The Use of Online Data Sources in a Qualitative Analysis Learning Project

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Abstract

Our purpose in writing this article is to describe the use of online data sources (such as blogs and microblogs) in a qualitative analysis learning project for graduate occupational therapy students. The project was designed to meet the following learning objectives: (1) increase students' understanding and appreciation for qualitative research principles and methods, (2) increase students' ability to use thematic and narrative analysis procedures with authentic data sets, and (3) increase students' ability to apply qualitative findings to occupational therapy practice. This article describes the project's theoretical rationale, components, objectives, implementation, and informal outcomes, along with a discussion of strengths and limitations of this project and suggestions for future research. This project demonstrates one way in which publicly available online data sources can be used to create an effective graduate qualitative analysis learning activity. We are sharing this innovative learning project in the hopes that it may be of interest to our colleagues in higher education and may contribute to the ethical and scholarly use of online data in learning assignments.

Keywords

blogs, learning assignment, narrative analysis, qualitative analysis, social media

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It is important for students in fields such as occupational therapy (OT) to develop clinical knowledge and skills, but also to develop an appreciation for the life experiences and unique contexts of individuals. One method for understanding client perspectives in a scholarly yet personal way is the use of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research that explores the lives of individuals through the collection and analysis of first-person data, or "stories" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With its emphasis on uncovering the meaning of personal experience, narrative inquiry is a natural choice for helping students gain a broader perspective and a greater appreciation for the diverse experiences of individuals. OT scholars contend that people make sense of their lives through narrative, and this making and telling of stories has fundamental importance to both clients and clinicians (Clark, 1993; Mallinson et al., 1996; Mattingly, 1994; Posatery Burke & Kern, 1996). Several more recent articles suggest that incorporating narrative into OT intervention may improve clinical services (Fortuna, 2018; Gunnarsson at al., 2010; Imanishi et al., 2016; Scaletti & Hocking, 2010).

While engaging in qualitative or narrative research has the potential to benefit students in OT and other professions, conducting such research from beginning to end presents many challenges. Even for expert researchers, narrative inquiry requires extensive and collaborative data collection, the ability to gather and understand complicated contextual material, and a high level of researcher self-reflection to address issues of power and create an authentic "re-story" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 72). In addition, educators interested in incorporating qualitative research into curricula must grapple with compressed timeframes, competing curricular demands, resource issues, and student expectations.

Zafran (2020) described the value of using narrative phenomenological approaches during student instruction to promote critical reflection and meaning making. In practice, this translates to a value for a person-centered approach that uses phenomenological methods even in the most medically oriented practice contexts (Colaianni et al., 2015). However, it can be challenging to promote the value for narrative and expository understanding within the demands of a fast-paced healthcare system. Cousins (1979) framed the importance of focusing on the patient perspective, but the cost factors within a complex and expensive health care system continue to orient practitioners to define value and quality in terms that are more meaningful for systems efficiency (Leland et al., 2015). Clinicians and educators must find ways to promote narrative perspectives, while also recognizing the constraints affecting health care practice and health care education.

The purpose of this article is to describe the innovative use of online data sources (such as blogs) in a qualitative analysis learning project for graduate students. Students first identify a topic of clinical or professional interest and conduct a preliminary literature review. They then develop a qualitative research question to guide the project. For example, "How do women with multiple sclerosis experience the challenges of parenting?" or "What is the meaning of employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities?" They then find a narrative "data source" by searching publicly available blogs and other social media sources. Once the data is narrowed, students engage in qualitative analysis and share their findings in written and presentation form. This is not a research study, but rather an analysis project. This project—completed in one semester--has allowed graduate OT students at a small, teaching-oriented college to experience many of the benefits of engaging in qualitative research by taking advantage of the depth and diversity of publicly-available online narrative sources.

Theoretical Background for the Learning Project

Written first-person narrative has long played a central role in social communication. Breines (1989) stated that "human action can be understood only in terms of the relationships that it generates with the world" (p. 51). From a pragmatic perspective, Breines felt that a person's ability to connect with the world is dependent upon active and meaningful engagement with the environment. Writing provides a means toward both ends since it provides a medium for interactivity between the inner world of ideas and the outer world of reality. Sartre (1949) stated that all good writing is social writing and is illuminated and constructed through the writer-reader relationship. According to this definition, a person cannot write as a lone individual – there must be some "other" that answers or responds to the writer's assertions. In this sense, writing becomes an act of witness, and a medium for self-affirmation.

In Sartre's model, the seemingly disconnected medium of diary writing is re-framed as a connected social discourse. Sartre (1949) stated that "all literary work is an appeal… to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work" (p. 46). This is particularly evident in the opening salutation that is so common in journal writing: "Dear Diary…" For example, Anne Frank addressed her famous diary as "Kitty" which was a personalization of her discourse (Frank, 1993, p. 2). At the time she wrote, Anne did not believe that anyone would be interested in her story. However, her diary has since been translated into nearly every modern language.

An appropriate follow-up to Anne's question might be "Why *would* people be interested in the private writings of another person?" Bunkers and Huff (1996) explained that "diaries are not so much inclusive because they contain everything from a given day, as they are inclusive in the sense that they do not privilege 'amazing' over 'ordinary' events" (p. 5). This celebration of the "ordinary" is a longstanding theme in understanding meaningful occupation. Diary writing and diary reading provides a vehicle of social connectedness through the

ordinary. This is a human need and is the basis of interactivity between the writer and the reader.

Educational and learning theorists refer to this communication interchange between reader and writer as a dialogic learning process (Nouri, 2014), often based on an expanded interpretation of Freire's (2018) seminal work on dialogic pedagogy as well as Bandura's (1986) social learning theory. Modern theorists are applying these concepts to numerous new formats where intersubjective social writing now happens.

A Digital Evolution: From Writing to Social Discourse

Writing has a long history of being used to express ideas and to serve as a communication tool. The Internet has reconfigured writing into complex forms that can reach exponentially greater numbers of people in constricted time frames. This has led to a new form of dialogic – of shared narration, storytelling, story-making, and interactivity. This new dialogic has been described as the "familiar – reconfigured – emergent paradigm" of Internet discourse (Herring, 2011). Writing was originally a "familiar" form of discourse that occurred primarily between individuals in an immediate personal context. It has subsequently been "reconfigured" into technological spaces, and is now an "emergent" methodology of discourse that can transcend practical limitations--bridging time, distance and even language (Herring, 2011).

Diaries and Blogs

Online diaries, configured on the Internet in the form of blogging and microblogging sites, provide a postmodern methodology for studying social spaces and interactions. The term "postmodern" is appropriate in this instance because it describes a virtual context where local environments and local relationships are no longer the basis for interactivity. Rather, people congregate online at virtual places (websites) where information is shared and where writing occurs. The nature of online interactivity includes, or even forces, dependence on written and visual forms for communication. Calzati and Simanowski (2018) described the varying ways that social media platforms are used as a postmodern methodology to construct and express self-identity among young Asian students.

The use of online writing and expression as an interactive tool provides an example of what Rowles (1991) described as a "surveillance zone," or an extension of personal space that has multiple uses. These zones surround individuals and act as areas of potential socialization and contact with others. A diary, in traditional or online format, may represent an extension of a person's self-definition and identity.

The proliferation of online writing anecdotally attests to the enjoyment of interactive journaling in a virtual context. For example, Stern (2002, 2004) discussed the opportunity of the Internet home pages as a forum for young women to create a narrative of their experiences. This narrative became a performance of their lived culture and provided a means of self-expression. Chandler (1998) applied the Levi-Strauss concept of *bricolage* in describing the process that people use in construction of their online identities through authorship of their web pages. Bricolage is a methodology of creating a narrative, where bits and pieces of the author's experience are placed on display as a representation of the author's reality. The facts that authors include in their construction of online narratives or identities are those facets of experience purposely selected by the author for the reader's understanding. The interpretation of the author's expression is reliant upon the interaction with the reader.

The new virtual context, essentially described by its reliance on the interactivity of writing on the Internet, is a powerful and important forum for individual self-expression.

Unsolicited patient expression published on the Internet is a valid form of narrative data (Robinson, 2001). Dillon (2010) advantaged online journaling in place of interviews for understanding a self-identity construct in adolescents. Other researchers have explored virtual methods as a good source for narrative data for research studies. For example, Henker et al. (2002) identified anxiety patterns in a population of teenage girls through analysis of online journals and later adapted this virtual technique to monitor the caregiving stress of parents who have children diagnosed with ADHD (Whalen et al., 2011).

Electronic Journals for Reflective Learning and Behavioral Change

Journaling in traditional and online contexts has been used as a learning and research tool; journaling in all its forms meets the criteria for reflective methodology. The widely cited Kolb Model (Kolb & Fry, 1974) has reflexivity embedded in the learning cycle. As an example, Thomas (2015) used journals to collect qualitative data on the experiences of nursing students. In a more clinical context, Garrouste-Orgeas et al. (2014) demonstrated the power of journaling in an ICU where a collective diary helped to facilitate communication and reflection. The ICU journal created an ongoing narrative about experiences shared between families and staff. Similarly, Heilferty (2018) found that parent journaling of their children's cancer experiences helped to improve communication and enhanced relationships with the care providers, among other benefits.

Some researchers have noted that unsolicited illness narratives may not always accurately reflect the entire population of patients with a given diagnosis. For example, Overberg et al. (2013) found that young women with breast cancer who were more likely to narrate their illness experiences online were more likely to represent patients who had different values about self-disclosure and who did not always represent the entirety of clinical treatments or outcomes. Other researchers (Drewniak et al., 2020) noted that although unsolicited narratives may be rich data sources of patient experiences, that the actual benefits of patients engaging in online narration may be difficult to quantify. Although these datasets might not be used to fully comprehend the quantifiable population characteristics of all people with a diagnosis, perhaps the more important consideration is that this kind of data can be used to comprehend the impact of the illness on an individual, which may be the more important frame for understanding the value of the data. Although there is increased use of this form for qualitative study, some researchers believe that unsolicited narrative remains an undervalued data source (Handy & Ross, 2015).

Emergent Forms of Online Expression

Social media platforms also may contain rich narrative data, although some formats of information sharing present unique challenges for analysis to early qualitative researchers or students. Twitter is a popular arena for expression, but messages are limited in character length. Instagram is also used by many people, but the format is more oriented to photographs. Finally, TikTok and YouTube are commonly used, but the format is in video form. Still, some researchers are beginning to use these platforms for data sources in qualitative inquiry (Cherian et al., 2020).

The learning project that we describe in this article proposes the use of online communication methodologies as a source of "data" for qualitative analysis. This project represents continued emergence of the full written form (in this case blogs and other online sources) as a dialogic method that is ripe for academic inquiry and student learning about narrative meaning-making as part of an occupational therapy process.

Description of the Qualitative Analysis Learning Project

The following sections provide a more detailed description of the Qualitative Analysis Project, including a re-cap the project's goals and rationale, and a description of how the project was implemented in its first several years. This section begins with a brief author introduction.

Self of the Authors

We, the authors, worked collaboratively to develop and implement this project, but we also recognize the impact of our personal backgrounds and perspectives.

Second author (Chris): I have had a long interest in the power of writing, and I began my own scholarly exploration of the topic at a Study of Occupations conference in 2004 where I presented on "The Occupation of Writing." Since 2005 I have kept my own online blog, documenting my occupational therapy experiences. Over time I expanded my interest in the online writing of others and how people create narrative around their own illness or disability experiences for the purposes of internal sense and meaning making. This interest was the driving force behind my consideration of online writing as a data source for a learning project in our curriculum.

First author (Sunny): It wasn't until graduate school that I really became aware of narrative inquiry as a research methodology, but I was immediately struck by the value and power of a structured approach to understanding the stories that people tell. As a lifelong private writer (mostly poetry and journaling) I was also intrigued by the idea of writing as a form of social discourse, which Chris describes in this article. Chris has been a mentor to me in my developing understanding of the power of narrative and its connection to clinical practice and life in general.

Learning Project Overview

The Qualitative Analysis Project is completed in a three credit-hour course, taught in the final graduate semester of a four-plus-one Master's program in occupational therapy. The first third of the course is devoted to foundational content and the remainder of the course is spent on completion of the Qualitative Analysis Project. Foundational content includes: overview of the qualitative research process generally; introduction to narrative inquiry specifically; practice with qualitative research critique; and practice with components of narrative and thematic analysis including "re-storying," analyzing context, and coding and interpreting narrative data. We follow a seminar format, which allows time for instruction, guided student work, peer critique, and instructor feedback during class time. In the final week of the course, students make presentations to peers and members of the faculty.

The Qualitative Analysis Project guidelines include the following steps, which are not intended to be strictly linear:

1. Identify assumptions and interpretive framework
2. Choose a topic of clinical or professional interest
3. Conduct a brief literature review
4. Draft research question(s)
5. Locate an electronic data source with all content available in the public domain
6. Designate a sampling frame and rationale, and collect data that fit the identified parameters
7. Identify and implement a qualitative coding strategy

8. Present findings in a written report, including a contextualized "re-story" and key themes with support from the data
9. Present findings in an alternative visual form designed to complement the written report
10. Share findings in a presentation, including a summary of methods, findings, and application of findings to professional practice

Learning Project Objectives and Rationale

Because of the challenges inherent in conducting rigorous qualitative research in a constricted time frame, we designed a project that emphasizes the analysis component of the narrative inquiry process. This is a project, not a full-scale research study. The use of existing electronic data sources allows this project to be completed in the available time frame, while still providing students with the benefits associated with exploring the lived experience of others.

We identified the following course learning objectives for our students: (1) students will review the literature on a topic of clinical interest, (2) students will integrate content from previous courses including statistics, research methods, and clinical courses, (3) students will gain an understanding of qualitative research and narrative inquiry in particular, (4) students will learn to analyze narrative data using qualitative procedures, and (5) students will gain an appreciation for the role that narrative analysis can play in occupational therapy practice. This final objective is supported by literature that suggests the benefits—to both clinicians and patients—of incorporating narrative into healthcare practice (Rian & Hammer, 2013; Stojan et al., 2019).

In developing this project, we considered issues of ethics and privacy as well as logistics. Our thoughts were shaped by Snee's 2013 critical reflection on the use of blogs in research. Snee (2013) noted that since the internet is still relatively new, ethical standards relating to the use of online data are also still evolving. She advocated for a contextual approach in her reflection on several key questions, including (1) are online blogs public or private? (2) are those who post online authors or subjects? and (3) could dissemination of study findings create potential harm to those who post? Kurtz et al. (2017) have also noted "the unclear boundaries between blogs as spaces for private reflection versus as content for public consumption" (p. 7) in their discussion of the ethical challenges associated with using online narrative sources in research.

One justification for the appropriateness of using online data sources is that our students are completing a learning activity and not a research study. Additionally, we consider the online sources students use to be "public," and we require students to carefully identify the intended audience as they read posts. In most cases, the blogger or poster uses her or his own name, and so students can credit "authorship" within the final presentation by using names and providing links to the original source. The students' analyses are not disseminated beyond the classroom.

As instructors we recognize that most bloggers probably don't imagine that their words will become the basis for a graduate analysis project. On the other hand, we feel that most people who post in publicly accessible online venues hope that their words will reach others and have an impact; we feel this project uses online narrative sources in that spirit. In reflecting on her own use of online data, Snee (2013) noted that "there is usually more than one ethically-defensible position on any given situation" (p. 63). We currently include a literature-based discussion of the ethics of using online narrative sources as an early step in the project, since there are both challenges and opportunities when using blogs as a source of narrative data (Kurtz et al., 2017).

Project Assessment

The Qualitative Analysis Project is graded using a comprehensive rubric, with criteria that align with the project objectives and required components. This is a high-stakes assignment, with total value for the paper and presentation ranging from 50-65% of total course points. Over the past three years, students' course evaluations and informal feedback have been very positive, as have faculty members' responses to the presentations. Although we have not collected formal data on the project's outcomes, conducting outcomes research is a goal that we may pursue in the future. This section describes student responses to the project, and provides anecdotal feedback from two former students.

Common Student Responses

Qualitative analysis is new to most students when they begin this course, and some students are initially skeptical about the value of analyzing stories. Many students have internalized the quantitative concept that bigger is better when it comes to sample size; it is difficult for them to anticipate the value in diving deeply into the experience of a single person. As instructors, we explain the importance of *transferability*--a concept identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as analogous to external validity in quantitative research. Thinking about transferability helps students begin to understand how the experience of a single person might apply to professional practice more broadly.

Students' enthusiasm generally increases as they begin to identify areas of clinical interest and to browse the internet for potential narrative sources. We guide students to find and evaluate electronic data sources, and give them readings that explain the pros and cons of using online narrative data. Students access data through a variety of sites and platforms. For example, one group of students chose to analyze the Instagram photos and posts of a college athlete who had sustained a serious spinal cord injury. Another group analyzed the personal blog of a woman recovering from a stroke. Because many blogs are extensive, students identify various sampling strategies to yield about 25-30 pages of double-spaced narrative data for coding and analysis. For instance, the students who chose the stroke blog sampled entries at regular intervals over the blog's five years, then coded and analyzed this data to find themes related to changes in the blogger's self-perception over time.

After engaging in this project, most of our students overcome any initial discomfort and discover the value of exploring the lived experiences of people with diverse challenges. By reviewing the literature, students become more knowledgeable about specific conditions (such as Down syndrome, anorexia, or cancer) and occupations (such as caregiver or advocate). But by analyzing the first-person stories of individuals, students gain a stronger ability to relate and empathize, and an appreciation for how narrative inquiry can support clinical practice (Fortuna, 2018; Imanishi et al., 2016). That is the heart of this project.

First-Person Student Perspectives

Following are the first-person perspectives of two students who participated in the Qualitative Analysis Project in its first year. While not systematic outcome data, this anecdotal feedback conveys the evolution in thinking about qualitative inquiry that occurs for many students in the class.

> Quite frankly, my perspective of the outcome at the beginning was far exceeded by the results of the end product. Having not coded data before, I could not foresee much data arising from the blogs. However, after learning coding

strategies my partner and I interpreted much more meaning within statements throughout postings in regards to the person, cognition, emotion, diagnosis, support, and other facets of life than originally anticipated. This project gave us further insight into these crucial areas that can be addressed through occupational therapy to help further understanding of a person's perspective after traumatic event or illness. (J. Maier, personal communication, November 25, 2017)

The qualitative analysis project taught me the value of qualitative research. When it came to research I used to find myself discarding qualitative articles in favor of quantitative research because quantitative research seemed stronger to me. Looking back, this is very interesting to me because as a therapist, the narrative of each individual is the focus of therapy. Going into the qualitative project, I was expecting to find very personal and specific information that would be difficult to generalize to other populations and individuals. We did find that very personal and heart wrenching information, but we also found the story of inspiration, positivity, and passion that can be found at the heart of each person. Honestly at first I just wanted to get through this final project of grad school. Yet, after delving into Carol's story line by line, I was inspired by her honesty, passion for others, and drive to make life as meaningful as possible. The final outcome of the qualitative project was a much greater appreciation for qualitative research and a drive to truly listen to every person who steps into my life. (N. Fusco, personal communication, December 4, 2017)

These student perspectives illustrate three common themes in students' response to this project: (1) initial perspective on qualitative research are often less than positive, but change over time, (2) qualitative analysis provides unexpected insights, and (3) qualitative inquiry has a direct connection to future practice. It is interesting to note that many students enter this final graduate course with a preference for quantitative research. Students have been introduced to both methodologies earlier in our curriculum, and faculty integrate both perspectives into class instruction and assignment. This student feedback (although informal), suggests that we may need to do more as a faculty to establish the value of qualitative research throughout the curriculum. It is informative to see that exposure to qualitative principles (paired with enthusiastic instruction and intentional application to practice) can change students' perspectives in a short period of time.

We feel there is a direct connection between (1) students' heightened appreciation for qualitative approaches by the end of the course, and (2) their recognition that exploring and attempting to understand narratives will yield insights into their clients that will in turn make them better clinicians. Being told that something is important is not the same as seeing its value for oneself. The students' insights into the relevance of narrative inquiry to practice align with the earlier work of scholars such as Mallinson et al. (1996), Mattingly (1994), and Posetary Burke and Kern (1996), who drew attention to the integral role that recognizing and interpreting patients' stories plays in the provision of outstanding OT services.

Discussion: Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

Student and faculty feedback—as well as students' post-course evaluations--indicates that the Qualitative Analysis Project described in this article successfully meets its objectives for most students. Strengths of the learning project include: (1) it can be implemented in a teaching-oriented Master's program that does not have curricular space or resources for full-

scale qualitative research implementation, (2) it teaches qualitative research and analysis principles in the context of authentic narrative "data" that have direct relevance to practice, and (3) it engages students' interest through the use of online data sources that tell the stories of real people with occupational challenges.

We are sharing this innovative learning project in the hope that it may be of interest to our colleagues in higher education, and that it may contribute to the development of ethical and scholarly learning activities that take advantage of publicly available online data sources to engage and teach students. As instructors, we feel that using online narrative sources allows us to bring an authenticity to this learning project that would otherwise have been difficult given our limited timeframe and other constraints.

We recognize that this learning project also has limitations. Since it emphasizes the *analysis* of qualitative data, it does not provide the comprehensive exposure to the qualitative research process that a full-scale study would allow. Because it is a project and not a study, students also do not have the opportunity to explore or probe the narrative data they gather. Kurtz et al. (2017) noted that establishing the accuracy of blog content is difficult, since by its nature blogging allow authors to self-create identities and choose what information to share. Bloggers can create shifting personas over time and across various social media platforms (Kurtz et al., 2017).

In addition, we have not developed a formal process for measuring outcomes, beyond the grading rubric and student course evaluations. Since we are promoting the potential value of using online narrative data sources in this way, we need to explore how we can substantiate our belief that this approach is effective. We would also like to strengthen the project's connection to clinical practice in the hopes that students will gain an even greater appreciation for the role of narrative in practice. Mattingly's (1994) concept of "therapeutic emplotment" has interesting implications and could be incorporated into this project through scholarly reading and discussion, or as a component of the written or visual presentation of findings.

As with any learning activity, we will continue to evaluate and revise the Qualitative Analysis Project. In addition to strengthening components of the existing project, there are many potential avenues for related research. For example, research could formally examine: (1) the efficacy of this learning project (on its own or compared to other learning activities), (2) students' perspectives on the project and its outcomes, and (3) the possible links between this kind of graduate assignment and clinical practice. There is also exciting scholarship potential related to inter-professional narrative inquiry, the evolution of online social discourse, the dynamics and meaning of story creation, and the role that personal stories play in shaping practice for a wide range of clinicians and professionals.

Conclusion

The occupation of writing has always been critical in promoting social and individual development, and in allowing a shared understanding of experience and personal perspective. Narrative is an evolving medium however, and the Internet is providing new ways for people to share their stories. Publicly available online journals and related formats have the potential to provide a rich source of narrative data for educators and researchers. When used with sensitivity and ethical consideration, blogs and other online sources can help students gain a deeper understanding of what it means to experience disability or challenges to occupational participation. The graduate learning project described in this article is one example of the use of technology to enhance teaching in the digital age. The Qualitative Analysis Project that we have shared successfully uses online data sources to teach qualitative analysis and to promote students' appreciation for the role that narrative inquiry and qualitative research can play in their future professional practice.

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