



5-1-2023

Assessing the Learning of Qualitative Research Through a Critical Reflective Essay

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Recommended APA Citation

Cena, E., & Burns, S. (2023). Assessing the Learning of Qualitative Research Through a Critical Reflective Essay. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(5), 1282-1289. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5725>

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Abstract

Despite a longstanding commitment to the notion of reflection as an integral part of qualitative research, there are few explicit learning tools or published assignment guides to aid understanding of this important aspect of student learning. Reflection both as a researcher and within the context of an educational perspective can be challenging; however, creating reflective assignments can help students consolidate and assess the learning of qualitative research skills in practice. This article describes a critical reflective assignment highlighting the challenges, rewards, and reflections on designing and conducting an interview process as part of a qualitative research methods module with postgraduate psychology students. We also consider the evaluations students have provided for this assignment and our reflections on what can be improved in the future.

Keywords

teaching qualitative research, critical reflection, reflection in qualitative research, reflexivity

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the rest of the teaching team for this module: my colleague Dr Katrin Dudgeon and the two Teaching Assistants Cara Ghiglieri and Phoebe McKenna who were part of the teaching team and have greatly contributed to the successful delivery of this module.

Assessing the Learning of Qualitative Research Through a Critical Reflective Essay

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Despite a longstanding commitment to the notion of reflection as an integral part of qualitative research, there are few explicit learning tools or published assignment guides to aid understanding of this important aspect of student learning. Reflection both as a researcher and within the context of an educational perspective can be challenging; however, creating reflective assignments can help students consolidate and assess the learning of qualitative research skills in practice. This article describes a critical reflective assignment highlighting the challenges, rewards, and reflections on designing and conducting an interview process as part of a qualitative research methods module with postgraduate psychology students. We also consider the evaluations students have provided for this assignment and our reflections on what can be improved in the future.

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Introduction

This paper presents a qualitative assignment offered to a qualitative methods module taught at the master's level as well as students' impressions and evaluations of the assignment. This assignment was designed in line with the overall aims of the module, which focuses on enhancing students' experiential learning and engaging them in the reflexivity process. In this article, the module coordinator (first author) and the module contributor (second author) will describe the assignment to convey how students experienced thinking qualitatively, to become more critical and reflexive researchers.

Qualitative research is very much about *doing* and many scholars have noted the importance of a practical understanding of qualitative research in order to be able to successfully transfer those skills to the research context (Mason, 2002). Nevertheless, qualitative researchers have the responsibility of conducting research that is trustworthy, relevant, and valid (Moravcsik, 2019). The need to be transparent about the research process underlines the importance of teaching these criteria for high quality-work (Blank, 2004). In this context, psychology students receiving qualitative research training need to be reflexive and present this process in their writing. The rest of the article presents the assignment in the hope that others who teach qualitative methods will find it useful to develop their students' practical and reflexive skills. We also consider the evaluations students have provided for this assignment and our reflections on what can be improved in the future.

Reflexivity and Critical Reflection

Reflexivity is a practice the researcher should commit to in making the research process transparent (Mortari, 2015). Within the postmodern paradigm, reflective analysis of one's

heuristic experience is essential to increase the credibility of research. In constructivist and social constructionist traditions, knowledge is socially constructed, and it is linked to people's social contexts within which it is created; objective science is not possible to achieve. Through reflexivity, researchers examine the relation between self and knowledge creation (Smith, 2011). It provides an opportunity for researchers to discuss their "presuppositions, choices, experiences and actions during the research process" (Mruck & Breuer, 2003, p. 3). Reflective practice, therefore, enables qualitative researchers to comprehend the role researchers play in constructing meaning with their participants and question the way they construct such a meaning. This process of reflexivity can be challenging, and more so for novice researchers who may be unsure of how to deal with many unpredictable situations in research. Urging students to engage in reflexivity despite this would allow them to begin to unravel the "contradictions and complexities of intersubjective dynamics" (Finlay, 2002, p. 542).

Critical reflection, on the other hand, is described as a way of improving students' lifelong learning and practice in higher education (Ryan, 2011). Kolb's (1984) model of the learning process presents reflection as a cycle of learning which includes planning, action, and evaluation, with reflection being a part of learning rather than outside or independent of it. Hence, this model extends learning beyond reproducing received knowledge. Teaching critical reflective skills offers a way to gain insight into practical knowledge. However, being a critical reflector is demanding as it involves 'de-centering' oneself, stepping back from the practice, and observing oneself and one's actions over time and place (Smith, 2011). Undertaking such activities requires a student to invest time and contemplation of various perspectives. For instructors, it can also be complicated to define what it is and whether it has been understood. Fook's model of critical reflection (2007) involves both theory and practice, which involves reflecting on experience through the lens of literature or theory (Hickson, 2011). In attempting to put both reflexivity and critical reflection together as essential qualities for engaging in qualitative research, we developed this assignment for a graduate-level introduction to qualitative research methods module taught at a psychology higher education department.

Introducing the Module and the Assignment

Before providing details on the assignment, we will first describe some key elements of the module, "Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods." A module is equivalent to a course in the US context, however for simplicity, we will refer to it as "module." The module, designed for students in the UK, spanned five weeks. It is a compulsory module for students in MSc taught programmes (Clinical Health Psychology and Applied Developmental Psychology); students completing the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology (DECAP), and PhD students (though doctoral-level students do not take the assignment). Approximately 120 students attended the module in 2021 (up from approximately 30 students in 2018), with students coming from various undergraduate programmes within the UK and Ireland as well as a small number of international students. Given the diversity of the group, their level of knowledge on qualitative methods was mixed; some students had prior qualitative experience, and a few had no background in qualitative methods at all.

Due to the rapidly increasing class size over the years, since 2020, the teaching of this module was arranged into a flipped learning mode with recorded lectures to be viewed in advance and in-person seminars based on practical activities. Sessions comprise of 1.5 hours of recorded lectures and 1.5 hours of seminars which offer postgraduate students an array of exercises and activities. The main topics covered by this module focus on introducing the features of qualitative research, including a range of data collection methods and analysis techniques, methodological assumptions, and quality in qualitative research. The goal of the module is to teach qualitative methods in a practical, systematic, and rigorous way.

The assignment for this module was a critical reflective essay which required students to reflect on the planning and conducting of a practice interview that they conducted with one of their peers. The essay was 2000 words, and the aim was to practice collecting primary data, learning about their potential, value, and limitations of the interview method, as well as developing reflexivity skills. Successful interviewing rests on practical skills, and its quality is judged by the strength of the interview and the level of skills the interviewer relates to the outcome and value of the study (Roberts, 2020). Students were required to make a link between their experiences or practice and existing theoretical knowledge of interviewing. The assignment was divided into three steps as below:

Planning the Interview. In this introductory module, it was our intentional decision not to ask students to pursue their own topics of research in case they selected a sensitive topic that would raise ethical concerns. We instead instructed them to choose one of two topics: (a) *Adjusting to postgraduate life*, or (b) *Hopes and realities of a future psychologist*.

Following the selection of a topic, students were required to formulate a *research question* consistent with one of the methodological approaches they adopted for this assignment (they could choose any of the methodological approaches – thematic analysis, IPA, discourse analysis or narrative analysis, which they learned during the semester). A brief commentary on the epistemological assumptions and a rationale for their choice of methodology was also needed. In line with the research question, they were expected to develop an *interview guide*, of no more than ten open-ended questions (excluding prompts).

The Interview Process. As a second step, students were instructed to conduct an *interview* with one of their peers by rotating roles, that is, one student was once the interviewer and the next time the participant. They were expected to record the interview and transcribe a 1000-word excerpt of the interview in the playscript format. They were advised to keep notes following the interview, which would be useful in writing the reflective piece.

Reflection. The final step involved the process of critical reflection. Students were advised to reflect back on the process of designing and conducting the interview by examining the dynamics of the interview and the way they developed a rapport with their participant, and to identify any issues or particularly positive aspects of the interview. They were also required to provide a researcher positionality statement by identifying their own background, assumptions, or preconceptions they had around the topic and how their personal experiences impacted every decision they made for the preparation and the interview itself.

To critically evaluate their interview design and process, students were advised to use relevant literature throughout the essay. Given that the assignment entailed components of research design, the emphasis was on the criteria of transparency and coherence – ensuring there was a fit between the research question, the epistemological and ontological positions, and the interview (Mayan, 2009). In guiding students to understand the core of the reflexivity process, we provided a summary of Gibbs' reflexive cycle (1988) and Finlay's (2002) article on reflexivity in qualitative research, as well as resources that described reflective writing and guidance on reflection.

As this assignment was for teaching purposes and students interviewed only each other, there was no requirement to obtain ethical approval from an ethics committee. To ensure participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality, students were advised to comply with the Data Protection legislation (2019) and to delete their recordings once they had completed the transcription process.

Evaluating the Assignment

Positive Comments: The assignment was evaluated by students in two ways: a) In the assignment itself, as part of their reflection, and b) in the formal module evaluation forms.

From the assignments, students described the experience as exciting and enjoyable. An important lesson from this assignment was that, as psychology students who were traditionally recipients of more quantitative-focused training, this process challenged their understanding of the research divide and heightened their understanding of the insightfulness of qualitative research. One of the students commented:

Throughout this process, I gained a vivid insight into the field of qualitative research, and in particular, conducting an interview. Before engaging in this study, I had much more experience with quantitative research, which I believed was the optimum method of data collection and produced firm statistical results. However, I now appreciate the huge importance of qualitative research and interviews for gathering rich and complex data which cannot be captured by quantitative methods. I have also come to realise the enormous skills it takes to become a qualitative researcher; to produce develop a research framework, guide interviews, and interpret the deeper meanings of data. I believe that this process has given me skills which will not only make me a better researcher but a better clinician: one who has a true appreciation for the experiences and perceptions of patients.

This exercise has opened a new world to me. While previously I viewed interview data as simply opinions and examples of anecdotal evidence, I now have a new appreciation for it as a valuable research tool capable for bringing new insights to new insights to further research. The practical aspect of this exercise has brought home to me how dynamic the processes can be and how I must carefully balance, skill, ethics and our moral duty to do no harm when I seek rich data this way.

Other comments were about enjoying the process of interviewing, through which they explored the experiences and understandings of their peers and themselves. Many of them highlighted that this assignment changed their preconceptions about qualitative research, and they were more willing to consider qualitative research for their thesis project.

I enjoyed the interview process and found it enlightening from the perspective of both exploring the experiences of other mature students and examining myself as a researcher. In conclusion, I started the interview process as a qualitative sceptic but became inspired by the opportunities this branch of research provides for progress towards social justice and diversity. I am now planning to incorporate qualitative research in my dissertation project using a mixed methods design.

Another student reflected that they had learned a range of important skills in doing qualitative research more generally:

My first experience of designing and conducting a qualitative interview was very positive and has left me eager for opportunities to develop my interview skills further. I take from this experience a number of learning points but in particular: The value of in-depth preparation, particularly for the novice; the importance of conducting a pilot-study to check that my knowledge and level of preparedness is suitable; and the usefulness of having an array of prepared prompts and probes.

Since its inception, it is evident that this assignment has given students a chance to expand their horizons and explore the richness of the field of qualitative research. In the student feedback, students commented that they had enjoyed the process of interviewing; it gave them concrete experience and allowed them to put what they learned into practice. Students also acknowledged that through this assessment they had gained the ability to practice research question design and consider their philosophical assumptions, which tend not to get a lot of attention in quantitative research. Furthermore, the comments also show that their confidence in interviewing increased:

My confidence in conducting qualitative research has increased as I feel equipped to handle the reflexive aspect of the research and any biases that may occur". One of the students stated that this assignment was "The most enjoyable assignment of all modules so far on the program.

Challenges: In their assignments, some students shared that they felt "anxious" about doing the interview guide, the interview itself and reciting the process. Ensuring they had developed an adequate 'open-ended' interview guide was described as a challenge and something they put a lot of thought into. Their reflections on challenges in the interviewing process centred on ensuring consistency in the three dimensions of the research process cycle: the research question, the methodological approach, and the interview questions. For the interview, students were advised to use the guide flexibly with regard to the order they were asked - a way of interviewing that would allow the participant to lead the interaction in unanticipated directions. However, many students indicated to have found this difficult and that they had followed the interview guide blindly. Others reflected on feeling unable to explore as thoroughly as they had anticipated as they had not used follow-up questions and probes before moving to the next question:

Although questions were interchangeable, I believe that the way in which I initially laid out my questions to be asked was at points illogical, as I found that they did not adequately flow. Due to this, I found myself mentally occupied with finding the next logical question as opposed to listening to the interviewee.

I think I focused too rigidly on appearing professional and in some ways, my choice of language caused interview disruptions when the participant was unsure what I was asking.

A second concern was about awareness of developing trust within and throughout the interview process and the importance of the role of the researcher in constructing research with the participant. However, this was often in reference to the time before the interview took place and in the initial stages of the research, because as course peers, gaining trust and rapport was not usually an issue and students enjoyed the process of sharing their commonalities and listening to experiences they shared. As *reflexivity* and *researcher positionality* are important elements of this assessment and the research process, students seemed to enjoy discussing it and sharing the reasons why they choose a particular topic. Yet, being reflexive was described to be challenging. Having to pay attention to their own decisions, presuppositions, thoughts, and the way they reacted during the interview process was a demanding task:

I believed reflexivity was an avenue for interjecting interview bias and therefore a hinderance to effective research. Learning that personal reflexivity is an

important component in creating rich data has developed how I think about qualitative research.

The realisation that my perception of a stressful topic may not parallel that of another individual is an important lesson I feel will be valuable both when conducting future research and providing empathetic support in my future career.

Students who revealed that they wished to eventually work with vulnerable research participants or clients frequently commented on how this experience was a wake-up call; that taking part in this assignment had impacted how they see themselves approaching such participants or clients from diverse backgrounds in the future.

Conclusion

Reflexive practice allows novice qualitative researchers to understand the role they play in the co-construction of research and meaning with the participants. Such experiences, which enable them to understand their actions in a practical way, and the way they may have reflected in the interview process, allow them to understand the influence they have in the construction of knowledge and the interpretation process. Importantly, from this practice, students understand that reflecting on their interview style is a core skill. However, to do this reflection right, it is imperative that a good comprehension of what is, and how to do, a critical reflection is essential. In summary, we intended for students to learn and practice skills related to interviewing, reflexivity, and some aspects of study design. From experience, this is an assignment which works well with students in a traditional learning environment but also in an online environment, and importantly, it develops practice and deeper learning.

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Acknowledgements: The authors wish to thank the rest of the teaching team for this module: colleague Dr Katrin Dudgeon and the two teaching assistants, Cara Ghiglieri and Phoebe McKenna-Plumley, who were part of the teaching team and have greatly contributed to the successful delivery of this module.

Article Citation

Cena, E., & Burns, S. (2023). Assessing learning of qualitative research through a critical reflective essay. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(5), 1282-1289. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5725>
