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Building Connections: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Qualitative Research Students' Learning Experiences

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Abstract

This paper describes a phenomenological study in which the authors explored students' experiences learning qualitative research in a variety of academic fields. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with six participants from various academic fields who had completed at least one post-secondary-school-level qualitative research course and who were not students of the researchers. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researchers identified five primary themes representing the lived experience and meaning found in the participants' experience of learning qualitative research: (a) a variety of feelings are experienced, (b) a pivotal experience serves as a catalyst in the learning process, (c) the central role of story, (d) active learning, and (e) relating learning to prior knowledge. The findings both support and contribute new aspects to the knowledge of this experience. The results also point to "building connections" as the essence of the phenomenon of learning qualitative research.

Keywords

qualitative research, learning experience, phenomenology

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Building Connections: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Qualitative Research Students' Learning Experiences

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This paper describes a phenomenological study in which the authors explored students' experiences learning qualitative research in a variety of academic fields. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with six participants from various academic fields who had completed at least one post-secondary-school-level qualitative research course and who were not students of the researchers. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researchers identified five primary themes representing the lived experience and meaning found in the participants' experience of learning qualitative research: (a) a variety of feelings are experienced, (b) a pivotal experience serves as a catalyst in the learning process, (c) the central role of story, (d) active learning, and (e) relating learning to prior knowledge. The findings both support and contribute new aspects to the knowledge of this experience. The results also point to "building connections" as the essence of the phenomenon of learning qualitative research. Keywords: qualitative research, learning experience, phenomenology

Understanding the student experience of learning qualitative research holds important implications for developing effective curricula, improving instructional methods, and enhancing pedagogical theory related to qualitative research. Over the last thirty years, scholars have explored aspects of students' experiences of learning qualitative research. Research in this area has been conducted primarily by instructors with their own students. In addition, studies of the learning experience of qualitative research students typically are limited to a sample of students from a single academic field or are focused on a single qualitative methodology or data collection technique. Research on qualitative research students' learning experiences can be grouped into three general categories: (a) students' experience learning qualitative research within a particular academic field (e.g., Shaw, Dyson, & Peek, 2008), (b) the impact of using a specific technique or tool on learning qualitative research (e.g., Raddon, Raby, and Sharpe, 2009), and (c) students' experience learning a particular qualitative methodology (e.g., Harper, O'connor, Self, & Stevens, 2008). The authors will briefly review the trends in the literature and gaps within this area of pedagogical research, as well as discuss how this review of the literature contributed to the development of the study described in this paper.

A number of articles exploring the experience of learning qualitative research address the experience of students within a specific academic field. For example, researchers explored the learning experiences of students of psychology (Mitchell, Friesen, Friesen, & Rose, 2007; Shaw, Dyson, & Peek, 2008), marriage and family

therapy (Pratt & Dolbin-MacNab, 2003), education (Roulston, deMarais, & Lewis, 2003), and various healthcare fields, such as health studies, medical, and public health (Stark & Watson, 1999; Von Unger, Werwick, Lichte, & Hermann, 2010; Wright, 2007). In this category of article, the learning activities often related qualitative research directly to the field of study. For example, Barrett (2007) described using a videotaped recording of a choral rehearsal to teach data analysis to music education students. Sociology teachers studied the students' experiences investigating social issues within a community using qualitative research methods (Brandao, 2009; Keen, 1996; Schell, Ferguson, Hamoline, Shea, & Thomas-Maclean, 2009). In their 2007 study, Holley, Risley-Curtiss, Stott, Jackson, and Nelson explored how social work graduate students learned qualitative research methods by conducting cross-ethnic qualitative interviews.

Other researchers have focused on students' experiences learning qualitative research via a specific technique or tool. Raddon, Raby, and Sharpe (2009) conducted a mixed method study to examine whether students found value in using the learning object, "Sleuthing the Layered Text," to learn qualitative coding. Other researchers have explored the effectiveness of students using qualitative data analysis software to learn qualitative research procedures (Este, Sieppert, & Barsky, 1998; Mahlamaki-Kutanen, 2003). Students in these studies seemed to find software useful when it was used with other learning modalities and they received supervision. Lastly, Schell et al. (2009) described students' experience incorporating Photovoice when learning community-based participatory research.

In addition to articles focusing on particular populations and research tools, another category of literature related to learning qualitative research addresses students' experiences learning one particular tradition or methodology within qualitative inquiry. Some articles focus on students learning aspects of ethnographic research such as observation skills (Brandao, 2009) or ethnographic autobiography (Henderson, 2008), while other articles focus on students learning other qualitative methodologies, including narrative inquiry, discourse analysis, and life history research (Harper et al., 2008; Mitchell, 2007; Richards, 2011). In still other cases, the articles focus on students learning basic skills of qualitative research applicable to multiple traditions, such as qualitative interviewing (Roulston et al., 2003; Roulston et al., 2008; Stark & Watson, 1999).

Regardless of the main focus of the students' learning experience, the literature appears to present some consistent findings. The results suggest students found learning qualitative research to be a very emotional experience. Students seem to experience excitement when they gain real research experience (Hein, 2004; Keen, 1996), anxiety and confusion when learning how to conduct data analysis (Li & Searle, 2007; Raddon, 2009; Richards, 2011), honor and humility when hearing personal stories from participants (Hunt, 2009; Mitchell, 2007). In addition to experiencing emotions when learning qualitative research, it appears students find experiential learning essential (Barrett, 2007; Keen, 1996; Schell, 2009).

The research conducted in this area encompasses a variety of methodologies with a range of methodological rigor. A number of studies used instructor analysis of students' reflective journals (Hein, 2004) or instructor-led focus groups of students' experience in a course (Brandao, 2009; Holley, 2007; Von Unger, 2010). In other cases, the instructors combined their own reflections on the students' learning with their analysis of their

students' evaluations or coursework (Keen, 1996; Mullen, 1999), or used a combination of coursework, focus group, and individual interviews (Pratt, 2003). Some researchers conducted more traditional research studies, using phenomenology (Mahlamaki-Kutanen, 2003), case study research (Barrett, 2007), or drawing upon techniques derived from grounded theory methods such as open and axial coding and constant comparison (Henderson, 2008). In the twenty-five papers reviewed for this study, the students' instructor conducted the research, though the role of the researcher in the production of the findings was rarely acknowledged (Richards, 2011). Similarly, only a handful of studies directly addressed the limitations of the research (Li & Searle, 2007; Roulston et al., 2003).

This review of the literature highlights a significant gap in the research on the learning experience of qualitative research students. Research in this area has been conducted almost exclusively by instructors with their own students, and the studies typically are limited to a sample of students from a single academic field or are focused on a single methodology. To address this gap in the literature, the authors used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to discover the lived experiences of students—not currently taught by the authors and from different academic fields—learning qualitative research and the meaning they found in these experiences. The goals of the research were to (a) generate and collect primary qualitative data regarding the learning experiences of qualitative research students; (b) employ Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of this data; (c) identify key themes of students' experiences learning qualitative research; (d) describe the lived experiences of qualitative research students' learning experiences; and (e) provide recommendations for how to improve the instructions of qualitative research courses.

Three researchers were involved in this study. The first author, Robin, teaches qualitative research in Nova Southeastern University's Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate program; the second and third authors, Anne and Fatima, are both students in this program. Robin was the Principal Investigator on the study; in this role, she designed the study, conducted the literature review, obtained IRB approval for the study, prepared the interview protocol, recruited the participants, trained the research assistants in qualitative data collection and phenomenological data analysis, supervised them throughout the data collection and data analysis processes, and assisted in data analysis and the report of findings. Anne and Fatima were research assistants on the study; they participated in training in data collection and data analysis, conducted bracketing interviews to prepare for the study, scheduled and conducted the interviews with the participants, transcribed the interviews, performed data analysis using IPA procedures, and participated in the report of findings.

Methods

Research Design

The authors chose a qualitative research method for this study to gain detailed information about the complex phenomena of learning qualitative research and to identify themes and theoretical structures which describe this process. The researchers were not interested in predicting what methods would improve the instruction of qualitative

research, but rather wanted to gain knowledge which would lead to providing recommendations (Trochim, 2006). The authors chose a phenomenological approach so they could understand the phenomenon of learning qualitative research from the perspective of the learners. Specifically, they used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to gain insight into how students made sense of their experiences learning qualitative research and the significance of taking a graduate level qualitative research class (Smith, et al., 2009).

Sampling

After obtaining approval for the study from the university's Institutional Review Board, the Principal Investigator (PI) recruited a purposeful sample of English-speaking adults who met the following criteria: (a) completed at least one qualitative research course in one of Nova Southeastern University's 64 graduate and professional academic programs, (b) are not currently students of the PI, and (c) are not enrolled in Nova Southeastern University's Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate Program. Incidentally, in addition to meeting the above criteria, all of the participants had completed or participated on a qualitative study outside of coursework prior to being in this study, although this was not an inclusion criterion. The study sample included three men and three women, and participants' ethnicity included Hispanic, African-American, and non-Hispanic White. The participants represented a variety of academic fields, including psychology, education, conflict resolution, college student affairs, administration, and computer and information sciences.

The PI sent an email letter to adults who met the study criteria. The email included a description of the study, the type of questions that would be asked, and reassurance that he/she would only be asked to recount relevant information. Once the participant expressed an interest in the study, the participant reviewed and signed the consent form to participate, which included his/her willingness to have the interview recorded. The participant was assigned to a research assistant by the PI after she received the signed informed consent form. The research assistant contacted the participant either by e-mail or telephone to arrange a time and date for the interview, and to provide instructions on how to access freeconferencecall.com to have the interview recorded.

In keeping with this methodological framework, and based upon the researchers' determination that they had achieved data saturation for the purposes of our study, they stopped recruiting participants after the conclusion of six interviews. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), a small sample size is acceptable because "IPA is an idiographic approach, concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts" (p. 49).

Data Collection

Each research assistant conducted three semi-structured in-depth interviews over the telephone. Prior to all interviews, the researchers obtained verbal consent to record the interview. Every interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, and was recorded via the freeconferencecall.com, a web-based recorder, and by a digital recorder. During the interview, the participant responded to open-ended questions related to his or her

experience learning qualitative research; and follow-up questions were asked based on the responses of the participants, the interview protocol, and research objectives. In keeping with the focus on phenomenology on the lived experience of a particular phenomenon, the researchers started each interview with the following phenomenological question: “Can you tell me about your experience learning qualitative research?” Depending on the response, the researcher developed a follow-up question or asked another question from the interview protocol if the response moved away from the research topic. For example, in one instance, the interviewee discussed how he had previously taken quantitative research classes, so the follow-up question was “How was the transition from quantitative to qualitative research classes?”

Data Analysis

The research assistants transcribed the interviews and then all three authors read and re-read the transcripts to immerse themselves in the data. Then the researchers began interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the data (Smith et al., 2009), which is inductive in nature. IPA does not include a single step of data analysis, but must include the following characteristics: (a) movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared among the participants, (b) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience, (c) commitment to understanding the participant’s point of view, and (d) psychological focus on personal meaning-making within a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). Following the IPA process, the researchers conducted initial noting, which includes descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2009).

The first stage of analysis in IPA is developing a set of descriptive comments on the interview transcript. The purpose of descriptive comments is to describe the content of the data. In making descriptive comments, the researchers identified key phrases, explanations, descriptions, and emotional responses. The researchers used the comment function within Microsoft Word to make these descriptive comments. At the next level of analysis, the researchers focused on how the transcript reflected the ways in which the content and meaning were presented linguistically, and the researchers’ noting took the form of linguistic comments. Considering the “how” along with the “what” of the textual data contributes to understanding the meaning behind the participant’s words. In making linguistic comments, the researchers paid particular attention to pronoun use, pauses, laughter, functional aspects of language, repetition, and metaphor use. During the third level of analysis, the researchers moved into a more interpretive stage of analysis in making conceptual comments. This stage of analysis includes the development of questions about meaning. The questions (or tentative language used in conceptual annotation, such as “seems” or “may”) indicate key concepts the researcher feels may be emerging from their analysis of the data. At this stage researchers begin to develop the insight into the data that will allow them to develop themes in the next stage of analysis. In making conceptual comments, the researchers noted preliminary concepts regarding the participants’ overarching understanding of learning qualitative research.

After completing initial noting on each participant’s responses, the authors searched for emerging themes across all participants by examining discrete sections of the transcripts and simultaneously recalling what they had learned during their analysis

up to this point. The themes not only reflected the participants' original words and thoughts but also the researchers' interpretations. In the development of themes, the authors supported each theme by descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments made by each of the participants. In order to improve consistency between the researchers in terms of their analytical procedures, the principal investigator met weekly with the research assistants via *freeconferencecall.com* or *Elluminate*—a web-based program which allows interactions via text, audio, or video—to discuss the process of IPA data analysis. After the research assistants completed each level of analysis, the principal investigator reviewed the findings and provided feedback. The research assistants re-analyzed the data when the PI identified inconsistencies in process between them. All authors concluded the re-analysis when they determined a common process of analysis had been achieved.

Quality Control

Challenges in conducting this research included the fact that the research assistants are doctoral students who are enrolled in the Qualitative Research Graduate Program at Nova Southeastern University and thus are learning qualitative research themselves. In order to manage this bias and knowledge of this phenomenon during the study, they bracketed or “suspended or set aside [their]... biases and other knowledge of the phenomenon obtained from personal and scholarly sources” (Hein & Austin, 2001, p. 5). This process began when the research assistants took part in bracketing interviews during a data collection class. They also kept a journal of their thoughts and ideas before, during, and after these interviews as part of the process of identifying and bracketing their biases.

When beginning this study, the research assistants continued to maintain a journal of their thoughts and ideas before, during, and after the interviews as well as during the analysis of the data. Additionally, they used open-ended questions when they gathered the data, which allowed the interviewee to guide the direction of the interview. Each interview began with the following question: Would you please tell me about your experience learning qualitative research? Follow-up questions were developed based on the responses of the interviewee and the interview guide.

To insure confidentiality, the researcher: (a) did not use actual names that may be linked to the participant's identity in the transcripts; (b) transcribed interviews in a private setting and used headphones to ensure privacy and confidentiality if not in a room by herself; (c) secured all electronic recording devices, notes, and transcriptions containing data obtained in the research in a password protected computer only accessible to the researchers; and (d) did not have the participant's identity on any written notes and these notes were destroyed after the interview. After each interview was transcribed, the research assistants analyzed the transcript and gave their analysis to the principal investigator to review for any potential biases, and no significant biases were noted. The weekly discussions during the data analysis phase also allowed for the researchers to compare, question, and probe their analytical insights and thus strengthen the trustworthiness of their findings.

Results

The authors developed their findings for this study as a result of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process, and the findings reflect the focus of phenomenology, which is the lived experience and meaning of a particular phenomenon—in this case the phenomenon of learning qualitative research. The results section also reflects the “double hermeneutic” of the IPA approach, in that the findings convey the researchers’ interpretation of the participants’ interpretation of their experience (Smith et al., 2009). The results section is organized by five themes identified in the analysis process: emotions, active learning, a pivotal experience, the role of story, and the impact of the student’s prior experience and knowledge. The themes developed in this study illustrate how learning qualitative research involves building connections—to people, to the qualitative research process, and to one’s prior theoretical framework and understanding of research. The focus of phenomenology is on the common elements of a phenomenon, rather than on the individual; in keeping with this aspect of the chosen methodology for the study, when presenting excerpts from the interview transcripts, the authors do not include participant names or pseudonyms.

Theme 1. The experience of learning qualitative research inspires a range of emotions.

The authors found that all participants in this study indicated that learning qualitative research includes experiencing a variety of feelings, both negative and positive. Many students appeared to feel confusion and anxiety when exposed to new terminology and methodologies. One participant recalled his feelings when first learning qualitative research: “What is coding? What is that about? What is phenomenology? What, you know, what is this about—grounded theory?” Another participant discussed her feelings regarding the terminology of qualitative inquiry:

When we get to qualitative data and you are talking about things like recursive frame analysis; what does that mean? I am still not sure if I know what that means but, it is just the terminology is just so radically different and the approach underlying it is so radically different...the thing that I found most difficult to comprehend sometimes was the terminology and what was the underlying meaning of that terminology. That took a while for that to sink in.

While the unfamiliarity of the concepts within qualitative inquiry tended to evoke confusion, the lengthy process involved in qualitative data analysis seemed to elicit frustration or the sense of being overwhelmed. One source of students’ feeling overwhelmed was the “sheer volume of data” associated with qualitative data analysis. One participant commented, “After I printed out [the transcript I thought] oh my god, I really have to read all of this, I have to break it down? So I guess what I’m trying to say is it was very overwhelming at first.” While the quantity of data was challenging, so was learning the process of qualitative data analysis. One participant noted,

I have to say that analyzing the data was the most challenging for me. I wanted the outcome quickly, like the process was driving me insane. But once I went through that process, it was amazing when I saw my first theme. I was like oh my gosh I can see it!

All of the participants noted that the initial negative feelings associated with learning new theory and new skills gave way to some positive emotions associated with discovery, which was characterized by amazement surprise, and excitement. “Collecting the data in that instance, it opened our eyes and was very surprising—the data that we did collect and the answers...it was a very, very exciting process.” Several of the qualitative research students also appeared to feel positive emotions when interviewing. As one participant explained, “I am always fascinated by the stories that people tell; those experiences are just something I’m attracted to.” These comments indicate that these qualitative research students’ emotions ranged from negative to positive. These emotions seemed to move from negative to positive as the students gained more skills and practice. Students from all academic background appeared to experience this range of emotions as a central aspect of their learning experience.

Theme 2. Learning qualitative research requires active learning.

Participants in this study apparently found not only that learning qualitative research was emotional, but also that it required active learning. This included the importance of “learning by doing,” in the form of conducting observations or interviews. As one participant observed, “I just am more of a hands-on person; theory only makes sense to me when I am practicing it (laughing), so I wish there was a bit more hands on actually doing it—that it was more of a lab versus a class.” All participants particularly noted that learning qualitative data analysis requires experiential learning. One participant explained regarding data analysis,

It is a process that you couldn’t learn unless you actually did it. Once I did it I kind of felt I had a better understanding of how qualitative data is analyzed....I just sort of jumped into it; once I did it a few times I kind of got a better feel for what it is about.

Participants also expressed the fact that learning qualitative research successfully required the learner to take initiative in the learning process. Acting independently seemed to be identified by qualitative research students as being a critical adjunct to the coursework. A few students noted they were “purchasing books on [their] own about topics like case studies, phenomenology, grounded theory and so forth,” and one student noted that he sought out extra training to increase his comfort level with qualitative inquiry. Another student commented,

I kind of self-teach myself in particular areas. There isn’t going to be one professor that’s going to be well-rounded in everything. I had a professor who concentrated a lot on the philosophy. I would either check out books

to understand it or read articles.... That was a process that allowed me to learn more and gain knowledge beyond the classroom.

Playing an active role by taking initiative in seeking out supplemental information appeared to enhance the student's learning experience, regardless of the student's academic background.

Theme 3. A pivotal experience plays a role in motivating students to learn qualitative research.

In addition to feeling a range of emotions and participating in active learning, all of the participants in this study indicated that their experiences of learning qualitative research involved a pivotal experience that served as a catalyst in their learning experience; this pivotal experience seemed to motivate them to learn qualitative research methods. In some cases, the triggering experience related to subject matter. For one participant, a class experience led to finding his dissertation topic: "I remember one class when I really felt a connection to qualitative research and that's when I connected to my dissertation topic. I really wanted to dig deeper and learn more about qualitative research." For another participant, it was learning about a specific qualitative methodology that brought inspiration: "I fell in love with phenomenological research; there is no other way to put it. I thought they made this approach especially for me; so nothing else mattered to me—I was going to learn about that approach and I was going to use it."

For other students, the catalyst that appeared to motivate them to learn qualitative research centered on a personal experience. One participant was a professor of graduate level students who described having the realization that he needed to learn qualitative methods "because my students are moving more and more in that direction and I really didn't know a whole lot about it." Another participant found motivation through the personal connection made in the course of a qualitative interview: "I interviewed a Haitian American...and talked a little about culture. I just remember learning so much through that process...I thought, wow this is such a powerful approach to really understanding—not just book sense." These examples illustrate that, for these study participants, learning qualitative research involved a moment of connection, either affective or cognitive, that inspired the student to learn qualitative research methods. Among the study participants, the men seemed to have a pivotal experience that led them to make a cognitive connection that motivated their learning, while the women seemed to make an affective connection as a result of a triggering experience, and this in turn inspired them in their learning of qualitative research.

Theme 4. Story plays a central role in the experience of learning qualitative research.

In addition to a pivotal experience that triggered motivation to learn, the analysis in this study suggests another feature that students of qualitative research found meaningful in their learning experience was listening to the stories shared during interviews. Participants in this study indicated that the stories shared during interviews

were critical to the qualitative research learning experience. One woman noted that she learned from the interviewee's stories themselves:

By doing interviews, I was able to grow from that in terms of my intellectual knowledge on conducting actual research, but also the knowledge gained from the participants in those interviews provided stories, and there's a lot to learn from someone's stories. It was very satisfying.

Participants also seemed to feel a personal connection with the people they interviewed when learning or conducting qualitative research; for several students, this personal connection became for them a defining characteristic of qualitative inquiry. One participant explained, "The process to me was very exciting. There was no other way to describe it, because I had an opportunity to talk to these women; I had the opportunity to hear their stories." In addition, qualitative research students identified stories as constituting the data they were to work with. As a participant observed,

I like the rich data; I like the fact that stories can come out of qualitative research regardless of the methodology...ethnographic research, phenomenological research, case studies. They all typically involve interviews, and there is bound to be a story that will come out of them.

Stories not only contributed to educational and enriching research experiences, but stories also tended to be perceived as rich data that led to discoveries during data analysis. Students from the fields of education, conflict resolution, and college student affairs seemed to emphasize the personal impact of the stories that they heard from people while learning qualitative research, while students from the fields of psychology, administration, and computer and information sciences seemed to emphasize the in-depth data that such stories provided.

Theme 5. Students make meaning of their experience of learning qualitative research by relating it to their prior research knowledge and experience.

A final theme that the authors identified in their analysis relates to how students of qualitative research make meaning of their learning experience. Participants in this study noted that they related what they were learning to either prior training in quantitative research or childhood experiences. These relationships seemed to be used to make sense of qualitative research concepts and methods. Students with experience in quantitative research, including those from the fields of computer and information sciences and administration, tended to find themselves comparing the two research paradigms at each step in the learning process. One such participant noted,

I went from dealing with numbers to dealing with text, interviews or whatever, but at the same time a lot of the concepts were very much the same—the idea of sampling, the idea of reliability, so the biggest

transition was the data and having to code the data and then being able to actually analyze it.

Other students, including those from the fields of education and psychology, appeared to relate what they were learning to their own personality or background. One participant commented, “Qualitative research I knew that for me it fit more so with my personality and research questions that I would normally asked.” Another explained,

I was raised by my grandmother who was literate, but she was basically my first teacher and she did a lot of her teaching through stories. So we would all sit down and she would tell us a story and then ask us questions about the story. There always used to be a lesson in the story that we had to figure out. So really, you know, in terms of when I was sitting in qualitative research classes it reminded me of my first ways of learning. So it made sense for me culturally and cognitively in terms of how I understand the world.

Participants’ comments suggest that these students’ experience of learning qualitative research involved making sense of what they were learning by relating it to prior academic or personal experience and knowledge.

Summary of Results: Building Connections

The findings of this study suggest that learning qualitative research is experienced and understood as a process of building connections. Students appear to experience a range of emotions as they build connections with the qualitative research processes and become more comfortable with the theory, terminology, and methodologies of qualitative inquiry, and as they gain the skills required for collecting, transcribing, and analyzing qualitative data. Students also seem to build personal connections with those they interview through the stories shared by the interviewees. These personal connections become interwoven in the learning process, so their learning is not only a product of what they have done but what they have heard. Finally, the learning experience would seem to involve building connections between prior knowledge and perspectives and the new perspectives and discoveries gained through learning qualitative research. As one participant said of learning qualitative research,

It opened a lot of doors; I thought about things much differently than I did before I was exposed to qualitative research. It has opened up a lot of different ways of looking at things more so than before I had the training, you know I can look at something more broadly. I guess it just opened up a lot more doors for me, a broader way of understanding the world.

As this comment indicates, the experience of learning qualitative research seems to lead to the learner making connections, which they perceive as broadening their understanding and opening up new opportunities.

Discussion

The results of this study appear to support several findings of previous research on qualitative research students' learning experiences, while also contributing some new findings in this area. Participants in the study experienced emotions identified previously in the literature as being associated with the experience of learning qualitative research. This includes the anxiety of being outside one's comfort zone (Richards, 2011) and being aware of one's lack of experience and skills with this research paradigm (Harper et al., 2008). Study participants confirmed the feeling of being overwhelmed by data analysis (Li & Seale, 2007; Raddon et al., 2009) and confused by the terminology of qualitative inquiry (Richards, 2011). Participants also conveyed the excitement of conducting research with human subjects (Keen, 1996). Their positive emotions parallel the accounts of other qualitative research students, who have described their learning experiences as "stimulating," "rewarding," and "amazing" (Schell et al., 2009).

The results of this study also indicate that stories play a central role in the experience of learning qualitative research. This finding includes the point highlighted in previous studies that students feel humbled (Mitchell et al., 2007) and honored (Hunt et al., 2009) by the stories interviewees share with them as they learn how to conduct qualitative interviewing. However, participants indicated that stories are more than a source of emotion in the student's experience of learning qualitative research. Stories also seem to contribute to the learner's experience of feeling connected to the interviewee. Stories constitute data, and students use story to frame what they are learning about research. Thus stories appear to weave throughout the lived experience of qualitative research students and are also essential to the meaning they make of their experience.

Participants in this study reinforce the finding of other studies that students of qualitative research find it necessary to engage in experiential learning (Barrett, 2007; Boardman et al., 2002; Harper et al., 2008; Henderson et al., 2008; Holley et al., 2007; Keen, 1996; Stark & Watson, 1999). In addition to this known aspect of the phenomenon of learning qualitative research, this study revealed a new dimension of the role that experience plays in the learning experience. In addition to experiential learning in general proving to be beneficial to the learning process, participants in this study indicated that a particular "triggering" experience served as a catalyst in their learning experience. These qualitative research students highlighted that such a pivotal moment served to motivate them to pursue learning qualitative research with more energy and commitment. While other authors have referred to learners experiencing moments of epiphany (Mitchell et al., 2007), the authors feel that this finding regarding a pivotal experience in the learning process makes a new contribution to the knowledge of the learning experience of qualitative research students.

Finally, the finding that students make meaning of their experience of learning qualitative research by relating it to their prior knowledge and experience has both known and previously unknown dimensions. In terms of known aspects of this finding, the literature on the learning experience of qualitative research students highlights the fact that prior training in quantitative research methods and the scientific method can lead to cognitive dissonance for qualitative research students but that students also find learning qualitative research can expand their understandings of what constitutes research

(Mitchell et al., 2007; Pratt & Dolbin-MacNab, 2003; Von Unger et al., 2010). The results of this study support both of these aspects of the learning experience of qualitative research students. In addition, this study revealed that students tend to make sense of their learning experience by relating what they are learning not only to prior education in research, but also to personal experiences that help them to interpret and make meaning of their learning experience. This included childhood experiences of learning lessons through the use of story, for example. This finding suggests that the meaning-making process that is central to the lived experience of learning qualitative research draws upon students' entire background and personal history, rather than just their prior academic training.

There are some limitations to this study that should be considered in evaluating these findings. The study participants, while they ranged in terms of their research experience, have all participated in a qualitative study outside the classroom. This was not an inclusion criterion but rather a sample characteristic that came to light in the course of the interviews. However, individuals who have taken a course in qualitative research but not gone on to conduct any qualitative research outside the classroom might indicate differing aspects of their learning experience. This would be a useful area for further research. In addition, participants in this study all took one or more courses at a single university, although they came from a variety of academic programs and studied with a variety of professors. Nevertheless, university culture and even regional factors may have influenced the learning experience of these students. Thus, it would be important to conduct similar studies with participants from other regions and settings.

The authors feel that the findings of this study hold important implications for teachers of qualitative research. In light of the fact that students indicate their anxiety is gradually replaced with excitement once they begin actually practicing the steps of qualitative research, we recommend that instructors of qualitative research incorporate experiential learning early within their courses, rather than the traditional model of covering theory and epistemology before beginning to practice qualitative research data collection techniques. This early experiential learning may help to reduce the time students deal with negative emotions such as confusion and frustration and help them transition more quickly to the positive emotions associated with this learning experience such as amazement and inspiration. In addition, instructors might purposefully build opportunities into their courses that support students in relating what they are learning not only to prior training in research, but also to prior life experiences that can help them make sense of the role of story and use of reflexivity in qualitative inquiry. Though both of these modifications of the traditional format of qualitative research courses, instructors will help students to build connections—to qualitative research procedures and to study participants—in a way that can render their learning experience both more satisfying and more meaningful.

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