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## Teaching Qualitative Research Online to Leadership Students: Between Firm Structure and Free Flow

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### Abstract

The US National Science Foundation (2013, 2015) surveys of earned doctorates in education show that between 2003 and 2014, over 20,000 degrees were granted in a field broadly defined as Educational Administration. It is then important to discuss the pedagogies of teaching not only the content area courses for educational leaders, but research as well. We highlight the intertwined tensions between different discourses: the ways of thinking about research that our students bring to the online classrooms, the course goals that we aspire to achieve, and the ways we teach qualitative research online. In doing so, we see our classes as spaces of the (not always smooth) interplay between the firm structure of expected goals and free-flowing nature of qualitative research.

### Keywords

Teaching Qualitative Research, Online Teaching, Leadership Studies, Educational Leadership

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## Teaching Qualitative Research Online to Leadership Students: Between Firm Structure and Free Flow

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### Introduction

The U.S. National Science Foundation (2013, 2015) surveys of earned doctorates in education show that between 2003 and 2014, over 20,000 degrees were granted in a field broadly defined as Educational Administration, which consists of Educational Administration and Supervision and Educational Leadership. The peak year was 2003 (2,362 awarded degrees), followed by the plateau between 2004 and 2009 (the average of 2,184 degrees) and a decline since then (895 degrees in 2014). Given the prevalence of the degrees awarded, it is then important to discuss the pedagogies of teaching not only the content area courses for educational leaders, but research as well. We concur with Wergin (2011) that doctoral studies in leadership – both EdD and PhD, since the majority of our graduates remain within their school system – should emphasize the “*continued scholarship into professional practice, not just proficiency in practice*” (p. 127, emphasis in original). To this end, we see the importance of teaching basic and advanced levels of qualitative research to leadership students.

We are writing this paper as teachers of qualitative research to educational and organizational leadership students in a private, not-for-profit, PhD and EdD granting university in the Midwest part of the U.S. This paper also emerges from the institutional shift we are part of in offering graduate-level classes in qualitative and other research methods completely online in 8-week terms. Over the years, we have experienced an increased emphasis on the instrumental and pragmatic nature of not only the courses we teach but also of the entire programs’ philosophies and purposes. Most of our students work in schools, where the data driven decision making language rules the day, where “inquiry is cut off from politics,” where “biography and history recede into the background,” and where “technological rationality prevails” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a, p. 3). We are also observing a dissociation of the scholarly and the professional, as our students bring to the classroom an acute sense of what should be done in order to be valued in their professional world, accompanied with ideas of what could/should be done as research. Working with and within this forced dichotomy, teaching qualitative research sometimes seems like a luxury, an intellectual and aesthetic exercise confined in the space of online discussion platforms.

We argue that there is a need to find ways to foster awareness of the complexities of teaching research online, how this practice is sensitive to contexts and relationships, and how it is embedded in community, culture, language, history, and power structures. How do we enact the tenets of qualitative research to the leadership students whose professional world seems epistemologies apart from the goals of qualitative research, in the learning environment that seems counterintuitive to this mode of inquiry? As instructors of such classes, educated in traditional university settings, who until recently taught in face-to-face classrooms, in this paper we engage scholarly sources and publicly available data on the trends in online teaching to highlight challenges and unique aspects of teaching qualitative research online to leadership doctoral students. We focus on the intertwined tensions between different discourses: the ways of thinking about research that our students bring to the online classrooms, the course goals that we aspire to achieve, and the ways we teach qualitative research online. In doing so, we see our classes as spaces of the (not always smooth) interplay between the firm structure of expected goals and free-flowing nature of qualitative research.

### **Qualitative Research and Online Education**

Given that qualitative research is not a monolith but an inter- and transdisciplinary field shaped by multiple ethical and political positions, a large tent that embraces different and often conflicting epistemologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013b), it is easy to understand why there is little recommendation when it comes to teaching qualitative research methods online. The field of qualitative research notably defies attempts to reduce teaching the art of qualitative inquiry to a set of step-by-step strategies (Breuer & Schreier, 2007) and online platforms seem “daunting or potentially even antithetical to the field” (Hunter, Hinderliter Ortloff, & Winkle-Wagner, 2014, p. 2). Although there is an abundance of textbooks on how to design and conduct qualitative research (see most notable examples, with multiple editions: Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013a, 2013b; Glesne, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and how to collect data in online communities (Johns, Chen, & Hall, 2004; Poynter, 2010), there are few studies on how to teach qualitative research, let alone how to go about it in an online format. For example, studies describe pedagogies of teaching qualitative research face-to-face through different phases and application of fieldwork, methods, and techniques (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012; Waite, 2014), teaching qualitative data analysis (Mulvihill, Swaminathan, & Bailey, 2015), or the utilization of popular media and group work in teaching Grounded Theory (Creamer et al., 2012). In a more metacognitive and reflexive manner, Humble and Sharp (2012) described co-journaling as a means of support in teaching, while Cox (2012) and Booker (2009) outlined an instructional approach to teaching qualitative research to school practitioners and administrators who, in their daily practice, mostly think through the quantitative data.

Koro-Ljungberg and Bowden (2016) tangle and untangle the teachable and unteachable movements and moments in qualitative inquiry by paying attention to less normative pedagogy. Rather than delineating preconstructed, delivery-based techniques, they point to the following:

- Learning and teaching (qualitative research methodology) often happen in a space of uncertainty and unknowing.
- Creative and continuously changing methodologies cannot be mastered (through a traditional sense of mastering, examination, and external evaluation).
- Teaching and learning always occur in the presence of others and ghosts (of the past).

- Qualitative research curricula may be necessary and at the same time inaccurate, misleading, and limiting in teaching students to view the world and carry out research in responsible and ethical ways. (p. 139)

With the growing number of online courses, we agree with Hunter, Hinderliter Ortloff, and Winkle-Wagner (2014), who argue that teachers of qualitative research “both traditional and distance must teach using interactive, engaging, and reflective methods” (p. 9). It is not clear, though, how well online programs are able to meet this call.

### **Prevalence of Online Programs in Higher Education**

In a 2013 policy brief on the future of higher education, Steven Schwartz (2013) accused universities of being stuck in the nineteenth century pre-industrial mode where their overpriced lives depend on outdated scholastic calendars and seat time calculations. Instead, Schwartz advocates online delivery as a way to achieve “faster, cheaper, better” education (p. 3). This assessment would indicate that online education is barely existent. However, a decade earlier, Pethokoukis (2002) reported that almost 200 schools offered graduate degrees online, and enrollment in online courses was increasing by 33% per year. According to the survey responses collected at more than 2,800 colleges and universities in the U.S., in 2013 over seven million or 33.5% of students took at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In another survey 89% of the presidents of four-year public colleges and universities and six-in-ten presidents of private four-year colleges reported that their institution offered classes online (Parker, Lenhart, & More, 2011). When it comes to graduate education, the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) indicated that close to 30% of graduate students or adult learners are either enrolled exclusively or in some distance courses.

Looking ahead, two-thirds of academic leaders believed that there would be substantial use of student-directed, self-paced components in future online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2014), particularly given the fact that, from the higher education administrative standpoint, online education represents a cost-cutting measure responding to state budget cuts. Also, the lower personnel costs and greater scheduling flexibility associated with contingent faculty were particularly attractive to administrators (Ortagus & Stedrak, 2013).

### **Perceptions of Online Teaching and Learning**

A survey done by the Pew Research Center on a nationally representative sample of 2,142 adults ages 18 and older and among the presidents of 1,055 two-year and four-year private, public, and for-profit colleges and universities provides important data for understanding the value of online education (Parker, Lenhart, & More, 2011). It turns out that the private college presidents were among the most skeptical about the value of online learning. Only 36% believed a course taken online provided the same value as a class taken in person. This compared with 50% of four-year public university presidents. Most college graduates had a negative view of the value of a class taught online as opposed to one taught in a more traditional classroom setting. Only 22% said an online course offered an equal educational value, while 68% said it did not.

A closer look at these trends requires an in-depth inquiry into students’ and faculty’s perceptions of the quality of online teaching and learning experiences. In a study of 190 adult education students, Yoo and Huang (2013) found that female students had a stronger intrinsic motivation to take online courses than their male counterparts. Students in their twenties, thirties, and forties reported a higher level of relevance in their short-term and long-term extrinsic motivation than the rest of the age groups. These respondents also considered the

short-term benefits of online degree programs toward their jobs more important than their long-term influences.

When asked about their best learning experiences, graduate students in online classes emphasized critical thinking and problem-solving assignments, research, writing, discussion forums, and videoconferencing. They wanted more mentoring relationships with faculty (Holzweiss et al., 2014). In another study students wanted and appreciated a course design that offered a direct relationship with the course instructor, via video, e-mails, thread discussions, and grading (Nichols, 2011). Studies showed no difference in self-reported trust between the students engaged in team work in online and face-to-face classrooms (Beranek & French, 2011), but a lower retention rate for online students (Brown, 2012; Ortagus & Stedrak, 2013) was noted.

It seems, though, that interaction among students and between students and instructors influenced significantly the perception of online courses (Brown, 2012; Heirdsfield, Walker, Tambyah, & Beutel, 2011; Hostetter, 2013; Nichols, 2011; Ward, Peters, & Shelley, 2010). In the Ward et al. study, both students and faculty were generally satisfied with *synchronous* interactive online instruction, as it enabled communication similar to face-to-face classroom interactions. On the other hand, students and faculty viewed *asynchronous* online instructions mostly in the negative light. Importantly, this study offered an insight into participants' perceptions and did not measure or assess the quality of such classes. When actual online courses were examined, researchers reported that in asynchronous discussions, students had more time to think about their responses, and that the increased thinking time improved the depth and quality of responses (Davidson-Shivers, Tanner, & Muilenburg, 2000). In a comparison of face-to-face and asynchronous online classes, Heckman and Annabi (2006) found that students were equally comfortable with discussions in both settings, but felt much more involved in face-to-face classes, since there was more feedback and listening to discussions as opposed to reading threads. This made the material "sink in better and seem more relevant." Also, "the professor leads the discussion much more in class and *translates* what people say so everybody understands it" (p. 146, emphasis in original).

Such accounts suggest that instructors behave differently in online and face-to-face interactions and grapple with establishing their social presence on an online teaching format (Hostetter, 2013; Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009). Social presence is the "ability to establish one's identity, perceive the identity of the other, and build online communities" (Hostetter, 2013, p. 78). Hostetter analyzed 4,000 postings in her online classes and found that students (the sample comprised all females) see discussion board activities as the most important catalyst in establishing social presence, which is demonstrated through "affective comments" (p. 80) such as: expressing emotions, using humor and self-disclosure, referring explicitly to other students' messages, asking questions, showing appreciation, and conveying agreement. Akcaoglu and Lee (2016) found that small group discussions in an asynchronous online classroom have a positive effect on students' perceptions of sociability, cohesion, and building relationships.

However, in a comprehensive review of research on teaching and learning online (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006), the authors also raise concerns about the shallow level of interaction and lack of high-level cognitive engagement in online courses. They offer a possible explanation in the lack of instructors' guidance in online discussion. Accordingly, we argue that the perceived lack of relationship between the students and the instructor in an online asynchronous environment can be overcome by careful and systematic instructional design.

## Designing an Online Qualitative Research Course

When asked about their dissertation research ideas throughout the doctoral program, most of the students express their desire to influence their practice. This desire is rarely formulated in the language that requires a qualitative approach. It is rarely written up in a form that signals a quantitative research either. The most common research questions use the words “impact” and “student achievement,” as in, “How does a leadership style (or school culture) directly impact student achievement?” We understand the school leaders are pressed to think about and address such questions in almost predetermined ways: the achievement is tacitly understood as a test score and therefore goes undefined, while the belief that a school leader could and should solely affect such achievement goes unquestioned. We believe that we are required by our profession to dispel the idea that in this case  $A \rightarrow B$  (i.e., that this question could be addressed by examining how one variable leads to one outcome). School districts’ overreliance on “measurable data” – regardless of how ill-defined or designed the research appears – leaves the educational leadership students paralyzed when we tell them to ask the why’s, the how’s, and to focus on the meaning making process of their participants.

We could spend an entire qualitative research course connecting epistemology and different theoretical frameworks with the study purpose and research questions, but this is not an option due to the fast-paced nature of an online program, which does not allow the students sufficient time to critically examine strong “data-driven” presuppositions about their professional practices. The course is thus designed in a linear fashion, which “might help researchers conceptualize qualitative research practices without becoming overwhelmed with the plentitude of methodological and theoretical options” (Koro-Ljungberg & Bowden, 2016, pp. 81-82). In the next section we first describe the structure of the online course that we designed and then discuss the rationale for our instructional choices and the online classroom occurrences that we regularly encounter when teaching qualitative research to leadership doctoral students.

### Format of the Course

All classes are asynchronous, offered on the Blackboard platform every term, and have 10-15 students enrolled. The course goals are for students to 1) understand connections between qualitative methods and diverse theoretical traditions; 2) familiarize themselves with major types of qualitative design; 3) conduct qualitative data collection; and 4) think through ethical and political dilemmas associated with qualitative research. As a result of this class, students should be able to develop a basic qualitative research study, construct and conduct an interview, analyze, interpret qualitative data, and write a report of their findings. The description of the assignments is provided in Appendix A. Due to the fast-paced nature of the course, each assignment acts as a building block for the final project. We believe that this streamlining, accompanied with the textbook (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and a closely knit collection of other readings and resources, facilitates inquiry and use of research language in “controlled” ways. The list of current readings is provided in Appendix B. In what follows, we highlight different aspects of the course assignments as they connect together and form the structure for the final project. We also bring in students’ perspectives to illustrate their interactions with the course as they make meaning of the qualitative process through engaging with meaning making within the parameters of their shared basic qualitative study.

In the introductory course, it is our intentional decision not to let students pursue their own topic of inquiry. Coming up with high quality topics while also learning *how* to pursue qualitative inquiry has proven overwhelming for many students. Instead, we alleviate the pressure of deciding what to study and only focus on *how* as the students work on a two-layered

shared project entitled *What is the Purpose of Education?* This “central” research question is broken into two sub-questions: (1) what is the purpose of education from the perspective of graduate students in the online qualitative research course? and (2) what is the purpose of education from the perspective of <...>? For the second question, the students are asked to come up with a participant group whose perspective would be explored. This is how one student reflected on the task:

As a beginning researcher, I am more comfortable with the concrete nature of quantitative studies, but at the same time am intrigued by the richness of meaning that comes from a good qualitative study. Thinking qualitatively was more difficult than I had imagined. I had to leave the comforts of concrete objective thinking and settle or accept subjective thinking. Just working on the research sub-question for my study was a drain. It was challenging to find the right words that really conveyed what I wanted to ask.

To answer the first sub-question, the students are given five images that represent some aspect of schooling and education to which they respond by writing a personal narrative. We ask the students if one or another picture reminds them of their educational experiences, or perhaps if one of the pictures makes them think of a particularly valuable lesson that they learned in life. If none of the pictures speaks to the students, they are invited to provide their own. These narratives are coded later in the term, thus becoming data for analysis and interpretation. Many students are surprised by the rigor of qualitative analysis, which they often initially view as a “light” or “just an opinion” type of method:

The other aspect that haunted me was organizing and analyzing the data from our reflective essays. I had to repeatedly immerse myself into the essays to look beyond the words and feel what was being said. The ideas from those essays were a mess of words, ideas and experiences until I began to tweeze out themes.

As a headline to my reflections on this class, I use the analogy of Alice falling down the rabbit hole. I have developed a deep appreciation of the qualitative research process, and have a deep respect for those that [use] it as their method of choice; unless they are prodigies, they have likely spent hours practicing their techniques and methods. While all of our learning has surprised me, the coding process was both daunting and fascinating, especially in its rigor and discipline.

I found narrative analysis to be labor intensive, which causes me to admire the work of those who conduct such studies. Coding only a handful of narratives for the final project, I have come to realize the enormous task this represents and the fine-toothed comb approach needed to extract information for qualitative work.

The students are also asked to write a “bracketing memo,” identifying a lens through which they are approaching the classroom topic: How do they think about the purpose of education as a “parent,” “professional educator,” “graduate student,” “spiritual person,” “first-generation college graduate,” “bystander who does not really care about this topic,” etc. We invite the students to grapple with changes and paradoxes of looking at education through multiple lenses throughout their life. We want them to acknowledge the lenses/perspectives/positions they tend to take when discussing the purpose of education or when hearing/reading about the positions and view of others.

To answer the second sub-question, the students construct interview questions and conduct a face-to-face interview with one or two participants that match their selection criteria. As students reflect on the interviewing process, they quickly realize both the advantages and inherent challenges in the open-endedness of qualitative data collection. Here is how one student described the process of finding a balance between the structure and free flow in interviewing:

Sticking to my interview guide for the first two questions, I became completely absorbed in the responses I was getting from my participant, and found myself significantly deviating from the structured guide. This deviation from the “game plan” caused me a bit of mid-interview panic (which in my mind I hid well from the participant), but I realized it was providing me some really organic material that was not only relevant, but helping me learn and grow in my own understanding of the purpose of education. As I listened to the transcript, I realized it was a natural way of probing into other areas that the participant brought up. Put another way, if I had *not* followed the participant’s logic and stuck to the script, I would have been leading by not getting full fruition into my response. I was grateful, however, for the interview guide as it was the way I “reeled in” my concentration and refocused.

In the final phase of the project, the students are expected to revise and build on previously submitted assignments to answer the central question, synthesizing three perspectives (voices), those of (1) the students in class, (2) participants of their choice, and (3) their own perspective as a researcher situated within a particular socio-cultural, personal, and professional context. In evaluating our students’ work, we believe that our detailed written comments and questions are more valuable to students’ advancement through the course than assigning points and following the numerical scale. We, however, provide both forms of feedback and expect students to incorporate instructor’s and peers’ feedback as they revise and develop their final project papers. The ultimate indicator of whether students met the course goals is the quality of their final project. In fact, extra credit points are offered at the end of the course for quality of revision. We encourage writing that shows students grappling with new ideas and leaving the “loose threads,” where research is seen not as a series of fixed steps to be reproduced, but as an intellectual and emotional process of (self-)inquiry and uncertainty. The following excerpt from a student’s paper is an example:

I began to say that I saw, in retrospect, how the pieces and parts of both the process and the results of this qualitative study came together and that I might have benefited from knowing more “up front.” Note that I said I started to say this. I then did what I have needed to do many times as this course has unfolded; I purposefully reframed my thinking, placing myself within the qualitative model. This left me where I was in one of our last discussion boards: I see the benefits of inductive thinking and those of deductive thinking. I like coding, sorting, thinking and rethinking the data, but must admit I have a love/hate relationship with the ambiguity that makes me at times want SPSS to crunch the numbers and show me the statistical significance.

We appreciate the love/hate relationship with the ambiguity that the student experienced in class. It forces students to “open up” the A→B inquiry and ask the what and the how questions instead. What transpires in the classrooms, though, does not necessarily follow the desired trajectory. Classroom dynamics dictate the constant shift between moving forward and “feeling

stuck,” creating the tensions between different discourses: the ways of thinking about research that our students bring to the online classrooms, the course goals that we aspire to achieve, and the ways we teach qualitative research online.

### **The Tensions Encountered**

**Where Are the Research Questions Coming from?** As qualitative researchers we emphasize the importance of connecting research questions and chosen methodology with an appropriate conceptual or theoretical framework. According to Imenda (2014), “the conceptual or theoretical framework is the soul of every research project” (p. 185). It determines how researchers formulate their study problem, purpose and questions, how they investigate the problem, and what meaning they ascribe to the collected data. Some researchers use the terms interchangeably. Regardless of the approach taken, the conceptual and/or theoretical framework of a study - “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research” - is a key part of the design (Maxwell, 2013, p. 39). We have observed that the students arrive at the qualitative research class largely unaware of the connections between the epistemology and methodology, although they “live their topic” (Hook, 2015). They have difficulties formulating questions that suit this form of inquiry. Therefore, a significant portion of the course involves unlearning the “impact of X on Y” language and “plugging in” epistemology (Hook, 2015).

Hook offers a useful description of epistemology as a “process of folding my researcher self into the theoretical threshold” (p. 983), and our teaching goal is to make the personal and theoretical assumptions visible. As we discuss the required readings, we do not ask our students to like or accept all the research examples, but we insist they too go beyond accepting or dismissing arguments because the research findings do not reflect their immediate reality. We insist they try to understand where the stated arguments are coming from and how researchers made their analysis and interpretations visible. When asked what set of ideas and claims about reality “speaks” to them, most of the students in educational leadership single out transformational theories of leadership (Bass, 1985, 1990; Burns, 1978). However, when asked to develop a research question and designs that reflect the tenets of that theory in the context of their local professional practices, the students usually fall back into a familiar pattern of proposing a top down approach, with a researcher firmly in control, in the quest for objectivity, and the research “subjects” as vessels of truth to be extracted.

This dynamic in qualitative research methods classes corresponds with Wergin’s (2011) claim that the underlying philosophy of EdD programs in educational leadership understands change and reforms coming from within/from the top of the educational system, thus ignoring “the hundreds of other settings that need strong, effective educational practice as well as reflection and inquiry into that practice” (p. 125). The student body in the U.S. schools is becoming increasingly racially and economically diverse, but the school leaders remain mostly White (80%) and middle class (Bitterman, Goldring, & Gray, 2013). Addressing the unpreparedness of school principals to engage in social justice education leadership, Kemp-Graham (2015) writes:

School leaders have yet to realize that to make systemic change for marginalized students, they must first understand their own biases, acknowledge their own deficit thinking, engage in ongoing critical reflection of their beliefs of oppression and social justice, thus becoming aware of the cultural influences in school settings and their own biases that perpetuate the inequitable practices within schools. (p. 102)

We argue that development of this awareness needs to occur in the content classes, so that it could be deepened rather than encountered for the first time in a qualitative research class. This tension is closely related to the unexamined positionality and power relationships in both professional and research settings, which leads us to the next tension to be addressed.

**Who are we in the research process?** By merely asking a research question we reveal what we deem important and worth researching. The students in our courses are often school principals surveying “their” teachers or classroom teachers interviewing “their” students, which signifies a position, a set of roles and rules that do not simply disappear in the research process. Researchers cannot change or hide multiple aspects of their identity that are visible and thus open to multiple interpretations by the research participants. When asked to write the “bracketing memo,” it is typical for the students to *name* their perspective, i.e., to state: “I approach the topic from a standpoint of a principal who has five years of administrative and ten years of teaching experience” and to reveal a number of personal and professional experiences and encounters that have shaped their understanding of the purpose of education. However, more often than not, these papers end with “I will do my best to eliminate my biases and conduct my research in the most objective manner.” We find it extremely difficult to move the students beyond the goal of objectivity into the realm of actively accepting their positionality as an important voice within their inquiry.

We read Bochner’s (2009) first person account “that *scientific activity is recursive*. To see phenomena, a scientist must transform them; having transformed them, he or she is transformed by them; (...) that *data cannot tell us what to ask of them, nor what they mean*. Thus, the meanings of data are never beyond challenge, never closed to other meanings, never capable of absolutely falsifying or verifying” (p. 363, emphasis in original). To scaffold a dialogue about subjectivity as an integral part of qualitative inquiry, the students are asked to read an article about an adolescent transitioning from one culture to another, where the researcher is also a father of the participant (Ma, 2010).

Almost invariably, the researcher’s positionality within this study sparks a discussion about “biases” and students reveal their deeply engraved assumptions about objectivity and generalizability as desired characteristics of research. Such reading of research and data sets leadership students up for questioning their own beliefs about “good” and “bad” research and challenges them to question the jargon of their workplace – to close the achievement gap and to create “best practices” – that signifies an end, a closure, a final product that offers answers once and for all. Such dialogue promotes critical examination and helps students “to grant and understand the layered quality of organized life is to recognize the connections and patterns between the layers - connections, bridges, linkages, relationships” (Bochner, 2009, p. 366).

**(Still) relying on the traditional way.** Once students respond in a narrative form to the given question, “What is the purpose of education?”, their narratives are aggregated and each student is required to approach the data via coding and thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; LaPelle, 2004). For most of the students this is the first time they encounter narratives or interview transcripts as data that is not to be put into an Excel sheet or turned into a table. Although we are aware of the critique of coding technique and may prefer different ways of data analysis (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013; St. Pierre, 2013), we believe that this imposed structure dispels the still present myth about qualitative research as the easy way out of “numbers,” that asks us to simply talk to people without putting an analytical effort into making sense of the collected data. We stress that coding is a way, not the canon, and invite students to follow their intuition in what the data is telling them (or not). Jackson and Mazzei (2013) attempt to

decenter some of the traps in humanistic qualitative inquiry: for example: data, voice, narrative, and meaning-making. In other words, our methodological aims

are against interpretive imperatives that limit so-called “analysis” and inhibits the inclusion of previously unthought “data.” It is such a rethinking of an interpretive methodology that gets us out of the representational trap of trying to figure out what the participants in our study “mean” and helps us to avoid being seduced by the desire to create a coherent and interesting narrative that is bound by themes and patterns. (p. 262)

We argue that our traps are of a different kind: students pursuing dissertation research in order to “prove” the point or a hunch, appease the powers in their organizational structure, or break the glass ceiling in their school district, thus seeing a doctoral degree mainly as an instrument in such a struggle. Such positioning of the students – when their scholarly/research self is overpowered by their professional self, which demands certain language and truth (e.g. reification of school culture, transformational leadership, and achievement) – necessarily determines (and limits) what we see as a start and end point in our teaching. We agree with Lather (2014) when she writes:

Dominant ideas of qualitative research assume a modernist self, transparent methods, and reflexivity as a “too easy” solution to whatever problems might arise. While the illusion of neat and tidy research has long been troubled, methodological examination tends to set up either-or dynamics in terms of “old school” and “what-comes-next” sorts of practices. Yet in the complex ecology of qualitative research in the present moment, the task is to move beyond the capture of a narrow scientism where qualitative research is reduced to an instrumentalism that meets the demands of audit culture, to move, rather, toward inventing practices that do not yet exist. (p. 8)

However, the argument for the post-methodology that Lather proposes remains a pedagogical utopia for us. Partaking of eight weeks on an online discussion board feels like a ride on an express research train and is barely enough to address the “pre-suppositions” that the students bring to class, let alone moving to re-imagining current professional educational leadership practices in novel ways.

**Speech vs. written text.** When it comes to teaching practice, Vygotsky, for example, privileged speech as a means of mediation and internalization (Wertsch, 1985). Online teaching relies heavily on written speech, which is inherently different from spoken speech in that it requires a certain level of abstraction and proper use of concepts (Vygotsky, 1986). In that respect, written speech can be more conducive to thinking at a higher level, scaffolding students to engage in dialogue, to argue, to agree, to test limits and to stretch boundaries. Both we and our students must write - mundane questions, “draft thoughts,” elaborate responses – and in doing so we must learn how to know each other through writing. But, “Where are we when we write?” ask van Manen and Adams (2009) and describe our online teaching lives so well: “the writer dwells in the space that the words open up.” In the online spaces we aspire to mediate higher order thinking by co-engaging in thinking with our students: similarly to the read-aloud when learning to read, *thinking along and aloud* helps the students bring their thinking to a higher level. Yet we are reminded by van Manen and Adams (2009) that epistolary form of expression and communication is likely the most remarkable difference between teaching and learning experiences online and those that are face-to-face:

In online text spaces—discussion-boards, email, blogs—we come to know the other through writing alone. Relation is not perturbed or infected by visuality or orality, physical presence or vocal discourse. We do not meet the other’s eyes;

rather, we read and are read by the other's text. We move and are moved by word alone. Online, we have no access or visceral response to the pre-reflective, tacit understandings of another's bodily being, voice and gesture, smell and presence. We come to know the other through a single modality: text. Here, textuality is the sole interstitial site of meaning, presence, contact, and touch. (p. 17)

When mindfully mediated, discourse in and around the written language enables novices to achieve a greater level of understanding and to increase their level of access and participation in the community of practice (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Rogoff, 1990). For example, the coding assignment forces students to approach their usually first encounter with qualitative data analysis on their own rather than bringing the interview transcripts to the class comparing the codes and doubting themselves, thinking that they did not "get it right." This way, they learn that qualitative researchers need to make their analytical and interpretive choices visible rather than simply transplanting the notions of validity and reliability learned from statistics, claiming that there is one correct way.

We deliberately insist on feedback and critique of ideas in the shared space of the discussion forum as opposed to individualized feedback via grading and emails. The firm requirement (despite some resistance) is that students learn only when their current view of knowledge is challenged, reformed, and synthesized through their interaction with others – and this interaction is shared among the participants of the course emulating a research community of practice.

## Conclusion

In this paper we provided an overview of an online qualitative research class that we teach to leadership students at the doctoral level. We discussed the tensions we encounter as we attempt to synchronize the course goals with an 8-week time frame to realize them. We believe that an asynchronous teaching platform accentuates the tensions we addressed. How to explain or enact, for example, the give-and-take occurrences of interviews on the static discussion board, where immediacy of a thought morphs into a post that could go unread or responded to when a new discussion thread already "moved on?" How to "type in" positionality and the role identity markers play in research, when both the instructors and the students remain mostly invisible to each other? At the same time, the privileging of a written form in an online teaching platform simultaneously challenges and liberates us in meeting the students through the text only. This way, "otherness is felt in the particular choice of words, in the style and tone of writerly presence, in the manner participants respond (or not) to others online. All else is left to the imagination" (van Manen & Adams, 2009, p. 17).

The tensions we addressed present our reflections on our experiences as online teachers of qualitative research. Our experiences resonate significantly with the meta-analysis of the learning experiences of qualitative research *students* in a face-to-face setting (Cooper, Chenail, & Fleming, 2012). The meta-analysis of 25 empirical studies showed that the learning of qualitative research methods consists of three interrelated dimensions: (1) affective – students experiencing excitement alongside confusion and frustration when faced with methodologies and theoretical frameworks that are a complete novelty; (2) cognitive – students becoming familiar with critically examining empirical research using qualitative methodology; collecting, analyzing, and reflecting on the data; and engaging in ethical questions associated with qualitative research; (3) experiential – students "learn by doing." Although the Cooper et al.'s study synthesized the results obtained in face-to-face classrooms, we recognized their dimensions in our online environment.

With the rapid increase of online doctoral programs in Educational Leadership, many instructors of qualitative research methods face a dilemma of how to convey a complex process of engaging in qualitative inquiry, including its technical aspects, without reducing teaching to linear sets of prescriptions. This paper continues efforts to re-conceptualize pedagogies in qualitative courses and offers course design ideas to help doctoral candidates bring continued scholarship into their professional practice. Sharing such pedagogical ideas remains an important contribution to the field of professional preparation of educational leaders and administrators.

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## Appendix A

### Description of the Assignments

#### Assignment 1: Respond to an image

Look at the provided images, select one and generate a narrative on what you see and what this image represents to you in relation to the assigned topic (about 500 words). **There is no right or wrong answer.** You can put down absolutely anything describing the actual image and/or reflecting on thoughts and feelings that this image evokes in you. These narratives will be collected and transcribed by the instructor. Later in the course, we will use these narratives to develop a coding scheme and analysis.

#### Assignment 2: Research design plan

Develop a rationale, a purpose statement, a research question, a sampling plan, and an IRB informed consent letter for the Basic Qualitative Study on an assigned topic. The research question will guide the design of your interview or observation and the coding of the data in your project. Your question will be shared in class during week 3.

#### Assignment 3: Bracketing memo

It is important that researcher's initial preconceptions arising from personal experience with the topic and research material are surfaced [aka bracketed] prior to undertaking the project. These pre-conceptions (i.e. researcher's pre-existing personal beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and opinions) should also be monitored throughout the research project as both a potential source of insight as well as potential obstacles to engagement with the participants. A common method of bracketing is writing memos throughout the research process. For this assignment, write a 1-2-page account acknowledging and foregrounding your preconceptions about your research question (Tip: you may use your response to the image as a starting point for this memo).

#### Assignment 4: Data collection instruments

For this assignment first decide whether an interview **or** an observation will yield best data to answer the research question that you came up with in Assignment #2. Keep in mind that interviews are best suited to gain insights into people's beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and descriptions of the event. Observations are better suited to explore people's behaviors, actions and practices to learn "how things work." Depending on your choice you will design either an Interview Guide **or** an Observation Protocol that you **will use to conduct your data collection** (For your final project you will interview 1 person for 40-60 minutes or observe an event for 40-60 minutes). Bring in the guide or the protocol to share and discuss with your classmates.

**Assignment 5: Image narrative coding report**

For this assignment you will code documents. The documents are narratives that you and your classmates submitted in Week 1 in response to an image. The coding scheme that you develop must lead you to answering a specific research question. You will be reading and “making sense” out of these narratives through the lens of “what can these narratives tell you about your research question?” Also, you must use Microsoft Word to code the transcripts and create the Code Book. Use assigned readings to help you develop a step-by-step coding procedure. More details on this assignment will be provided in class. Bring in the coding book and memo and share and discuss with your classmates.

**Assignment 6: Final Project Report**

This assignment is the final written report of your Basic Qualitative Study. All previous pieces (the design plan, your data sources, IRB letter, interview guide or observation protocol, and image narrative coding sheets) will contribute to and should be included in the final report with **all necessary revisions made**. In addition to previously submitted pieces, the final report write-up (the rationale, research question(s), methods, findings, and reflection) must synthesize ideas from the analysis of (1) image narratives, (2) additional piece of data (either an interview or an observation that you conducted), and (3) your own voice as a researcher (bracketing assignment and memos). Think about how you may want to frame your report so that your title and your writing accommodate these three distinct dimensions/lenses on the topic that has been explored through this course. Remember that qualitative writing requires you to move flexibly between different meanings and themes generated by your research and highlight commonality and disjunctions in human experiences. Outside references are encouraged. This paper should be 10-12 pages long (excluding Appendices), written using appropriate APA style. More details on this assignment will be distributed in class.

**Appendix B****Key Resources in Introduction to Qualitative Research Online Course**

Textbook:

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

This textbook offers an excellent introduction to qualitative research, informing yet not overwhelming students.

Key journal articles and supporting resources:

On the epistemology of qualitative research:

Bochner, A. P. (2009). Warm ideas and chilling consequences. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 2(3), 357-370.

Labuschagne, A. (2003). Qualitative research - airy fairy or fundamental? *The Qualitative Report*, 8(1), 100-103. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol8/iss1/7>

On positionality in qualitative research:

Bourke, B. (2014). Positionality: Reflecting on the research process. *The Qualitative Report*, 19, 1-9. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss33/3>

Ma, W. (2010). Bumpy journeys: A young Chinese adolescent's transitional schooling across two sociocultural contexts. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 9, 107-123.

On ethics of qualitative research:

Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D.L. (2000). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33(1), 93-96.

On bracketing:

Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2010). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(1), 80-96.

On data analysis:

LaPelle, N.R. (2004). *Simplifying qualitative data analysis using general purpose software tools*. Retrieved from [http://escholarship.umassmed.edu/prevbeh\\_pp/84/](http://escholarship.umassmed.edu/prevbeh_pp/84/)

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Taylor, E. (2002). Using still photography in making meaning of adult educators' teaching beliefs. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 34(2), 123-139.

On validity in qualitative research:

Maxwell, J. A. (1992). Understanding and validity in qualitative research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(3), 279-300.

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