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## Qualitative Research and Arts-Based Research: From Experiments to Empowerment

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### Abstract

This is a review of the book, *Empowering Students as Self-Directed Learners of Qualitative Research Methods*, edited by Janet C. Richards and Wolff-Michael Roth (2019). Authors of the book include university faculty members and their students who share how they teach and learn to conduct qualitative research. Inclusion of international authors who describe how they use a variety of Arts Based Research methods and specific examples of steps in conducting and reporting qualitative research are some of the strengths of this book. In this review, I will focus on chapters that highlight the strengths of the book and its usefulness to the field of qualitative research.

### Keywords

qualitative research, arts-based research, self-directed learning, empowerment

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I would like to thank BRILL for requesting me to review the book.

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This is a review of the book, *Empowering Students as Self-Directed Learners of Qualitative Research Methods*, edited by Janet C. Richards and Wolff-Michael Roth (2019). Authors of the book include university faculty members and their students who share how they teach and learn to conduct qualitative research. Inclusion of international authors who describe how they use a variety of Arts Based Research methods and specific examples of steps in conducting and reporting qualitative research are some of the strengths of this book. In this review, I will focus on chapters that highlight the strengths of the book and its usefulness to the field of qualitative research.

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As a qualitative researcher who uses poetic inquiry and ethnography, I enjoy reading publications in which authors utilize Arts Based Research (ABR). Also, as a faculty member, I am always looking for books that teach how to do qualitative research. Hence, I was glad when Brill/Sense publishers asked me to review, *Empowering Students as Self-Directed Learners of Qualitative Research Methodologies*, published in 2020, and edited by Janet C. Richards and Wolff-Michael Roth. Interestingly, authors of this book include both faculty and their doctoral students from different countries—the US, Germany, Norway, Singapore, and Canada. The book presents their ideas under three broad themes—Teaching for Empowerment, Experiencing Empowerment, and Empowerment beyond schooling. The diversity of authors adds value to the field, as it presents myriad positionalities or lenses and may appeal to a diverse audience, ranging from experienced qualitative research instructors to diverse learners, including English Language Learners. For my review, I will focus on sections of chapters that form the core of the book. It is not a completely exhaustive review. I will describe what I consider the best parts of the book, and its usefulness to the field of qualitative research.

Qualitative research allows a wide variety of inquiry methodologies to nest under its wide umbrella. Over time, interest has increased in the types of creative methodologies that qualitative researchers have employed effectively. Teaching college students how to conduct research using qualitative research methodologies can be quite challenging, however. Unless they are students of a university program that values qualitative research, students are likely to go home with a cursory understanding of the broad differences in quantitative and qualitative research, and Denzin, Merriam, and Creswell are likely the most cited qualitative researchers in student papers. Some doctoral students are at an advantage when it comes to learning about and utilizing qualitative research methods such as ABR, which encompasses methods such as poetic inquiry, social fiction, voice, photography, story, and auto ethnography, to name a few. That is because they are required to read about these methodologies extensively when they take courses. Some—like I was—may be fortunate to have professors who are passionate about such methodologies and inspire and guide their students to use ABR.

## Bisecting the Chapters

The book begins with the commonly adopted structure of introduction to authors, and overview of each section and chapter. In Chapter 2, Richards describes how she empowers her students to take charge of their writing and guides students through a four steps process. The best parts of the chapter are two sets of guidelines: a list of academic writing principles, and a suggested model of qualitative research design. These serve as checklists to help evaluate research report and writing quality. Both the experienced and the novice would benefit from having these two tables handy when they conceptualize, implement, and write their research papers. The second table is similar to the rubric used by *The Qualitative Report (TQR)*. Lastly, the author shares two examples—a conference proposal, and a doctoral student presentation of a mini-inquiry. The former illustrates how the author uses these guidelines to craft the proposal in which she utilizes poetic inquiry. In her mini-inquiry a doctoral student Nhu Lee from Vietnam presents voices of refugee students through diagrams, drawings, and comic-strip snapshots with callouts. Lee has effectively used drawings to depict some sections of her manuscript, such as Venn diagrams for the literature review and a priori questions. Both examples excellently showcase ABR methods, and I highly recommend this chapter for instructors and students.

Chapter 3 is titled “A Mindfulness Based approach to Teaching Qualitative Research Methods” by Margrit Shreier. From her experience as a practitioner of mindfulness-based meditation (MBM), she attempts to connect mindfulness to qualitative research. The title caught my eye because I am trained in Vipassana meditation popularized by S. N. Goenka (visit [www.dhamma.org](http://www.dhamma.org) to learn more). Shreier describes some of her students’ experiences with MBM. Journal entries from two students demonstrate how they connected mindfulness with their qualitative interview process.

Like the author of this chapter, I too have used elements of this technic to help undergraduate students focus on the task at hand, instead of letting final grades, career or family issues preoccupy their minds. There is evidence in research to show how practicing Vipassana or mindfulness alleviates stress and anxiety and promotes physical, emotional, and mental well-being (Krygier et al., 2013; Zhang, Cui, Zhou, & Li, 2019). Being mindful during formal and informal interactions with participants is a great quality that novice researchers should develop. I also agree that knowledge about the meditation technic is essential for teaching about it. Journal entries provide glimpses of students’ transformation through the practice. The entries are compelling, as they recount how MBM helped them pay more attention to their readings, and enhanced their feelings of empathy towards their participants. I wish the author had elaborated on each of these aspects of student reflection more in the chapter, to help readers gain insights on how mindfulness can affect how people think and act, and make a stronger connection between mindfulness and qualitative research. She does discuss each journal entry briefly and also towards the conclusion, but digresses by reflecting on the risks that mindfulness practice poses for people who have experienced trauma, and precautionary measures she intends to take in future when she teaches the course again.

There are some limitations in this chapter. Examples are drawn from students who were considered experienced practitioners of MBM (“extreme cases” p. 50), and hence not representative of all students. Secondly, students were promised bonus points for making at least 4 journal entries, which may have contributed to more positive journal entries. Additionally, Shreier does not provide examples of student entries that contradict these views, except to briefly reflect on them towards the end. Thus, there is limited evidence to conclude that MBM was effective in helping students master and apply MBM. The author could have made a stronger case for the benefits of applying MBM in qualitative research by a detailed analysis of the journal entries—both positive and negative experiences.

In Chapter 4 a faculty member and their doctoral student describe how they teach the concept of positionality to their students in one course. Positionality is particularly essential when the research is about the “other”. Hence, introducing this topic to beginning qualitative researchers is a great way to facilitate introspection and reflection early on, and provides them an opportunity to trace their transformation along the journey.

Samples of student reflections demonstrate how they identify positionality or lens of authors whose works they read, and apply it to their own research. One student remark that stood out to me stated, “...it was some introduction into the way we think about things and making sure we didn’t include our own bias...” (p. 73). The instructor could have leveraged this teachable moment to engage students in in-depth discussion about researcher/author bias and its effect on various aspects of research and writing. Describing their positionality does not require that researchers hide their bias but serves as an opportunity to openly talk about it. The topic of positionality provides an excellent opportunity for promoting student empowerment, particularly for students from diverse backgrounds who often experience a certain level of helplessness when conducting research about the dominant culture. This could have been described in more detail and connected to each student activity examples described in the chapter.

In Chapter 5, a professor and her doctoral student use the dialogue form to describe their positionality as researchers, as they teach a course on interviewing theory and practice. I recommend this chapter as a supplementary reading for both basic and advanced research methodology courses for these reasons:

a. Interviewing participants is complicated, requires practice, and novice interviewers wish “...they had more time to practice before this point in time” (p. 80). Like I reflect in my own work (Cousik, 2015) one can never fully prepare for the unexpected turns that even highly structured interviews can take. As a student, I remember feeling nervous and awkward, and wishing that the interview would end before I was consumed by embarrassment at my gaucheness.

b. Students needed to practice and document their interviewing technics, both with the same peers and new peers to understand how they are out of their comfort zone while interviewing actual research participants. I am glad the author points this out, because practice provides students with the necessary and critical skills for conducting the interview (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2019) and with the help of the instructor, enables them to explore possible technics to encounter any hurdles.

c. Finally, readings, mock interviews, reflections, and discussions helped students develop a comprehensive understanding of the connections between theory and practice.

In Chapter 7, a doctoral student Haberlin describes his foray into poetic inquiry, explains how he and his participant integrate their skills into the inquiry process and provides a useful framework for emerging arts-based researchers (p. 125). A moot point for consideration he emphasizes (per Sandra Faulkner’s guidelines), is that poetic inquiry or any ABR requires the researcher to hone skills in both the artistic and traditional research methods. I agree that many ABR proponents do not adhere to one art form. For example, in my research, I like using my photographs and drawings in addition to poetic inquiry, but agree with the author’s recommendation that one must eventually decide on one art form and practice it to a level of refinement to be considered an expert in that area.

In Chapter 9, another doctoral student describes how her professor (Richards) used simulation to teach qualitative research methods. Two examples of assignments on pages 141 and 143 serve as great models for professors designing qualitative research courses. They provide clear expectations for students and point to additional resources such as Author guidelines by the *TQR* and *Anatomy of a Qualitative Research Study* (Raker, 2019). Finally, Appendix I includes the actual simulation exercise role-played by students. This exercise offers

readers an excellent glimpse into the students' thought process and strategies they use to follow assignment guidelines.

In Chapter 11 Michael Roth explains how teaching qualitative research methods can be improved through student apprenticeship rather than just by taking courses. He aims to bridge the gap from course work to practice, through these apprenticeship models: single and double apprenticeship model, crossover apprenticeship, data sessions and interaction analysis, and teaching rigorous data analysis. An important advantage in the crossover apprenticeship model is the opportunity for the faculty member to learn about an unfamiliar topic from their student. Roth recommends faculty accompany the student to the field to supervise student's research. Although valuable, this is not always practical because faculty are bound by university regulations and time constraints and may not be able to accompany their students to the research setting, unless they are the PIs or co-researchers. This is also not feasible if the faculty member is teaching a large number of graduate level or postgraduate level courses to students who may be conducting research in a variety of locations, far from one another.

This book can serve as an excellent source of supplementary reading in research methods courses. It also offers value to novice and experienced research faculty, who are interested in honing their ABR methodology, or faculty who teach qualitative research. Finally, I create a poem to capture some critical elements of qualitative research that this book also espouses.

In Qualitative Research  
Not Anything Goes  
But Everything Matters  
Quality Controls Variables

Mindfully Reap Rewards  
Empower the UnEmpowered  
Paint Their Stories  
Sing Their Narrative

Exchange Divergent Views  
Unravel Delve Deeper  
Turn Mundane Events  
Into Compelling Chronicles

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### Author Note

Dr. Rama Cousik is an Associate Professor in Special Education at Purdue University Fort Wayne. Rama received her Ph. D from Indiana University Bloomington in 2011. She teaches courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels on inclusion, UDL strategies, autism, and collaboration. She also supervises graduate students on their Thesis and Research Projects. Rama is a qualitative researcher, and her publications showcase use of poetic inquiry and cultural interpretations of disability. Please direct correspondence to [cousikr@pfw.edu](mailto:cousikr@pfw.edu).

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