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Assessing the FACTS: A Mnemonic for Teaching and Learning the Rapid Assessment of Rigor in Qualitative Research Studies

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Abstract

Teaching and learning research appraisal strategies is a challenge in undergraduate education and for practitioners alike. The appraisal of rigor in qualitative research papers is particularly complex and sophisticated work for many undergraduate research students and practitioners who want to develop their critical reading skills. The mnemonic strategy (The FACTS) explained in this paper is one pedagogical strategy for establishing a simplified approach to teaching and learning the appraisal of rigor in qualitative research. While not a comprehensive tool, the FACTS are a useful introduction to the complex challenge of qualitative research appraisal.

Keywords

Pedagogical Strategy, Mnemonic, Research Literacy, Qualitative Research, Research Appraisal

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Assessing the FACTS: A Mnemonic for Teaching and Learning the Rapid Assessment of Rigor in Qualitative Research Studies

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Teaching and learning research appraisal strategies is a challenge in undergraduate education and for practitioners alike. The appraisal of rigor in qualitative research papers is particularly complex and sophisticated work for many undergraduate research students and practitioners who want to develop their critical reading skills. The mnemonic strategy (The FACTS) explained in this paper is one pedagogical strategy for establishing a simplified approach to teaching and learning the appraisal of rigor in qualitative research. While not a comprehensive tool, the FACTS are a useful introduction to the complex challenge of qualitative research appraisal. Keywords: Pedagogical Strategy, Mnemonic, Research Literacy, Qualitative Research, Research Appraisal

Research literacy is an essential competency for nursing practice (Jakubec & Astle, 2013) and consists of the ability of to locate, understand, and critically evaluate evidence for application in practice – a topic distinct from research *capacity* which is the ability to *conduct* research (Jakubec, 2015). Assessing rigor in qualitative research is an important, but challenging, research literacy activity for those in nursing and other health and community practice fields. For nursing students evaluating qualitative research studies and articles can be a challenge with students often mistakenly applying quantitative evaluation techniques to qualitative studies (Locke, Silverman, & Spriduso, 2010).

The purpose, goals and strategies of qualitative research are distinct from quantitative studies; being exploratory rather than explanatory and essentially interested in understanding how people make sense of their lives or experiences and how these experiences are organized or constructed. Qualitative research, thus, becomes a particularly appropriate for the discipline and practice of nursing (Munhall, 2012), and qualitative research literacy requires knowledge and skills for the accurate appraisal of rigor of a study.

There is no one process of ensuring rigor or trustworthiness appropriate for all qualitative studies, but generally the goal of rigor is to accurately represent study participants experiences or circumstances. Several complex frameworks for the appraisal of rigor have been developed over the years (Ryan-Nicols & Will, 2009; Shenton, 2004). While not a comprehensive appraisal, the mnemonic we developed provides a rapid and basic approach to the assessment of the quality of qualitative research studies. In this paper we describe the mnemonic FACTS (Fittingness, Auditability, Credibility, Trustworthiness and Saturation) as a teaching-learning innovation to support appraisal of rigor in qualitative research literacy.

(F)ittingness (also termed transferability) is the ability of the researcher to demonstrate that the findings have meaning to others in similar situations (Beck, 1993). Transferability is dependent on the degree of similarity between two contexts (Koch, 1994). It is not considered the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to provide an “index of transferability,” rather the researcher should assume the responsibility of exhibiting, through data and analysis, the transferability in their research paper. Sandelowski (1986) further elaborated that “a study meets the criterion of fittingness when its findings can [fit] into contexts outside the study situation and when its audience views its findings as meaningful and applicable in terms of their own experiences” (p. 32). This fit may also be considered part of the purpose or relevance of the research – also evaluated as part of appraisal of rigor.

(A)uditability is the systematic record keeping of all methodological decisions, such as a record of the sources of data, sampling, decisions, and analytical procedures and their implementation. This is sometimes referred to as confirmability. Guba and Lincoln (1989) termed this record an “audit trail” (p. 243). An audit trail shows the confirmability of research findings through “a recording of activities over time that another individual can follow... the objective is to illustrate as clearly as possible the evidence and thought processes that led to the conclusions” (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007, p. 49). The audit trail should be sufficiently detailed to make it possible for other researchers to repeat the same enquiry in the same setting should they want to (Beck, 1993).

(C)redibility relates to how vivid and faithful the description of the phenomenon is (Beck, 1993), that is the probability that the study findings will ring true to other people in similar circumstances. Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that a study is credible when it presents such a vivid and faithful description that people who had that experience would immediately recognize it as their own. Thorne (2000) observed that this process involves “immersing oneself in data, engaging with data reflexively, and generating rich descriptions that will enlighten the reader to the deeper essential structures underlying the human experience” (p. 69).

(T)rustworthiness is a concept in qualitative research that encompasses all of the above mentioned steps and refers to the degree of confidence one can have in the data. This assessment addresses the quality or credibility of the data and/or the research paper as a whole. The believability of the overall findings is another aspect of trustworthiness – confidence in the truth in the findings. In this ways both researcher and data credibility are evaluated, along with the dependability and confirmability of the data and overall findings. Taken together these aspects of the evaluation or rigor demand appraisal that the necessary steps have been taken and thoroughly described in a way to ensure that the study procedures meet high standards and that the results can be trusted.

(S)aturation: Data saturation in qualitative research occurs when the researcher is no longer hearing or seeing new information – that there is sufficient data. This can also be referred to as informational redundancy. The example of a soaked sponge that can’t hold more water provides one illustration of saturation, analogizing that adding more data would be of no further consequence to the analysis.

We believe that the research appraisal mnemonic FACTS will support teaching and learning of research literacy and specific appraisal of rigor in qualitative studies. Beyond the teaching-learning benefits, broader consistency in evaluation and literacy of qualitative research may expand the scope of dissemination and utilization of findings in nursing practice. Both the application of the mnemonic and outcomes related to research literacy and utilization will be important next steps for this teaching and learning innovation.

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