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Abstract

Lichtman’s fourth edition of *Qualitative Research in Education: A User’s Guide* has become my qualitative research *guide on the side*. From the book cover to the way she organizes and writes the chapters, Lichtman invites readers to join her on a journey to learn how qualitative research can address some of education’s most pressing problems. Up-to-date, easy to read, and useful, this book has earned a permanent place on my bookshelf. In this review I provide a review organized by themes. I describe each theme, offer excerpts from the text that represent the theme and explain its importance to me as a qualitative researcher and lifelong learner. While most examples in the textbook are related to education, Lichtman’s sage advice and style transcend disciplines.

Keywords

qualitative research, user’s guide, educational research

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Your Qualitative Research “Guide on the Side”: A Review of Marilyn Lichtman’s *Qualitative Research in Education: A User’s Guide* (4th Edition)

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Lichtman’s fourth edition of *Qualitative Research in Education: A User’s Guide* has become my qualitative research *guide on the side*. From the book cover to the way she organizes and writes the chapters, Lichtman invites readers to join her on a journey to learn how qualitative research can address some of education’s most pressing problems. Up-to-date, easy to read, and useful, this book has earned a permanent place on my bookshelf. In this review I provide a review organized by themes. I describe each theme, offer excerpts from the text that represent the theme and explain its importance to me as a qualitative researcher and lifelong learner. While most examples in the textbook are related to education, Lichtman’s sage advice and style transcend disciplines.

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Introduction

As a reviewer of qualitative research studies, we often advise our authors to ensure that the title reflects the content. The title is the initial point of contact for readers, and it should give them a preview of what to expect in the work. Just as a title should represent the content, the book’s cover art can also give a glimpse into the author’s work and style. In Marilyn Lichtman’s fourth edition of *Qualitative Research in Education: A User’s Guide*, we see both of these principles in action. The title clearly describes what the book is about. It is a user’s guide. In fact, the way Lichtman weaves in personal stories makes one feel like she is right there with you—your personal qualitative research *guide on the side*. The book’s cover art, reminiscent of Picasso’s style, features vibrant, colorful faces, each one unique and interesting. This artwork provides an initial glimpse into the way Lichtman’s values and interests guide her teaching.

I met Marilyn in the fall of 2020. We participated together in a *TQR Conference* panel discussion about qualitative inquiry and to what extent it should be scientific. We needed a moderator for the panel and a couple of the panel members knew Marilyn, so they invited her to join in. Given this was the time during COVID, the conference was virtual, and our panel met a couple of times beforehand to discuss our plan for the session. We had such a fun time together that we decided to follow up the panel session with an article on the same topic and our panel experience. As we worked together on the manuscript, I learned more about Marilyn and her experience with qualitative research. I also learned that she was drafting this book and I told her that I would love to read it when she finished it.

I have organized this review into themes that resonated with me (Chenail, 2010) including guide on the side, about Marilyn, qualitative research competencies, user’s guide, and the reflective practitioner. I conclude with my interpretation of this book’s unique contribution to research methods and why it has earned a place on my bookshelf. For a review

of the book's contents in a more structured chapter-by-chapter format, consider reading James Bernauer's review (Bernauer, 2023).

Guide on the Side

A *guide on the side* refers to when an educator takes a supportive and facilitative role rather than being the central source of information or authority (alternately referred to as the *sage on the stage*). Lichtman noted, "I do not claim to know everything. I do not say that one way is better than another. I do not have all the answers. But I offer many questions and some solutions. I urge you to be creative and bold. I urge you to take a risk and follow your own muse. I urge you to disclose who you are to others and especially to yourself. We are always in a place of becoming. I have come to find that the journey and process are perhaps more important than the outcome or final product" (Lichtman, 2023, p. 104). Lichtman takes a personal, hands-on, interactive approach to her user's guide by self-disclosing, giving personal examples, encouraging active learning through journaling and reflective writing, and inviting readers to engage with her on a journey to learning how to do good qualitative research.

About Marilyn

Learning qualitative research and learning about Marilyn go together and I think this is important. Just as it is important for readers of qualitative research to know the self-of-the-researcher, knowing who Marilyn is—her background in education and experience, who and what has influenced her over the years, and what she values aside from qualitative research, invites the reader to make a personal connection through words as if she was right there beside you in a physical classroom, looking over your shoulder, guiding you through your qualitative research study. Lichtman notes, "Acknowledging who and what we are and believe and what our experiences have been is a critical factor in doing qualitative research" (Lichtman, 2023, p. 5). Some things about Marilyn that I found interesting include (1) she began work as a first-grade teacher in 1959 and then moved to become a reading clinician at George Washington University's Reading Clinic, (2) she earned doctorate in educational research and statistics and began teaching at Catholic University and then Virginia Tech, (3) she has served as a consultant to school systems and has conducted numerous evaluations, and (4) she has a deep appreciation for the arts and their connection to qualitative research noting they have many commonalities. These characteristics, qualities, and values are what make this book unique and interesting. In particular, I found it valuable to learn about her extensive background in statistics and quantitative methods. This background played a significant role in her ability to recognize and emphasize the importance of qualitative research in education, especially during a critical period in history.

Qualitative Research Competencies

Marilyn studied as a quantitative researcher. But as she got into the trenches of education, she realized that quantitative research designs could not address some of education's most pressing problems. She noted her purpose for writing this book: "...numbers do not tell the whole story about schools and teaching and education" (Lichtman, 2023, p. 2). With this book, she can guide researchers on qualitative methods that answer the *What*, *Why*, and *How*. We need guidance on the development of qualitative research competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) now more than ever in the educational space. With the advancements in technology such as artificial intelligence (AI), it will be critical for researchers not only in education but other disciplines (e.g., business, humanities, natural and applied sciences) to

know how to apply qualitative research designs to education's most pressing questions. For example, *what* are the ethical implications of using AI in educational decision-making and how can we ensure fairness and equity? *Why* is it important for educators to understand AI and its potential impact on teaching and learning? *How* can we leverage AI to re-design teaching and learning?

User's Guide

As Lichtman notes, "It is my objective that when you complete this book, you will be able to design and conduct a qualitative research study" (Lichtman, 2023, p. 19). Lichtman designed this book to be helpful and useful to its readers. This intention is evident from her clear and concise language, well-organized structure, real-life, contextual examples, and reference materials. The book includes an extensive glossary of terms, organized table of contents, and index. There are *Did You Know?* sections throughout the book that provide relevant tidbits of information that get readers to think more deeply about the topic. Although graphics, photos, figures, and tables are sparse, I found them relevant and useful. The appendices provide clear and detailed guidance about preparing interviews, using questioning strategies, conducting observations and more. As this is Lichtman's fourth edition, it is up to date with current research methods and examples.

Reflective Practitioner

Schön (1983) described reflection-in-action (i.e., thinking about something while doing it) and reflection-on-action (i.e., thinking about something beforehand or retrospectively) and how professionals can use reflection to improve their practice and solve problems. Throughout Lichtman's book, she encourages reflection by suggesting opportunities to use a journal or diary to document one's journey as a qualitative researcher. Lichtman also provides activities at the end of every chapter so that readers can think about and practice applying what they read. These experiential activities would be great to include in a qualitative research course at any level.

Conclusion

I have studied qualitative research since the early 2000's and have collected many books. I keep some of my favorites on a bookshelf next to me in my home office. Such books include Creswell and Poth's (2024) *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2022) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research*, Charmaz's (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, Marshall and Rossman's (2021) *Designing Qualitative Research* and Saldaña's (2021) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. I think these books appeal to me because of their unassuming and inviting style, useful guidance, and clear examples of how to do qualitative research. I have added Lichtman's book to that shelf and will use it for my own learning as well as for mentoring others.

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Links to online resources:

Publisher's Website: https://www.routledge.com/Qualitative-Research-in-Education-A-Users-Guide/Lichtman/p/book/9781032251745?gclid=Cj0KCQiA2KitBhCIARIsAPPMehJjFj40T8D_eCaOL9yZ8NZPTM0wL3b8W2xiKqaz5WE_u6T_pkePZ7saAplaw_wcB

Podcast: Qualitative Research in Education with Marilyn Lichtman: <https://tqr.nova.edu/2023/05/24/podcast-qualitative-research-in-education-with-marilyn-lichtman/>

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