and ever changing, work has to be highly organised while simultaneously being creative and theory has to be borne in mind even though QR implies practical/hands-on application. Such complexities make the teaching of QR particularly difficult.

Implications for What Follows

From the previous discussion, it is clear that the term Qualitative Research is used in confusing and ambiguous ways, there are no clearly-bounded content areas to be taught or specific procedures to follow. Furthermore, a great many lecturers have been faced with teaching this elusive subject with little background training or experience. But most importantly, as far as can be ascertained, there has been little empirical investigation concerning what is being taught, why or how in QR courses. Similarly, there is virtually nothing about how students and staff react to what is presented. This book, therefore, sets out to fill such a knowledge gap by focussing specifically on QR as a discreet field of teaching and examining how QR may be defined and conveyed to students in a variety of contexts and disciplines. Much of the material has been derived not only from personal teaching experience but also from an intensive review of courses undertaken across disciplines, in both Australia and England. From this it has been possible to see how similar and different emphases are embedded across courses, what commonalities exist, what common issues arise and what lessons can be learnt to assist the QR teaching fraternity around the world.

The Decision to Observe Classes as a ‘Student’

To achieve the aims outlined above, and in order to provide a firm foundation for discussion, I needed to see courses in action and in some detail. Consequently, I decided to carry out intensive multi-site case studies because, as Merriam points out, this approach is particularly useful: “in presenting basic information about areas of education where little research has been conducted” (Merriam, 1988: 27).
CHAPTER 1

Case studies also seemed a sensible approach because I wanted to make comparisons across QR classrooms. In addition, I also needed to: understand course processes, lecturer decisions and emergent issues; see student and lecturer reactions to courses first-hand; determine commonalities and differences across various courses through an exploration of processes and dynamics of practice; and to discover whether the same issues occur across disciplines.

Also by using material from a number of such courses it was hoped to detect trends which might resonate with other QR lecturers. Through such an approach it may then be possible for readers of this book to apply some of the information to their own settings, for as Stenhouse points out:

There is the logic of application from a variety of cases to one's own. Starting from the diagnosis of one's own situation you can seek relevant insights from other cases...They can be diagnostic of the pattern of educational conditions and thus constitute a taking stock of multiple experiences. Such studies clarify the range of problems confronting practitioners and recipients and the range of responses to them. (Stenhouse, 1975: 80)

Outline of the Book

The book comprises several parts. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides some preliminary considerations such as what writers have and haven't told us so far about QR pedagogy. Then Chapters 3 and 4 present some detailed examples of a range of QR courses, while Chapters 5 to 10 concentrate on the issues that arose within and across courses. These issues include how lecturers managed contextual factors, the theory-practice relationship, what to include in the curriculum, assessment, management of student projects and the matter of sharing teaching with others. I then make some suggestions about how to improve QR teaching and present some resources which I have found to be useful.

Along the way I ask questions such as: How can QR courses be organised? What kinds of decisions do lecturers have to make? What kind of issues are likely to arise? How do students react to particular types of courses? How can student projects be managed in the best way? and How can QR teaching practice be improved?

In summary then, the rationale for this book arose from a desire to be better informed concerning QR teaching practice, fill an apparent gap in current knowledge, share any understandings gained with other QR lecturers and to find constructive ways for the practice of QR teaching to move forward.

But to begin with, let's take a look at what we know about developments within QR teaching to date.