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Exploring Perceptions of Key Events in a Qualitative Research Class: Applying Some Principles of Collaborative Analytic Inquiry in Practice

Janet C. Richards
University of South Florida, jrichards@usf.edu

Steve Haberlin
stevehaberlin@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Little research portrays collaborative analytic inquiry in practice. Drawing on our dual lenses, we, a professor and a doctoral student in an advanced qualitative methods course, applied principles of collaborative analytic inquiry to construct new understandings about key events that occurred during an advanced qualitative research class. Using asynchronous e-mail communication, we shared, affirmed, and questioned each other's and our own storied recollections of moments of joy and learning intertwined with some challenging issues. To begin our inquiry, we planned and negotiated our responsibilities, voiced our concerns and questions pertinent to the project, and avowed our willingness to risk emotional vulnerability and discomfort as we confronted our truths. We also studied the extant literature to learn about analytic inquiry since our work, followed some tenets of this research method. We conducted our work in three phases. In the third phase of our study we documented what we believed were significant, problematic issues in the course and responded to each other's and our own assumptions. Our reflections helped us establish the value of collaborative analytic inquiry to create space for self-study. In the process of our work we came to recognize that the broad themes in our research, although not generalizable, might occur in any teaching context.

Keywords

Collaborative Analytic Inquiry, Key Events, Meaning-Making, Qualitative Methods Course

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Exploring Perceptions of Key Events in a Qualitative Research Class: Applying Some Principles of Collaborative Analytic Inquiry in Practice

Janet C. Richards and Steve Haberlin
University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, USA

Little research portrays collaborative analytic inquiry in practice. Drawing on our dual lenses, we, a professor and a doctoral student in an advanced qualitative methods course, applied principles of collaborative analytic inquiry to construct new understandings about key events that occurred during an advanced qualitative research class. Using asynchronous e-mail communication, we shared, affirmed, and questioned each other's and our own storied recollections of moments of joy and learning intertwined with some challenging issues¹. To begin our inquiry, we planned and negotiated our responsibilities, voiced our concerns and questions pertinent to the project, and avowed our willingness to risk emotional vulnerability and discomfort as we confronted our truths. We also studied the extant literature to learn about analytic inquiry since our work, followed some tenets of this research method. We conducted our work in three phases. In the third phase of our study we documented what we believed were significant, problematic issues in the course and responded to each other's and our own assumptions. Our reflections helped us establish the value of collaborative analytic inquiry to create space for self-study. In the process of our work we came to recognize that the broad themes in our research, although not generalizable, might occur in any teaching context. Keywords: Collaborative Analytic Inquiry, Key Events, Meaning-Making, Qualitative Methods Course

Truth is not to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110)

Overview

We are a professor of an advanced qualitative research course (Janet) and a doctoral student in the class (Steve). In this paper we describe how we employed some principles of collaborative analytic inquiry and asynchronous e-mail communication to respond to each other's and our own recollections of key events that occurred throughout the semester. Our partnership took place immediately after the semester ended when our impressions of events remained vivid and we could look back on our experiences to "recall, consider, and reconsider ...[our] thoughts" (Rubinstein-Avila & Maranzana, 2015, p. 245) (also see Hickson, 2011).

Inviting a Fellow Traveler to Join the Inquiry

Knowing inquiry is a knowledge-building journey, as the professor of the class, I (Janet) was committed to reflexively uncovering and considering key events in the class that were

¹ Note: all student names are pseudonyms.

sometimes troubling to me and perhaps students in the class. I considered this venture as a type of self-study because I recognized I needed to know more about my performance as a teacher of qualitative research. But, I needed a way of seeing beyond my own views- a sounding board –another voice and fellow traveler – some “other” to help me in my journey of coming to know. Therefore, I invited Steve to engage with me in the research to provide insights only available through collaboration. A number of reasons prompted me to ask him to join me in the study. I knew Steve well. He was a doctoral student in two of my qualitative courses. He was keenly interested in research, had good observation skills, and regularly e-mailed me his impressions of significant moments in the advanced qualitative class. I recognized we would make good partners and I trusted his insights. We also have similar writing styles. We write to see what happens, to come to know, to discover, rather than plan out everything ahead of time. And, we trust ourselves to find our way in our writing journey. Equally important, Steve had his own concerns about course events to untangle and sort out. Thus, I believed our teamwork would benefit both of us.

Why Collaborative Analytic Inquiry?

Scholars characterize inquiries along a continuum. For example, at the emotive end of the spectrum, evocative researchers bridge the gap between the aesthetic and biography. They write stories about highly emotional personal experiences, such as loss and pain that “move the reader to feel the feelings of the other” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744). Falling on the analytic side of the scale, other researchers engage in a style of exploration that is more cognitive and useful for purposeful analysis of events (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Our aim was to explore, and make sense of our perceptions of significant incidents in a qualitative research class. Therefore, considering our research as a type of self-study, we deemed it appropriate to turn to a more traditional form of self-reflection and writing. “There are many ways analysis via self-study may be accomplished, and the term collaborative analytic inquiry applies to such possibilities.

To structure our analysis, we used the following principles set forth by Anderson (2006). We participated in critical reflection, presented philosophical perspectives to support our inquiry, and reflexively dialogued with each other. However, when we neared the conclusion of our journey, we made a decision to forgo what Anderson (2006) recommends as the finale. In keeping with our postmodern philosophical orientations, we considered it inappropriate to develop and present theoretical understandings of our discoveries and understandings to broader social phenomena. Along with Ellis and Bochner (2006), we have difficulties making positivist statements about the world, or producing theory from any form of qualitative research. Adhering to Ellis and Bochner’s (2006) claim, we believe there are many truths and consequently we want to “encourage multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings, and plural voices” (p. 438). Thus, we cannot reach conclusions “about the human condition or something that holds true for all people at all time” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 438). However, we admit while our discoveries are situated within our own contextual experiences, similar occurrences might hold true in the context of the larger social and cultural landscape. For example, student-student and student-teacher interactions are often fraught with tension in every teaching/learning context.

Writing as Inquiry

Throughout our journey of self in relationship with each other we were mindful of Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2005) powerful view of “writing as inquiry.” Writing and informally talking about our writing with each other (e.g., prior to class, a few phone

conversations, a meeting in Janet's home), forced us to make our thinking transparent and exposed our socially constructed beliefs and values as they applied to our realities. Writing also allowed us to confront our vulnerabilities by reconsidering and questioning our personal perspectives about the moments and dynamics we considered important in the class (see Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Sawyer, Norris, & Lund 2012). Interpreted through Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) notions of rhizomes (i.e., a continually growing root system), our writing partnership helped us consider fresh viewpoints and opened up new entry points concerning our perceptions and beliefs (Boghossian, 2016). Consequently, as we wrote, we gained insights that served as a vantage point heuristic to help us understand each other and ourselves. In other words, our shared communication served as a source of raw material for our subsequent processing (Ingold, 2011).

Taking First Steps

At the close of the semester, prior to initiating the inquiry, we spent approximately a month exchanging e-mails about how to structure the study. We collected our thoughts about our research efforts, delineated responsibilities, and discussed issues of concern.

Janet: Those who engage in collaborative inquiry speak about the importance of finding "the right fellow traveler" (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). Steve, I know you and I will be great fellow travelers. We're both captivated by qualitative research and we're avid writers with similar writing behaviors. We already have a good working relationship - you as my student and I as your professor in two qualitative research classes. And we both want to revisit and make sense of events that took place in the advanced qualitative class. But, we still need to make sure we know "the rules" of what we call "collaborative analytic inquiry," and apply these ideas to our study. Gershon (2009) states, "It is...somewhat surprising that with a few notable exceptions... almost all qualitative studies have tended not to make explicit... the ways in which co-authors work together" (p. xviii). Let's heed what Gershon says. Without a doubt our separate realities and interpretations of events may vary. So, as a first step, we need to consider and make explicit how we will react if one of us challenges the other's interpretations of events.

Steve: I agree we'll work well together because we already have formed a good relationship this past year in two qualitative classes. To tell the truth, I don't know how we'll work out any differences we may have until we have to work out our differences. But, I'm not concerned about challenging each other. I have confidence we can work things out. Yet, we do need to find out more info about inquiry. I want to read more -learn from those who have traveled this road before us. For instance, Martinez and Andreatta (2015) offer some good points in their analytic collaborative autoethnography. They wrote separate autoethnographies, read each other's stories, asked questions, and honestly answered those questions. We don't plan to write an autoethnography. Our work is not autoethnographic. but I have confidence we'll be honest.

Janet: I like the part you wrote about honesty- honesty as we each know it according to our perceptions of the world. Now, as Gershon (2009) advises, I want to share some more questions and concerns I have prior to beginning our collaboration. How much should we/can we each reveal about ourselves to each other? Does being honest mean telling all? For example, Ellis (2007) cautioned two students who contributed to her work to not share anything they would later regret "because they might be concerned about how... their professor, saw them" (p. 20). Yet, I think we have to reveal a considerable amount about our beliefs and perceptions to ensure this inquiry is honest and trustworthy. However, being honest might impact our emotional vulnerability. We've got to be aware of vulnerability and still speak the truth. It's an act of faith.

Another big issue we've got to figure out is how we can disclose what we each perceive as key events in the class when significant moments, in all probability, will often involve students in the class. Ethically my concern is the involuntary participation of study participants. Ellis (2007) describes this dilemma as "situational ethics" arising from moments in the field that require researchers to act from their hearts and minds and acknowledge their interpersonal bonds to others" (p. 4). It is almost inevitable students will be "implicated in our stories" (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013, p. 13). If and when that happens we have to delete all mention of events tied to these students, or we need to get students' permission to involve them in our inquiry. Perhaps we might use pseudonyms. That might work. We don't need to submit an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol because the IRB doesn't consider this study as research since it involves our own perceptions. But we need to be especially cautious with what we reveal, as there are always ethical tensions in qualitative research connected to the confidentiality and privacy of study participants. IRB Human Subjects Guidelines note that invasion and/or privacy or breach of confidentiality can be ethically wrong or present risk of harm to participants. For instance, I worry participants might be alienated from friends, lose jobs, or feel embarrassed or guilty. I also have a concern that makes me think of the post-structuralist, Foucault. Foucault (1980) argues power is relationships - meaning power determines relationships at any given time. I dislike acknowledging this because it sounds hubristic but, whether we consciously admit this or not, as the instructor of the course, I am the one who has power since you are a student. Because of power differentials, I might dominate the inquiry and repress your voice. I worry you will keep silent about how I, as the professor of the course, might have contributed to some of the low points and challenges in the semester. Please don't think you'll hurt my feelings if you speak the truth as you see it. One last comment: might the blending of our separate voices be misread as a narcissistic, navel gazing partnership? How do we guard against self-absorbed solipsism?

Steve: I, too, am concerned about the involuntary inclusion of students in the class. Yet, how do we give detailed accounts of key events without implicating them in the process? Perhaps Johnson's (1982) advice on "ethical proofreading" can help. Prior to publishing qualitative research, she suggests reviewing the article's language to ensure it is descriptive as opposed to judgmental, providing context for unflattering descriptions, and asking some of the participants to read the manuscript to check for accuracy and provide feedback. She also suggests researchers should review the article's language to ensure it is descriptive as opposed to judgmental, provide context for unflattering descriptions, and ask some of the participants to read the manuscript to check for accuracy and provide feedback. We engaged in member checking by e-mailing a copy of the article to participants, of which only one replied. The participant held some different perspectives (e.g., students that should be highlighted in the writing) but generally agreed with our depiction of the course experiences. Besides all of these checkpoints, let's make sure to remove certain material, or provide amorphous accounts to avoid implicating students. One of the positives of a collaboration is we have each other to crosscheck these ethical decisions.

Of course, power does play a part in this collaboration. I will do my best to be truthful with my reflections. Though, I must admit I worry slightly about having my voice repressed in this process. As we move along in the piece will my "writing voice" be suppressed, or molded to fit your writing style, or preference? But, power, as Foucault (1980) argued, is not simply a negative or repressive thing that makes us do things against our wishes. Power can serve as a productive, positive force. In our writing collaboration, I believe the power you possess as my professor will probably entice me to work harder, write better, improve my skills, and push me out of my comfort zone---and I believe this process has already begun. And, I think our best defense against solipsism is to make sense of our individual and collective narratives but also help provide meaning, depth, and value for others who might read this work.

Moving Forward on the Journey: Studying the Extant Literature: Phase Two

Once we figured out our responsibilities and made a pact to be honest, even if honesty caused us discomfort, our next step was to determine how we might proceed. Therefore, we carefully studied the extant literature and collaborated on what information to include. Since there is not sufficient information about what collaborative analytic inquiry entails, our mission was to learn as much as we could about a methodology in which researchers engage in analysis of a community to which they belong. Accordingly, we read Carolyn Ellis' writings on autoethnography (2004, 2007, 2009) and Ellis and Bochner's *Communication as Autoethnography* (2006). In addition, we studied Laurel Richardson's (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) and Norman Denzin's work (1989), and chapters in Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis's *Handbook of Autoethnography* (2013) that briefly mentions and minimally describes analytic autoethnography. We also examined Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez's (2013) informative text, *Collaborative Autoethnography* in which they offer tantalizing tidbits about analytic inquiry. Then, concentrating solely on collaborative inquiry, we read Gates' (2014), paper entitled, *Un/comfortable Collaborative Inquiry*. Gates discusses pitfalls of collaborative inquiry, such as being afraid to tell the truth because the truth may be painful to a writing partner and withholding views on points of disagreement so as not to offend a co-writer. We also learned collaborative inquiry has possibilities for deep discussion and opportunities for challenging a writing partner's existing ideas beliefs and therefore offers generative possibilities and shared understanding (Gates, 2014).

As we continued to discuss Leon Anderson's (2006) article entitled "Analytic Autoethnography," we recognized his ideas characterized some dimensions of our work as we envisioned it. For example, we were full members of the research community and planned to be visible in the study. We also intended to engage in critical reflexivity that would lead us to deeper levels of analysis and meaning making (see Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). Our only philosophical concern was the final step proposed by Anderson (2006) - linking what we discovered about ourselves and others to wider cultural, political, and social concerns (see Adams et al., 2015; Anderson, 2006). Instead, we sought to reflect postmodern practices by regarding our experiences as unique to our context. However, at the same time, we also recognized the larger discourses and practices of our world might be applicable to other teaching situations. Our readings also helped us recognize that (1) two theoretical perspectives particularly situated and supported our inquiry interdisciplinary symbolic interactionism with postmodern propensities (Bochner & Ellis, 2001); and, (2) the discipline of phenomenology that in part studies an individual's lived experiences (i.e., phenomena) from a first-person point of view (Bayne & Montague, 2011). In the following section we briefly describe these philosophical approaches and connect their ideas to our research.

Symbolic Interactionism

Introduced by George Herbert Mead in the 1920s, symbolic interactionism asserts human beings act in a manner that matches their interpretation of the meaning of their world. As individuals interact within their social context they generate meaning in relationship to what they experienced (Carlson, 2013; Reynolds, 2003). Succinctly stated, the meaning people make of things emerges from social interaction with others. Symbolic interaction theory addresses the subjective meanings people impose on objects, events, and behaviors. Subjective meanings are significant because it is believed people behave based according to what they believe and not just on what is objectively true. These meanings are addressed and modified through an interpretive process. In particular, symbolic interactionism offers a pivotal assumption that embodies collaborative inquiry - the importance of social interaction.

Phenomenology

Based on Husserl's (1982) phenomenological philosophy, phenomenology emphasizes the meaning people make of their lived experiences and strives to understand their perceptions of lived experiences (Bartholomew, Gundel, & Kantamneni, 2015). Calling it "descriptive psychology," Husserl positioned phenomenological work as a systematic study of the content of one's experiences (Kaüfer & Chemero, 2015). Exemplary phenomenological researchers possess open, curious minds that blend meaning of experience, psychology, and the content of study participants' conscious expressions (Bartholomew, Gundel, & Kantamneni, 2015; Finlay, 2014). As Finlay (2014) sees it, the challenge for researchers is to go beyond what they already think they know, and "remain open to new understandings" (p. 122). In essence, researchers must "bracket" aside their habitual understanding. In this way, researchers develop a persona of openness, a capacity to be surprised and aware of unexpected and unpredictable phenomena (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nystrom, 2008). Consequently, rather than entering our relationship with preconceived notions, as collaborative inquirers we must keep an open mind to what might emerge from our own reflections and individual and collective interpretations of the data.

Turning Inward: Studying Ourselves: Phase Three

Janet: Now we've entered phase three of the inquiry Steve and crossed what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) call a plateau, emphasizing that a plateau is always in the middle of what one is trying to accomplish. In this final phase, we move on and study our perceptions of key events in the course. I'd like us to begin with the text I chose. My thinking was (and is) that I needed to make a radical shift and offer my advanced qualitative students some theoretical ideas beyond constant comparative methods to analyze data. I chose post-structuralist theories because they provide theory to support one's research.

But, the post-structuralist philosophies of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and the like, were difficult for me to understand unless I engaged in considerable repeated, close readings. I worried constantly that students hated this text and were sorry they had to purchase it because they could not get any meaning from it. Perhaps other faculty worry about the texts they choose. Other than Samuel, the brilliant, young man who seemed to know everything about the post-structuralists, until mid-semester, students in our class struggled to comprehend each chapter. But by mid-semester, they included notions, and theories from the text in their mini research projects and by the end of the semester, all students inserted concepts from the text into their presentations. Regardless, I messed up because I did not offer sufficient guidance early in the semester. Looking back, I expected students to read and understand the text on their own. My expectations were too high.

Steve: I certainly don't believe you "messed up." As Iftody (2013) notes, the idea of learning through experience can be described as the art of being present and the willingness to get in touch with our worlds. What would be worse is, as a professor of the class, you remained ignorant of the fact that students struggled and needed your help early in the semester--- or you dismissed the notion that students at the doctoral level even needed assistance, that they should be able to figure it out on their own. Rather, you are now in a position to take what you learned regarding the text and use it to better teach incoming students in your next advanced qualitative class. You wanted to keep students on the cutting edge of the field, and anytime you push the limits, you risk challenges and the inevitably learning curve. But I'm not implying students should not struggle in their studies.

Janet: Steve, remember, you can't hold back your thoughts, like Gates (2014) writes about. You did give me a different way of looking at my actions. But seriously, how did you

feel about the text? Remember, we already discussed Foucault's ideas about power and relationships. You can and must be honest with me. We need to look deeply into ourselves to discover our innermost thoughts, so we see where "those thoughts might take us, separately and together" (Wyatt, Gale, Gannon, & Davies, 2011, p. 134).

Steve: You're right. My biggest challenges during the course involved making sense of the Jackson and Mazzei (2012) text and comprehending the post-structural theorists and figuring out how to implement this knowledge in research. But it's not because you didn't help us understand the ideas. When I first read the text, it felt like I was reading in a foreign language; the ideas were completely alien to me. The authors contend that in using the theorists' ideas on power, gender, desire, and other concepts, one could graduate from traditional approaches to data analysis, such as constant comparative methods and interpret the data through the lens of these philosophers to gain much richer meaning. The problem was that, as an emerging scholar, I was still gaining familiarity with constant comparative methods and not quite ready to embrace the "next best thing." Second, I was unfamiliar with the theorists in the text. Therefore, how could I analyze data through their eyes when I really didn't understand what they wanted me to see? After many close readings and class discussions, including one with an awesome guest lecturer you invited--a professor who employed post-structural analysis in his work-- I began to grasp the concepts. I even used Derrida's (1978) ideas when scrutinizing data for my third mini-inquiry. By the last day of the course, I actually felt like I had a decent understanding of how to use post-structuralist ideas in my work. I truly believe most everyone seemed much more comfortable with post-structural ideas and how to use them. You pushed us out of our comfort zones and, though it was challenging and took time, learning took place. Research suggests students engage higher levels of engagement and learning when faculty members challenge students academically, and value enriching educational experiences (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). And the final presentations showed a quantum leap in our thinking level/data analysis...what a difference from the start of the course. As scholars question the level of rigor in college classrooms, for learning and growth to happen in academia, students must experience some type of challenge, questioning of assumptions, struggle with understanding and dissonance (Campbell & Dortch, in press). Nevertheless, Janet, I think professors might worry that if they challenge students too much, course evaluations will suffer.

Janet: You are right about professors being concerned about their course evaluations. But I still think I could have done better. As I've said in class, I don't consider post-structuralism as "the next best thing." Rather, post-structuralism is just one of a number of ways (along with constant comparative methods) to analyze data. For example, some scholars believe constant comparative methods do not tell the entire story of an inquiry because this data analysis approach looks for what is and ignores what is not (of course no inquiry can reveal the complete story). Anyway, I now use "post" theories and concepts when appropriate, to support ideas and statements I make in my research. Now think about these questions. How might I have met Samuel's learning needs? What was the biggest issue you for you in the class? Did you hear other students complaining about the text? Maybe I worry about my students too much.

Steve: Your question regarding Samuel's learning needs made me smile and think of the elementary gifted students I teach. Like Samuel, they are far advanced intellectually, but must often "suffer" through the curriculum at the same pace as classmates; I think this is unfair. Samuel, and students like him, would benefit from the principles laid out by Cross (2015) in a student's Bill of Rights (gifted or otherwise). Among these rights, students need access to a rigorous, complex, and challenging curriculum and should be able to accelerate through the curriculum at an appropriate pace. In addition, they should have choices in what to study and how to pursue that learning. For Samuel, this might involve studying post-structuralist theorists

or theoretical frameworks with which he was unfamiliar or wanted to further explore for dissertation purposes. It could mean asking him if he would like to assist in the instruction of the course—he would have been a wonderful tutor for students struggling to understand the text. Of course, these are merely suggestions. My “biggest” issue in class also related to a lack of differentiation. At times, the overall pacing of the course felt too slow me. It felt like I was always waiting...*waiting* for classmates to finish their work, *waiting* for them to present—so I could present again. Personally, I wanted to move faster, to learn more, present more, and share more. Unfortunately, the situation reminded me of research suggesting advanced students often spend a quarter to half the school day waiting for classmates to catch up (Webb & Latimer, 1993). It’s frustrating since I didn’t have control over how fast the course moved, or the curriculum, and I didn’t want to say anything to you since I might upset or offend you. So, I slowed myself down to meet the pace of the class. While completing a fourth inquiry project would be challenging given time constraints, I wasn’t entirely opposed to the idea—since it would allow me to further refine my skills. Nevertheless, this would have caused problems for others in the class who were trying to meet the minimum requirements. Oh yes, I heard a few complaints about the text but not many. Classmates said it was just too hard to understand. At least one student said she needed to learn more about the basics of data analysis (i.e., constant comparative methods) rather than spend time on “post” endeavors. But not to worry—anytime you challenge students, there’s sure to be some kickback, some resistance.

Janet: You mention how some students slowed you down. I agree that this was a BIG issue with me - they slowed down other students and me too. That happens sometimes in the advanced qualitative course because students have varying experiences in the prerequisite class. My opinion is that some learn a lot, and some don’t and those who lack prerequisite understanding need a review. However, in our class there were not only some students with varying learning experiences and understanding. A few were unmotivated students. They were often late to class and they were absent too much. In fact, Maya, the student who sat next to me in class, whispered to me one night, “Dr. R., too many students are always late.”

So, that’s the night I made this announcement – “Students are complaining that other students are often late. Please attend class on time.” But the late students continued to be late; they did not seem concerned about my announcement. They continued to be late.

Steve, do you notice a pattern here with me? I do. Writing to enact these memories helps me make sense of my attitudes and behaviors in class. In my mind’s eye I can even see myself in the classroom, where I stood, where I sat- what I said. And now I am remembering another inquiry I conducted in which I discovered I wanted all my qualitative methods students to be happy and I trusted them to do their best (Richards, 2011). It appears I don’t want to be the “bad guy.” Actually, Maya mentioned that I’m too nice. But do I have to stand with an attendance sheet in my hand, and mark people present, absent, and late? Maybe I do have to take attendance. As I write this I had another thought. When one student (more than once) kept looking at a personal laptop computer screen I knew that student wasn’t taking notes. That student was reading and responding to e-mail. I know this because I walked over and stood behind the student. But did I say anything?? No, I did not! Notice the pattern? As I write this I’m annoyed with my behavior. I am not a wimp at all. I am confident and outspoken, but I am also caring of my students. I think many faculty struggle with these disparate feelings. Sometimes caring about students can be difficult (Richards, 2011). And when you care a lot you make some mistakes, like I did. I let inappropriate behavior go on. And, in retrospect, I know I did not show the feelings I had when a few students acted like they didn’t care. Again, I turn to Foucault —if I have the power, I must use it wisely. Good teachers hold students responsible (Linsin 2014).

Steve: Yes, I remember the night you reminded students to show up on time. I thought, “Wait, aren’t we doctoral students? Should she really have to remind us of the class starting time?”

I understand people are busy; things come up. But habitual lateness was certainly a problem. I think there is such a thing as “being too nice.” Since I am a teacher of young children, this is something I had to learn as well. Perhaps it is human nature for others to take advantage of one’s kindness. The challenge is you want to be nice and want your students to be happy, yet you must be firm. To further understand your dilemma, I read Hirschi’s Social Control Theory (1969), which posits all people have a tendency toward deviancy unless they feel strong bonds to a community. Maybe some of the students (particularly ones that had not taken your prerequisite class) failed to feel a connection to the classroom community, to each other, and/or yourself? Seeing we only spent a few hours together a week, a bond might not have been established. I definitely did not feel the camaraderie experienced during the prerequisite course I took with you the previous semester where for some reason the students “jelled.” While wanting your students to be happy and feel supported, perhaps this is translating—or at least being perceived by students— as lower expectations, which can result in less supportive teacher-student relationships (Demant & Van Houtte, 2012). According to Social Control Theory, these non-cohesive relations lead to less-than-desirable behavior, which is what you experienced with your students during the course.

One thing that especially bothered me also involved that particular student—let’s call him Shawn—whom I perceived as acting disrespectful to you and classmates. For instance, when you spoke, or students presented their inquiries, he had his head buried into his laptop, presumably typing e-mails or writing papers for other classes (though, as a researcher, I should not speculate). Judging from his facial expressions and lack of participation in discussions, Shawn had no interest in being there. Worse, when he presented projects, he “talked more about himself. Since Shawn tainted every topic with his self-interests, so many opportunities for learning were lost. For example, during a presentation about an ethnography Shawn and his project partner had read, Shawn bashed the book, simply saying he totally disagreed with the perspective of the author. Rather, as a student of qualitative research, I had hoped we would discuss the author’s methodology including participation observation, note-taking, and data analysis. While normally a patient person, I found my patience wearing thin on more than one occasion.

Actually, I don’t think Shawn meant to purposely annoy or frustrate classmates. As Lett (2014) notes, “sometimes it feels as if the accused person is actually thinking, ‘If I do this particularly obnoxious thing, I will ruin someone’s day’ but, in all honesty, this is probably not the case” (p. 12). Nonetheless, this kind of student can harm the overall morale of the class and make change the dynamics of the class. And as a student myself, what can I do about it? If I say something to this student, it would just create hard feelings, possibly backfire, and possibly make others uncomfortable. As the instructor of the class, I suppose you could be “harder” on this student—but, likewise, it could create animosity or a negative environment.

Janet: I wished every week Shawn would shape up by himself but that didn’t happen. Foucault (1980) would tell me I did not use my knowledge and power wisely with Shawn. Therefore, I failed Shawn and the entire class. I’ve got to remember – with knowledge and power come responsibilities, and I have to accept those responsibilities. I needed to meet with Shawn early in the semester and set some boundaries.

Steve: I now also notice a pattern with me. While I learned much during the course, my high points during this time—as well as much learning-- actually emanated from outside activities related to class. For instance, after several weeks into the course, you asked me to present one of my projects (an oral history I wrote) to students in a beginning qualitative class.

Following my presentation, I can remember your exact words. You told students, “Steve’s only in his second semester as a doctorate student. He has an affinity for qualitative research.”

Honestly, I enjoyed the praise—and the experience validated for me that I had produced high-quality work. The opportunity to share my work provided other benefits. I had to prepare for the presentation. This meant deciding how to arrange my material—what to leave in, what to take out—what visual aids to utilize (I settled on black and white images to produce the right tone), and how to package my presentation via PowerPoint. The experience also honed my public speaking skills—I reminded myself to make eye contact, speak clearly, and smile. In addition, I had to field questions from the audience.

A second-high point came when you asked me to collaborate on projects, such as the arts-based inquiry I had initiated on my own, as well as this inquiry. I believed at this point in the course I had made major strides in my ability as a qualitative researcher; I knew instinctively if you-- someone who prolifically published research-- respected my work enough to want to become part of it, then I had truly reached a new level. The idea of collaborating with the instructor on an inquiry excited and inspired me. These outside activities pushed my abilities and learning way beyond classroom learning. For instance, for this collaborative autoethnography, I read books on the subject and immersed myself in the genre. I have revised and edited with you. I have received personalized feedback and guidance, which does not normally happen within the confines of the classroom. Actually, I have learned as much or more from you outside of class as I have within it. I wish I had more opportunities to work with other faculty outside of class. But small or individual group mentoring never seems to happen. Yet, prominent scholars such as Bochner (2014) describe the immense influence professors have on their academic and personal lives through close mentorship and spending additional time with doctoral students.

Janet: You’re correct. Students usually learn more from authentic interactions and experiences with a more advanced “other.” For example, consider Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. And—I just had a thought—in a way our writing together in this inquiry embodies Vygotsky’s developmental theory. I learned from you – you learned from me. Through our recollections we provided space for our own thoughts opinions, and questions to emerge. Therefore, we are each other’s more knowledgeable other. Now it’s time to make more sense of our work.

Steve: I make sense of our work in these ways. Perhaps I suffered from extremely high (unrealistic?) expectations. I wanted to progress faster through the course and I expected classmates to do the same. Since I was able to fairly easily complete three, authentic mini-research projects, I expected others to follow my lead. My expectations failed to consider that students learn at different rates and speeds, and those in the class, possessed varying levels of experience. And, despite the post-structuralists’ theories being difficult for even you to comprehend, you (perhaps unrealistically) expected your students to grasp the material. I recall you stating that even some of your colleagues in the qualitative field questioned your lofty goals with post-structuralist theories. Not only did students have to apply these higher-level concepts in their research but also as you stated, you “expected students to read and understand the text on their own.”

Janet: Steve, I believe you are right. I do expect my students to rise to the occasion. I have hubristic tendencies and have published previously about my hubris as a professor of a qualitative #1 class. I think, “If I can do it- surely my students can do it also.” So, I need to be aware of my over confident, brash proclivities. On the other hand, I learned through your description of Shawn’s behavior in class, I needed to take action and not be a wimp. As you mentioned, there is a possibility he was not aware of his impolite actions and retorts. He needed some help and guidance and I failed to provide support. I only remember being mad at him and doing nothing about his behavior and negative attitude.

Ending the Journey

Janet: We're at the end of our journey for now Steve. I know we revealed our honest feelings and perceptions. Our work is trustworthy. The data are authentic. We followed reliable collaborative processes and showed these processes clearly. In particular, writing back and forth to each other enabled us to challenge each other's views and assumptions and consider and reconsider our thinking. We documented our perceptions of key events in the class. We read and read our accounts, pinpointing words and phrases that illuminated the specifics of the event. We discussed our individual and joint interpretations and incidences. In addition, we presented this work at an informal qualitative symposium. In the audience were five of my colleagues and some doctoral students --one was Samuel, the student in the class we discuss in this paper. All agreed on the verisimilitude of our work. We also sent this paper to members of the class and Maya wrote back that she thought our work was "spot on." She also cautioned us about not revealing too much about Shawn, so we removed a few descriptors about him. We made our thinking transparent to help others understand collaborative analytic inquiry in practice. We also followed ethical steps to protect others presented in our work, analyzed and interpreted the meaning of our personal experiences, and included extant literature (see Ellis, Adams, & Buchner 2011). Now I am going to bring up the topic of generalizability again. You know scholars such as Ellis and Bochner (2006) believe it is inappropriate for any qualitative study to produce theory that is generalizable. I was awake last night worrying about Anderson's (2006) assertion that analytic inquiry should produce theory. As you know I've been dragging my feet about this final phase of our collaboration. Now I've made a decision that makes me comfortable and I wonder if you feel the same way. Making broad conclusions that emanate from our work just did not seem right to me. I reject this positivistic goal. Ellis and Bochner (2006) say there will always be an assumption on the part of a few qualitative researchers that "one must go beyond particular and immediate experience... to reach some conclusion about the human condition or something that holds true for all people all of the time" (p. 438). I have to say I agree with Ellis and Bochner. And even Anderson (2006) himself notes not all qualitative research is explicitly or self-consciously committed to addressing general theoretical issues.

Steve: Janet I agree with you. I, too, read and reread the opposite arguments presented by Anderson (2006) and Ellis and Bochner (2006), and I always believed our original intent was to engage in a discussion to make greater meaning of our experiences, to sort things out -- not to produce theory that generalizes. I never once thought we intended to have the final word. We employed the following principles of analytic collaborative autoethnography because of our research aim - to explore issues related to an advanced qualitative class through self-study rather than to intentionally ponder emotional experiences.

Janet: It's interesting Steve that you mention emotional experiences. Now, as I look back on what I was feeling during some parts of the class, I realize, (although as I stated I never showed this in class), I felt hurt and betrayed by students who habitually came late to class and by a student's rude behavior. This collaborative writing as inquiry with you brought these feelings to the forefront. I also now know I have to change my way of dealing with recalcitrant students. I cannot ignore them, cross my fingers, and wish for the best. I have to take action.

So, to summarize, we employed some principles of collaborative analytic inquiry because of our research aim - to explore issues related to an advanced qualitative class through self-study. Specifically, we engaged in the following practices in three phases:

Phase 1: Prior to writing we engaged in considerable face-to-face and asynchronous e-mail reflection and discussion. We also considered possible impediments to our partnership since it entailed a student/teacher relationship, which we knew might cause power role difficulties.

Phase 2: We turned to the extant literature and reflected about the differences between analytic autoethnography and collaborative analytic inquiry. We concluded we needed to support the study through ideas residing in collaborative inquiry

Phase 3: We conducted the study by discussing our individual notions of key events in the class. Then we wrote back and forth to each other, engaging in reciprocal dialogue to make sense of the events. We also checked and summarized our collaborative analytic processes. As we neared the end of our work, we had an epiphany. We recognized we could continue to reject a positivist notion about generalizing our discoveries as a final truth. Yet at the same time, we could acknowledge human behavior and emotions are universal and are influenced by social context (Wolff, June 2017, personal communication).

Steve: So, you are correct, Janet. We both believe there are no fixed truths. There are only multiple forms of knowing that often are modified over time and with experiences. This brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) use of the term rhizome you mentioned previously in this work. Rhizome refers to concepts and understandings that are always open, reversible, and modifiable, like the discoveries we made in our research. As Dewey (1930) suggested, no mode of inquiry can offer "anything approaching absolute certitude" (n p). Our collaborative analytic inquiry upholds Dewey's views.

Janet: True, Steve. Our perceptions of class experiences, such as: a) some students' disruptive behavior; b) my reluctance to directly confront these students; c) my not meeting Samuel's learning needs, and; d) not providing sufficient guidance to students about our textbook and your feeling slowed down in the class by other students were context specific. However, we also acknowledge (and research on group dynamics affirms this), there is a universality in the nature of difficult behavior in groups (Deerling, 2011). So, yes, as the final step in our inquiry we did not generalize our discoveries to wider social phenomena. However, we came to recognize the broad themes in our research represent phenomena that might apply to other learning contexts.

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Author Note

Janet Richards is a professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning and affiliate faculty in Educational Measurement at the University of South Florida. She is senior editor of *Literacy Research and Practice* and teaches qualitative research courses, including arts-based

research. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: jrichards@usf.edu.

Steven Haberlin, a former teacher of gifted elementary students, is a second year doctoral student in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of South Florida where he is pursuing Certification in qualitative research methods. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: stevhaberlin@yahoo.com.

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