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## Reflections on Teaching Qualitative Methods Using Team-Based Learning: An Exemplification by Photovoice

Nadia Rania

University of Genoa, [nadia.rania@unige.it](mailto:nadia.rania@unige.it)


Laura Migliorini

University of Genoa, [laura.migliorini@unige.it](mailto:laura.migliorini@unige.it)

Stefania Rebor

University of Genoa, [stefania.rebor@hotmail.it](mailto:stefania.rebor@hotmail.it)

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### Abstract

This research article as a part of larger study intends to explore the role of teaching qualitative methods is not easy and often represents a great challenge. In this work, we describe our experience of teaching a qualitative methods course for undergraduate psychology students. In this course, we used a Team-Based Learning (TBL) approach in which we had students cluster into small groups to enhance their education by having them become more active in their learning. To teach qualitative methods, we used TBL and in this paper, we present the exemplification of this method by choosing Photovoice. The Team-Based methods may be thought of as a new approach for teaching qualitative methods at the university because it allows the students to reach relevant life skills, like reflexivity, sensitivity, and critical thinking that are relevant not only for qualitative researchers but also for the psychologists and the social service professionals.

### Keywords

Teaching Qualitative Methods, Team Based Learning, Photovoice, Psychology Students

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## Reflections on Teaching Qualitative Methods through Team-Based Learning: An Exemplification by Photovoice

Nadia Rania, Laura Migliorini, and Stefania Rebora  
University of Genoa, Italy

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*This research article as a part of larger study intends to explore the role of teaching qualitative methods is not easy and often represents a great challenge. In this work, we describe our experience of teaching a qualitative methods course for undergraduate psychology students. In this course, we used a Team-Based Learning (TBL) approach in which we had students cluster into small groups to enhance their education by having them become more active in their learning. To teach qualitative methods, we used TBL and in this paper, we present the exemplification of this method by choosing Photovoice. The Team-Based methods may be thought of as a new approach for teaching qualitative methods at the university because it allows the students to reach relevant life skills, like reflexivity, sensitivity, and critical thinking that are relevant not only for qualitative researchers but also for the psychologists and the social service professionals. Keywords: Teaching Qualitative Methods, Team Based Learning, Photovoice, Psychology Students*

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In this paper, we present our experience of teaching qualitative methods to psychology undergraduates by using a Team-Based Learning (TBL) approach. Our aim is to introduce a new teaching approach that employs a Team-Based Learning (TBL) method, an understudied area in psychology literature, to help undergraduate psychology students better learn qualitative methods. The Team-Based Learning approach is a learner-centered teaching strategy designed to promote an alternative to traditional classes based on lectures. We organized students into small groups of students in order to offer them an opportunity for more active and effective learning in the classroom, and to help students develop lifelong learning skills (Fink, 2004). The TBL method is largely used today in many countries and in different disciplines such as medicine, science, business, humanities, and law, because it enhances skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, time management, organizing one's own work, stress management, adjustment to different environments, working in a group, and flexibility, as mentioned in the recent study of Cheng, Liou, Tsai, and Chang (2014).

### Teaching Qualitative Methods

Methods for teaching qualitative research are developing very rapidly (Konecki, 2009), although some authors (Chatfield, Cooper, Holden, & Macias, 2014; Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011) state that in the literature there is a lack of sharing knowledge about best practices for teaching qualitative research. Chatfield, Cooper, Holden, and Macias (2014), taking up the work of Cooper, Fleischer, and Cotton (2012) underline that research on students' learning experiences with respect to qualitative methods includes students' experience learning qualitative research within a specific academic field as well as the effect and the experience of using a specific method to learn qualitative research. In our experience, teaching qualitative methods is not easy work and is in need of some new methods and ideas. Many courses usually include lectures and active learning methods used to stimulate critical thinking and reflexivity (Humphreys, 2006; Mason, 2002). Furthermore, qualitative courses are aimed at developing student

competence to carry on qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). Becoming a qualitative researcher often requires a change and modification of thoughts and points of view (Barrett, 2007; Carawan, Knight, Wittman, Pokorny, & Velde, 2011) in order to promote critical and reflexive thinking. However, the transfer of implicit knowledge to critical thinking is not so easily done in a classroom setting. Generally, qualitative research courses focus on the theoretical and historical bases in order to deepen understandings of the different qualitative methodologies. According to Dyrhauge (2014) qualitative methods courses tend to focus on the different qualitative techniques used in social sciences like interviews, observation, focus group, and data analysis that students can use in their future professional contexts. Specifically, Rifkin and Hartley (2001) state that the main teaching objectives for qualitative methods are that firstly students must know when to use qualitative research methods instead of quantitative methods. Secondly, students should be able to use a variety of data collection methods (interviews, observations, projective techniques) and means to analyze the data collected. Furthermore, students are expected to learn how to apply these methods for use in assessment and evaluation processes. The challenges and the difficulties in teaching qualitative methods can best be conquered when teaching is interactive and experiential, that is by providing realistic situations, projects, and assignments in which students can learn by doing and teachers facilitate.

Some authors (Konecki, 2009; Machtmes et al., 2009) in their courses regularly teach qualitative methods through projects to support the growth of qualitative competence. At first, students are familiarized with the procedures and instruments of qualitative research and then they collect data with the different techniques to learn how to use them. Booker (2009) said that he includes instructional techniques ranging from small group work to experiential activities to reflective writings. Moreover, Booker (2009) states that those students who are not familiar with qualitative methodology can create resistance in learning qualitative methods if they have solely been trained in the quantitative research perspective.

According to some authors (Chatfield, Cooper, Holden, & Macias, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lapum & Hume, 2015), teaching qualitative methods may be improved by the use of the arts because it can enhance the learning experience of students. The arts, as poetry, photo, film, and tale, can be used to appeal to students' interests and their capacities to conduct research using a qualitative approach. The arts allow an individual to represent one's own experiences or feelings that may otherwise be difficult to express using more conventional qualitative techniques (Rania, Migliorini, Rebora, & Cardinali, 2015; Migliorini & Rania, 2017). Hansen and Rapley (2008) highlighted the fact that learning by doing is one of the key points of teaching qualitative methods. Often university courses in qualitative methods, as seen in the previous contributors (Chatfield, Cooper, Holden, & Macias, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lapum & Hume, 2015), have low registrants, at most 20, and are organized in the form of experiential workshops. Our approach, however, through the TBL method can be employed to teach large groups of students. In a TBL course, the focus is not on what the teacher says, but on what the students do (Rania, Rebora, & Migliorini, 2015). The Team-Based methods may be thought of as a new approach for teaching qualitative methods at the university level. This method, in fact, combines teaching content, promoting critical thinking and reflection with working in teams.

### **The Team-Based Learning Methods**

Lifelong learning has been a central issue in European education policy since the beginning of the century (European Commission, 2001). Maurer and Mawdsley (2014) underline from a 2010 Eurobarometer survey that teamwork competencies are relevant skills required by graduates. Because of this, universities today are emphasizing group work.

Simultaneously, Zgheib, Simaan, and Sabra (2010) highlight the importance of teaching using innovative techniques such as TBL. Kelly, Haidet, Schneider, Searle, Seidel, and Richards (2005) defined TBL as a set of instructional principles designed to promote the effectiveness of lectures on small groups working independently in large classes with a large number of learners. Historically, Larry Michaelsen created the TBL approach in the late 1970s at the University of Oklahoma's Business School in the USA (Parmelee, 2010), by replacing lecture classes with helping students to be ready to solve the problems they would find in the real world of work. According to Parmelee, Michaelsen, and Cook (2012), there are six steps in TBL:

1. Advanced preparation through out-of-class/individual study.
2. In class, students must individually answer a set of multiple-choice questions focused on the concepts required to solve the team application problem.
3. Students answer the same set of questions as in Point 2, but as a group, and they must reach consensus.
4. Students receive further explanations from the teacher on the concepts they have been working on.
5. Students are faced with a problem similar to one they will find during their careers. They have to solve it and defend their choices to the class if asked.
6. A group can request that the teacher consider an alternative answer to the one chosen as the best, in which case the group has to explain why their answer was better than the previously chosen best.

Fink (2004) sustained the idea by explaining that the use of small group activities can help students in the initial understanding of the content and support their learning by practice. Secondly, small group teaching processes increase students' abilities to solve increasingly difficult problems because of the large amount of time spent on a task. Furthermore, small group teaching develops the students' teamwork skills. Lastly, the use of small groups helps students understand the value of teamwork in solving complex problems.

TBL is different from the other methods of small group teaching: it is a precise instructional scheme and not simply small group activities (Fink, 2004). Small group work learning is an experience that significantly involves students in ways not possible with lectures (Kelly et al., 2005). Such personal involvement in the learning process can enhance personal motivation and interest in the study. Furthermore, small groups offer the opportunity to exchange opinions and perspectives with others. A small group can grow into a team when people work together over time and in different meetings (McMahon, 2010). By interacting together, a task can become a common goal and trust among members and a mutual commitment to the well-being of the group develops. Furthermore, the TBL approach, as underlined by Fink (2004), offers incentives to the teams to spend time and make an effort to do their best to obtain a good result and feedback about individual and group work. This feedback makes students aware of their learning and how they are working as a team. Using a TBL approach helps teachers in motivating students to learn proactively through collaboration (Yang, Jiang, Xu, Liu, Liang, Ye, & Tao, 2014). As affirmed by Cheng, Liou, Tsai, and Chang (2014), teachers can improve your expertise because in the TBL method strong knowledge along with skills in managing people and groups is needed.

Using TBL methods can support students in enhancing their analytical and problem-solving skills also necessary in clinical situations. Although the TBL method can prepare students to cope with complex and multi-team work contexts, the literature underlines some limitations. One limitation is that TBL seems to have a positive effect on frailer students'

academic performance (Abdelkhalek, Hussein, Gibbs, & Hamdy, 2010; Cheng, Liou, Tsai, & Chang, 2014) and the second is that the TBL method could be fit mainly for students with excellent innovative thinking (Mayer, 2010).

### **An Application of TBL in Teaching Qualitative Research Methods**

In this work, we relate the experience of designing, teaching and reflecting on a qualitative methods course for undergraduate psychology students in a public university in northwestern Italy. The authors of this paper are the two teachers of this qualitative methods course and a colleague with a PhD in Social Science who participates as an observer of the group dynamics. Qualitative research methods university courses are not very frequently taught in Italy and therefore, there are only a few people who have this type of experience. We present the description of our teaching experiences and our reflections on this issue. We think that experimenting with a new teaching method can enrich and represent a challenge for university teaching.

For this project, we taught a course with 50 students (38 females and 12 males with an average age of 27.3 years) that took place over a 7-week semester, with two 3-hour meetings per week for a total of 42 hours. The objective of the course was to provide a theoretical and practical framework of qualitative methods in order to prepare students for designing and realizing qualitative research in psychology. A significant amount of attention was paid to planning intervention research and then analyzing the data using software. During the course, the teachers presented the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods and then deepened the descriptions by explaining how to design a multi-method and multi-level research project, including how to choose the method to use and the context for its employment. Moreover, the instructors critically presented qualitative research techniques (e.g., observation, video-observation, interview, Ecocultural Family Interview, video-tour, audio-tour, focus group, Photovoice, documentary collection). The teachers also taught qualitative analysis (e.g., thematic analysis based on Grounded Theory, textual statistics analysis, narrative analysis, and relational analysis). During the course, small groups were created to practice qualitative interviews, focus groups, and video-observations, followed by the analysis of the data using specific qualitative software (e.g., NVivo, T-Lab, Transana, Anvil). Furthermore, small groups had to work on a qualitative research project, employing the learned techniques. In the project presented in this paper, small groups were created to be heterogeneous, as required by TBL technique in order to enrich the work with different individual perspectives. The criteria used in organizing the groups were gender, residence, curricula of studies (e.g., Developmental Psychology or Community Psychology), age, graduation exam grade, high school attended, and grade point average.

To teach qualitative methods, we used a modified Team-Based Learning (Rania, Migliorini, & Rebora, 2015) that was already used with psychology students; however, we changed the six steps (see Table 1) as characterized by Parmelee, Michaelsen, and Cook (2012) to be directly relevant to qualitative research.

Table 1. Differences between TBL and modified TBL

|               | <b>TBL</b>   | <b>Modified TBL</b>  |
|---------------|--|--|
| <b>Step 1</b> | Advanced preparation out-of-class/individual study.  | The teacher gives general indications about the principal concepts. Students do not have to study before class.  |
| <b>Step 2</b> | In class, students must individually answer a set of multiple-choice questions focused on the concepts required to solve the team application problem.   | Students have to individually reflect on the qualitative instrument explained by the teacher in Step 1 in order to understand how to create an exemplification of qualitative instrument (e.g., observation, photovoice phases, interview) and to be ready to discuss their understanding in the next step.  |
| <b>Step 3</b> | Students answer the same set of questions as in Step 2, but as a group, and they must reach a consensus answer.  | Each group creates in class the instrument of qualitative research (e.g., observation, photovoice phases, interview) taught in the modified TBL session. Then there is an open class discussion about the topic of the session, during which students try to answer the questions that arose during the discussion.  |
| <b>Step 4</b> | Students receive clarifications from the teacher on the concepts they have been working on.  | At the end of each session, the teacher clarifies information to respond to the questions that emerged during the group discussion.  |
| <b>Step 5</b> | Students are faced with a problem similar to one they will find during their careers. They have to solve it and defend their choices to the class if asked.  | Each group of students chooses a critical issue characterizing the society where they live, and then they produce a research project using the qualitative methods they learned. For this activity, the students also have to study the existing literature to know the current situation for their chosen issue. Additionally, students have to answer some questions from the teacher, who plays the role of examiner. |
| <b>Step 6</b> | A group can request that the teacher consider an alternative answer to the one chosen as the best, in which case the group has to explain why their answer was better than the previously chosen best. | At the end of the exam, each group can decide if the grade obtained satisfies them. If not, they can decide to improve their research project and then make a new presentation in order to earn a higher mark.   |

Each qualitative instrument (observation, video-observation, interview, Ecocultural Family Interview, video-tour, audio-tour, focus group, Photovoice, documentary collection) was taught during a different modified TBL session, specifying its ethical values and the software that would be best to use for analysis. In the next paragraph we illustrate our experience of TBL method application through our use of Photovoice.

## **An Exemplification of TBL by Using Photovoice**

In this section, we illustrate how it is possible to teach qualitative methods experientially to facilitate students' learning (Fontes & Piercy, 2000). We exemplify the teaching of Photovoice through our modified TBL. We choose Photovoice, among the different qualitative methods, because it is an innovative technique in social science, understudied in qualitative courses, and a method we have used in several research studies.

Photovoice was designed by Wang and Burris in 1994. It is a research tool that can be used with Participatory Action Research (PAR), which involves people in communities and is based on the concept that they are experts of their own lives. Through a photographic technique, Photovoice encourages participants to identify, represent, and improve their communities (Rania, Migliorini, Cardinali, & Rebora, 2015; Wang, 2006). Photovoice involves people in a co-learning process in which participants, policymakers, and researchers learn from each other and from their own expertise; moreover, Photovoice involves a reflective process to develop participants' critical thinking and to help participants to balance the research goals, the required actions, and the evaluation (Rania, Migliorini, Rebora, & Cardinali, 2014; Wang, 2006).

*We illustrate the teaching of Photovoice technique with our modified six-step TBL*

Step 1. During the first lesson, we presented thought slide and exemplification the Photovoice methodology (phases of technique and method), the ethics about image use (informant consent), and basic photographic techniques (first and second foreground, lights, shadows, etc.). Students do not have to study it before.

Step 2. In the second lesson, we encouraged students to individually think about the Photovoice technique (through strength and difficult analysis of the photovoice) and possible applications to salient issues for the society (through brainstorming technique). In our class, the students found issues related to applying the technique such as intercultural relations, environmental well-being, social contact, violence against women, and health promotion strategies. In this phase, students can individually ask for explanations (i.e., how decide the subject of the photo, how obtain the informant consent). The questions students tended to ask were related to how to involve the people that are photographed, how one's level of technical expertise could influence the Photovoice process.

Step 3. Students then reflected on possible difficulties linked with the realization of a Photovoice application. In this step teacher invite students to describe writing their possible problem to carry on the method. Students raised concerns about the context of the photo and how to involve policymakers.

Step 4. During the fourth lesson, we clarified information to respond to the questions that emerged about ethics and Photovoice during the group discussion. When we realized a research project including persons we must considered all kinds of procedure in order to protect the individuals.

Step 5. In this step students had a more active role and the teacher had a enhancing role. In the fifth lesson students applied Photovoice to one of the issues they identified as central for the society in Step 2 (i.e., immigration strengths and problems, well-being in the contexts). Each work team chose a different issue and in the course of this step, the students took the pictures and then discussed and proposed possible solutions to their identified issues by presented their Photovoice projects. Each group also created a poster to summarize the topics that emerged during the discussion.

Step 6. In the sixth lesson students detailed a research project employing the Photovoice technique for which we evaluate the students' comprehension of the learned technique trough



a final exam (their presentation of the project and discuss with the teacher). Students can decide to improve their research project in order to earn a better evaluation from us.

### **Reflections**

Teaching qualitative methods raised questions and a great challenge for several reasons. First, in Italy it is quite a recent discipline. The learning process for how to teach qualitative methods is just in its beginnings and at this time there is little sharing of knowledge about the best qualitative methods teaching strategies for psychology students. Second, because of the numerous techniques associated with qualitative methods, students need more extended training; they also require competencies in reflexivity and sensitivity. In this section, we will report our reflections that are based on the entire process of teaching and on the discussion with students at the end of the course regarding their experience of group processes, critical thinking, skill development, and communications with peers.

We consider our experience a lesson learned as teachers because this is a teaching method with high involvement that requires not only the teacher's theoretical knowledge, but interpersonal skills as well. Furthermore, we have seen how teaching and learning qualitative methods is enriched by group relationships and interactions. In fact, group techniques could enhance student comprehension of the real-world meanings of their study that finds in the group an "echo" (Lewin, 1951). By using a TBL format in the teaching of the Photovoice technique we were able to convey that we can use a research tool to involve people in communities based on the concept that they are experts of their own lives. Also in the TBL learning method we promoted activities in which students can experiment, becoming more active learners and enhance their personal and social skills. In line with the work of Levitt, Kannan, and Ippolito (2013) the employment of this teaching technique in our experience, as emerged during the group discussion, helped students to develop very important skills for becoming psychology researchers and psychologists, they practiced critical thinking during discussions and learned to work in groups. During the working group experiences, students learned how to listen to the others, how to relate, and how to collaborate with each other, as well as how to adjust to different situations. We can affirm from our practice that the students developed important abilities, such as reflexivity and sensitivity, needed to be a researcher in psychology and a professional psychologist as stated by several authors (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Our students identified overall positive emotions arising from the TBL experience, especially in relation to their expectations about the result of the final exam. Our students, as shown in previous research (Rania, Migliorini, & Rebora, 2015), appreciated the TBL experience describing team work with positive impressions of teammates and as a place where mutual listening and open and a collaborative atmosphere were experienced. In conclusion, our application of TBL for teaching qualitative research can be considered a constructive experience that improves academic results and stimulates a deeper learning in the students (Rania, Rebora, & Migliorini, 2015).

Furthermore, our experience on teaching qualitative methods using a team-based learning could contribute to an understudied area in psychology literature. We introduced several aspects related to improvement in qualitative method learning describing the experience of a qualitative methods' course for psychology students by using a Team-Based Learning approach. This method is a strategy designed as an alternative to traditional teaching, in order to enhance a more active and effective learning and to enable students to develop lifelong learning skills. The implication of TBL approaches to teaching qualitative method is based on the assumption, as underlined by Abdelkhalek, Hussein, Gibbs, and Hamdy (2010), that students construct knowledge for themselves, with direction and support from the instructor.

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### Author Note

Nadia Rania is an Assistant Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Genoa, PhD in Research Methods in Human Sciences and Family Mediator. She teaches Qualitative Methods and Psychology of Groups and Community. Furthermore, she is a member of the College PhD in Migration and Intercultural Processes. The main research topics in which she is currently involved are: use of qualitative methods (diaries, interviews, Photovoice) in different groups and different contexts of research and family intra/intergroups relationships; immigration and acculturation processes; and well-being and quality of life in oncology. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [nadia.rania@unige.it](mailto:nadia.rania@unige.it).

Laura Migliorini is an Associate Professor of Social and Community Psychology at the University of Genoa, PhD in Research Methods in Psychology. She teaches Social Psychology and Community Psychology. Furthermore, she is a member of the College PhD in Migration and Intercultural Processes. The main research topics in which she is currently involved are: support positive parenthood in social contexts at risk and immigration and acculturation processes. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: [laura.migliorini@unige.it](mailto:laura.migliorini@unige.it).

Stefania Reborà is a psychologist and PhD student in Migration and Intercultural Processes. Her current themes of research are: parental ethnotheories, immigration and acculturation processes, Photovoice, and qualitative methods. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: [stefania.reborà@hotmail.it](mailto:stefania.reborà@hotmail.it).

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