

JOURNEYING WITH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH LEARNERS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the learning experiences in teaching qualitative research to students with quantitative research orientation. It presents the value of qualitative studies by discovering through working examples the methodologies guided by “from the known to the unknown” principle. The foundations of qualitative research were discussed in comparison with quantitative approaches through familiar situations and cases. Lessons on sampling, instrument selection, and data analysis were done through pair work, mock interview, journal writing, and analysis of sample data. The inductive approach to learning worked in drawing the principles of qualitative researches from class activities. Formulation of the research titles was done by giving the qualitative versions of quantitative studies identified from the problems in their own workplaces or communities. Trial and error method of learning worked since the learners were unsure of their outputs at first and revised them until they were satisfied of their answers. Teaching was challenging but learning experiences were rewarding finding out that new principles can be drawn inductively from real cases experienced by the students and the teacher as learner.

KEYWORDS: qualitative methodologies, trial and error, from the known to the unknown, working experience, teacher-learner, autoethnographic

INTRODUCTION

Observing people in the natural setting is an interesting thing. For one, it gives us the power to get into other person’s lives without explaining our purpose because sometimes there is no purpose at all. We find observing them enjoyable and at times funny --- perhaps because we find ourselves in them. Sometimes we get the chance to verify ourselves through them and feel happy with the confirmation that like us, they also tremble and mumble and sometimes cry or laugh on trivialities. Sometimes we find them doing things we consider queer or unlikely. Moreover, we learn many things from them. In observing people, we somehow find explanation to things we did not comprehend before. The ability to observe is an ability to study the environment, especially the most active component of it, the people. This brings to note important aspects of our existence we did not notice before or the phenomena which enable us to evaluate ourselves and our action, sometimes our values, too.

Observation, if guided by questions and purpose, set forth the mood of a scientific inquiry. Observation, then, becomes an all-consuming process that one cannot depart from in the process of conducting qualitative research. It becomes the center of the methodological rigors of qualitative

research, apart from other methodologies under the broader framework called the phenomenological or interpretivist paradigm.

This paper primarily aimed at sharing the writer's learning experience in teaching qualitative research to quantitative-oriented students in research classes and how the students developed new constructs about research. It was conducted under an autoethnographic framework, which combines the elements of ethnography and the elements of the personal narrative (Litchman, 2014). My narrative here are the personal accounts I had while understanding the struggles of the students, both at the baccalaureate and graduate levels, mine as a teacher-learner, and how we moved our ways together towards a broader and deeper understanding of the nature of things. These narratives intertwine with the research culture of the university that is heavily grounded on the logical-positivistic paradigm of approaching reality.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGIES: THEIR VALUES

The practicality and value of any scientific enterprise lie in its contribution to knowledge; how it will be used to improve our lives is perhaps its ultimate goal. The fundamental value is providing descriptions and explanations which help us understand things and events. Can aptly be said is the value of science, which is dependent on how people look at its utility against what is expected of it. Thus, a research that aims to explain some phenomena of interest is highly valuable if it is able to provide such explanation. Conversely, one which aims to find definite measure of performance or achievement is of practical value when it provides the answers to such question. In other words, scientific method is highly consensual and value-laden, too. There is no permanent measure or indicator attached to all types of inquiries, which become the constant guide in evaluating their utility or significance.

In many fields of study, in communication for example, topics for inquiry are diverse and highly compromising. Some questions are fitting for qualitative inquiry; others however, lend themselves to quantitative approaches. While some research questions seek for quantitative measures, others just find numerical information insufficient of the needed explanation. In the latter case, qualitative methodology is said to be more useful. For sure, there is no method of inquiry that has the absolute answers to all questions there could be about all the problems in the different fields of learning or the different natures of reality. Needless to say, to favor one does not condemn or demean the value of the other. The research questions highly determine which method to use to be able to get optimum results or answers to our problems. Much better, we can approach things with methodologies from the two traditions, hence, the mixed methods studies.

In the field of communication (my undergraduate class) and education (my master's level class), qualitative research provides explanations to questions, be they discourses of the media or of an individual, of organizational communication, or documents reflective of practices, ideology, culture, and even the processes of social representation and social reproduction, and in the administration and

supervision of schools, as well as the most researched academic performance of students. In all these concerns language is embedded within such that it is central to all social activities. Some social theories produced important insights into the social nature of language and how it functions in contemporary practices such as critical discourse analysis. Calling the approach 'critical' is a recognition that our social practice in general, and our use of language, in particular are bound up with causes and effects which we may not be all aware of under normal conditions" (Fairclough, 1995). Every act reflects our selves and how we construct the world around us particularly at certain instance. While previous experiences and insights form part of our selves, they are only partial in explaining our current state in the same manner that our present experience and knowledge only account a fraction of our future stance even on the same thing. Through this I explained to my students that the same topic of research can have different findings should it be conducted at another time, or should it be conducted even at the same time, but by another researcher. It is because our perspective on the matter is highly consensual and should I say, context dependent.

On the Convergence of the Positivist and the Interpretivist Paradigms

Being a relatively new field on inquiry which philosophic underpinning is not fully understood (at least in my academic community), qualitative methodology has been the subject of criticisms because of the non-generalizability of its findings, 'subjectivity or in qualitative terms 'perspectivity' (Patton, 2002) in its data collection and analysis, non-fixed sample, and flexibility of research design, among others. Therefore, a working knowledge of its theoretical traditions is very important. Such would lead the students to appreciate its rigors and work within the parameters defining the methodology with considerations of its philosophic underpinnings, the analyses, and findings. In teaching, "To argue that it is paradigm that is in contention is probably less useful than to probe where and how paradigms exhibit confluence, and where and how they exhibit differences, controversies, and contradictions. As the field or fields of qualitative research mature and continue to add both methodological and epistemological as well as political sophistication, new linkages will be found, and emerging similarities in interpretive power and focus will be discovered." (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013)

Qualitative research places emphasis on understanding by looking closely at peoples' words, actions, and records without necessarily casting aside the mathematical significance of words, actions, and records should they be necessary in providing the needed explanation. A major difference between the two approaches is "not the counting or lack of counting of the occurrences of a particular word or behavior, but rather the meaning given to the words, behavior or documents as interpreted through quantitative analysis or statistical analysis as opposed to patterns of meanings which emerge from the data and are often presented in the participants own words." (Maykut and Moorehouse, 1994)

The marriage of the two traditions, the logical-positivist paradigm (where quantitative method falls) and the phenomenological perspective (qualitative method) is welcome, if such could complement and supplement each other's limitations or maximize their potentials. Such alliance broadens our

understanding of the experience and the implications that can be drawn from it. The question may be on which methodology is considered as the main methodology and which one comes as supplementary or acts as means of validation activity or cross-checking measures to strengthen analysis. The issue has something to do with the institution's accepted format or writing and presentation style. I explained this to my students with reference to my institution's convention of report writing. Since it is heavily oriented of quantitative approaches, the main research reports are presented with the quantitative findings first and the qualitative ones follow to further explain the quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, in purely qualitative studies such as textual criticism of literary pieces (usually done by Literature major students), or conversation analysis, another format is followed which deviates from the standard format adopted by quantitative studies.

Approaching Qualitative Research Principles

In qualitative research, the general question or topic, related literature, significance, and research design are interrelated, each one building on each other. The design must be flexible, because it may probably change throughout the research process (Patton, 2002).

Questions and problems from research most often come from the real-world observations and dilemmas, and research questions such as those which spring out of the topics discussed in class. These maybe generally classified as technical topics (especially on ICT), media discourse (both for the processes of text production and text consumption), organizational practices, and the less-treaded communication policy. They are not stated as if-then hypothesis derived from the workings of a theory, which is often the case for studies with my teacher education students who had leanings on the relationship between the independent and the dependent variables. As a process, qualitative research is both creative and analytic, that is, the researcher's intuition or thought processes blend with the methodological principles lending flexibility and context sensitivity to research. I explained to them how one could develop a sort of theoretical formulations of his/her own from his/her data. Such as a grounded theory, "which purpose is to generate a theory grounded in, or emerges from the field." (Lichtman, 2014)

Qualitative methodologies build on a purposive sampling using a strategy known as maximum variation sample (Maykut and Moorehouse, 1994), which honors variations in the participants' responses as significant in determining their constructs, behavior, and understanding. In using an emergent design, you are not supposed to pre-state your sample size, but you can describe your bases for determining and terminating sampling, such as reaching the saturation point, which is "an awareness that no new information is emerging" (Grbich, 2013). Sampling moves away from the traditional concept of representativeness which is attained through the 'sample to population ratio' and the most popular random sampling to avoid bias. In fact, snowball sampling works where you start from a considerable number of cases or research participants then ask for more participants who could provide answers to your questions and who meet your qualifications criteria. You move on until there is no more variation in the answers or information obtained. Theoretical saturation signals

that there is nothing more beyond what the researcher already obtained in the process of data collection; hence, sampling can rightly stop because significant information is obtained. In class discussions, different opinions came about at this point, majority questioned the rigors of the study if it would include only few individuals and whether it could be accepted by the panel of examiners of their papers. I explained by asking or demonstrating several examples, such as who would be the best person or persons to describe how they felt, for example about the difficult calculus exam they took, about the strict grammar teacher of theirs, about the car collision incident which happened right outside our building. Further, I asked them whether they needed to calculate for the sample size of all the institution's personnel and the more than 10,000 students and do a random sampling just to find the answers to these questions. Mine was to demonstrate the workings of qualitative principles for them to recognize that any approach should be grounded on some foundation or principles.

An inductive approach to data analysis works best with the communication topics mentioned above. The data are not grouped according to pre-determined categories. Rather, what becomes important in the analysis emerges from the data, out of the process of inductive reasoning. "The discovery process is a beginning search for the important meanings in what people have said to you in interviews or what you have observed in the field, in documents, and the like" (Taylor and Bogdan in Maykut and Moorehouse, 1994). Guiding the entire process is the principle of constant comparative method where each of the new unit of meaning is selected for analysis and is compared to all other units of meaning. If there are no similar units of meaning, a new category is formed. In this process there is no room for continuous refinement; initial categories are changed, merged, or omitted; new categories are generated; and new relationships can be discovered (Goertz and Le Compte in Maykut and Moorehouse, 1994). In our discussions about the topic on development for example, the students' answers like infrastructure, technology, economic sufficiency, social equality were not given as choices before the discussion, but they rather came out after the discussion and activity. Similarly, when they were asked about their understanding of a paradigm, answers ranged from one-word "framework" to "diagrammatic representation of the concept of their study" and lengthy explanation about "their understanding of how things are done with all the details elaborating about methodology and everything related to their topic." The analysis was not easy as answers came in varied expressions and it took several reading and re-reading of their answers until categories are set and finalized. In the case study of Franco (2016), the research question "How does a qualitative methods seminar for doctoral graduate students contribute to students' understanding of the a) complexities of qualitative research and the b) importance of conceptual/theoretical framework in qualitative research?" many answers were given. The students were unaware of their own epistemology and ontology. They were also unaware of the link between researchers' philosophical stance and their research. They were also unaware of the importance of theoretical/conceptual framework in research. They were also unfamiliar with the proliferation of qualitative methods. These findings only showed the research orientation of the students, which definitely is far from the qualitative framework.

Exploration of relationships and patterns across categories is an integral component of the data analysis. It focuses on closely examining the many prepositional statements that have emerged from your careful analysis. Through this you can verify meaningful connections between and among ideas. However, the patterns and relationships identified may not be final and will undergo revision or series of revisions until you are satisfied that the representations you have made are the best representations of the participants' constructs, language, and behavior. Interested others, especially those who have training in the field can provide assistance by asking questions and maybe suggest connections they see in your data. The entire process is really flexible if to make the best representation of the people or event, which is the center of the investigation.

Teaching Qualitative Research: A working experience

In the research classes I taught, I started out with the methodological principles by throwing in questions about occurrences in different settings and what the students' responses would be, should they be in the given situation. Such examples ranged from questions like: what do you do in times of calamities or disasters such as an earthquake or a typhoon or fire? How do the government and the 'progressive block' act in times of social unrest or abnormal situations? How is s/he as a boss (with the boss at a hearing distance and with the boss out of sight)? How do you say 'I love you?' or 'I want to break it up with you'? How do people behave in meetings? How does the gay lingo become a representation of its speakers? How do couples working in the same office communicate regarding official or family matters? How are representations, intentionalities, and identities reflected in the President's speeches? There are endless possibilities soliciting our possible responses or actions in different situations.

The students' responses to these questions ranged from formal statements and conventional way of presenting their best to the 'umms'...and 'aaahs' and 'well...' (while looking at the ceiling or glancing elsewhere, biting their lips, and hands of different movements in trying to provide explanations)...and most of the times reflecting uncertainty and puzzled countenance. Oftentimes, they would laugh while asking themselves or their seatmates these questions and found that such were not simple questions if asked in a formal way such as in a classroom set up. In the discussion, however, we were able to point out why we could not just answer them as easy as we defined certain terms or concepts. We could not predict people's actions from others' perspectives; our perceptions came short of the real behavior or description of the real events. This is because every person is different and events do not happen in exactly the same fashion as they do. Therefore, there is no way in which prediction can be ascertained to reflect people's behavior in another setting and another circumstance. In these situations, we were able to connect it to research and why and how are researches conducted. We were able to point out the limitations of counting and statistical measures or what they are incapable of doing. Hence, the qualitative method prevails.

In all the steps of the processes involved in teaching qualitative research, several problems were met. Making the students understand and accept a new perspective other than what they have known came

first. It is true that unlearning something that has been known for some time is difficult to do. It creates dissonance in the learners. Throughout the process the method has been the application of the principle from the “known to the unknown.” Operationally, it was teaching what the students know about research from the perspective of quantitative methodologies and pointing out how it is done or how such topic can be conducted via the qualitative means. For example, in teaching sampling methodologies, you can start with the principles of sampling in quantitative research and how each technique is done in the context of qualitative studies. Explaining the process can be done by explaining the principles through an example and giving the qualitative means of sampling given a certain topic or converting the quantitative topic to a qualitative focus. The title of the study can be rephrased given another focus, which in most instance my student were delighted at having beautifully-worded titles apart from the usual titles of descriptive-correlational studies which they are all exposed to, which pointed out the relationship of variables right at the titles.

The principle also applies when discussing research instrument which is far from the survey instrument they were all familiar of. Comparison of the data drawn from an interview guide questions which were generally open-ended told them that rich information could really come out direct from the research participants. Among the activities we did was converting to interview questions statements that required pre-set three or five scales or categories of answers. They were able to reason out the limitations of the questionnaires by doing a mock interview and analysing the answers not based on somebody else’s words or standard ways, but those of the interviewees themselves. The process led them to the analysis process which they did not know they were already doing when they were conducting the interview or even when they were conceptualizing their topic. It was found out that the students did the textual, intertextual, and sociocultural levels of analyses as found out by Balanon (2015) in her study of discourses of communicators --- the program implementers and the beneficiaries. Though my students were not conscious of the process, their analyses proceeded from finding meaning in the written or articulated words/utterances and connecting them to the other texts or references they read. In the discussion, they would always cite their personal experiences and how practices were in their own schools and organizations. From the “known” or the established understanding about the principles of data collection and analysis process, they were able to see how these were done in qualitative studies, which were the “unknown” principles to them at the start of the course. Similar process of analyses came out when they were asked to do an observation. I assigned them to observe the same event, an orientation meeting of freshman students conducted by the Office of Student Affairs. When they had their reports, different angles of emphasis came out. That became a good point for me to discuss how differences in perspectives can better describe phenomena that standard questionnaires may fall short of describing. All the discussions redound to pointing out qualitative research principles, which are their ways of defending the value of qualitative studies, be they case studies of two students with disciplinary problems or a good performing student who shy away from others, or students exhibiting language anxiety, and many more examples from real-life experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching was not easy, especially for a teacher who is also learning with her students and one whose foundation in research is more of the quantitative methodologies. It was walking through the learning process with the students, with the teacher sometimes ahead of them guiding them of the way, but sometimes being just one among them and experiencing with them the dilemmas they feel as they try to understand the principles, orient themselves of the new terminologies or old ones but with different shades of meaning, if applied to qualitative research and many more. The trial and error thing in teaching cannot be avoided as they tried on with their new learning. In all the steps of the way, I found learning with them satisfying despite the many disagreements at first. I still find it difficult to rephrase titles and correct the method of analysis, or redirect their interview process as well as their journal writing technique. But in all the struggles that we co-experience, we grow as learners.

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