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## Demystifying the Construction of Qualitative Research Methodology: An Approachable Text for Doctoral Students

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## Demystifying the Construction of Qualitative Research Methodology: An Approachable Text for Doctoral Students

### Abstract

Durdella's text, *Qualitative Dissertation Methodology: A Guide for Research Design and Methods*, breaks down the steps for conducting qualitative research in applied programs of study and social behavioral science fields. The book, also useful to department chairs and program directors, focuses on designing a qualitative study, conducting the study and analyzing the data. Useful advice drawn from Durdella's experience as a dissertation committee chair, in addition to introspective questions for the student, help to demystify the methodology chapter and, thus, could have a positive impact on programs.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Methodology Chapter, Dissertation Writing, Applied Fields of Study, Social Behavioral Science Fields of Study

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## Demystifying the Construction of a Qualitative Research Methodology: An Approachable Text for Doctoral Students

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*Durdella's text, **Qualitative Dissertation Methodology: A Guide for Research Design and Methods** (2019), breaks down the steps for conducting qualitative research in applied programs of study and social behavioral science fields. The book, also useful to department chairs and program directors, focuses on designing a qualitative study, conducting the study and analyzing the data. Useful advice drawn from Durdella's experience as a dissertation committee chair, in addition to introspective questions for the student, help to demystify the methodology chapter and, thus, could have a positive impact on programs. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Methodology Chapter, Dissertation Writing, Applied Fields of Study, Social Behavioral Science Fields of Study*

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Doctoral students start off motivated and eager, albeit nervous, having decided to invest significant time and money to fulfill their dream of obtaining the academy's highest degree. But fast forward several years and students usually have fallen into one of two categories: those on track to defend their dissertation and those who are sadly realizing they may never reach that magnificent day.

Higher education institutions welcome students into their doctoral programs who are deemed worthy of the academic challenge. So then why do roughly half of those admitted never finish their degree and, more importantly, what can be done to help fix this complex problem?

A newly released textbook has the potential to make a significant difference in the number of students who end up with a Ph.D. or Ed.D., as opposed to being ABD. In *Qualitative Dissertation Methodology: A Guide for Research Design and Methods*, Nathan Durdella offers a comprehensive manual for conducting qualitative research in applied programs of study and social behavioral science fields. The text contains erudite advice for every step of the journey, from choosing a dissertation chair, to deciding the most appropriate research tradition for the proposed study, to conducting the field work and, lastly, to picking an interpretive paradigm to analyze the data.

Serving as dissertation committee chair for many students (including myself) in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies doctoral program at California State University, Northridge, Durdella picked up on patterns that threaten to derail dissertation completion. He points out students often are trying to decide the topic and focus of their dissertation event before they have even learned about methods, academic writing and research design. "This process—marked by intense emotional dynamics, intellectual engagement and often physical and mental demands—tends to strain students who sometimes balance work activities and professional obligations (not to mention family commitments) with academic course requirements and the demands of dissertation writing" (2019, p. xvii). Thus, students can feel overwhelmed and underprepared from the very first semester, potentially undermining their ability to finish their dissertation and earn their degree.

Durdella spent a sabbatical semester tackling this decades-old problem, resulting in a text that is truly a gift to both students and their department chairs and program directors. Rightly so, it takes a deep dive into the methodology chapter—truly the heart of the dissertation—because the strength of any dissertation study lies in how well the study is

planned and executed. This is a different approach from competing textbooks, which tend to cover the entire qualitative dissertation, as Durdella accurately points out in the preface. His text is divided into three parts to cover these crucial topics: establishing one's dissertation committee, developing the original study and analyzing the data. Each of the 10 chapters begins with a short explanation of its purpose and learning objectives and includes pertinent questions students should ask of themselves, such as, "What physical or virtual sites or research settings could serve as backups in case I ultimately cannot access participants in my current or anticipated site(s) or setting(s)?"

A variety of helpful charts—including a three-year timeline for completion—provide valuable information. In addition, Durdella cites examples from his students' work, such as exactly how study participants were described in the dissertation and some of the questions they were asked. To supplement the text, Durdella (2018a) recorded a 13-minute video titled "Developing Skills in Formulating Qualitative Research Questions" and a 15-minute video called "Key Skills in Writing a Qualitative Research Proposal" (Durdella, 2018b), which help bring a human touch to topics students may otherwise view as a bit dry.

He also recounts some experiences he's had as a committee chair, as well as a faculty member who vigorously defends qualitative research methods. One poignant story recounts the day he received an email from a student who was frustrated because her committee chair cast doubt on the design of her qualitative study, suggesting she also needed a survey. "I advised her to argue that there are multiple approaches to ensure quality in qualitative research—that she did not need to 'tack on' a survey to enhance her findings and recommendations at the end of her study," wrote Durdella (2019, p. 89). Durdella's warmth in the classroom comes through in the text, which uses plenty of first- and second-person references. It's an approachable and quite readable text, especially for re-entry students, and would be ideal for both on-ground and online classes. He has an exceptional way of empowering his students, which is evidenced in this writing about the student's role as researcher:

Beyond the normative practices and attitudes about research in disciplinary and research communities, you control a lot of what happens in your study. From beginning to end, conceptualization to implementation, you are the chief research instrument in your dissertation study. Throughout this book, the idea that you are at the center of your study has been consistent, and the components of your dissertation methodology chapter reveal who you are as a researcher. (2019, p. 296)

The beauty of this text is it demystifies the process of constructing a qualitative dissertation methodology. This is *the* big hurdle a student must cross to make it to degree completion. While it could have used more specifics on how to get dissertation findings accepted at a conference and published in a peer-reviewed journal, overall the text is a solid all-in-one qualitative research manual for students in applied and social behavioral science fields. And with more pressure being put on institutions to increase their graduation rates, this text could very well help more students earn their doctorate degrees.

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