



Dialog on a country path: The qualitative research journey



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted 25 October 2013

Keywords:

Qualitative research
Nursing
Teaching
Shared inquiry
Dialog

SUMMARY

There is little information in the literature describing how students learn qualitative research. This article describes an approach to learning that is based on the pedagogical approach of Dinkins' Socratic–Hermeneutic Shared Inquiry. This approach integrates shared dialog as an essential aspect of learning. The qualitative pedagogy described in this article focused on three questions: What is knowing in qualitative research? How do we come to know qualitative research? What can we do with qualitative research? Students learned the basics of qualitative research within a context that fostered interpretive inquiry. In this way, the course framework mirrored the combination of interviewing, storytelling, and journeying toward understanding that constitute qualitative research.

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Introduction

Phenomenological research is a heedful, mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life.

[Max van Manen, 1984, p. 38]

Qualitative research is assuming greater importance in nursing as students, clinicians, educators, and researchers turn to questions that may not be answerable with quantitative approaches. Yet, there is little information in the literature that describes how students learn about qualitative research (Stark & Watson, 1999; Barbour, 2003; Waite, 2011). This article describes the application of the pedagogical approach of Dinkins' Socratic–Hermeneutic Shared Inquiry to a graduate course in qualitative nursing research to engage students in the “heedful, mindful wondering” of qualitative research. The article does not describe a formal research study. Instead, it offers a teaching approach that faculty can use to engage students in both the content and process of learning about qualitative research.

Background

A review of literature of teaching approaches to qualitative research indicated that there has been little written about how students learn the process of qualitative research. A few studies, however, illustrated

some creative approaches to teaching this content. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2012) described a qualitative research course designed both to clarify the qualitative research process and encourage students to become qualitative researchers. The framework for this course consisted of four phases: conceptual/theoretical, technical, applied, and emergent scholar. The developers of the course believed writing was a method of discovery and crucial to the process of becoming a qualitative researcher; therefore, throughout the course, students were required to write several qualitative reports that involved their collected data, analysis, and interpretations.

Cook and Gordon (2004) used metaphor and analogy in their instruction of qualitative research for graduate nursing students. By linking the research process to the nursing process and by constructing a teaching session using metaphors and analogies to a well known radio show, nursing students were able to make links between known conceptual frameworks and those associated with new knowledge.

Transformational learning theory provided the scaffolding for teaching qualitative research by Carawan et al. (2011). Teaching strategies were used that fostered many of the tenets of transformative learning: a safe, learner centered environment, critical reflection, ongoing discourse, and the placing of qualitative learning in the context of the students' research interests and personal lives. Poetry, photography, storytelling, and cartooning are a few examples of creative teaching/learning strategies that helped the students transform their thinking about qualitative research.

Memo writing served as an effective teaching strategy for teaching qualitative research to practitioner–researchers who were entrenched in the quantitative mode of research and thinking (Cox, 2012). The process of memo writing enabled these students to discover what directed them to think quantitatively rather than qualitatively, as well as providing a means to open up conversation with other qualitative researchers.

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Delyser (2008) outlined an advanced qualitative research course created for graduate geography students. Seminar discussions of such topics as ethics in qualitative research and actual practice of qualitative techniques such as interviewing and transcription have resulted in positive feedback from students and rewarding teaching experiences for the faculty.

Cobb and Hoffart (1999) crafted a two semester course for teaching qualitative research to doctoral nursing students. The formulation of two semesters of course work was based on the beliefs that more knowledge of epistemological assumptions, more time to read and critique representative research, and more time to actually conduct a small group qualitative study are needed to truly understand and appreciate the complexities and contributions of qualitative research.

While the teaching of content and research processes is deemed vital throughout the literature, the importance of avoiding a mechanical approach that is void of passion is seldom emphasized. Some authors stressed the need to incorporate into teaching the *art* of qualitative research (Stark and Watson, 1999; McAllister and Rowe, 2003). Barbour specifically warned of the “technical essentialism” that can pervade qualitative research (Barbour, 2003, p. 1020). Simplifying concepts of qualitative research into a step-by-step perfunctory approach greatly minimizes the role of the researcher and the skills needed to elicit and analyze stories from participants. Strategies to create a vision “when seeing and listening, to create a space to “dance” with a text, and to develop a passion for and about the phenomenon under investigation” are not a usual approach to teaching qualitative research (Stark and Watson, 1999, p. 721).

Complementary teaching and learning strategies that develop the sensual qualities of seeing, listening, and feeling, are suggested, since these are all qualities essential to rigorous qualitative research. Creative writing, the use of art and music in learning activities, and discussions in an accepting learning environment are examples of strategies that help to develop the sensual qualities so vital to the conduct of qualitative research (Stark and Watson, 1999; McAllister and Rowe, 2003; Carawan et al., 2011). As McAllister and Rowe clearly state, alternative teaching strategies are not to replace the learning of facts, philosophies, and procedures necessary in qualitative inquiry. Yet, innovative or complementary teaching techniques that cultivate students' perceptive and interpretive abilities must also be employed.

Teaching through Shared Inquiry

The Socratic–Hermeneutic Shared Inquiry framework for teaching integrates shared dialog as an essential aspect of learning. Socrates' method of inquiry, also called his *elenchus*, is characterized as *shared* inquiry in the strongest sense (Dinkins, 2005). In this approach to teaching, faculty members put themselves into the inquiry, dialoguing with students to search together for understanding.

Two important aspects of the Shared Inquiry approach to learning are the importance of addressing one's assumptions and of exploring beliefs that seem to conflict. These goals seem particularly appropriate in teaching qualitative research, as students and faculty who have been schooled in the quantitative paradigm often need to rethink their assumptions and conflicting beliefs about “the science” of research. Engaging in Shared Inquiry requires students and faculty to take risks in exposing prejudices to each other. Hans-Georg Gadamer noted that if we have prejudices or “habits of thought” that we have not even noticed ourselves, we may need others to notice them for us (Dinkins, 2005). As the inquiry process continues and understanding develops, preconceptions which may not have been previously noticed are reevaluated and possibly altered or rejected. The process of Shared Inquiry, then, allows students and faculty to acknowledge that they are both part of the inquiry, to check their assumptions with other inquirers, and to remain open to the possibility that their assumptions may be challenged.

To help students grasp essential concepts of qualitative research without the “technical essentialism” that might preclude them from forging their own personal journey of learning, a qualitative research

graduate-level course was developed that was framed with Shared Inquiry. The course was designed not only to teach students factual information about qualitative research but also to help them experience learning within an environment where they could feel comfortable in challenging each other in dialog. The approach aimed to foster qualities of seeing, listening, feeling, and reflection on learning — all qualities that are essential to developing perceptive and interpretive skills important for rigorous qualitative research.

Structure for the Course

The 3-credit qualitative research course progressed over a six-week period in the summer, requiring students to focus intensely on the subject matter. The actual classroom period constituted only 24 h. The remaining 21 h allocated for the course was integrated into structured online discussions, which required the students to synthesize their readings done outside of class and apply them in specific learning situations. An additional feature allowed the students to query a philosophy professor online about aspects of their learning, with online responses from the philosophy professor for all the students to read. Students asked questions about the difficult texts they were reading, and questions about their own thinking on qualitative research. Following the Socratic model, the philosophy professor responded with questions to stimulate further thinking and reflection or with suggestions of how and where students could inquire further.

Face-to-face classroom time was used to present traditional content related to qualitative research, including the various disciplinary perspectives that lead to different types of qualitative research, such as ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory. Online discussions engaged students and faculty in reflecting on the meaning of qualitative research for their practice, research, and personal knowing. Three questions provided a focus for students' online reflections: What is knowing in qualitative research? How do we come to know qualitative research? What can we do with qualitative research? Excerpts from course dialog are included here to illustrate how students and faculty addressed assumptions and explored conflicting beliefs. Responses are not meant to represent definitive course outcomes, but to illustrate the thinking processes that occurred through the dialog.

What is Knowing in Qualitative Research?

The first online discussion focused on the type of abstract knowing that comes with qualitative research. Using Heidegger's metaphor of a Country Path (Heidegger, 1966), students and faculty dialogued online about their perceptions of knowing in qualitative research. Using the non-synchronous discussion feature of the online software, students posted their thoughts in response to the following prompt:

Martin Heidegger has an essay called “Conversation on a Country Path,” in which he presents a dialog between different scholars on the topic of “What is thinking?” Imagine that Socrates, Heidegger, van Manen, Gadamer, Benner, and Diekelmann are walking down a path in a woods. You are here in the role of the person you have selected to study. Socrates has asked you to think about the question: “What is knowing in qualitative research?” Participate in this dialog as if you were the person that you have selected to study for the course. Try to answer as you think this person would have answered. Socrates has started the dialog. Talk to him!

Each student assumed the identity of one of these scholars and after familiarizing themselves with the selected scholars, responded to the prompt. The threaded discussion that ensued helped all participants to expand their understanding of each scholar. To respond to the prompt in the manner of the selected scholar, the students had to think deeply about the values, beliefs, and writing style of the selected scholar. This required them to think beyond their own beliefs and prejudices

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