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Teaching Qualitative Research Methods through Service-Learning

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Abstract

This paper is the result of a voluntary service-learning component in a qualitative research methods course. For this course, the service-learning project was the evaluation of the benefits to volunteers whom work a crisis hotline for a local crisis intervention center. The service-learning course model used in this paper most closely resembles the problem-based service-learning course model where students work as consultants. This paper focuses on the processes involved and the benefits to students in improving their qualitative research skills through the service-learning project.

Keywords

Qualitative Research Methods, Service-learning, and Volunteer Program Evaluation

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Teaching Qualitative Research Methods through Service-Learning

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This paper is the result of a voluntary service-learning component in a qualitative research methods course. For this course, the service-learning project was the evaluation of the benefits to volunteers whom work a crisis hotline for a local crisis intervention center. The service-learning course model used in this paper most closely resembles the “problem-based service-learning” course model where students work as consultants. This paper focuses on the processes involved and the benefits to students in improving their qualitative research skills through the service-learning project. Key Words: Qualitative Research Methods, Service-learning, and Volunteer Program Evaluation

Teaching Qualitative Research Methods through Service-Learning

Many qualitative research methods courses demand students work on a class project to encourage the development of basic qualitative skills (e.g., interviewing, analysis, or writing up the research). Involvement in actual studies allows students to confront and resolve issues such as gate keeping, ethical dilemmas, planning the research, entering the field, gathering and analyzing data, rigor of research, and writing the report. One of the core beliefs of the instructor, who is the primary author of this article, is that graduate students learn more about methodology by actively participating as part of a class in a study. Participation can span from conducting a limited literature review, transforming data into information, and writing the report with student reflection throughout the process (Kolb, 1984). To provide such a real-world experience, the instructor integrated a service-learning component into a qualitative research methods course, primarily designed for doctoral students, to provide their students with the

opportunity to fully experience a qualitative study and to aid in the students' personal development as researchers.

Service-learning is a form of experiential education (Furco, 1996) and there are documented efforts to utilize experiential learning activities based on the Kolb's (1984) model to teach qualitative research methods (Hopkinson & Hogg, 2004). Likewise, research about service-learning "tilts heavily toward quantitative studies," (Boyle-Baise, 2002, p. 329) with a focus on perceptions of college students measured through surveys and questionnaires. Qualitative studies that include an element of service-learning are limited and, for example, a search for qualitative studies that included service-learning in the field of multicultural education only yielded 10 results (Boyle-Baise). In this paper the authors describe how the service-learning component was conceptualized and implemented in an effort to expand service-learning literature, particularly pertaining to issues regarding its use as an experiential learning method to teach qualitative research methods

Service-Learning

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse states that there are many definitions of service-learning; however, all definitions have the following components:

Service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity change both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content. (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, n.d., para. 5)

This course fits the model of a "problem-based service-learning course" in which students work individually or in teams work with community partners to "meet specified community needs" which "provide community situations and problems as service-learning opportunities for students" (Schramm, n.d., p. 4). In this model, students often act as consultants to a community organization (Heffernan, 2001).

To find such a community partner, the instructor of the course and the director of the local crisis intervention center met through a mutual associate. The relationship appeared to be a positive one because the director was open to being a community partner and the center was located in close proximity to the institution. Collaboratively the director and the instructor focused on a project to evaluate the benefits to volunteers who work at the center's crisis hotline. This was an ideal project for both parties since it met a need of the center and the flexible schedule of the volunteers to be evaluated would meet the needs of the graduate students enrolled in the course.

Setting the Scene

Students were introduced to the voluntary service-learning component of the project during the first night of class. There were 14 students enrolled in the course and all participated in the service-learning project. The students were informed that the first

six weeks of class would focus on learning the basics of qualitative research and weaving this knowledge into the class project. Reflective journals were a requirement of the course, and guiding questions for the journals were provided to encourage students to internalize the readings, add to their current knowledge base, and broaden their thinking. The reflection piece allowed the students to make the connection between their learning experience and their service in order to meet the general models of a service-learning course. Developing the student skills as researchers was integrated into the journal writing. Understanding how to conduct a study and the reasons for literature review, allowing the focus of the study to give rise to the appropriate methodology, rigor and credibility, and analysis are required learning steps for the metamorphosis of a student into a doctoral researcher. The instructor focused on having the students apply their knowledge to the class project.

During the first six weeks of the course, the director of the crisis intervention center (community partner) and a volunteer specialist gave guest lectures to the class. The director shared the history of the crisis center, discussed crisis and suicide intervention, and described the training of the phone volunteers. He also invited the class to tour the crisis center later in the semester. Having the community partner in the classroom allowed the students to ask questions about the setting and reason for this class service project.

Students also asked questions about the ethics of the study; they wanted to know what the phone volunteers would divulge to them about the callers (e.g., names of individuals that called, suicide calls, calls from individuals with various sexual habits). These questions led to a class discussion about the researcher (students) as the learner, and how the researcher had to learn to set boundaries with the individuals they interviewed during studies. Internal Review Board (IRB) requirements for the university were also discussed and students were given a copy of the university's IRB requirements. This discussion gave rise to the students' reflection question for journals as they began the continuous struggle of ethical dilemmas in qualitative research. Students also learned that the researcher was the tool in qualitative research, and the necessity of addressing various issues – such as how their backgrounds and biases influence studies and the need to acknowledge this to the reader (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Additional reflection questions focused on the student's background, and how this played a part in their thoughts and concerns about the project.

The volunteer specialist discussed various volunteer models, the reasons why individuals volunteer, and how volunteers like to be rewarded for their service. Since this presentation followed the director's lecture, the students were beginning to place the phone volunteers in the context of volunteer models. Thus, the project began to assume meaning for the students. Reflection questions for this week focused on volunteer models.

For the next several weeks, the students focused upon learning the different qualitative research genres and planning the research. Phenomenology was chosen as the research methodology for the class project. As we began planning the research, we reviewed the general guidelines for research studies such as: the introduction to the topic; establishment of each researcher's voice; the review of the literature (theoretical, gaps in the literature); and research questions and methodology (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Most of the students were doctoral-level and had already been introduced to the basic

guidelines for research studies, but had never approached it systemically so they could see the interconnection of the various sections. Reflection questions focused on establishing their voice and why it was necessary to build a story of interest to the readers.

At this point in the course, the students had sufficient background in both qualitative research and the project to be broken into groups. Groups were assigned areas of the literature to review to build the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study. Students were paired up, and were assigned various research areas depending on their interest. The individuals in each group were encouraged to develop a conceptual map and share it with their (partner and eventually with the class).

A class period was used to tour the crisis intervention center, for the students to immerse themselves into the context of the setting. The director gave the class a complete tour of the center, including the library, researcher's offices, break room, "phone room," and how the center kept its volunteers safe. This tour allowed the students the ability to establish a mental relationship with the place in which they would do their interviewing and transcribing (i.e., the crisis center). This was the first solid connection between the students and the class project. Due to the nature of the center, many of the students felt comfortable questioning the director about all types of crisis issues. This questioning period was the time trust between the students and the community partner began to develop. Reciprocity was discussed, and the students experienced a "learning moment" when they understood that they would gather data for the center, and the center would allow them to engage in a study that is generally not available for students. Reflection questions focused on trust between the participants and the researchers.

Field notes were a required assignment for the tour and students later shared these notes with each other. Students were instructed to take field notes about what they observed during the tour; however, no specific guidelines were given. Therefore, students were amazed how different their field notes were and the different spin each student put on their notes. Their reflection assignment focused on how their background and training influenced their field notes, and how this would influence their research as well. Students addressed their comfort level with being in a crisis intervention center and interviewing individuals whom dealt with life and death issues. They were encouraged to focus on whether they were comfortable with the project's focus.

Planning the Research

After the crisis intervention center tour, the class began to share their introductions, review of the literature, and develop their guiding questions. Each student was assigned to develop their own guiding questions based on the literature reviews completed by the class. This assignment gave rise to an intense discussion about what should be asked and why. When the discussion began to focus upon questions that had nothing to do with the literature review, the question would be asked why these questions were being developed, focusing the student back to concepts supported by the literature review and relevance. This activity allowed students to connect the literature review to their methodology (regardless of whether it was quantitative or qualitative). The interactive nature of this course allowed for natural emergence of a "community of practice," in which the students could share their research with others (Rossman & Rallis,

2003, p. 34). Students began to value their community and realize the value of having their work questioned, forcing them to develop a deeper understanding of their study (Rossman & Rallis). Using a community of practice helps develop critical thinking skills and ability to handle and value critiques of research. This community of practice is necessary development for doctoral students as they learn that this network is critical for success as an independent scholar after they complete graduate school.

Developing the interview questions led to a discussion of interviewing styles. As the students discussed their project, they decided to blend the standard open-ended questions with the dialogic interviews. They wanted to use the same questions, but wanted to have a dialog with the volunteers they interviewed. In order to prepare for this process, the instructor paired up the students and had them interview each other and write up their interviews. This activity demonstrated that some of the students were excellent listeners and asked probing questions, and some students just followed the interview guide with no additional probing questions. To expand this activity, one student role-played different roles, such as a mad interviewee, the interviewee whom never really answered the questions, and the classic interviewee who only replied in terse sentences. Reflection questions focused on how to interact with a variety of individuals and address the issue about interviews that yielded no or very limited data.

As the students began to write up the methodology section, the discussion focused on the credibility and quality of the research. We discussed such issues as detailing the data gathering methods, discussing the researcher's credibility, and the triangulation of the data (peer reviewers- multiple analysts). During this activity, the students began to discern that addressing the credibility of the study made the study stronger and more valid and the data more reliable.

Gathering the Data and Analysis

At the crisis center, volunteers were recruited for this project through a center-run newsletter, e-mail, and word of mouth. Volunteers that were recruited gave their availability for interview times to the coordinator at the center. These times were shared with the students, and the students chose interviews based on their time schedule. An application for exemption from the institutional review board was obtained in order to commence with the study.

Students went to the interviews with the university-approved consent form, tape recorder, and notebook for field notes. The consent form was given to each volunteer to read and sign (the volunteers were also given a copy to keep for their own records), and the students explained the volunteers could quit the study at any time. The students interviewed the volunteers outside of class time as class time was spent finishing the methodology and preparing for the analysis of the information.

Most students interviewed volunteers during the day or immediately before the volunteer's shift in the late afternoon. The instructor also interviewed two volunteers so she could share the same experiences as her students. Students were required to transcribe their tapes at the center (a condition of the study), and e-mail their interview and field notes to me. The length of time needed to transcribe one interview and field notes was approximately four hours. Students whom completed an interview used their journals to reflect on the experience. The interview experience resulted in students understanding the

time required in gathering data in a qualitative study and the volume of data gathered. Students with more dialogic interviews ended up with much longer transcriptions, and the data were richer for the effort. Reflection focused on their interviews and how they thought they did as the researcher, what field notes they took, what problems they encountered (e.g., volunteers that showed up late, individuals with heavy accents, volunteers that felt compelled to participate and yet did not want to participate).

All students completed at least one interview within a week, and at the next class session, the instructor distributed a copy of each transcription to each student. Every student thus had 13 transcripts to review and analyze. We used Moustakas' modified van Kaam method for analysis (Moustakas, 1994). This method includes seven steps:

1. listing and preliminary grouping,
2. reduction and elimination,
3. clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents,
4. final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application
5. construct for each co-researcher an individual textual description,
6. construct for each co-researcher an individual structural description, and
7. construct for each research participant a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience.

The analysis was very limited due to the time left in the semester when the analysis began. Students read each transcript, began to break them down, and saw what horizons were emerging. This process required them to use their community of practice; class time was devoted to this process. Most students had at least one more interview before the end of the semester, and we finished up with 23 sets of transcripts and field notes. The rest of the semester was devoted to enhancing the quality and credibility of the qualitative analysis. This included triangulation of data by multiple analysts to strengthen credibility which also assisting in reducing single observer bias (Patton, 1990).

Benefits

Having a class-based research project yields many benefits to students. For many students in the field of social science, this is the first time they have worked through the steps of a research study. Students see how the introduction leads to review of the literature, and how reviewing the literature enables the researcher to find gaps and thus openings for exploration in terms of their research. The literature drives the methodology by mandating which methodology is most appropriate for the study.

Quantitative research is seen by many students in this degree program as the standard of methodology and most of our students have been conditioned to accept such due to its objective nature and control of variables (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Students are led to believe that qualitative methodology lacks rigor or credibility. Yet, through this study, the students were an active part of establishing the rigor in the study. They discussed how their backgrounds could influence their study, and realized the need for an extremely detailed methodology so that the study may be replicated. Through this effort, they began to understand the rigor of qualitative study. If students are taught to critique

qualitative studies by their credibility and rigor, there is a stronger likelihood they will begin to read qualitative studies and incorporate the findings in their own research.

Professional development is one area in which graduate students improve when they participate in a service-learning project in a methodology class (Gunaratna, Johnson, & Steven, 2007). The students gain a chance to work with real data they collect, and play a major part in what would be collected. Students who are leaning toward a qualitative dissertation get their chance to see the volume of data gathered and the time required to analyze that data, and the fact that there is a way to process the data.

One of the biggest benefits to in-class service-learning projects is the development of a community of practice. Most graduate students have limited ties to their classmates in a program, and may have limited time with their graduate committee. But by developing a community through this service-learning component, they have forged relationships with fellow researchers that will continue beyond the course.

The class project also had benefits to the local crisis intervention center. In addition to meeting the criteria from Schramm (n.d.), which was to “meet specified community needs and provide community situations and problems as service-learning opportunities for students,” students also provided services to the local crisis intervention center through the evaluation of the benefits of the center’s volunteers.

The primary benefit to the local crisis intervention agency was the evaluation report about benefits of volunteering to its volunteers. Management of volunteers remains a critical issue for nonprofit and community-based organizations and evaluation of benefits to volunteers is important in order to provide information for program development and management purposes. Furthermore, the local crisis intervention center requires that its volunteers receive specialized training in order to man the phones at the center. It is important that volunteers be benefits to volunteers be adequately reviewed due to the involvement and the substantial amount of resources devoted to their training.

Other benefits to the local crisis intervention center, which are among those listed identified by Schramm (n.d.) include having access to the prestige associated with a university partner, having a partner in social change [and services], and linking community partner practice with academic theory.

Discussion

The class-based research project provided an invaluable experiential learning opportunity for students and met a need for the local crisis intervention center. For the majority of students, this was their first opportunity to actually apply research methods skills. It’s our belief that more opportunities to apply research methods in an experiential learning environment should be provided to students at the doctoral level who are enrolled in research methods courses, either quantitative or qualitative. Additional research should be conducted on teaching methods that employ experiential learning activities designed to give doctoral students opportunities to apply research skills.

This article simultaneously addresses two needs in the literature related to service-learning and qualitative research. The first is the expansion of research about service-learning as a teaching methodology. The service-learning teaching methods that were applied in this course can be emulated in other experiential learning venues such as an internship, fellowship, practicum or cooperative education or field study opportunity.

It also expands the research on the value of experiential learning in teaching qualitative research methods which was a need identified by Hopkinson and Hogg (2004). Like Hopkinson and Hogg, the students enrolled in this course were graduate-level students and the experiential learning (service-learning activity) occurred in a research methods course.

Secondly, this article provides another qualitative study about service-learning. As mentioned previously most service-learning studies have been quantitative (Boyle-Baise, 2002). The incorporation of reflection activities, through journaling, provided an opportunity to gather contextual qualitative data throughout the duration of the course and service-learning experience. Journaling activities allowed students to balance and reconcile their roles of learner and researcher.

Finally, this article provides insight into the benefits of the service-learning experience for both students enrolled in the course and the community partner. As stated, most service-learning research focuses on student outcomes and benefits (Boyle-Baise, 2002). In the case with this article, the benefit for the community partner, local crisis intervention center, is the evaluation report about the benefits of volunteering for the center's volunteers.

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