Reflecting on Students' Reflections: Exploring Students' Experiences in Order to Enhance Course Delivery

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Abstract

Learning qualitative research skills can be a daunting process for students given characteristics such as its subjective and time-consuming nature. I therefore wanted to understand in detail my students' course experiences by exploring the (i) literal and metaphorical language that they utilized to describe their experiences with qualitative research; (ii) challenges they faced in undertaking qualitative research; and (iii) personal and course triumphs shared by students. Using a generic qualitative research design, I undertook document analysis of a sample of written coursework reflections from 17 of my master's level students. Findings showed that students had an emotional experience of lows and highs as they engaged with the qualitative research process, that they embraced the opportunity to engage with practical and experiential learning activities, that their appreciation for qualitative research grew, and that peer support was an important element in motivating them throughout the course. Thus, I recommend the integration of opportunities for more practical, experiential learning activities and peer work for those delivering qualitative research courses.

Keywords

learning qualitative research, course experiences, reflection, document analysis, generic qualitative research

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Learning qualitative research skills can be a daunting process for students given characteristics such as its subjective and time-consuming nature. I therefore wanted to understand in detail my students' course experiences by exploring the (i) literal and metaphorical language that they utilized to describe their experiences with qualitative research; (ii) challenges they faced in undertaking qualitative research; and (iii) personal and course triumphs shared by students. Using a generic qualitative research design, I undertook document analysis of a sample of written coursework reflections from 17 of my master's level students. Findings showed that students had an emotional experience of lows and highs as they engaged with the qualitative research process, that they embraced the opportunity to engage with practical and experiential learning activities, that their appreciation for qualitative research grew, and that peer support was an important element in motivating them throughout the course. Thus, I recommend the integration of opportunities for more practical, experiential learning activities and peer work for those delivering qualitative research courses.

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Introduction

In qualitative research, the researcher's intention is to uncover rich, detailed, in-depth data with respect to the central phenomenon that they are exploring. Two of the main data collection techniques in this research approach are interviews and observation, both of which render the researcher as the main "instrument" of data collection as it is through them (e.g., what they see and hear in the data collection process) that data are collected, sifted, and presented (Lichtman, 2013). Consequently, researchers are called to engage in reflection continuously on the process and practice of research, and to become consciously aware of their own values, biases, and other influences that may be present throughout the research undertaking.

For those of us teaching qualitative research courses, this reflective tendency is something that we try to instill and develop in our students as a central precept of the research process. I have experienced this first-hand as a facilitator of an introductory qualitative research course for students in the discipline of education at a tertiary-level higher education institution in Jamaica. In this course, the value of reflection is underscored through its incorporation as a critical component of each assignment that students have to submit. Although I know the value of reflection and have been teaching it to various groups of students during my seven years delivering the course, I wanted to spend a more concerted amount of time engaging with the thoughts shared by my students in these reflections, beyond my reading of these as part of their qualitative course assignments. I know that my students experience challenges and triumphs in

the course and had explored these through semi-structured interviews with a small sample of students in another research undertaking (Ferguson & Gordon, 2019). However, I wanted to delve deeper into what these students actually documented, and the transitions and shifts they went through as they progressed through the course, for two primary reasons. Firstly, I wanted to continue improving and strengthening my delivery of the course and to be as responsive to students' needs as possible. Secondly, I have always had an interest in researcher development and this inquiry was a natural part of this. As a result, I wanted to foreground the following research questions:

(1) What literal and/or metaphorical language do students utilize to describe their experiences with qualitative research?
(2) What challenges do students face in undertaking qualitative research?
(3) What triumphs are documented and shared by students as they progress through the course?

In this paper, I begin by sharing some of the literature on reflection and qualitative research, and on qualitative teaching and learning. I then move on to describe the qualitative research course that I teach. I share the methodological approach to the research, and then delve into the findings unearthed through my analytical process. I end by discussing these findings and the implications for my practice as a facilitator/teacher of the qualitative research course, as well as the practices of other course facilitators.

Literature Review

Reflexivity, Reflection, and the Qualitative Researcher

Various definitions for reflexivity abound in the literature. For instance, Holmes (2020) defines reflexivity as:

the concept that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in their research, seeking to understand their part in it, or influence on it … It requires an explicit self-consciousness and self-assessment by the researcher about their views and positions and how these might, may, or have, directly or indirectly influenced the design, execution, and interpretation of the research data findings. (p. 2)

Dowling (2008) defines reflexivity as the engagement of qualitative researchers in an ongoing process of introspection into and explanation of the ways in which they may have influenced their research undertakings. For the purposes of this research, I draw particularly on definitions by Lichtman (2013) and Saldaña (2015b). Lichtman (2013) indicates that reflexivity "is usually associated with a critical reflection on the practice and process of research and the role of the researcher" (p. 165). Saldaña (2015b) describes reflection as:

the act of pondering various components of the research project to make sense of and gain personal understanding about their meanings. It is making sense of something that may be puzzling or confusing, and understanding the purpose or significance of something. (p. 8)

I apply these two definitions principally to my students' reflections on the practice and process of qualitative research and the aspects that they are trying to make sense of as "novice" qualitative researchers.

As evidence of this acknowledgement and recognition of the role they play in the research process, qualitative researchers normally engage in a process of self-reflection, carrying out an ongoing dialogue with themselves and documentation of their possible influences on the process, ways in which the research process may have been undertaken differently, and so forth. This process is critical for several reasons. Firstly, as Pitard (2017) shares, a researcher's ability to know another depends on their ability to know themselves. In other words, self-awareness allows us to critically consider the ways in which our positionality may have influenced our research at the conceptualization, execution, interpretation, and dissemination stages. Secondly, it contributes to the trustworthiness of our research through greater transparency with the readers of our research. Thirdly, the acknowledgment of our positionality is a part of ethical research as it highlights, for instance, the power dynamics that can influence research and aspects such as the procurement of informed consent (Soedirgo & Glas, 2020).

Given the importance of reflective practice for qualitative researchers, it is integral that it is integrated into qualitative research course delivery (Kilburn et al., 2014). As Wiles et al. (2016) state: "Teachers must help students to explore how their personal perspectives inform their view of knowledge and contested "truth" (p. 3). They go further to articulate that self-reflection is useful as it allows students to both internalize their learning and relate concepts learned to practical application (Wiles et al., 2016). Indeed, Wiles et al. (2016), in their sharing about a strategy utilized to develop critical reading amongst their postgraduate students in a qualitative research methods course, highlight how they integrated reading and reflection into their course and the usefulness students accorded to it. Similarly, Nutov (2018) also shares on a qualitative research methods course delivered to pre-service teachers, which includes as one of the components the integration of reflections, stating that the students' reflections allowed for more meaningful learning of the basic elements of qualitative research and contributed to their personal development.

Teaching and Learning Qualitative Research

A substantial body of research exists with respect to the teaching and learning of qualitative research. From the perspective of those teaching qualitative research methods, they cite the need for teachers to facilitate reflection amongst students; offer them practical, experiential, and interactive activities; account for students' different learning styles; and offer opportunities to connect course activities to students' professional and real lives (e.g., Booker, 2009; Cummings-Vickaryous et al., 2010; Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016; Sargeant, 2012). Importantly as well, a number of teachers have spoken to the emotional nature of the process for their students as a gamut of emotions is experienced as students engage with various facets of the qualitative research process and move through the course (e.g., Cooper et al., 2012; Cummings-Vickaryous et al., 2010; Richards, 2011).

Both teachers and students have reported a multiplicity of challenges encountered in teaching and studying qualitative research. These have included a predisposition towards and prevalence of the positivist paradigm amongst students, the subjective nature of the qualitative research process, the time-consuming nature of elements such as data collection and analysis, and the challenges of data analysis (Abbott & Earnshaw, 2020; Booker, 2009; Humble & Sharp, 2012; Hunt et al., 2009; Reisetter et al., 2003).

To offset these challenges, lecturers and students have cited the need to ensure that experiential learning activities and real-world research undertakings are incorporated into

courses; peer relationships are supported and facilitated; and that students are encouraged to make connections between current content in their qualitative research courses and prior research knowledge and experience (Cooper et al., 2012; Cummings-Vickaryous et al., 2010; Danquah, 2017; Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016; Rania et al., 2017).

It should be noted that whilst the scholarship in this area is quite substantive, with some examples highlighted above, the body of literature with respect to the teaching/learning of qualitative research in the Caribbean is not as expansive. This is despite the fact that Evans (2009) chronicles a rich history of qualitative tradition in the region over a period of more than two centuries, and notwithstanding the fact that there is a corpus of qualitative research work emanating from the region. Scholars, though, have tended to neglect exploring the teaching/learning of qualitative research in the region; thus, there is a dearth in this area. Some of the scholars who have explored this area include Keller and Mohammed (2005), Newman and Hordatt Gentles (2013) and Ferguson and Gordon (2019). Keller and Mohammed explore the use of Caribbean literary works in a postgraduate qualitative research methods course to help students understand the nature of qualitative research. Their research found that the use of these texts did have some influence, helping students to be more receptive to qualitative research given the positivist mindsets with which they came to the course. Newman and Hordatt Gentles (2013) theorize about a possible pedagogical approach to engage Caribbean graduate students with qualitative research given the antithetical nature of qualitative research (inductive, iterative, and non-positivistic) and regional teaching cultures (traditional, prescriptive, and didactic). They describe how their approach to building a social context for learning at all phases of the fieldwork process and integrating structures that facilitate non-traditional thinking allow students to emerge with more confidence in the qualitative research process. In their generic qualitative research study, Ferguson and Gordon (2019) undertook semi-structured one-to-one interviews with students to explore the experiences of adult part-time learners in an introductory graduate-level qualitative research course. They found that whilst students encountered challenges in balancing their roles and responsibilities against the time-consuming nature of qualitative research, they still benefitted from the course due to the practical activities, peer collaboration and the ability to connect the work in the course to their professional lives.

Summary

The literature highlights the usefulness of reflection for qualitative researchers given the subjective nature of the process. Additionally, the literature has illustrated the various challenges encountered in qualitative research delivery from the perspectives of both course lecturers and students. There is, however, a paucity of literature on the teaching and learning of qualitative research in higher education in the Caribbean region. This research will therefore add to the regional scholarship in this area.

Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education Course

The Introduction to Qualitative Research in Education course is a 13-week semester long course delivered to students as part of their master's programme in various education related specialisms in the School of Education at the institution where I am based. All students are required to complete a series of research courses as part of their programme, with this course as one of their options after completing the general research methods course in their first year. The course is primarily delivered to masters' level students but there are some instances in which MPhil/PhD students both from within the School of Education as well as other disciplines within the university choose to take the course. As part of the course, students

focus on the underlying paradigm of qualitative research; the nature and value of qualitative research; qualitative research design; issues of entry, access, ethics, and trustworthiness; reflexivity; qualitative data collection techniques (interviews, observation, documents and other unobtrusive measures); qualitative data analysis; the literature review; and reporting and writing qualitative research. Students are required to complete and pass two coursework assignments and a two-part final assignment. These are:

(i) a field report involving an interview and observation (coursework assignment)
(ii) the analysis of the data collected as part of their field report (coursework assignment)
(iii) an oral presentation of their research plan (part a of their final assignment)
(iv) a mini-research project (part b of their final assignment)

Each assignment builds on the other so that students are completing aspects of their mini-research project and receiving feedback on each component before submitting this mini-research project.

Importantly, each assignment includes a reflection component in which students reflect on what they learnt as qualitative researchers carrying out different facets of the qualitative research process, such as qualitative data collection, qualitative data analysis, and a complete qualitative mini-research project. As part of this reflection, they consider the challenges and rewards of the different aspects of the qualitative research process, ethical issues encountered in the field, elements they would wish to improve on in the research undertaking, things that they would do differently at the various stages of the qualitative research process, and their understanding of what it means to be a qualitative researcher. Additionally, although not explicitly stated in the guidelines for the reflection, students can also reflect on aspects of positionality given that this aspect is covered in a concerted manner under the topic of "Reflexivity and Self-Disclosure." The rationale for this is to highlight the importance of reflection as an integral component of the qualitative research process.

Methodology

Research Design

I utilized qualitative research for this inquiry given that I was interested in understanding my students' experiences during the course, how they described these experiences and the triumphs and/or challenges encountered as they pursued the course. As Merriam explains, "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). A generic research design was utilized. In this research design, my study "exhibit[s] some or all of the characteristics of qualitative endeavour" but is not explicitly guided by a particular qualitative research genre (Caelli et al., 2003, p. 2; Kahlke, 2014). Additionally, as Caelli et al. (2003) assert, the generic research design is apt for those whose focus is on understanding an experience or event. In this case, my focus was on understanding my students' experiences of the qualitative research process and course. As a reminder, my research questions are:

(1) What literal and/or metaphorical language do students utilize to describe their experiences with qualitative research?
(2) What challenges do students face in undertaking qualitative research?

(3) What triumphs are documented and shared by students as they progress through the course?

My data consisted of documents, specifically, my students' coursework reflections as they had to include a reflection as part of all four of their assignments for the course. Lichtman (2013) highlights the value of documents as "evidence of what people did and said and what they thought," noting as well that they capture "thoughts, ideas, and meanings of participants" (p. 231). Likewise, Glaser and Strauss (1967), speaking to various types of publications/documents, share that in these "people converse, announce positions, argue with a range of eloquence, and describe events or scenes in ways entirely comparable to what is seen and heard during fieldwork" (p. 163). In line with these writers, Coffey (2014) points out that documents are a rich source of data yet often neglected in qualitative research. To analyze these documents, I coded the data and moved through a process of clustering these codes, identifying themes and generating assertions as will be described below in the data analysis section.

Ethics

In undertaking this study, ethical principles were followed to ensure that participants rights were protected and respected. To ensure that students did not feel coerced or pressured in any way to allow their reflective components of assignments to be analyzed and shared in this research, students were contacted after they had completed the course and grades had been released. Students were informed of the focus of the research, the data that were being requested, and how the findings would be shared. Once these details were outlined, those students who wished to have their data used gave consent. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are utilized for all data presented.

Sampling Strategy and Sample

The students pursuing the introductory qualitative research course are primarily master's level graduate students in the discipline of education. Occasionally MPhil students from other disciplines may also register for the course. The students are adult learners pursuing their studies on a part-time basis whilst also employed primarily in the education sector as teachers, guidance counselors and/or principals.

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select the students whose work would be analyzed for the research. I purposively selected students from three cohorts over a three-year academic period. The sample included two groups pre-pandemic (2018/19 and 2019/20 academic years) and one group during the pandemic (2020/21); however, there were no discernible differences with respect to the themes that emerged from students during the pandemic. Thus, the data for all students were retained as part of the data set. These were students who fit the following criteria:

- students who exhibited low (grades 50-59), medium (grades 60-69) and high (grades 70 and above) performance levels in the course
- both female and male students
- students from different specializations within the School of Education as well as students who were sitting the course from other disciplines within the university.

With these criteria in mind, I identified 23 students across the three cohorts. These were students who had voiced both the negatives and positives of qualitative research in class

discussions, private consultations and so forth. I contacted each of them to introduce the research and seek their permission to analyze their reflections in a more systematic manner than my reading of these pieces for assessment purposes. Of these students, a total of 17 responded (four males and 13 females) granting me permission. This included six students from the 2018/19 academic year, five students from the 2019/20 academic year, and six students from the 2020/21 academic year. Three of these students had attained low grades, six students had attained medium grades, and eight students had attained high grades. These students were primarily representative of various education master's specialisations, including, curriculum and instruction, educational planning and policy, educational psychology, higher educational management, and language education, and one other non-education discipline.

From the 17 students who formed the sample for this research, I selected the three written reflections of each from their field report, data analysis and mini-research project submissions. In these reflections, students were asked to reflect on the relevant aspect of their assignment (e.g., undertaking data collection, undertaking data analysis, carrying out their mini-research project). Although a reflection was included in their oral assignments, these were oral presentations for which I would have had no written document to analyze. Thus, a total of 51 written reflections were analyzed.

Data Collection

To understand my students' experiences, I had previously carried out a small-scale study, which involved five students and engaged them in one-to-one semi-structured interviews to understand their experiences of qualitative research (Ferguson & Gordon, 2019). That study was extremely useful as it highlighted the challenges encountered by adult learners in balancing the multiple roles and responsibilities they hold against the time-consuming and detailed nature of qualitative research. Additionally, that study discussed the value that these students found from the course experience, despite the challenges, due to aspects such as the practical, experiential activities and peer collaboration. I wanted, however, to engage with more students' voices to delve further into these experiences and to explore if and how their experiences of qualitative research had changed and shifted as they moved throughout the course.

The data for this inquiry were the reflections that were part of students' assignments for the course. Once students gave their permission for their use, I retrieved these documents from the respective course folders for each of the three years. As previously indicated, the three written reflections from the field report, data analysis and mini-research project submissions were utilized for each student, resulting in 51 reflections in total as the data for this exploration.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the reflections drew on processes outlined by Creswell (2016), Lichtman (2013), Miles et al. (2019) and Saldaña (2015a). I began by grouping the data by assignment. I then read through the reflections in their entirety more than once, keeping in mind the research questions. I also read through the data for each student across the three assignments. The Three C's approach of deriving codes, categories, and concepts, outlined by Lichtman (2013) was utilized. The codes applied to the various data segments were short words and/or phrases that were truly summative and essence-capturing. Codes were revisited, with redundant codes removed and those codes exhibiting shared characteristics or elements clustered together into categories. Categories were then also revisited and reviewed, and concepts or themes identified; these two terms (concepts and themes) are utilized interchangeably by Lichtman (2013). The interrelationships amongst themes then led to the development of assertions – declarative statements about the themes. Assertions are "declarative statement of summative

synthesis, supported by confirming evidence from the data" and are akin to "bullet points" of "major patterns, themes, trends, and findings" (Miles et al., 2019, p. 93).Therefore, the findings are presented in the form of assertions. Table 1 highlights the development of one of the assertions from the coding process as an illustrative example.

Table 1
An Illustration of the Development of One of the Assertions

Cluster of Codes	*Category*	*Theme*	*Assertion*
• Enhanced understanding • Semi-expert • More confidence • Budding researcher • No longer novice • Qualitative researcher in training • More dedicated and grounded researcher • Growth • Now identify myself as a qualitative researcher	Maturing as researcher	Development of researcher identity	As a result of their experience in the course, students emerged from the course able to identify themselves as researchers, in whole or in part, or as those with enhanced research skills.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the research, a member check process was undertaken in which my preliminary findings were shared with the participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicate that the member check process is crucial for establishing the credibility of a research study. Students were invited to share their comments as to whether these preliminary findings resonated with them in relation to their experiences in the course. Additionally, triangulation involving multiple sources of data (multiple reflections from the participants at various points throughout the semester) was utilized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

Findings

In this next section, I present the research findings emerging from the document analysis. For each assignment, students had to include a general reflection on the experience of undertaking the assignments as outlined previously in the course description. In this reflection, they were invited to share on lessons learnt carrying out the assignment, challenges and rewards experienced, any ethical issues that arose, elements they would wish to improve on, things that they would do differently at the various stages, and their understanding of what it means to be a qualitative researcher.

Emanating from the analysis, two assertions are presented with respect to the language students utilized to describe their experiences with qualitative research – the use of emotive language and the use of language symbolic of the process as an adventure or discovery. One assertion is presented with respect to the challenges encountered by students – the practical and conceptual challenges encountered. Six assertions are presented with respect to the triumphs celebrated by students – the practical relevance of the course, producing sound assignments, enhanced understanding of the qualitative research process, discovering the value of qualitative research, the development of their identities as researchers and the usefulness of peer support.

Research Question One: What literal and/or metaphorical language do students utilize to describe their experiences with qualitative research?

Emotive/Emotional Language

Students shared that they traversed a range of emotions during the course. These included negative feelings of "initial apprehension," "stress," "frustration," "anxiety," "defeat," "trepidation," "confusion," and positive feelings of "pride," "fascination," "excitement," "appreciation," and "enjoyment." This range of emotions was evident in Schontal's reflections. In her first assignment, she wrote,

> My experience in performing and carrying out this field report assignment was particularly challenging and tiresome. The thought of formulating a research topic, research questions, interview questions, carrying out an observation, doing an interview, transcribing in verbatim the interview, writing a reflection among other things was overwhelming. The thoughts of how it all would unravel did unpleasant things to my youthful mind that I could hardly envision (Reflection One).

By her reflection for the final assignment she shares, "the messy ambiguous process that I began with soon became fascinating and exciting" (Reflection Four).

Qualitative Research as Adventure and Discovery

In describing their course experiences, students likened their sitting of the course to a process of adventure and discovery that, although arduous and exhausting, resulted in some tangible output at the end. Students used metaphors such as a "journey," "solving a mystery," a "treasure hunt," or a "roller coaster ride" to signify this, all of which coalesce around these notions of adventure and/or discovery. As an example, Sheana likened her experience to a journey on a bus:

> My first stop was the field research; with my background in visual arts I thought that my observational skills would prove useful. It in fact did but wasn't as easy as I had imagined. I encountered some challenges aligning my observations to the research focus. I slowly began to understand that it wasn't just any observation but rather observation with a purpose. My second stop on the journey was data analysis. It was at this point that I began to question whether I had gotten on to the wrong bus. The quantitative bus had already pulled out and so I had to tighten my seatbelt and face the journey. The ride was rough, I fell into the coding ditch multiple times, the categorizing corners were deep and the bus had to turn back numerous times as I had either forgotten or had to revise

or review vital information. The bus eventually came to a halt at the assertion stop and I started to recognize where I was (Reflection Four).

Research Question Two: What challenges do students face in undertaking qualitative research?

Practical and Conceptual Challenges of Qualitative Research

Amongst the challenges shared by students were those pertaining to the practicalities of engaging in qualitative research, which ranged from unexpected ethical issues that arose in the field, to collecting data through the interviews and/or observations, to the analysis of their data. Speaking to the observation component of the field work assignment, Karen recounted:

> Conducting the observation posed some amount of challenges simply because of the familiarity of the site. Regardless of that fact, I had to focus the observation to prevent an elaborate and unnecessary report on the site. Observing the actual space where the [teaching] took place had its own challenges; students were a little distracted but settled quickly. It would have been good to observe the teacher some more, but I tried to stay within the allotted time (Reflection One).

Several students spoke to some of the unexpected ethical dilemmas that arose in the field as they carried out their research, for instance, navigating a dual role as guidance counsellor and researcher in relation to the topic being focused on, or receiving parental consent from the parents of the girls who were the sample for the research. Many students shared challenges with respect to the analysis of qualitative data. Mario shared his feelings as follows:

> The coding, clustering and categorizing of the interview and observation [data] provided some amount of difficulty. The reason for this is that there were doubts about whether or not I was doing the right thing, even though we practiced in class a couple times, being on my own now provided some fear (Reflection Two).

Other students similarly felt anxious, intimidated and overwhelmed.

Research Question Three: What triumphs are documented and shared by students as they progress through the course?

Practical Relevance

Students embraced the opportunities to put into practice the theoretical aspects about the qualitative research process learnt in class in the fieldwork components. They also appreciated the opportunity to engage in research whose findings could have practical application to their institutional contexts. Reflecting on the interview that she had carried out, Lisa said,

> During the interview the topic came alive as I heard the responses of my participant and I began to think if I had more participants, I would get more perspectives and the research started to take on greater significance for me. I had sort of an epiphany as I began to see the significance of qualitative

educational research, in general, to discover perspectives on certain issues or problems in education and perhaps find solutions even to inform decision-makers or just to improve our practices as educators (Reflection One).

Producing Sound Assignments and Research

The students also expressed satisfaction when they felt they had performed to their best on their assignments and produced sound research. Natalie spoke to how she felt carrying out her analysis of her interview and observation and making connections to her research questions.

The process of re-reading the transcript and observational field notes was extremely helpful as, the more I read, the more I was able to make connections between what the teacher said and did, the more I discovered answers to the research questions through what the participant said and did. It felt rewarding. It was like the process of reading any other piece of literature (whether story, article or poem) and gaining enhanced knowledge or a new way of seeing after each reading. I just kept finding more and more answers in the process (Reflection Two).

Enhanced Understanding of Qualitative Research

Through engagement in course readings, activities and the undertaking of an actual mini-research project, students noted an enhanced understanding of the various facets of qualitative research. As one example, Christopher spoke to what he learned from carrying out the observation:

This fieldwork experience developed my listening and note-taking skills. It taught me how to capture what was said with greater accuracy. Observation enabled me to produce a detailed description of the environment and situation that allows me to look for specific things and behaviours concerning the study. Hence, what you cannot see you might hear it, what you cannot hear you might feel it, and what you cannot feel you might taste it. All of which can help in allowing you to give a detailed description of the situation that you are observing (Reflection One).

Value of Qualitative Research

Several of the participants highlighted a newfound appreciation for the value and contributions of the qualitative research approach based on their course experiences. Andrew's thoughts are reflective of those from several students. Originally more familiar with quantitative research, he shares the following in his final reflection:

While conducting this research, I developed an appreciation for qualitative research I did not have before. I understand the usefulness and the breadth of knowledge it allows to be captured. This is a reward in itself separate from whatever results are obtained from this research project. At the end of the research process, I can say I have actually come to like qualitative research, something I did not think I would have after the first time coding and my own struggles during the course. However, as I got into it more, things became easier and more natural. My initial assumptions of qualitative research were negative.

I thought that it was a very subjective process that would not yield meaningful results. This was the thinking of a hard-headed individual ... Just like quantitative research, there are an array of steps to ensure quality and trustworthiness of data (Reflection Four).

Development of Researcher Identity

As a result of their experience in the course, students emerged from the course able to identify themselves as researchers, in whole or in part, or as those with enhanced research skills. Moving through the course, students expressed increasing confidence in their various reflections, with the "growth" most clearly articulated in their final reflections. Carol-Ann shared, "Overall, I am more confident about the research process, and I find I am able to speak more confidently about what qualitative research is. As a matter of fact, I have come to identify myself as a qualitative researcher" (Reflection Four).

Peer Support

One of the most valuable elements of the course experience for the students was the support from peers, which allowed for mutual learning as well as emotional support. This was felt to be an essential component in students' successful completion of the course. In accounting for his enhanced confidence with the data analysis process as he progressed with his assignment, Colin said,

What also helped was the process of peer-debriefing, where I discussed my coded data (including the clusters, themes and categories) with colleagues who provided me with constructive feedback I used to either affix or change a particular interpretive stance I took. This collaborative process certainly helped to ease my decision-making and helped me make what I thought were optimal choices (Reflection Two).

Interestingly, as part of the member checking process for this research undertaking, two of the students emphasized this element of peer support as they shared their thoughts on the preliminary findings. One student (Janet) remarked that a particular student had seemed like my assistant with the questions he asked during the various classes, thus pushing her to strengthen her oral presentation so that she could address the questions that she felt he would inevitably pose.

Discussion

There is no doubt that qualitative research has much insight to offer those seeking to understand human experiences and behaviours. The delivery of qualitative research to students is, therefore, important. Yet, as was found with my students and students of other qualitative courses as documented in the literature, students can find learning the qualitative research process to be a challenging one, notwithstanding the psychosocial and research benefits that emerge as they progress through the course and reach the course conclusion.

Based on the students' written coursework reflections as they progressed throughout the course, it is evident that the students' experiences with qualitative research were paradoxical. On the one hand, students described the qualitative research process (either as a whole or in reference to various facets such as the analytical process) as time-consuming, tedious, and overwhelming. This was exacerbated in part because of various challenges

encountered, whether these challenges were encountered at the conceptualization stage (coming up with a topic), in the field (ethical challenges), in the data analysis, or in the dissemination of the findings phase. This accords with students from other qualitative research courses as shared by other facilitators. Cummings-Vickaryous et al. (2010) share that journal entries from students demonstrated that they felt "overwhelmed" and "anxious" at almost every stage of the research process (p. 8). Additionally, some of the challenges documented by other facilitators, such as a pre-existing predisposition towards the positivist paradigm amongst students, the time-consuming nature of elements such as data collection and analysis, and the challenges of data analysis were some of the challenges encountered by my students (Abbott & Earnshaw, 2020; Booker, 2009; Cummings-Vickaryous et al., 2010; Humble & Sharp, 2012; Reisetter et al., 2003).

At the same time, though, students also described the experience as rewarding. In particular, they welcomed the ability to carry out actual research (however onerous it might be) as this allowed them to engage in a practical and experiential way with course material. Other facilitators have noted the importance of allowing students authentic, experiential, and practical experiences in the delivery of qualitative research courses (e.g., Cooper et al., 2012; Cummings-Vickaryous et al., 2010; Danquah, 2017). Students particularly appreciated being able to undertake research that was/would be meaningful within their institutional contexts. It was also noted that their view of themselves as researchers shifted, with several of them able to now class themselves as "researchers" and with many sharing that they felt more confident as they moved through the course. Given that most students come to the course declaring both a dislike and fear of research, this was surprising and heartening. Cummings-Vickaryous et al. (2010) also noted enhanced confidence and research abilities amongst students. Importantly as well, students emerged from the course with a deeper understanding of various facets of the qualitative research process and with newfound respect and appreciation for qualitative research and the insights that it can offer.

It is also seen that the course experience was an emotional one of lows but also highs as students indicated both negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed, to name just a few, and positive emotions such as excitement, fascination, and pride. Use of this emotional/emotive terminology to describe their course experiences was evident across the reflections. This array of emotions has characterized other qualitative research students' experiences (Cummings-Vickaryous et al., 2010). Cooper et al. (2012) share that the participants in their study experienced a range of emotions including confusion, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed because of new terminology, new methodologies, and the amount of data. Yet, like my students, their students "noted that the initial negative feelings associated with learning new theory and new skills gave way to some positive emotions associated with discovery, which was characterized by amazement surprise, and excitement" (Cooper et al., 2012, p. 8). Reflecting on her own experiences with students, Richards (2011, p. 815) noted, "my students' emotions often swerved and changed course like they were on some shaky carnival ride."

Importantly, peer support throughout the course was one of the elements identified by students as being significant in sustaining them in their journey. This was something that surprised me given my presumption that students at the graduate level did not appreciate group work alongside their seeming and voiced fearfulness of criticism from their peers during segments such as the oral presentations. Yet, the comments shared in their reflections and during the member check process showed this to be an erroneous assumption on my part. The importance of a support network has been something noted by other course facilitators (Cummings-Vickaryous et al., 2010; Hunt et al., 2009; Rania et al., 2017).

It also has to be noted that, in relation to the efficacy of self-reflective processes, the documentation of this enhanced learning of qualitative research accords with those such as

Wiles et al. (2016) and Nutov (2018) who note the importance of reflection for meaningful learning and for the relation of conceptual understanding to practice. This was evident in my students' reflections as their narratives highlight their own interrogation of practice and moments of learning as they engaged with the process.

Finally, what was also noted was that only a few students were consciously engaging with reflexivity in a broader sense, thinking about their role and the influence on the process; for instance, the student who did give thought to his dual role as guidance counselor and researcher. In this way, this individual was giving consideration to some of the ethical issues/power dynamics imbued in his dual role, an aspect that Soedirgo and Glas (2020) point out should be considered as part of reflexivity.

Limitations of the Study

There are a few limitations to the study that should be noted. Firstly, the study focused in large part on education postgraduate students; thus, the voices of students from diverse disciplines were mainly absent. Additionally, the students with whom I work are primarily adult learners who are pursuing their studies part-time. It would be interesting to explore whether full-time graduate students, with the time to focus primarily on their courses, would share the same course experiences. Finally, although reflections were a part of four assignments in the course, I was only able to analyze three reflections per student as the reflections for the oral assignments were not in a written format and thus inaccessible to me post-course.

Given the characteristics of these students, such as their situatedness in the discipline of education and their pursuit of their studies part-time, the results cannot necessarily be generalized to other graduate-level qualitative research students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this analysis of my own students' reflections, which mirrored the findings of other qualitative researchers, I would like to put forward the following recommendations for those of us who deliver these research courses:

- Given the importance of peer support and learning to motivate students as they undertake their courses, facilitators should ensure that courses have opportunities for peers to interact with one another at various points, and that students are actively encouraged to form small working groups to support one another as they undertake their various assignments.
- Given the emotional nature of the qualitative course experience for students, peer support is one outlet for students to share and discuss these emotions. So too are students' written reflections and/or researcher journals. Therefore, encouraging students to document these emotions (alongside the other aspects of their reflections) in a written format, can offer a useful therapeutic outlet for students.
- Where not already part of qualitative research courses, practical, experiential, and authentic experiences should be built into courses so that students can engage in meaningful learning that can be translated into their disciplinary and professional contexts. Thus, the research process is not divorced from their realities but actually feeds into it, providing added impetus for them to persevere in their course journey.
- Given that only a few students made a concerted effort to consider and document the possible influence that they (their roles) might have on aspects of

the research process, more emphasis needs to be placed on notions of positionality and having students focus and reflect on their own influences on the research process so that they engage in a broader process of reflection.

Additionally, as course facilitators, we too must constantly engage in reflective practice to ensure that we are conscious of our students' experiences and can respond to our students' needs whether practical in nature or socio-emotional, in order to ensure that they have successful and rewarding course experiences.

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