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Catching the “Tail/Tale” of Teaching Qualitative Inquiry to Novice Researchers

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Abstract

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Keywords

Qualitative Inquiry Pedagogies, Critical Friends Framework, Teaching Data Analysis, Reflexivity

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Catching the “Tail/Tale” of Teaching Qualitative Inquiry to Novice Researchers

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This article responds to the call for deeper examination of qualitative inquiry teaching practices by presenting representative examples from the pedagogies of three teacher-educators who have taught Qualitative Research Methods courses for the past 15 years. We focus in particular on the pedagogical complexities of teaching data analysis, which is a topic that remains under-theorized and under-represented in contemporary scholarship on qualitative methodologies. Using a critical friends framework, we analyze and synthesize our pedagogical responses to key dilemmas we have encountered in our respective contexts, all state universities, to introducing qualitative inquiry to novice researchers who often enter the analytic process with positivist notions of knowledge creation. They sometimes enter the analytic process with the belief if they can only “catch the tail” of this thing called qualitative research they will be able to “do it right.” Yet, as the metaphor implies, catching a fierce beast by the tail, thinking you can control its actions, can intrude on the inductive and holistic character of the qualitative inquiry process. Keywords: Qualitative Inquiry Pedagogies, Critical Friends Framework, Teaching Data Analysis, Reflexivity

In contemporary higher education, shaped by academic capitalism, teaching qualitative inquiry and analysis is never a neutral practice. As Cannella and Lincoln (2004) and Lincoln and Cannella (2004) remark in their two-part critique of methodological conservatism in contemporary practice, “dangerous discourses” abound. Students learning to be qualitative researchers are disciplined into being “good researchers” that cultivate feelings of desire and satisfaction for absorbing particular norms and “getting it right.” From a critical perspective, teaching in the contemporary academy laden with similar “dangerous discourses,” the act of learning/teaching about data analysis is not immune from the impact of epistemological orientations and the pervasive norms surrounding Colleges of Education. Qualitative inquiry has great potential to be a liberatory space from which to critique those contexts and practices, and yet all efforts to undo and redo the worldview of novice researchers steeped in the subculture of “educator preparation” means those preparing the ground for liberatory thinking and doing must work within/against the surrounding discourses. In such a historical moment, it is important for students’ to be aware and equipped to engage not only with the methodological tools to pursue their research but to understand that how one conceptualizes, approaches, and *believes* one should engage in the research process is also part of the politics of knowledge construction.

We, the authors, have collaborated over the past several years, presenting our work-in-progress at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, and served as “critical friends” for each other as we explored the pedagogical dilemmas and complexities we encountered teaching Qualitative Research Methods courses for past 15 years. We reside at

three different state universities within educator-preparation programs attracting students with similar profiles (students focused on preparing for careers as higher education faculty/administrators, K-12 teachers/administrators, or community educators). Using a Critical Friends framework (Cox, 2003; Humble, A. M., & Sharp, E. 2012; Moore & Carter-Hicks, 2014) we distilled and further analyzed a few representative examples from our pedagogies that have been the most effective over this period of time and contain “tales to tell” about introducing qualitative inquiry to novice researchers who often start off believing that if they can only “catch the tail” of this thing called qualitative research they will be able to “do it right.” Yet, as the metaphor implies, catching a fierce beast by the tail, thinking you can control it’s actions, can be a fatal mistake leading students and faculty who believe they can control the data analysis process by holding on tightly to one part of the beast, to succumb to a misguided positivist notion about knowledge creation. Students’ desire to “do it right” is often the first demonstration of the epistemological stance they inhabit. It presents a pedagogical opportunity to heighten students’ awareness and increase transparency about epistemological and methodological assumptions, a condition that is often lacking in graduate research methods courses in education (Koro-Ljunberg et al., 2009). In this spirit, we position ourselves as social justice educators trained in social foundations and qualitative methodologies using varied interpretivist, critical, feminist, and poststructuralist approaches as we introduce novice researchers to qualitative inquiry. We also practice “getting lost” (Lather, 2007). Our collaboration on this article is evidence of this practice. And we are spurred on by some more recent scholarship calling for more examination of qualitative inquiry teaching practices (Eisenhart & Jurrow, 2011; Hurworth, 2008; Preissle, & deMarrais, 2011).

For the purpose of this “telling” we will focus on strategies used to teach Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA). Teaching data analysis is a topic that remains under-theorized and under-represented in contemporary scholarship on qualitative methodologies (Hsiung, 2008; Wright, 2007). Expanded and deepened discussions with a focus on strategies and approaches for teaching data analysis will benefit the increasing numbers of faculty assigned to teach qualitative research methods classes within colleges/schools of education with the US. Asking ourselves what has been most effective in our courses, as we work within and against dominant mechanistic impulses that often muddy the field, we provide specific examples from our courses within the bounded parameters of a 16 week course, a timeframe that accelerates the pedagogical tensions of working against the flow of positivism as the dominant way of knowing. We focus on creative strategies that encourage novice researchers to work collaboratively on educational issues and questions. By interweaving pedagogies of dialogue and reflexivity we present three strategically creative and critical ways to approach qualitative analysis, including moving beyond meaning-making via traditional coding strategies (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). Although we teach in three different spaces, for the purposes of this article, we represent and share our pedagogical practices collectively.

Cooperation and Collaboration

Cooperation and Collaboration are two related yet distinct pedagogical concepts as they are used in the context of designing learning environments where doctoral students can experiment with catching the “tail/tale” of data analysis in qualitative research. Panitz (1996) uses these terms in a general way to distinguish between learners who happen to be in the same space together engaging in transactions or exchanges that are cooperative and the group dynamics and processes involved in collaboration which demand greater amounts of intentional reflexivity to be present in order for transformative learning to

occur. Collaborative Learning provides opportunities for more than simple cooperation. The learning goals need to be transformed from individual goals to collective goals with both individual and group rewards. Collaborative Reflexivity and Collaborative forms of QDA can be answers to the often dis-satisfying perception that QDA is a lonely and messy task with researchers surrounded by piles of papers and innumerable folders on their computers as they work to discern patterns and meaning in their data. Wyatt and Gale (2014), recently reminded us that “Social scientists are increasingly expected and encouraged to develop collaborations...yet doctoral writing, for example, is, with rare exceptions . . . solitary” (p. 345). Speedy (2012) argues that the “explicit practice of collaborative writing amongst social researchers alters the academic space they inhabit and the ethical know-how that they come by” (p. 349). Gale et al. (2013) and Gale and Wyatt (2008) offer additional examples of the benefits and special challenges related to collaborative writing. To encourage collaborative practice during the process of data analysis requires shaping a pedagogical space where students learn to access their creativity and build their Research Imagination (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2012a). Pedagogical strategies that have worked well in our classes are centered on developing a capacity to imagine.

Pedagogical Strategies: Collaborative Reflexivity and Imagined Dialogues

Collaborative Reflexivity and Imagined Dialogues are a few ways that we attempt to teach students about the data analysis process, where improvisation is valued and mechanization is avoided. Data analysis often includes a struggle to find a coherent story and a quest for an appropriate narrative voice. These tools situate the novice researcher as reflexive narrators. Reflexivity is a dynamic set of processes including building and nurturing a high awareness of self and having the tools and courage to confront one’s interpretations. Forms of Collaborative Reflexivity require an active imagination and learning to be Reflexive in the presence of another involves good prompts/questions as well as individual writing time that can be shared with trusted others for further examination and deeper inquiry. Providing students with a few select definitions or descriptions of the term Reflexivity, along with continuous demonstrations by those teaching qualitative research methods courses of how they negotiate their own self-interrogation, help the novice researcher understand the essential nature of such practices. For example, Reed-Danahay identifies reflexivity as a process of “reflecting critically on self; [the] ability to notice our responses to the self” (1997). And if Reflexivity is understood to be an act of identifying the tacit knowledge of the researcher and the impact various levels of awareness have on a qualitative inquiry project, then the concept of “Relational Reflexivity” as proposed by Parton and O’Byrne (2000) can be useful; namely as a process used by social work practitioners encouraging them to “ask questions about their assumptions that influence the way they engage with their clients” (p. 78). Reflexivity is a dynamic set of processes including building and nurturing a high awareness of self and having the tools and courage to confront one’s interpretations. Intentional pairing of students can help foster different types of relational dynamics that aid the reflexivity process and serve as a stepping-stone to the creation of Imagined Dialogues, which can be used to help Novice Researchers learn about QDA. Students are asked to create a piece of writing where they imagine a dinner party with eight guests. The guests are authors they select from the qualitative research methodology literature and/or other authors who have published qualitative studies. They can only invite eight. The topic of the dinner party conversation is the student’s study, and in particular the Research Questions, the data analysis approaches they used, and their preliminary findings. The eight guests are selected from key items in the literature review portion of the study and the student needs to write an imagined dialogue capturing the dinner party

conversation. Some guiding prompts include: What would these authors say if they were gathered in one place to discuss your study? What happens in the conversation if they reveal their differing theoretical lenses? What would they say to each other? How can you represent in dialogue the meaning they may construct from your data and the ways they may try to argue/persuade others around the table to adopt their version of the meaningfulness of your results? What questions would they raise and how would they question you as well as each other? Once the student has created their Imagined Dialogue they share it with their student-collaborator who has independently written their own Imagined Dialogue about their student-collaborator's study with the same eight authors selected by that student. The two versions of the Imagined Dialogue are discussed and then a third co-authored version is collaboratively created. This process is then recreated with the second student's study at the center. Graduate-level pedagogies, such as these, aimed at strengthening metacognition hold promise for evoking interdisciplinary understandings and possibilities for making meaning of qualitative data (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2012b). Data do not exist "waiting to be collected" (Glaser, 2002, p. 323). Rather, we generate data based on interactions with others within a specific context. Collaborative Reflexivity and Imagined Dialogues have been effective tools in guiding the development of novice researchers' Research Imagination.

Pedagogical Strategy: Analytical Discernment Through Queries and Probes

Besides promoting imagination and dialogue as key to stimulating collaboration and cooperation in the research process; a second pedagogical strategy that can be used to teach qualitative analysis is Analytical Discernment through the use of queries and probes. Asking questions of oneself, each other and the data nurture a quality of discernment in novice researchers and allow for a deeper analysis. Since qualitative research has moved from traditional modes of data gathering through observations and interviews to collecting data through multiple modes, it presents us with opportunities and challenges that are new and unique. Pedagogically, there are questions and issues surrounding how to teach students when it is appropriate to collect multimodal data and how to analyze visual and audio data in order to gain nuanced understandings. Organizing courses to further the aims of critical qualitative research so that students have the opportunity to investigate "blind spots, absences and invisibilities" (Carducci et al., 2013, p. 6), and what Mazzei calls "inhabited silence" (2007), is of high value. For novice researchers to learn to look beyond what "is there" to what is "not there" or what is absent or invisible requires them to bring an awareness of who they are and an attention to their long established habits of "seeing." Students learn the quality of discernment or the art of differentiating between data types to arrive at decisions regarding the relative significance of different data and the connections between them so that a holistic narrative emerges. One way to practice discernment in analysis is to use types of data that go beyond semi-structured interviews, often referred to as the "dominant kind of qualitative study" (Miller & Dingwall, 1997, p. 52). Keeping this in mind, it is important in critical qualitative pedagogy to challenge students to gather data that are not always verbal.

Promoting / Framing a Pedagogy of the Visual

To set the stage for a pedagogy of the visual, students are first asked to brainstorm the types of data they can gather that will allow a fuller understanding of the phenomenon in question. Once a comprehensive list is drawn up, students are asked to work through the limitations of each data type as well as frame the nuanced knowledge it might yield. In promoting a pedagogy of the visual, we focus on photographs, videos, and images gathered or created by participants and/or researchers since they are often possible to gather easily or

already exist in the data collected. By including visual data the first step in learning discernment is to distinguish between “looking” and “seeing.” According to Sturken and Cartwright (2009) seeing is arbitrary in the sense that we see all the time. Looking, in contrast, is directed. Looking (or visuality) is the act of making sense of what we notice in the world (Rose, 2001).

Observing image-based stories

Requesting that students bring some photographs that are part of a “story” from their lives has proven quite effective in helping them discover the possibilities of photographs as data (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2013). Students arrange the photographs on a large poster board. There is freedom to organize photographs in a variety of ways - representational or symbolic. Some students add to the photographs by creating drawings on the poster board or scribbling on the margins. Students read Jackson’s use of diagrammatic representations in social work (Jackson, 2012) and then arrange visual diagrams or timelines around themes such as gender or race identity development. At other times, students depict photographs as external markers of an interior “sense of place” (Luttrell, 2009) or of a critical incident (Jackson, 2012). Before they begin their own narratives, students go around the room and pick one or two “photo-stories” that they find compelling. They then “jot notes” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011) on small index cards and learn to describe what they see and what they think (Babbie, 2012). By distinguishing between description and interpretation, the students become aware of the interlinked nature of the two. They learn to identify their prior assumptions and identify their blind spots. Next, students make a list of questions regarding what they observe in the visual data. Questioning the visual data leads to discerning the two intrinsic types of data in visual research. The first is pre-existing data, which is what we begin with in the class. We then move to distinguishing between participant-generated data and researcher-generated visual data. Students use the photographs and visual images as prompts to interview each other. These interviews in turn yield further prompts for understanding the visual images. A holistic narrative of a phenomenon can emerge with a combination of visual data and interviewing or observation. Since visual data allow for non-verbal expressions, it opens up possibilities of examining emotions and the feelings of participants that may not always be accessible through verbal communication means (Jackson, 2012). As researchers have asserted, visual methodologies offer the possibility of creating empowering platforms that are participant-centered (Kesby, 2000; Pauwels, 2010), a powerful rationale for including it in critical qualitative research pedagogies.

Pedagogical Strategy: Negotiating Contexts and Tensions

A third pedagogical strategy in the practice of critical qualitative pedagogy is negotiating the tensions accompanying the deliberate disruption of “dangerous discourses” (Cannella & Lincoln, 2004) that students bring with them. Good analysis is not mechanistic but everything about class design in traditional formats works to suggest that it is. In this setting, “good” students absorb norms that compel them to cling to ways of learning qualitative research that conform to a more positivist ideal returning time and again to validity checklists and ways of writing that are remarkably similar rather than creative. One of the tensions inherent in teaching critically is the question of how to teach process in a way that supersedes product in an environment that demands certain products as evidence of process? One way might be by giving students two syllabi, a main one with a second that critiques the first as a way to interrupt dominant ways of teaching (Bailey, 2010). A second tension that surfaces in teaching qualitative research is the reality that a 16 week class is

insufficient to interrupt positivist misunderstandings of qualitative approaches or explore at length the complexity of contemporary methodology. Yet recognizing these tensions as opportunities for partially interrupting the dominant research discourses allows for new strategies. For example, one pedagogical strategy is to present certain normative approaches (e.g., triangulation, coding, etc.), and then interrupt them. Creating a series of empirical assertions with evidentiary warrants, then asking students to create statements that directly contradict the first statement and to look for data to support that is one way to present normative approaches and then interrupt them. Discrepant cases or where one theory juxtaposes another are further examples of strategies that can interrupt the dominant discourse and immerse students into the complexities of creating meaning.

Messy Memos

One way to negotiate the tensions of teaching both within and against dominant research discourses is through tools such as the messy memo. An array of analytical, theoretical, and interpretive memos populate qualitative analysis and serve as useful tools for researchers to reflect on, synthesize, theorize, relate, and complicate data and thus are a standard writing tool that can serve any number of critical, interpretivist and post-structural projects. If writing is a way of thinking (Van Maanen, 2011; Wolcott, 1994) then memos catalyze and represent fragments of that process and bring researchers potentially to another layer of theorizing. However, their appearance on a standard syllabus as one of many mechanisms for one's analytic toolbox signals for many students that there is a "right" way to construct a memo and the memos faculty have received over the years often have a polished, performative character constructed for the instructor gaze rather than as a process of thinking that seems to counter the intent. To require students to craft a series of "messy" memos that have incomplete sentences and thoughts and fragments of ideas rather than polished certainties still places a memo in the context of a class that inevitably contributes to doctoral socialization but also helps interrupt conventional memo expressions and releases students to think about their data, not their grade, not their instructor, as they will when doing independent research.

Critical Interruptions and Responses

Another way of working within and against dominant research discourses is by introducing an array of concepts typically associated with traditional validity criteria for positivist paradigms such as triangulation, peer-debriefing, and audit trails and ask students to define those terms and provide examples of those concepts from a variety of sources. After mobilizing and practicing these terms to become familiar with the dominant language of inquiry, invite critical questions about those tools and approaches using ideas/language from, for example, critical or feminist theory. For example, culturally-responsive teaching practices (Delpit, 2006) can serve as a device for developing critical questions. This exercise forces the novice researcher to ask: Whose voice did they collect? How can they be sure? Such questions introduce novice researchers to the practice of critical qualitative research that offer the potential of interrupting dominant and "dangerous discourses."

Conclusion

In the qualitative inquiry classroom and at all stages of the research process, there is a need to present a space for students to debrief dilemmas and opportunities as they encounter them and are building their identities as researchers. Some dilemmas will occur naturally in

the field, while others are designed within the classroom, yet all need the careful guidance of experienced mentors willing to walk alongside those crossing the threshold into qualitative inquiry. We are among a group of adventurers, willing to tell our tales about teaching novice researchers in the context of schools/colleges of education, and we find ourselves highlighting and shadowing, underscoring and obscuring, encouraging and redirecting, as we grapple with paradigm proliferation (Wright & Lather, 2006), conveying analytic practices and approaches, and modeling for graduate students daring to become critical qualitative researchers.

As “critical friends” our conversations, questions and collaborative writing about the pedagogical dilemmas we face inside qualitative research methods courses designed for educators, all serve to spur us on toward continued understanding and refinement of our own praxis. This “critical friends” collaboration has been essential in helping us build productive tools and strategies for interrupting graduate students’ positivist approaches to qualitative analysis, including their starting belief that analysis has clear, direct, and linear steps. By designing activities focused on underscoring the deeply conceptual and political nature of making knowledge claims and the value of “getting lost” in the process we can re-orient the novice researcher away from their propensity to want to “catch the tail” of the beast and instead “catch the tale” of qualitative inquiry.

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