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## “Miss, this is a lot of work”: Exploring Part-Time Students Experiences of Qualitative Research

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## “Miss, this is a lot of work”: Exploring Part-Time Students Experiences of Qualitative Research

### Abstract

Qualitative research can be time consuming and intensive as researchers engage in data collection, analysis, and interpretation of rich, detailed, multi-layered, and voluminous data. For Master’s level students struggling to balance full-time work, family, part-time studies, and other obligations, the nature of qualitative research can be overwhelming and discouraging as they learn about and engage in the research process. However, if students’ experiences are rich and meaningful, the time investment can be worthwhile. In this generic qualitative study, Master’s Level Education students’ experiences in an Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education course are explored. Drawing on data from semi-structured one-to-one interviews, as well as students’ written reflections from course assignments, we (i) explore the conceptual and personal challenges that students describe as they learn about and engage with qualitative research; (ii) explore students’ perceptions of class readings, activities, and assignments; and (iii) discover students’ perceptions about how class readings, activities, and assignments shape their experiences in the course. Findings suggest that although these part-time adult learners encounter difficulty in balancing their adult roles and responsibilities with the time consuming nature of the qualitative research process, they still find the course experience valuable due to the practical, experiential activities utilised; the connection of content to their professional and academic lives; and the collaborative experiences with their peers.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Education, Course Experiences

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## **“Miss, this is a lot of work”: Exploring Part-Time Students Experiences of Qualitative Research**

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*Qualitative research can be time consuming and intensive as researchers engage in data collection, analysis, and interpretation of rich, detailed, multi-layered, and voluminous data. For Master’s level students struggling to balance full-time work, family, part-time studies, and other obligations, the nature of qualitative research can be overwhelming and discouraging as they learn about and engage in the research process. However, if students’ experiences are rich and meaningful, the time investment can be worthwhile. In this generic qualitative study, Master’s Level Education students’ experiences in an Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education course are explored. Drawing on data from semi-structured one-to-one interviews, as well as students’ written reflections from course assignments, we (i) explore the conceptual and personal challenges that students describe as they learn about and engage with qualitative research; (ii) explore students’ perceptions of class readings, activities, and assignments; and (iii) discover students’ perceptions about how class readings, activities, and assignments shape their experiences in the course. Findings suggest that although these part-time adult learners encounter difficulty in balancing their adult roles and responsibilities with the time consuming nature of the qualitative research process, they still find the course experience valuable due to the practical, experiential activities utilised; the connection of content to their professional and academic lives; and the collaborative experiences with their peers. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Education, Course Experiences*

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### **Introduction**

Researcher development is important in the context of higher education in order to build capacity amongst those individuals entering into the world of academia as well as for practitioners who wish to undertake research to inform their practice. Additionally, it is also important for preparing individuals to think critically and analytically, to generate new knowledge and engage in action to address real problems, and to communicate this knowledge in written and oral formats.

With this in mind, we focus on an introductory qualitative research methods course for graduate students in education at a tertiary-level institution in Jamaica. The course is important for these students as part of researcher capacity building both for those who want to move into doctoral studies after completing their Master’s degree, as well as for those who wish to undertake research within their institutional contexts to inform their practice as educators. At the same time, qualitative research can be time consuming and intensive as researchers engage in data collection, analysis, and interpretation of rich, detailed, multi-layered, and voluminous data. For Master’s level students struggling to balance full-time work, family, part-time studies, and other obligations, the nature of qualitative research can be overwhelming and, as a result, discouraging as they learn about and engage in the research process. However, if students’ experiences are rich and meaningful, the time investment can be worthwhile. In this generic

qualitative study, Master's Level Education students' experiences in an Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education course are explored as we wanted to understand the experiences of part-time adult learners who are working full-time in particular. In doing so, we define adult learners as those who are financially independent of parents, who work full-time (35 hours per work or more (STATIN, 2018)), who have other obligations (e.g., spouse/family, church/ministry work, etc.) and who are studying on a part-time basis. Specifically, we seek to address the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the conceptual and personal challenges that students describe as they learn about and engage with qualitative research?
2. What are students' perceptions about class readings, activities, and assignments?
3. How do these perceptions about class activities and assignments shape their experiences in the course?

I (the first author) am one of the Lecturers who delivers the Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education course within the School of Education at the University in which I am situated. The course pre-dates me having been designed and developed by colleagues within the School prior to my joining as a member of the academic staff. I, however, have been delivering the course to various cohorts of students for four years now, since joining the School in 2015. I have previously taught research methods courses to undergraduate and postgraduate students in various disciplines in England and Guyana but these four years mark my first experience focusing solely on qualitative research methods. I (the second author) am a past Master's student in the School and took the course as part of my programme of study, delivered by a Lecturer different to the first author.

In this paper, we begin by offering an overview of some of the main issues raised by researchers in the teaching of qualitative research, the learning of qualitative research, and the issues faced by part-time students. We then move on to offer an overview of the Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education course, including its aims, assessment, and activities. We share with readers our methodological approach in undertaking the research, and the findings of the undertaking. We end by sharing recommendations from both our research participants as well as ourselves that could help to alleviate some of the pressures that part-time students are facing as they learn qualitative research.

## Literature Review

### Teaching Qualitative Research

There is a body of research on the teaching of qualitative research methods, which touches on a range of issues, including the challenges involved (e.g., Sargeant, 2012), approaches to teaching (e.g., Rania, Migliorini, & Reboria, 2017), and ways for educators to support one another in teaching (e.g., Humble & Sharp, 2012).

Lewthwaite and Nind (2016) highlight the importance of research methods training in the enhancement of research capacity in the social sciences and report the findings from their study, which involved the collection and analysis of data from focus groups with methods teachers and an online forum for doctoral students and early-career researchers. Amongst their findings were the following: that methods teachers delivered courses by facilitating students' active engagement with methods, first-hand experience of conducting research, and reflection amongst students. Sargeant (2012) shares on her experiences teaching qualitative research methods to second-year undergraduates and highlights the need to consider the different

learning styles of students when teaching and the need to encourage reflexivity amongst students, particularly in relation to qualitative texts. Booker (2009), in her experiences teaching graduate students qualitative research methods, points out that students experience challenges with the subjectivity of qualitative research, the time consuming nature of data collection and analysis, and the limitations in generalising findings. Additionally, for her students, there must be a connection between the course and the issues and challenges faced in their professional lives (Booker, 2009).

Rania, Migliorini, and Reborá (2017) reflect on their experiences teaching qualitative research methods to undergraduates in psychology using a Team-Based Learning (TBL) approach. Like Lewthwaite and Nind (2016), they indicate that the challenges encountered by those delivering qualitative research methods courses can be mitigated through experiential and interactive learning activities. They highlight that students need extended training because of the various techniques that are a part of qualitative research, that they require particular skills in reflection and sensitivity, and that both teaching and learning are enhanced through group relationships and interactions.

Humble and Sharp (2012) also share on their teaching of qualitative research to graduate students, pointing out that one of the significant challenges is the positivist paradigm which dominates thinking amongst students to the detriment of alternative paradigms. Other challenges include its methodological complexity. They share on the use of peer journaling as a mechanism to support the teaching process and to offer themselves a way to reflect on their teaching and learning as educators, which offered them clarity, confidence, and connection with one another.

From the literature, we can see that educators do cite challenges experienced by students such as the complexity of qualitative approaches, the paradigm underlying qualitative approaches, engaging in reflection, and the time consuming nature of the research process. Additionally, the writers point to the need to utilise interactive and experiential learning to deliver the courses and to ensure that course material connects with the professional lives of students.

### **Learning Qualitative Research**

There is also a body of literature that speaks to students' learning experiences with qualitative research. Hunt, Mehta, and Chan (2009) share their experiences as graduate students utilising qualitative approaches in the undertaking of health-based research. Some of the challenges they discuss are the process of inductive analysis, and identifying the 'important' elements in data. Cooper, Fleischer, and Cotton (2012) carried out a phenomenological study of students' learning experiences. Amongst their findings were that learning qualitative research was an emotional experience for students, including feelings of confusion and anxiety; that active, experiential learning was necessary; that students learning was motivated by a pivotal experience related to either the subject matter or a personal moment; and that students learnt meaningfully when they were able to relate their experience to prior research knowledge and experience. Like Cooper, Fleischer, and Cotton (2012), Turner and Crane (2016) also note the importance of experiential learning in supporting the learning process.

Reisetter et al. (2003) point out that those learning qualitative research can be challenged by the interrogation of their assumptions and previous knowledge about the nature of research. In learning qualitative research, their research found that students were impacted by their previous research experiences, for instance, with quantitative research; that their personal epistemological and philosophical viewpoints shaped how they responded to qualitative research; and that the usefulness of the approach to their professional lives also shaped their acceptance of the approach.

Thus, the findings from this body of research correspond with many of the findings from those delivering qualitative research courses with respect to the challenges experienced by students and the most effective way to deliver these courses.

### **Adult and Part-Time Students**

Many writers highlight that higher education is experiencing a greater influx of adult or non-traditional students (Barrett, 2016; Fairchild, 2003; Kerns, 2006). Barrett (2016, p. 4) defines adult learners as “individuals who are financially independent of parents, have been gainfully employed, have dependents other than a spouse, and have other social roles and responsibilities”. This cohort of the student population is characterised by particular features, including, “adult roles, relationships and responsibilities”, engagement in employment, and having “less time available for academic work than traditionally aged undergraduates” (Barrett, 2016; Fairchild, 2003; Kerns, 2006, pp. 40-41). Fairchild (2003, p. 11) points out, however, that these same students have high levels of motivation and drive to achieve, and “value opportunities to integrate academic learning with life and work experiences.” Additionally, the literature also points out that these students can experience difficulties balancing, work, study, and family (Fairchild, 2003).

Many of these students undertake their studies on a part-time basis. Kember et al. (2005) point out that a number of these students cannot cope with the challenges of these varying demands on their time, indicating that completion rates for part-time courses are often lower than those for full-time courses. One of the key factors in students’ participation in courses of study and their persistence in these courses is their workload (Barrett, 2016).

From the literature reviewed, it is clear from the perspectives of both those teaching and learning qualitative research that there are challenges associated with the research approach, including its philosophical underpinnings and methodological complexity, its time consuming nature, and the reflective processes. Additionally, we can see that despite its challenges, if qualitative research is taught utilising experiential and active learning, and if the usefulness of the research findings can be connected to individuals’ professional lives, then this can make the process easier to engage with. Finally, with respect to part-time adult learners, the literature indicates that adult learners are already challenged with the varying and competing demands on their time. We can surmise that these challenges are compounded with respect to more challenging and time-demanding courses such as those focused on qualitative research methodologies. Indeed, based on our own experiences as a lecturer and past student in qualitative research methods, this is in fact the case. This research will add to the body of literature in this field and also address a gap as there is a dearth of literature relating to the experiences of part-time adult learners in particular and their learning experiences of qualitative research methods.

### **The Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education Course**

The Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education course forms part of the Master’s programme within the School of Education at the tertiary level institution in Jamaica where this research is situated. After taking a compulsory Research Methods course, students then have the option of choosing either an introductory quantitative or qualitative research methods course as a follow-on. Class sizes normally range between 20-25 students and take place from 4:00pm to 7:00pm once a week over a thirteen-week period, with most students coming from the formal education system. These include teachers, guidance counsellors, deans of discipline, principals, and vice-principals. Additionally, the cohorts normally include students from various specialisations within the School including, Curriculum Development, Higher

Educational Management, Language Education, Mathematics Education, Educational Psychology, Educational Administration, and Teacher Education and Development, as some examples. The course is taught by several lecturers within the School of Education, including myself (the first author). The Course Description for the course read thus:

This course builds on .... the compulsory research methods course that all Masters students in the School of Education are required to complete - by helping students become proficient in qualitative methods. It consolidates and extends their understanding of and skills in qualitative research methods introduced. In this course students have an opportunity to learn and practise qualitative research skills and to develop an understanding of the importance of ethics and trustworthiness as part of good qualitative research design and practice. They will also be introduced to a variety of qualitative research genres to include ethnography, case study, life history, grounded theory and phenomenology.

The core text used in the course is Marilyn Lichtman's *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide*. Additional readings are drawn from texts by Gretchen Rossman and Sharon Rallis, Corrine Glesne, Sharan Merriam, Michael Patton, and John Creswell, amongst others. As part of the course, students have to complete and pass three major assignments, as follows:

- (i) The first is a field report centred on their tentative research topic and questions. Students have to undertake a 30-minute interview and a 30-minute observation exercise around their proposed research topic, producing a properly formatted, verbatim transcript, along with detailed field notes that contain both descriptive notes and observer comments. Students also need to describe the site, setting, and participants, offer a rationale for the selection of each, and explain how they negotiated access and entry. This assignment is worth 20% of their grade.
- (ii) For the second assignment, students analyse the data collected as part of the first assignment – the field report. They must describe their procedures for preparing, managing, analysing and interpreting the data; illustrate how they coded their data; prepare an analytical memo; and present some preliminary findings in the form of assertions. This assignment is worth 20% of their grade.
- (iii) The third assignment consists of two parts. The first part is an oral presentation of their proposed research (15% of their grade) and the second part is a report of their research based on five hours of data collection and analysis, including an introduction, literature review, methodology section, findings and analysis, and conclusion. This accounts for 45% of their grade.

For all assignments, students are asked to reflect on the process and to include this reflection within their submission. All assignments, with detailed individual feedback, are returned to students before the next assignment is due since each assignment builds on the preceding. Additionally, group feedback is shared with students.

Each three-hour face-to-face session with students includes a 'lecture' component, in-class activities (both individual and group), and discussion. For instance, when teaching observation as a data collection technique, I (the first author) begin with an overview of observation. We then move on to the practical activities. Students will view a scene from a film that has education/schooling as one of the major themes (e.g., *To Sir with Love*) and practice recording descriptive notes and observer comments based on this scene. These notes are then shared with peers who offer feedback as to the detail and accuracy of the notes, and as to

whether the descriptive notes and observer comments represent what they are meant to be. This is followed by a second exercise in which students go outside to a public space on the campus and observe students in relation to a 'mock' research question.

As another example, when teaching qualitative data analysis, I (the first author) begin with an overview of the data analysis process. Students are then given research questions and extracts from interviews, and work in groups to code, cluster, and memo the data and come up with preliminary assertions. Thus, most if not all topics have a practical aspect within the classroom that allows students to practice that element. Additionally, at the end of each class, students are asked to reflect on the content covered in class and/or their feelings as a qualitative researcher. They do so in forms such as a written journal or on their laptops.

## **Methodology**

In undertaking this research, I (the first author) selected a qualitative research approach specifically a generic design. The qualitative approach was chosen for two principal reasons. Firstly, it was our desire to explore and understand in depth and detail students' experiences in the Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education course. Based on this desire for experiences and meaning from the students' perspectives, a qualitative research approach was deemed suitable. Merriam highlights that, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (2009, p. 5). Secondly, it was our intention to share not only the research and its findings with the School's own research students as one audience; we also wanted to utilise this research process as a model (in part or in whole) that current and future students in the course could refer to as they undertook their own research as part of the course requirements.

### **Data Collection**

We utilised semi-structured interviews in the research as this offered our participants flexibility in the interview process. I (the second author) piloted the interview schedule with a past Master of Education student and we both made minor revisions thereafter based on both the experience of undertaking the interview and the review of the transcript. Additionally, we also utilised document analysis as the reflections which formed part of each assignment in the course were also analysed.

### **Sample Selection and Ethics**

Participants were purposefully selected based on their status as past students of the course. In purposefully selecting students, we chose students from course streams during the 2017/18 academic year so that course experiences would be fresh in their minds. Although the course is open to both MEd and MPhil/PhD students, we wanted to focus on the MEd students as anecdotal evidence suggested that they were the ones who struggled the most with the time demands of the course. Additionally, we wanted students with varied performances in the course, including students who had received As, B+s, Bs, and Fail grades in the course. Finally, we wanted students across the various specialisation areas within the department. Based on these criteria, I (the first author) selected ten students across the various specialisations, however, only five students expressed an interest in taking part in the study, and of these, only four actually participated in interviews as there was difficulty with the scheduling of the fifth interview. The four participants included two males (Leon and Andre) and two females (Natalie and Michelle). They varied in age from 27 to 42 and were pursuing a range of

specialisations within the department. All were employed full-time whilst pursuing their Masters' degrees part-time.

Although students selected had already completed the course and knew of their course grades, and although I (the first author, as the Lecturer) would not be teaching any of these students again in any other courses (given the courses that I teach within the School), we wanted to mitigate against students feeling coerced in any way to participate in the research or feeling fearful of any negative repercussions, as well as offer them safeguards with respect to privacy and confidentiality. Consequently, I (the second co-author), a former student within the School and a research assistant, contacted students via email introducing the research, carried out the interviews with the students, and developed pseudonyms for the students.

In addition to the precautions outlined above, prior to each interview, I (the second author) shared formal letters of introduction with students which reminded students of the (a) purpose of the research (b) duration of the interview (c) expectations in the research process and (d) how the research findings would be utilised. Participants were asked to sign informed consent forms as an indication of (a) their understanding of the research process, (b) consent to participate in the research process, and (c) their consent to the audio recording of their interviews. I (the second author) informed the students that they could withdraw from the process at any time if they felt uncomfortable for any reason.

## **Data Analysis**

To aid in the data analysis, I (the second author) transcribed all interviews verbatim. Additionally, I also noted body language and facial expressions as part of the process. I read through the interview transcripts several times and coded these. I did not utilise any a priori codes. Rather, through the process of reading through the transcripts several times, codes emerged from the data. Thereafter, I clustered codes, with this categorisation process leading to the emergence of common themes. Strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of the research included member checking, triangulation (use of two data sources), ethical conduct of the research, and the use of thick description.

## **Findings**

### **Question One: What is the Nature of the Conceptual and Personal Challenges that Students Describe as They Learn about and Engage with Qualitative Research?**

#### **Engaging with Qualitative Research – Expectations and Realities**

Participants' expectations of qualitative research were different from the realities encountered as they engaged with the research process in the course. For all of the participants, perceptions of qualitative research were founded in their experiential background about the nature of the research paradigm. All thought that their individual preferences and capabilities made them more inclined towards qualitative research or perhaps even better suited for "words" than numbers which is the perceived reality which drives quantitative research.

However, as they began to engage with qualitative research there arose a conflict between what was initially desired and what was now required. All struggled with conceptualizing what they had thought qualitative research would be and what it actually was. Participants attested that going through the course helped them to see that the paradigm was not merely about not liking numbers and liking words and telling stories. They came to the conclusion that for qualitative research to be credible it required rigour. They came to see that in order for them to acquire rigour their research, it meant putting in countless hours of hard

work. Michelle who was completing her second post-graduate degree admitted that her expectations of the level of work in qualitative research was quite a contrast from the realities that she experienced as she tried to do her best in the course while supporting a family. She expressed in her interview:

I thought it was just getting the persons' view on whatever topic I wanted, and I would just write the persons' view and then this is, "These are the views of the people! Now, do something about it!" I never thought about how the, the research needs to be organized so that it can be trustworthy and credible... It takes a loooooong time!

Thus, one of her expectations was that qualitative research was about merely indicating individuals' perspectives, but the reality encountered in the course was that there were additional facets to the process, such as ensuring trustworthiness of the process. Her sentiments were shared by Andre, who recorded in one of his written reflections for an assessment that "It is a fact that I underestimated the level of work that would have been required to complete this paper. It was truly a time-consuming activity to transcribe the interviews. This was then compounded by the procedures required to conduct the analysis of the data." He further went on to share in this reflection "Admittedly, I got to the point an emotional wreck when I was faced with the challenges of completing this task. Indeed, I had to use my high school motto as a reminder that I should *persevere and excel*. I will not forget the almost sleepless nights that I had to experience as a result of completing this study and going to work the next day feeling like a zombie." For Andre, the reality was that the qualitative research process required more effort than he expected. The time-consuming nature of qualitative research was a challenge highlighted by those such as Booker (2009).

### **Engaging with Qualitative Research – Achieving Balance**

Participants expressed in various ways that engaging with qualitative research involved trying to achieve a balance between the various responsibilities of their life and the demands of the course. As was mentioned previously all participants in the study worked full-time while attending the course. The dichotomous reality between the course and their lives outside of it proved to be difficult to manage. It became evident as they shared their experiences that weaving a balance between the many demands on their time and the course proved to be a significant factor.

They all indicated the difficulty they faced in finding time to do all that was required of them personally and professionally. Whether it was time to attend classes, to reflect on learning or simply to complete assignments, the challenge recurred throughout interviews. Participants could see the relevance of the work, but they simply wished that there was not so much of it. So there was a wrestling between wanting to acquire the necessary conceptual and practical knowledge, but at the same time attempting to cope with the many demands of their time within the scope of the course as well as their personal lives. In one of her written reflections for a course assessment, Michelle expressed the following:

An interview that last about 26 minutes in total took me over 8 hours over 2 days to complete. Transcribing verbatim takes serious concentration, listening and re-listening and going over and over and time, so much time. This I had to do while pausing to attend to the questions and requests of my children or husband, every pause meant, re-focusing and listening to a section a 10th time sometimes, to hear properly what was said including trying to capture in words

inaudible utterances and sounds that I will refer to as ‘*un-spellable*’ – that is right, that is not even a word in English, but that best represent the sounds I tried to represent in the transcription.

Thus, Michelle found the qualitative research process to be a time consuming one as she illustrates in her description of the lengthy transcription time of one interview in relation to the undertaking of the same interview.

## **Question Two: What Are Students’ Perceptions about Class Readings, Activities, and Assignments?**

### **Class Assignments – Practical but Demanding**

The students felt that the assignments undertaken were practical in nature but, as with all components of the process, demanded much from them with respect to time and effort. The practicality was demonstrated as course assignments acted as scaffolding as each assignment helped students to develop skills which they could apply to the next. Participants shared how they appreciated the fact that they were able to see the connection among pieces which they had to complete. For example, Leon highlighted in his interview, “So each assignment that was given, it builds on the knowledge of the previous one. So it was like a building block... by the end of it you understand what qualitative research actually entails.” Rather than coursework being discrete units, each task they had to do prepared them more for the final project.

Additionally, participants in the study generally felt that class assignments were meaningful and practical. Experiences were shared as to how in-class application of theoretical concepts helped to cement their understanding of course content. In-class simulation of research activities, peer discussions and feedback provided the necessary scaffolding that participants needed, as they were able to benefit from the knowledge of their classmates as well as learn from questions posed. Consequently, participants were able to build their confidence before attempting tasks on their own and as such when time came for them to go into the field, they felt more capable to do so. The use of practical, experiential, and interactive learning is a key element in ensuring the success of the teaching and learning of qualitative research methods (e.g., Cooper, Fleischer, & Cotton, 2012; Rania, Migliorini, & Rebora, 2017; Turner & Crane, 2016). Indeed, the importance of group relationships and discussions, forged in this instance through peer discussions and group activities, is an aspect highlighted by Rania, Migliorini, and Rebora (2017) in both the teaching and learning of qualitative research methods.

Classroom space also provided an avenue for questioning others and self. Through reflections on learning, participants were able to ponder how they were interacting with course content. For many the reflections, though appeared to be an expectation of the course with which they had to contend and see the benefits of, but not necessarily enjoy. In his interview, Andre animatedly shared his thoughts about Friday evening reflections:

...I could understand the merit in it, but of course the human aspect of it, in that I would have had a full week really and I am tired on the weekends or leading up to Friday or stuff like that, but I saw the benefits in it because you get to solidify and reflect on what you have learned and how you can improve, not only as an individual but of course the ultimate goal is to become a better researcher.

Thus, Andre has highlighted how the reflections served a practical purpose by ‘forcing’ students to reflect on their practice and consider how it could be improved yet was simultaneously mentally demanding as his class stream was scheduled for Friday evenings at the end of a long week of work.

It was fascinating to note that all participants felt that the final research paper required more of them than could have been realistically completed in the time frame of the course. They felt that more time was needed for them to complete a research paper which called for them to apply all they had learned throughout the course and that the duration of the course made such a task quite difficult. Michelle shared in her interview her struggles “I had to be scrambling to ensure that I could meet that deadline and meet it at some kind of quality”, thus demonstrating the time demands were much.

### **Question Three: How Do These Perceptions about Class Activities and Assignments Shape Their Experiences in the Course?**

#### **Course Experiences – A Journey in Practicality, Relevance and Fun**

Arising from the data analysis was the shared conclusion that the Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education course was one which proved practical and relevant to participants, and fun and enjoyable at the same time. Interviews conducted revealed that relevance was seen in the way course content could be applied to individuals’ current studies, their work within the field of education, as well as their own personal development. The descriptions of their experiences showed that for many, the journey through the course was not one that became a mere collection of dates of attendance or completion of assigned tasks. Rather, it was a process of gaining skills that would help them to navigate the demands of completing research at the post-graduate level. One such participant was Leon, who enthusiastically shared how his previous experience with research had left him somewhat hesitant and unsure about how to proceed with research. However, he explained during the interview how the course helped him to form a foundation for completing his final research as a graduate student:

The techniques, the information that we garnered, that engagement in qualitative research umm, was fundamental in me being able to successfully complete that. And just coming up, I know it’s not a part of the interview but, on my way up I saw one of my lecturers and she was like, “You did very well!”

Thus, the course had offered Leon practical knowledge and experience which he could draw on in carrying out his final research piece for his degree programme.

All participants in the study were students who also worked while completing their studies. As they were working in different institutional settings and roles, participants likely brought different professional realities and expectations to the course. However, it was interesting to note that for all participants, practical relevance was seen in how course content could be applied to the professional roles in which they worked and desired to work in the future. Practical relevance was seen in how course content helped them to shape their own thinking and to start asking questions about the issues or concerns that they observe within their work environments. This ability to connect course content to professional contexts was an important factor highlighted by those such as Booker (2009) and Reisetter et al. (2003) in having successful teaching and learning processes.

By thinking within the framework of qualitative research and what they have learned about conducting such studies, participants shared that they had a sense of how better to

discover answers by asking critical questions and then attempting to garner the information necessary. Similarly, there was also their shared thoughts that through completing the course, they could thereby help those that they teach to be better equipped to conduct qualitative research when necessary. For example, while doing the course Andre worked as a teacher educator. As part of his role he was required not only to observe teachers as they participate in their teaching activities, but to also guide them in the completion of their own research. He believed that his experience in the course provided skills that could enable him to better equip students in this regard. In his interview he said:

...it basically complimented what I was doing as a teacher educator at the time. So I wasn't only improving my research skills but also...how to help student teachers collect data and how to analyse data... Even in terms of content or materials received from the course, I was able to guide my students in terms of completing their research papers.

Thus, the research skills gained enabled him to support his own students in undertaking their own research.

Leon shared a similar thought in one of his written reflections for a course assignment, writing, "I am learning how to refine my interview skills so that I sound ... professional and focused. It taught me how to observe now with focus and purpose, an activity we do every day but mostly without purpose but this process showed me what to look for when I am observing." For Leon, the practical skills in observations were enhanced through the research process, which he then utilised in his job. This relates to the findings of those such as Cooper, Fleischer and Cotton (2012), who found, in their phenomenological research that students learning was more meaningful when they were able to connect it to prior research knowledge and experience. Likewise, Reisetter et al. (2003) also found that students' learning was shaped by their previous research experiences.

In addition to the practicality and relevance, the experiences of the participants is that they appeared to have genuinely enjoyed the experience in the course. An interesting dynamic about the participants is that some had prior, if limited, experience with conducting qualitative studies, while others had none. However, all students had done some research course as prerequisites for the Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education course. All shared how those experiences had shaped their thinking about research, whether positively or negatively. For participants the baggage from previous studies was erased as they saw the course as "fun." It was an interesting descriptor for a research course and noteworthy was the non-verbal cues as students talked about these experiences.

Based on the findings from the interviews and reflections, it can be seen that these part-time adult learners did encounter difficulties in balancing the demands of the course with their other adult roles and responsibilities, and that it was challenging to find a balance. Yet, they still find the course experience valuable due to the practical, experiential activities utilised; the connection of content to their professional and academic lives; and the collaborative experiences with their peers.

## **Discussion**

In summary, the findings of this research mirrored that of other research carried out surrounding lecturers' teaching and students' learning experiences in qualitative research courses. The participants voiced that the course was extremely demanding with respect to the time required, mirroring what was found by those such as Booker (2009). Additionally, participants expressed that the course was demanding in terms of the assignments and other

requirements. This was compounded by the fact that these students are adult learners, working full-time alongside family and/or other obligations. Despite this, we found that participants benefited from the peer and group discussions and the practical, experiential learning activities, as found by those such as Cooper, Fleischer, and Cotton (2012) and Rania, Migliorini, and Rebora (2017). Additionally, where content and activities were connected to or could be translated to professional contexts, this was an added benefit for the students, as found by Booker (2009) and Reisetter et al. (2003).

Before moving on to share some of the implications of these findings, it should be noted that there are some limitations to the study. Firstly, as is the case with qualitative research, these findings cannot be generalised to all students learning qualitative research. However, the detailed glimpse into these participants' experiences do offer us insight into what students, and those who are working students specifically, encounter in courses of this nature. Additionally, these are the experiences of participants in course streams that I (the first author) deliver. There are other Lecturers who deliver the course within the School and so it would have been useful to see if there are commonalities amongst the perspectives shared by those in other course offerings as well.

Based on these findings, we will first share some of the recommendations offered by our research participants during the interviews. We then move on to share some of our own recommendations. Some of our participants recommended the following to ease the burden associated with the various facets of the qualitative research process:

- The Lecturers should share some pre-suggested topics that could be realistically carried out over the thirteen-week period, from which students could choose.
- A longer period of time should be allocated to carry out the study.
- Weekly reminders (beyond the course outline) of what students should be doing (e.g., week two have a topic identified, week three have your research questions, etc.) should be shared with students at the beginning of each class.
- More synergies should be forged between the various research courses so that the linkages and connections were clearer.

The recommendation of having a longer period of time to undertake the study is not easily instituted given the semester system in which the School (and wider University) operates. Additionally, the suggestion of having the Lecturer identify topics is not one that I (the first author) am readily drawn to as the idea is to have students select topics that they have an interest in so that this can sustain the process. However, the recommendations will be taken on board and shared with other Lecturers who deliver the course as we reflect on our own practice and consider ways to continually improve our course offerings.

In terms of our own recommendations, we propose three. The first is that to alleviate the pressures that students face whilst not undermining the aims of the course is that students could undertake the assignments in groups, working together to collect the data, transcribe interviews, analyse the data and present the report. Thus, students will be engaged in the practical aspects of the course which are seen as valuable by our participants but will be working as a group which can help to address some of the time issues mentioned by our participants. Indeed, this is something that Sargeant (2012) speaks of, noting the 'time consuming' nature of qualitative research, she has adopted a group work approach for reports indicating that this makes the work more manageable for individuals. Additionally, students' confidence could be enhanced through the process of peer support and collaboration. Of course, great thought would have to be given to this in order to ensure that individual contributions to group work could be easily identified and assessed.

The second is that the requirement to collect and analyse five hours of data could be minimised to three or three and a half hours. This would still afford students the opportunity to engage with the qualitative research process but would minimise the time demands of what proves to be an overwhelming course for students. Again, this is something that would have to be discussed internally within the School and, if agreed upon, this change to the course might then have to go through the institutional review and approval process.

Finally, some of the time demands of the qualitative research process could be mitigated through use of technology that could facilitate and assist with transcription of data and data analysis. Students would have to be introduced to the possibilities and possibly engage in short tutorials for, for instance, computer aided qualitative data analysis software.

### Conclusion

Qualitative research is an approach that can result in multi-layered, rich, detailed, voluminous data, which, when analysed, can yield great insight into individuals' thoughts, behaviours and actions, interactions, experiences, and overall lives. Yet, as the students in the introductory qualitative research methods course can attest, it can be time consuming and overwhelming, particularly within the context of a part-time programme of study in which students have to balance study, work, family, and other roles and responsibilities. Yet, as the students also attest, it can be a rewarding experience if delivered in a meaningful, practical way that connects with their professional lives.

Given the time consuming nature of the data collection and analytic processes, as well as the time needed to orient students' minds to what is oftentimes an alternative paradigm for many, attention is needed to delivering course material and assessing students' learning in a way that does not overwhelm them. The recommendations emanating from students' themselves as well as those from the authors will hopefully serve as a starting point in this process.

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