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# Using World of Warcraft to Teach Research Methods in Online Doctoral Education: A Student-Instructor Duoethnography

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### Abstract

The educational potential of games has captured the ongoing interest of scholars and educators who have sought to understand when, how, and under what conditions games support the teaching and learning process. General knowledge of how games support literacy, scientific thinking, or social learning has been theorized and researched, but some applications of game-based learning remain unexplored. One area where much remains to be learned is within online doctoral education and particularly in the poorly understood area of research methods education. In this study, three doctoral students and an instructor collaboratively field-tested a set of instructional activities within World of Warcraft that were designed to promote understanding of qualitative research methods. A duoethnographic approach was used to promote dual-perspective dialogue about the merits and challenges of using online gaming environments as field sites where research methods can be practiced and developed. Results illuminate merits, challenges, and areas of development as researchers that surfaced while completing the research methods activities. Directions for further research are suggested.

### Keywords

Online Doctoral Education, Distance Education, Research Methods Education, Duoethnography, Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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## Using World of Warcraft to Teach Research Methods in Online Doctoral Education: A Student-Instructor Duoethnography

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*The educational potential of games has captured the ongoing interest of scholars and educators who have sought to understand when, how, and under what conditions games support the teaching and learning process. General knowledge of how games support literacy, scientific thinking, or social learning has been theorized and researched, but some applications of game-based learning remain unexplored. One area where much remains to be learned is within online doctoral education and particularly in the poorly understood area of research methods education. In this study, three doctoral students and an instructor collaboratively field-tested a set of instructional activities within World of Warcraft that were designed to promote understanding of qualitative research methods. A duoethnographic approach was used to promote dual-perspective dialogue about the merits and challenges of using online gaming environments as field sites where research methods can be practiced and developed. Results illuminate merits, challenges, and areas of development as researchers that surfaced while completing the research methods activities. Directions for further research are suggested. Keywords: Online Doctoral Education, Distance Education, Research Methods Education, Duoethnography, Massively Multiplayer Online Games*

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Online doctoral education is now a viable option for those who wish to pursue a terminal degree through a distance venue (Kung & Logan, 2014). Yet, questions about best practice in online doctoral education have led to discussion and inquiry on issues such as program structure (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006), student perspective and satisfaction (Erichsen, Bolliger, & Halupa, 2012; Fuller, Risner, Lowder, Hart, & Bachenheimer, 2014; Teng, Chen, Kinshuk, & Leo, 2012), and distance supervision (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2014). Curricular issues are also an important part of the conversation as doctoral educators grapple with moving courses online. Research methods courses covering topics in qualitative methods, quantitative methods, or research design, comprise a core part of the curriculum for doctoral programs (Card, Chambers, & Freeman, 2016), yet challenges have been noted when teaching methods courses via distance education. For example, a reflective analysis of instructors who taught qualitative methods courses through a distance approach revealed concerns such as heavy time demands for course preparation, challenges to personal teaching philosophies, and misgivings about what students were actually gaining from the distance versions of the courses (Hunter, Ortloff, & Winkle-Wagner, 2014). Ivankova (2010) discussed findings from a study of online doctoral-level mixed methods research instruction, which involved teaching students how to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches. Although benefits were noted, such as increased access to the course and prompt feedback, challenges were also identified. The challenges were related to the combined issues of the online format and the complexities of teaching mixed methods research approaches. Online instructors experienced issues such as technological problems (e.g., connectivity, hardware incompatibility), student inexperience with online education, and difficulty in teaching certain procedural topics, such as data analysis, through the online venue. The conclusions of this study suggest reevaluating

pedagogical strategies for research methods courses so that they are more applicable to the online environment.

A central concern with online forms of research methods education hinges on the role of mediating technologies and how they might support or detract from the process of teaching students how to do research. A review of the literature on doctoral supervision at a distance revealed a wide variety of technologies in use including email, social media, blogs, micro-blogs, web conferencing, VOIP (voice over internet protocol), learning management systems, discussion forums, online video, eportfolios, virtual worlds, social bookmarking, and telephone (Maor, Ensor, & Fraser, 2016). A review of 18 empirical studies emphasizing the impact of web-based tools, including Web 2.0 settings, on the training, support, and supervision of doctoral students suggested potential for collaborative and innovative approaches to doctoral supervision, but also revealed that digital pedagogies are not well developed or researched (Maor, Ensor, & Fraser, 2016). From these findings it can be surmised that additional research is warranted to deepen knowledge of instructional practices employed when teaching research methods courses through online technology-rich courses.

It seems reasonable to build on knowledge of research methods education from face-to-face settings when designing and teaching online versions of research methods courses. Unfortunately, research methods education, in general, is not well-established as a field and suffers from lack of clarity regarding best practice in how to teach students to do research. In the introduction to the book *Teaching Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, Garner, Wagner, and Kawulich (2009) complained of a “great ignorance of teaching research methods in the social sciences” (p. 1). This book serves to collate some of the distributed information about research methods education while striving toward development of a pedagogical culture. Additional efforts have been made toward deepening understanding of trends in research methods education while examining questions related to the pedagogy of teaching students how to do research (Earley, 2014; Wagner, Garner, & Kawulich, 2011). Although these efforts advance knowledge of research methods education overall, they fall short of illuminating the particular issues online educators face when teaching research methods courses online or supervising research at a distance.

### **Teaching Research Methods in World of Warcraft**

The purpose of the present study is to expand the knowledge base of instructional practice for online research methods education through a collaborative experience involving research activities in World of Warcraft and a series of online conversations. A duoethnography approach (Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012; Sawyer & Norris, 2013) was adopted so that student and instructor perspectives were given equal voice while working together as co-investigators during the collaborative beta-testing of this instructional approach. Duoethnography is a qualitative approach through which, “two or more researchers work in tandem to dialogically critique and question the meanings they give to social issues and epistemological constructs” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 2). The central goal driving this investigation was to examine the feasibility, challenges, and potential value of using World of Warcraft for online doctoral-level research methods education.

World of Warcraft (WoW) was selected as a learning environment for several reasons including the educational potential indicated by prior research, what it offers as an online technology, and instructor familiarity with the system. For clarification, the instructor mentioned here was a co-researcher and designer of the online research methods course used in this study.

Interest in the learning potential of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) has been ongoing for many years (de Freitas, 2009; de Freitas & Griffiths, 2007;

Gee, 2003; Voulgari, Komis, & Sampson, 2013). Social learning, in particular, is a natural feature of online games like WoW (Ang & Zaphiris, 2008) and occurs when people work together in teams to defeat challenges (Chang & Lin, 2014) or use in-game text chat to engage in learning conversations (Nardi, Ly, & Harris, 2007). Furthermore, prior research has uncovered potential for development of skills that align well to research practice such as strategic thinking (Silva & Mousavidin, 2015), problem solving, communication, and collaboration (McCreery, Schrader, & Krach, 2011).

As an online technology, World of Warcraft provides online and persistent access to an extensive three-dimensional virtual world with multiple continents, countries, cities, and wilderness areas available in a range of landscape types (e.g., desert, forest, prehistoric, etc.). The virtual world is inhabited by a wide variety of fantastic creatures and a civilization comprised of several races divided between two warring factions: Alliance and Horde (Blizzard Entertainment, n.d.). The game, driven by a heroic story line, is embedded in the virtual world so that players interact with it via avatar characters with which they complete the various tasks and activities encountered in the game. It is possible to observe other players, interact with them through collaborative play, or use the text chat tool in the game-client software to read or participate in ongoing public conversations.

There are abundant opportunities to engage in online research activities in World of Warcraft whereby the application of qualitative approaches, similar to what have been used in prior research in online game settings, can be practiced, reflected on, and discussed (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). Practice in data collection strategies can be accomplished directly through the game by capturing screenshot images or by saving chat transcripts, which can then be used to practice coding and qualitative data analysis. Research ethics can be explored through consideration of the unique issues involved in online games research. Other players are represented in avatar form and use fictitious names, which supports preservation of their anonymity during research activities conducted in the public spaces of World of Warcraft. Nevertheless, questions about how to ethically use publicly acquired data or whether or not to anonymize player names in research manuscripts are important to examine. The ethics documents prepared by the Association of Internet Researchers (n.d.) are worthy of review as they have some applicability to online games.

The instructor in this study had familiarity with World of Warcraft and this was another factor contributing to its choice for the research methods education experience. Prior to the study, the instructor had spent over 4 years playing several characters, engaging in varied activities offered through the game, and learning the cultural norms of players. World of Warcraft is complex, so this prior exposure made it possible to knowledgeably align instructional goals with game attributes as recommended in educational gaming literature (Shelton & Parlin, 2012; Shelton & Scoresby, 2011). Several activities, designed to promote practical knowledge of research design, data collection, and analysis were developed based on instructor knowledge of what the game had to offer and what students who were both entry-level players and novice researchers should be able to accomplish. Additional information about the curriculum is found within the method section.

## Method

Duoethnography is a relatively new approach, less than a decade old at the time of this writing, but it is evolving into an established method suitable for critical and reflective examination via conversations among people with different life histories and diverse points of view (Norris & Sawyer, 2004; Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012; Sawyer & Norris, 2013). The duoethnographic approach builds on Pinar's (1975) autobiographical method of *currere* (Latin

infinitive form of the word *curriculum* meaning to run the course), whereby the curriculum of one's life is viewed through a process with four steps or moments:

- Regressive: Remember past autobiographical and educational experiences;
- Progressive: Consider the imagined future of lived and educational experiences;
- Analytical: Examine how the past and present affect educational experiences; and
- Synthetical: Examine the meaning of the lived present as a whole.

Duoethnography has been used to reveal various aspects of curriculum as they relate to or shape life experiences and identity development in both society and school settings. For example, Krammer and Mangiardi's (2012) duoethnography emphasized the hidden curriculum of schooling and how past school experiences had shaped their respective identities as teachers and doctoral students. Madden and McGregor (2013) engaged in duoethnographic conversations from the dual perspectives of facilitator and participating student as they engaged with a pedagogy for decolonizing that was enacted within the context of a doctoral course in education. These types of conversations have the potential to give voice to the varied and deeply human experiences teachers and students have in school.

As noted by Breault (2016), duoethnography often involves examination of themes that include race, gender, pedagogy, professional practice, or sexual identity. In the present study, the primary concern was with issues of pedagogy as it relates to qualitative research methods education within an online doctoral program. More specifically, we as co-researchers were interested in examining the dual perspectives of students and instructor during the lived experience of teaching and learning research methods through the use of an online game. As a group involved in an online educational technology program, we were also curious about the fidelity of using online game technologies, in this case World of Warcraft, as a site for teaching research methods. The duoethnography offered a mechanism through which it was possible to examine this question from the dual perspectives of student and instructor.

The instructor and students who were co-researchers in this duoethnographic study met through a fully online doctoral program in educational technology. All three students had previously taken a leadership course from the instructor, which touched on the topic of leadership in online games like World of Warcraft. The students responded to an announcement about a summer pass/fail innovative practices course featuring qualitative research methods instruction in World of Warcraft. The students' involvement in the course stemmed from their respective interests in topics related to possible dissertation research such as the potential of games and simulations for teaching, the graphic design of games and how players modify the game interface, or social learning within game environments. The instructor was interested in exploring the potential of World of Warcraft for online research methods pedagogy.

### **Addressing Issues of Ethics and Trust**

A challenging issue that must be addressed with student-instructor duoethnography is how to manage classroom power differentials, which could impact the credibility of the findings. In other words, instructors hold power over a grade in the course. There are issues of ethics and trust at play, which might render a duoethnography useless if students feel coerced or if they believe that it is unsafe to speak freely. In the present study, several safeguards were put in place to engender trust and ensure ethical practice to protect students from harm while making it safe for them to share honest impressions. First, the course was voluntarily selected by each of the students as their chosen option for fulfilling a requirement for an innovative practices course in an online doctoral program in educational technology. Second, it was

offered as a pass/fail course. Students were ensured that they would pass as long as they participated regularly in the course. There were no grades and students could decide for themselves how much time to devote to the activities, although it was suggested that they spend from 9 to 12 hours per week like they do in other courses. Third, each student was given the option of either participating as a co-researcher in the duoethnographic study or they could write a final reflection paper at the end of the course. All the students opted to join in as co-researchers in the duoethnographic study. The level of candor expressed in the online class discussions was high, which indicated that a sufficient level of trust was reached to engage in honest appraisal about what was working, or not working, as the students progressed through the sequence of activities. Evidence of this comes from our conversations. As an example, in one discussion about the role of grades and the pass/fail nature of our summer innovative practices course, one student stated that,

I felt like I could be a lot more candid with my remarks or be more adventurous and think this might be of benefit to me instead of oh this is what I know the teacher's looking for so this is how I get that grade or I'm going to regurgitate the answer that the teacher wants.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required for this study for two reasons. First, the research activities that we field-tested were class projects that were used solely for the purpose of learning research methods and would not be presented, posted, or published outside of the university. Second, we only report findings from the duoethnography and our personal experiences with the curriculum in alignment to what Norris, Sawyer, and Lund (2012) stated, "Duoethnographers agree to write joint papers with themselves as the sites of the research" (p. 21). Our conversations were recorded through private Google Hangouts and were saved as unlisted videos on YouTube that only the research team could access. All additional materials such as the online course shell and research practice documents (e.g., fieldnotes blog, Twitter account) had privacy settings enabled so that only the members of the research team could access them.

## **Context and Participants**

The duoethnography was enacted in the context of an innovative practices course in a fully online doctoral-level educational technology program. A key component of the innovative practices experience is to stretch students beyond familiar ideas about educational technology as they develop into leaders who drive innovative research and practice within the field. Typically, students negotiate the terms of the innovative practices course, work with a supervising faculty member, and conclude with documentation of a work plan and detailed reflection paper based on what they accomplished during the course. In this particular instance, the instructor presented a proposal for a research methods education course in World of Warcraft to all of the students in the doctoral program. An informational meeting was held several weeks prior to the start of the course for those who were interested in participating. Only those who selected the experience participated.

The demographic characteristics of the three doctoral students and faculty member are provided in Table 1. All of the students and instructor were adults holding academic positions in higher education. One of the students was near the beginning of the doctoral program and the other two were a year further along in the program. Entry-level knowledge of research methods, and particularly qualitative methods, was minimal although some course work had been completed in general research methods, research ethics, and quantitative methods. At the beginning of the course the students were asked to complete an informal questionnaire about

their prior coursework in research methods, knowledge of the topics of the course, and experiences conducting research. Two of the students had taken a statistics course and a quantitative methods course. The other student had taken a course in general research methods. None of them had taken coursework in qualitative methods. All three of the students had completed online instruction in ethics for conducting human subjects research, but none of them had experience conducting research.

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Table 1. Demographics of Students and Instructor in the Duoethnography

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Role	Gender	Occupation
Student 1	Male	Associate Professor of Art
Student 2	Female	Assistant Professor of Radiologic Sciences
Student 3	Male	Assistant Professor and Program Director in Radiographic Science
Instructor	Female	Associate Professor and Associate Department Chair in an online graduate program in educational technology

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### **Curriculum and Technology**

The innovative practices course was structured in a seminar style so that the four members of the team could collaboratively explore and discuss the fidelity of using World of Warcraft as a platform for research methods education. All of our experiences were mediated by technology due to the fact that we lived in three different states in the U.S. and could not meet in the same physical space. A series of synchronous meetings and asynchronous research activities were organized in six modules during a fourteen-week summer academic session. The course modules, topics, and activities are described in Table 2. Over the summer there were nine online meetings that yielded a total of 11 hours and 25 minutes of recorded conversations. The meetings included instructor presentations of information related to research methods topics, collaborative activities in World of Warcraft, and conversations about our experiences. An online course site was created in the Moodle learning management system with links to reading materials and resources, basic instructions for getting started with World of Warcraft, and discussion forums. Private accounts for collaborative fieldnote activities were created in Google Blogger and Twitter.

Instructional objectives, around which the activities were designed, were written in alignment to the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (2012) standards for Professional Knowledge and Skills (standard 4) and Research (standard 5) since they were most applicable to the course curriculum. The central instructional objectives were:

- Collaboratively evaluate the use of online game and virtual world environments as a research methods training laboratory.
- Engage in reflective practice as both a researcher and member of a research team.
- Practice applying appropriate research design, data collection strategies, data analysis approaches, and synthesis of findings.
- Assess and evaluate current research methods reported in published literature.
- Apply research ethics per established institutional guidelines.



- Collaboratively write a scholarly journal article to disseminate findings.

Table 2. Titles and Descriptions of Course Modules

Module Title	Description
Module 1: Orientation	Create a World of Warcraft character (Orc, Horde faction), discuss research ethics, participant observation, and how to collect fieldnotes.
Module 2: Ethnographic Design	Create an opposite faction character (Night Elf, Alliance faction), discuss ethnographic design, and examine aspects of culture, norms, and learning in the game.
Module 3: Qualitative Data Analysis	Explore a major city in World of Warcraft and discuss how to collect, interpret, and analyze chat logs via qualitative coding.
Module 4: Virtual Census Methods	Conduct a mixed-method virtual census as a research team to discuss and examine gender representation in WoW characters.
Module 5: Theory and WoW	Do a basic dungeon walkthrough together. Discuss the application of theory to research (e.g., Activity Theory, learning theory).
Module 6: Collaborative Writing	Discuss findings and collaboratively write an article to submit to an academic journal.

### Data Generation and Analysis

Sawyer and Norris (2013) have explained that data generation and analysis occur simultaneously in duoethnography. Data are generated through written or spoken dialogue although artifacts such as pictures, notes, journals, e-mail, or documents may also be included. The data analysis process, “unfolds from researchers’ patterns of meaning making within their (re)creation of experience in their stories” (p. 67). For example, Jagger, Sperling, and Inwood (2015) conducted a duoethnography on garden-based pedagogy that included photos, fieldnotes, anecdotes, observations, and transcripts of conversations collected over a two-year period. Data analysis and interpretation evolved through informal and formal conversations where they shared stories about their experiences followed by focused conversations driven by guiding questions. Through this process the team, composed of a faculty member and two doctoral students, identified themes related to aesthetic, affective, and community dimensions of the learning garden experienced.

In the present duoethnography, where we collaboratively explored a research methods curriculum in World of Warcraft, we followed a process like that used by Jagger, Sperling, and Inwood (2015) in their garden-based curriculum study. To promote rigor, we adopted their process of formal, informal, and focused conversations, and meticulously recorded all online meetings. The activities described in Table 2 were completed in conjunction with a series of online meetings that integrated formal discussion (presentations) and informal open

discussions. All the online meetings were recorded as unlisted YouTube videos (i.e., not accessible to public view) to generate a complete record of what was said and done. These recorded conversations were used as the primary data set for the study, although artifacts from the course activities were referenced in the discussions. Those artifacts included documents in the online course site, a private blog where fieldnote writing was practiced, and a private Twitter feed used to practice collecting data directly from World of Warcraft.

The first seven of nine online meetings were held in conjunction with the activities listed in Table 2. Five of these meetings were structured with an agenda, presentation of current topic, a collaborative activity in World of Warcraft, and periods of open discussion. Two additional meetings were entirely open discussion with no agenda or activity so that conversations could emerge organically and informally. Then, like Jagger, Sperling, and Inwood (2015), we engaged in a series of focused conversations, driven by guiding questions, for reflective analysis and identification of conclusions about our experiences with the curriculum. In preparation for these focused conversations each member of the team wrote responses to four prompts:

- (1) What was good or beneficial about the summer innovative practices experience?
- (2) What challenges did we face?
- (3) How did we grow, transform, or develop as researchers through this experience?  
and
- (4) If we were to try this again what should we do different? What should be added?  
What should be removed? What should be changed? Why?

Discussions during our final two meetings focused on our written responses to these questions and our thoughts about the experiences we had just completed.

One of the goals of the focused conversations was to identify key findings from the duoethnographic exploration that would best represent the story of our experience with an exploratory curriculum. We experienced the tensions and uncertainties noted by Farquhar and Fitzpatrick (2016) regarding what should be shared and how to present the truth of our experiences. Side conversations that are unrelated to the purpose of the study or discussions that were too private for public exposure were left unshared. Transparency is important for engendering trustworthiness in the findings from a duoethnography, but the level of transparency has been approached in different ways by duoethnographers. Some have chosen to post transcripts of their conversations online within public view (Breault, Hackler, & Bradley, 2012), while others limit what is shared to essential excerpts relevant to the topic of study (Jagger, Sperling, & Inwood, 2015). The later approach was adopted for our study. The discussion excerpts presented in the results section were identified by us as representative of what we believe are the most relevant outcomes from our experiences with a new online research methods curriculum. In addition, we shared both positive outcomes and challenges to present an authentic and balanced account of our experiences, conversations, and diverse points of view.

Consensus about central conclusions that represented our experiences was attained during the focused conversations. The next step was to go back into the recorded meetings and identify representative excerpts of our conversations. A minute-by-minute analysis was done directly on the video recordings via an online spreadsheet (i.e., Google Sheets). Each row of the spreadsheet contained a deep link (i.e., it jumps to a place within the video) to a specific minute of the recording so that we could quickly access sections of the meeting for review of what was said, done, or shown at that point. Descriptive (topic) coding (Saldana, 2016), was used to label each minute of video with a phrase that identified the central topic of discussion.

The online spreadsheet also included information about who was speaking, what we were doing (e.g., presentation of information, in-game activity, open discussion) and a short summary description of the conversation or activity for each minute of video. This analysis served as a verification strategy that was useful for “checking, confirming, making sure, and being certain” (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002, p. 17) of central findings during the process of identifying key conversations that were representative of our conclusions.

## Results

Findings from this duoethnographic investigation reflect the merits and challenges of the instructional approach along with our perceptions about how we developed as researchers. Quotes from the recorded conversations illustrate what we as a research team identified as representative of our overall experiences working with a new curriculum for research methods education involving World of Warcraft. Labels on each of the quotes indicate student or instructor voice and correspond to Table 1 where a description of each participant is provided.

### Merits of the Instructional Approach

The dialogue around merits of the instructional approach emphasizes what was identified as good or beneficial about the overall experience. We found this to be a unique experience that promoted new perspectives engendered through online interaction and collaboration. Online interaction was valued as beneficial, although it manifested in various ways. There were synchronous group meetings in Google Hangout, collaborative activities in World of Warcraft, and solo activities where each person worked independently to practice participant observation while interacting with the game and other players. In-game interactions were experienced in different ways by members of the group. One student had a positive experience after joining a persistent group, called a guild, and gained knowledge of player dynamics and group norms. Another student with less gaming experience, found it challenging to engage in interaction with other players at first, but later discovered a satisfying experience in dungeons where groups of players work together to defeat a series of strong computer-generated characters called bosses. The quotes below are excerpted from a conversation between two students about these types of interactions and the value they placed in them.

**Student 3.** I've really enjoyed this class a lot. I've enjoyed the ability to collaborate in real time. I like the ability to do this online so that we can all still be in our different places across the country and work on this together either synchronously or asynchronously. I like World of Warcraft. I'm a gaming person so actually being able to play the game and tell other people that I'm doing it for my doctoral program has been a lot of fun. But I've liked the aspects of using it through a different lens. Instead of using it as, playing the game as a gamer, playing the game as a researcher and as a student and trying to get something out of the experience. I've really liked that a lot. I've liked being able to interact with other people and become part of a guild. Seeing how the norms of the guild work, how people interact together. To see small subdivisions within the group. Factions that are kind of rivals, but still part of the same guild. To get help from all of these people and have everybody be so friendly and generous. It's been a really neat way to interact with people. Even though it's in a game it's still very much interacting with other people. Those are things I have found of great benefit along with all of the specific things we have learned

about qualitative research and how they can be applied in this virtual environment.

**Student 2.** Now that I'm getting more into the game I can see the interactions as being, you know, satisfying. I didn't have any interactions with anybody for so long. After going through the dungeon last week and then trying that on my own with other players that's a lot better for me than just doing the quests and being alone. I wish I would have gotten into that a little bit sooner like you did. That was pretty neat.

Online collaboration was deemed as a merit and students opted to engage primarily in real time online interaction rather than through asynchronous discussion throughout the summer innovative practices course. A discussion forum was set up in an online Moodle course site so that students and instructor could hold asynchronous discussions between live sessions, but the forum was ignored. The instructor was confused by this and asked the students why they were not using the forums. The following excerpt was taken from that conversation and illustrates the difference in instructor and student perspective about online discussion forums.

**Instructor.** You know, one thing that I never would have guessed would have happened in a million years would be that the discussion forums would be basically ignored and everyone came to the live sessions. It's always opposite in my experience. Every time I've taught an online course in the last twelve, thirteen years, anytime I put something out there live I'm lucky if anyone shows up. It's just not popular. It's hard for people to find the time. Time zone problems are always an issue. We have a small group, but I thought there would be more happening in Moodle, that there would be more use of the discussion forums to talk between live sessions. I didn't go in and post questions, well I started to do that and it just didn't seem to take off. I thought, there's something about this experience that requires the live setting. I still don't understand what happened there.

**Student 1.** I think since we were meeting, since we were doing things on our own and meeting regularly, um, maybe that's why they weren't as active, because we were coming in every week. Then, we also only have three people too. I would almost feel like if I put a discussion out there it's just going to take other people's time when they may not really feel that the discussion is pertinent to them where as if I'm in a class of say twenty or twenty five then there may be relevance to a couple other people in the classroom who may want to participate in the discussion. So, those are just some thoughts on my end as the reasons that they're there and maybe why we didn't use them.

**Instructor.** Well, it was interesting to see what happened when things were not graded or required and where people went. I started to think, maybe we shouldn't really have a discussion forum in there at all or just have one where people can go in between if they have something, but that was a big surprise to me, because the live sessions have never worked in the past. With this small group, and this particular group, it was better for us than anything asynchronous. These quotes illustrate common themes regarding what was found beneficial about the instructional experience. As a group, we found value in the collaboration through the live meetings and activities. We were able to go into

the game together, despite geographic separation, and engage in research activities that we were able to discuss immediately. Yet, experiences with interaction and the value placed on different types of collaborative activities were varied as illustrated by the quotes excerpted from our conversations.

### **Challenges of the Instructional Approach**

In addition to an examination of benefits, we spoke together at length about challenges we faced as we worked through the activities. The most notable challenges we identified were based on the open-ended structure during the earlier part of the course, student unfamiliarity with World of Warcraft, and time constraints that made it difficult to accomplish everything we wanted to do. One challenge that came up repeatedly in our conversations was course structure. The course was designed to begin with open-ended activities, so that students had time to explore the game, and then progress toward more structured activities where we as a group could practice and discuss research strategies. Unfortunately, students reacted in a way that was unexpected. Their previous experiences with the instructor indicated that they valued the type of structure they had experienced in the past. The instructor shared some of the dilemmas faced when designing this new learning experience since multiple factors had to be considered such as what the game would allow and the entry-level experience of students. Excerpts of some of the conversations on this topic serve to illustrate this challenge from instructor and student perspectives.

**Student 2.** Your organization of your courses is what really drove me to sign up for this course.

**Instructor.** And then you got surprised. It's organized, but it's not like the other ones.

**Student 2.** But it is organized. So, there's something to follow. It's not a blank slate, which I like.

**Instructor.** Yeah, me too. You know, it takes some of the stress out to plan something. One of the things I had to look at though when I was putting it together was what does World of Warcraft allow us to do? Then, based on what I know about research, what can we do in this environment? Then, I also had to factor in that all of you were probably new to this. I was pretty sure you were, and you were also educators. So, I had to factor all these things into it.

The topic of course structure and the challenges of teaching and learning research with World of Warcraft was examined from both student and instructor perspectives. The students had expressed concern about the open-ended nature of some of the earlier activities, which was stressful from the student perspective since expectations seemed unclear, yet as educators they could see the potential value in allowing students to figure some things out on their own. The following excerpt is from a conversation where the instructor and a student discuss the issues from their perspectives as educators.

**Instructor.** I was very reluctant to over structure this, like I said before. Even though in most of my courses I would structure it down to the microbe. That's kind of my speed. It's been kind of hard for me to have looser reigns on this to see what emerges. I find in, at least other classes I've taught, I don't know what

your experiences have been. We're all educators, but there are students who really want it step-by-step. It reduces stress. It's clear. They know what they need to do. On the other hand, the drawback to that is sometimes they're so wrapped up in following the steps that they don't learn as much as they could. They don't have that chance to struggle with something and really learn it. So, it's always a challenge.

**Student 3.** I find that struggle with my students as well. They want the step-by-step and they want me to feed them all this information, because especially in elementary and high school that's how they've been taught their whole lives is feed me this information and I'll regurgitate it back to you. I'm trying to help them understand that there's more to that. Especially in my line of work with health care. Not everybody's going to be the same. It's not all the same situation. You've got to take this information. You've got to figure out the basics of it and then apply it to many different situations. So, spoon feeding you is going to be detrimental for you in the long run.

Unfortunately, we were unable to satisfactorily resolve the issues with open versus structured research practice activities in World of Warcraft. There were differences of opinion regarding how much structure was appropriate, how much exploration to allow, and how to satisfy various types of learners as the following discussion excerpt illustrates.

**Student 1.** I guess that's the general question, you know, it's how do you blend the purpose with the exploration? It's one of those slippery slopes where I don't think you'd want to make it where you give too much direction in the topic, but at the same time, give a little bit. I think everybody would have a different perspective. You'd probably have people upset because they want more direction or less. I don't know if there's a way to make it a perfect scenario for all. I don't think there is.

**Instructor.** That has been my biggest struggle with this whole thing all the way through. Knowing that people probably need more direction on how to play World of Warcraft and more direction on where we were going, which since this was the first time through it was hard for me to be as clear as I would have liked either. At the same time, I was worried about over scripting it, because we wouldn't know how far we could go with it. You know, it would constrain it too much.

A related challenge had to do with student unfamiliarity with World of Warcraft. Two of the students had played various games and one had very little experience with gaming. All the students had limited exposure to World of Warcraft as an online game. The learning curve for the game, and time needed just to learn the basics, tended to eclipse the central purpose of learning how to do research within the virtual game world. As one student noted,

There's so much to do as we try to learn about qualitative research through this environment that learning so much about how to play the game took up a lot of the semester. It was hard to try to apply the learning principles of the course when we didn't understand how to play World of Warcraft. That took up a lot of the course time.

World of Warcraft is structured to guide players through the game and there are multiple websites with information about the game. Nevertheless, students felt that additional structured guidance or group activities would have been beneficial to them.

### **Developing as Researchers**

Despite the challenges, there was evidence that students developed at least some knowledge of qualitative research methods while completing the activities in World of Warcraft (See Table 2). The activities and discussions offered a chance to practice participant observation in a virtual game world, collect and analyze data, interpret literature, and discuss ideas as a research team. Together we attempted to make sense out of what we were experiencing during our conversations. Early on we sought to identify our roles as participant observers based on the descriptions offered by Merriam and Tisdell (2016, pp. 143-144).

- **Complete Participant:** The researcher is a member of the group being studied and conceals role so as not to disrupt natural activity.
- **Participant as Observer:** Researcher's role is known to group, but secondary to role as an active participant.
- **Observer as Participant:** Researcher's role as observer is primary and participation in the group is secondary.
- **Complete Observer:** Researcher is completely hidden or in a completely public setting such as an airport.

As a group, we reviewed these descriptions and discussed our role as participant observers in World of Warcraft. The following excerpt is from that conversation.

**Instructor.** Which of these fits what we're doing?

**Student 1.** I think it would be the complete observer from my perspective unless our um, what's that guild we're joining, can identify us to the group, that we are researching.

**Instructor.** To some extent it might.

**Student 3.** So, until we went over these right now, and I looked at these the other day after you posted them, I had thought from the previous readings that we would be more participants as observers because of our purpose in getting into the World of Warcraft was to observe. But we're going in as we're playing it. We're learning it. We're doing it. Um, but then our research is secondary to it, but from this list that you gave us on the PowerPoint I see us more as complete participants, because we're in there and we're doing, but to my knowledge we haven't told anybody that we're doing this for research at all.

**Student 2.** Right, I have to agree with that.

**Instructor.** Well, it seems to me that these two are very similar. The complete participant and the complete observer, because we're working in, as long as we're in a major city and observing Trade chat we're looking at a very public space as a complete observer. We're also a complete participant because we're not disrupting natural activity.

During our conversations toward the end of the summer course, students shared their belief that even though they still had much to learn, they had gained knowledge and developed as researchers. The following excerpt comes from one of these conversations.

**Instructor.** I notice a lot of difference in the energy of this group now as compared to the beginning. As we've gone through this experience and people have kind of relaxed we've had some good conversations. We really have. There is a difference now in the things people are asking. Everyone have evolved since the beginning of the summer.

**Student 1.** Well, it's like this game, it's uh, I don't feel like I've made the achievement yet or the grade, well of course because there isn't one, but I know that I've been growing. The types of research that I understand, or the methods that we use, or even the articles that I've read have been a little more relevant and I'm understanding them more now that I'm immersed in doing this.

**Student 2.** Yes, I feel the same, yeah.

Overall perceptions about growth and development as researchers were generally positive. Students gained knowledge of qualitative research design, data collection, and data analysis. In addition, there was some indication that students had a shift in perspective regarding the nature of qualitative research. As one student noted, "I feel like I've learned a lot about qualitative research. I guess I didn't know what it was before. I thought I had an understanding of what it was. Now, I have a greater appreciation for qualitative research."

The students had entered the summer innovative practices course without prior coursework or experience in qualitative approaches. They were introduced to qualitative approaches through practice activities in World of Warcraft and online discussions. As the excerpts above illustrate, there was a subtle shift over the semester as the students became more familiar with qualitative approaches and how they could be applied within the game.

## Discussion

The primary purpose of this student-teacher duoethnography was to collaboratively examine the feasibility of using World of Warcraft as a site for research methods education in an online context. Together, we worked as co-researchers to beta-test a set of activities that allowed us to engage in application of qualitative design, data collection, data analysis, and synthesis of results. We worked as a research team to explore the merits, challenges, and potential for learning research methods within an online gaming environment. The results of our experiences and dialogues over the span of a 14-week summer course led us to draw several conclusions and formulate ideas for improvement of the curriculum as well as to generate possible directions for further research. One of the primary benefits was the live collaboration in online meetings where we discussed research methods and engaged in activities together to practice research within the game. The online meetings provided a way to mentor doctoral students who were developing as researchers while progressing through an online program. The World of Warcraft game offered ample opportunity for students to practice the types of activities qualitative researchers engage in such as participant observation, data collection, and application of research design. Yet, challenges were experienced too. It seemed like there was never enough time and earlier meetings felt rushed. Additional meetings were scheduled to allow more time for reflective and critical discussion about the game and the research approaches being applied. World of Warcraft was new to the students and they found it both



confusing and time-consuming to play. To some extent, learning how to play the game overshadowed the research-methods education that was the primary focus of the investigation. Further research is needed to determine the optimal way to balance learning how to use the game with learning how to do research in the online game setting.

One notable challenge identified by the group was how to organize the instructional activities in the research methods curriculum. The first two activities were designed to be open-ended so that students could play the game, become acclimated to the online game setting, and start to experience what it means to be a researcher in this online virtual game world. The goal was to give students a chance to experience the particular challenges of participant observation in virtual worlds such as how to identify human versus computer-generated characters, what to observe, how much to write, etc. These types of problems have been discussed at length by Williams (2007). Students were able to engage in these open-ended activities, but they voiced substantial confusion during our conversations, which indicated that they needed greater guidance and structure than what was offered. Later activities that were more highly structured resulted in a more satisfying and meaningful experience. A recommendation for further research is to examine the extent to which research methods education activities should be structured versus open-ended and what might be gained or sacrificed in the process.

The use of duoethnography as a research approach in a team composed of students and instructor made it possible to engage in ongoing real time discussions where perspectives from each point of view could be aired as we progressed through a new research methods curriculum. This approach was deemed appropriate due to the novelty of the curriculum and the general lack of clarity about research methods pedagogy (Earley, 2014; Garner, Wagner, & Kawulich, 2009; Wagner, Garner, & Kawulich, 2011). Students were able to talk about points of interest or confusion as they surfaced and the instructor was able to clarify and explain the reasoning behind the design of instructional activities. It was a valuable process for testing the potential merit of an educational intervention as it unfolded in a naturalistic setting. Our experiences in the duoethnography mirrored what others have written about the benefits and challenges of including students as co-researchers. Benefits include providing a space for student voice to be heard, opportunity to engage in research practice, and development of unique insights, while challenges include ethical issues, time pressures, and problems inherent in development of student role or identity in the research process (Mearns, Coyle, & de Graaff, 2014; Welikala & Atkin, 2014).

Challenging issues of trust and ethics should be given special care when using duoethnography with students. In the present study students were adults in academic positions who voluntarily selected the experience as described in the methods section. With younger students there may be additional considerations due to age, maturity level, and power differentials as suggested by Ceglowski and Makovsky (2012). Nevertheless, there are intriguing possibilities for engaging students as co-researchers in the classroom. Further research in different classroom settings, content areas, and age groups could illuminate the potential for research that integrates student voice to develop knowledge about instructional practice or processes. The students in the present study provided a perspective that challenged and stretched the assumptions and ideas the instructor had regarding what to expect or how the instruction would be received. At the same time, the students had the unique opportunity to learn about the underlying purpose and intended goals of the instructional activities from the instructor who designed the curriculum. The duoethnographic method supports the practice of deepening understanding of the teaching and learning process from within naturalistic classroom environments while making space for multiple perspectives to have voice.

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