

# Teaching qualitative research methods: Some innovations and reflections on practice

Oliver J. Mason, School of Psychology,  
University of Birmingham.

## **Abstract**

*This paper considers some of the problems inherent in teaching qualitative research methods within psychology. It stresses the use of a reflective approach to course design that aims to 'emancipate' students in their own study and research, as well as equipping them with a combination of practical and theoretical skills. In addition to a brief description of the course, I describe some innovations in tackling the topic that try to optimise participation and active learning. Philosophical and political aspects to the subject are discussed as particularly thorny issues. Several approaches to evaluation are described that serve both to increase participation and help the teacher respond to issues of level and content. Some of the implications discussed for future teaching include revisions to the coverage of discourse analysis and the role of political values in psychological research.*

## **Introduction**

This paper presents my personal experience of teaching qualitative methods to clinical psychology postgraduates and to practicing clinical psychologists. At the outset, a disclaimer is perhaps in order: neither can I provide a pedagogical 'blueprint' for teaching research methods, nor is my own experience of them (or their range) anything more than modest. What I am attempting to do is describe the process of planning, implementing, observing and reflecting on my practice in teaching. It is in this broad and loose sense that the endeavour might be described as action research (Lewin, 1952).

However, I can make little appeal to a formalised model such as that of Elliot (1991). The process is 'active' in the sense of *improvement* and *involvement* (Carr & Kemmis, 1986): I hope to improve both my own teaching practice and contribute to the wider debate on the teaching of qualitative methods in psychology. I try to involve, as far as possible, students themselves in aspects of both what and how these methods are taught as part of a collaborative approach. Considered in terms of Carr and Kemmis' (1986) typology of action research, my approach is 'practical' rather than 'technical'; and whether truly 'emanci-

patory' I might leave to the judgement of the reader. I would take the stance that it is very important to consider participants' positions and perspectives on the teaching they 'receive', and importantly, contribute to; and that they gain self-confidence as potential 'authors of their own research direction'. The success of this can perhaps only be judged by the extent to which an open and honest relationship between teacher and students develops.

### **The problem: How to teach the tools of an uncertain trade for use on an unknown job?**

Qualitative research methods do not form a 'how to do' set of skills that can be applied in the textbook fashion of quantitative methodologies and statistical analyses. Nevertheless, for training in research methods to be one of successful transfer to the research context, some sense of practical understanding is essential. Perhaps simplistically, the 'tools' might be seen to be some of the techniques contained in the multitude of forms of content analysis, grounded theory, discourse analysis, and so forth. Indeed some approaches stress that use of these analytic 'tools' can only be learnt 'on the job' with real-life data with which the researcher is personally involved and concerned ('How to analyse discourse', Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Secondly, the plethora of approaches and philosophical stand-points ('the uncertain trade') rule out adopting a 'monist' position with respect to the 'right' method and position to adopt. Lastly, and perhaps obviously, without knowing the specific task for which any student might later want the skills, it is difficult to equip them given the range available ('the unknown job').

As for any course, the level and prior experience of students should inform one's approach to teaching. One problem more particular to this context is that undergraduate courses in psychology teach qualitative methods to widely diverging degrees and

students come with anything from no experience to PhD-level experience. Given little prior knowledge can be assumed how should a course include that variety of experience and interest?

The current context for me is one of teaching to groups of around 25 postgraduate clinical psychology trainees for whom research skills training is but a small part of the overall course. The teaching timetable sets aside roughly three three-hour teaching sessions for qualitative research methods.

As if to compound these difficulties, there are significant issues about the degree to which teaching should examine the various 'scientific' and philosophical assumptions that underpin different approaches. I stress the need for students to appreciate distinctions between positivist and at least some forms of post-positivist stances towards science (Woolgar, 1988). This is essential to both understanding the positioning of much qualitative research, and in helping the student form a consistent stance when forming and carrying out their own research (an appreciation also desirable within the quantitative tradition). Without a specific context and desired outcome for research (the 'job'), understandings of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of research positions are difficult for a teacher to elucidate.

Not only is a philosophical education critical, some appreciation of the politicised nature of any research endeavour (whether framed as 'science' or not) is paramount. Some educators go so far as to explicitly endorse a particular stance such as 'feminist pedagogy' (Stabb, 1999). Should one adopt a particular philosophical or political position in teaching by remaining true to one's personal perspective, or reflect the range of positions that might be chosen from? Certainly the variety of research contexts and the politicised nature of their purpose present a challenge to the educator, both to convey through concrete examples and not to act as 'font or arbiter of knowledge and truth'.

## Tackling the topic

In common I suspect with many teachers of qualitative methods, I should 'confess' to being largely 'self-taught': this is probably due to the dominance of quantitative approaches in psychology at the time of my research training. Certainly, my own learning took place in the context of a first-hand project that demanded I acquire the background and skills *in vivo*! This might seem a weakness, and certainly can contribute to a narrowness of content and approach if not guarded against. However, many researchers report 'the major lesson' to be 'Get hands-on experience', and stress that no amount of reading or talking about it can bring a researcher close to having an idea of what is involved like doing it (Stabb, 1999). For these reasons, my own experience of research is the ground I chose to build on, supported of course, by the writings and advice of others.

An additional important resource was the writings of others on what might constitute the canon of qualitative research methods in psychology (Bannister *et al.*, 1994; Richardson, 1996; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999; Kopala & Suzuki, 1999): these were some of the references I found useful in course design and implementation. They also offer a ready fund of appropriate and approachable references (a challenge in this fertile but often 'exotic' field) for first-time students.

A further set of issues to consider is the teacher's and, as importantly, the students' objectives from the sessions. In some ways, these can be clearly defined in the context of the clinical psychology training course. This is a three-year taught professional qualification requiring a research thesis in the final year. A simple view might be that this requirement suggests that the course should enable students to complete the project. However, my and colleagues' experience has been that any research training provides only a part of the necessary groundwork to enable this as so many approaches might be

taken as to make comprehensive teaching coverage impractical. Instead, the goal becomes one of giving good background coverage of a method or approach, as well supporting independent learning to the level needed for post-graduate research. Taking this approach has the added advantage of fostering independence of action and thought from the beginning of training. The difficulties of handling the variety of prior experience are reduced as students become engaged in sharing both opinion and expertise with one another.

The academic context has a key influence on one's approach to teaching qualitative research. Taking place in a School of Psychology within a university (for which the subtext might be 'the business of science') locates qualitative approaches as somewhat heterodox, possibly counter-cultural and, to some, even heretical. Often placed at the opposing end of an imagined polarity with quantitative methods, and with opinions running high about the merits and de-merits of qualitative methods, there is an additional challenge of maintaining a balanced approach that addresses these concerns constructively.

A more pragmatic concern of the teaching is to give a very practical view of what a 'realistic' qualitative piece of post-graduate research might involve. Some of the differences to 'orthodox' practice can mean a re-consideration of the process of obtaining ethical permission, issues of recruitment and sampling, the frequently iterative nature of research process, and cost and time constraints. Some of these can be perceived as burdensome uncertainties in a process already beset by fears for some students.

Little of the foregoing has specifically considered learning objectives that might be expected to guide one's approach to teaching the topic. Taken from the course description these are:

1. To be able to consider research questions and methods suitable for qualitative research;

2. To be able to locate relevant information on the subject area;
3. To be able to identify and apply criteria to published literature and their own research;
4. To be aware of practical considerations of participants, ethical application, and time and cost in planning research.

My own feeling is that while these are worthwhile they omit the more difficult to define aspects of gaining 'a feel' for different approaches and developing the critical and self-reflective stance on one's own and others' work so important to qualitative work.

### Doing it

Despite a brief history to the inclusion of the subject within the doctoral course, I had been unable to obtain any details about what and how it had been taught. This gave me no clue as to what had worked previously. Currently, after two iterations, I feel the course has assumed a structure that while not fixed, will remain a framework for the future (especially given the time reworking would require).

It is not feasible to describe detailed content here, but an over-view of the structure with some examples might be useful (see Table 1 overleaf). Though in practice more flexible, the course involves a combination of formally taught parts with other more active learning approaches. Depending on time constraints, both grounded theory and discourse analysis are introduced and tackled in pyramid exercises in which students combine into small groups following an individual task element. Then feedback to the whole group occurs leading to discussion of the difficulties encountered and the insights gained into the method. Use of experiential learning, group work and encouraging open discussion has been suggested to lead to deeper and more effective learning (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 1999). My own and colleagues' experience has been that all of

these are essential to teaching research methods. At the centre of the sessions are two exercises that attempt to engage the student with grounded theory and discourse analytic methods. Initially working as individuals, the students form small groups to work further and then compare 'results' with other groups. This then generates considerable discussion.

Usefully filling the 'graveyard' slot after lunch, the 'hegemony' debate has provided a lively and engaging discussion in which 'opposing camps' (artificially and playfully constructed for the purpose) argue the merits and de-merits of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Using key philosophical, scientific and pragmatic concepts on large cards helps make the 'territory' over which debate ranges easier to map as the camps construct a case for one or the other owning concepts. The addition of another teaching member with diverging views helped facilitate debate and examine ways in which quantitative and qualitative approaches might be combined. One spin-off of this exercise is that it models opposing positions on issues at the very heart of the philosophy of science in a way that retains integrity and some recognition of their complexity.

I commented earlier on the difficulties of conveying philosophical complexity in ways less abstract and closer to personal experience. By no means a full solution, I attempt to root several positions (positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism/ post-modernism) in concrete example and elicit implications from students for our understandings of 'real-world' phenomena in clinical practice. This allows students to compare and contrast disparate accounts at ontological, epistemological and methodological levels. Linked to the challenges of comprehending this philosophical complexity is the increasingly complex terminology attached to qualitative theory and method. Nightingale and Cromby (1999) usefully provide an

**Table 1. Timetable**

Format	Content	Examples
Flip-chart exercise	Philosophy of Quantitative & Qualitative Paradigms (positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism)	'Consider possible criticisms of what you understand to be a scientific approach to studying psychology in the university.' Mapping ontology/epistemology/methodology.
Handout-supported lecture	Grounded Theory Methodology	Handout gives copies of overheads used to describe the method, lists the distinguishing characteristics and some of the technical terminology of grounded theory.
Pyramid exercise 1	Practising coding and categorising, developing grounded theory	'Attempt to code what you think are critical aspects of the account. These may be single words, phrases, sentences ... as you think appropriate .... Write some of your own observations, hunches and intuitions about what you generate'
Handout-supported lecture	Discourse Analysis Methodology	Potter and Wetherall's ten steps: research questions, sample selection, collection, interviews, transcription, coding, analysis, validation, the report and its application.
Pyramid exercise 2	Discourse Analysis in practice	'the discourse analyst is concerned with the detail of passages of discourse, however fragmentary and contradictory, and with what is actually said, not some idea of what is intended'.
Handout	Writing a qualitative research proposal	Guidelines are taken from Elliot et al. (1999).
Lecture/ Discussion	Evaluating Qualitative Research – Criteria of trustworthiness and validity	Woolgar's Methodological horrors.
'Hegemony' Debate	Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative versus quantitative approaches	Students' own opportunity to reflect in a debate on their experience of both types of research and their pros and cons.
Lecture/Discussion	Combining qualitative and quantitative research	Uses material from Morse (1991) and Mitchell (1986) to illustrate different models for combining approaches.
Focus Groups/ Postcard-writing	Feedback on level, content and presentation	

appendix of terms some of which I augment for the attempted benefit of the learner. That 'discourse analysis' can refer to two different practices (at least) is an example of the sort of potential pitfalls that the learner can be helped to negotiate though 'jargon' is a frequently cited difficulty by students.

I highlighted earlier that one has choices regarding the adoption of an explicitly politicised position such as feminist pedagogy – a presumably common one given the concerns of much qualitative work with feminist perspectives. I try to reflect this concern in teaching but adopt a neutral stance to any single position (as for philosophical ones). The pedagogical milieu is clearly one in which the teacher sets expectations: I hope to encourage collaboration rather than competition, and a minimum power differential that encourages constructive dissent and multiple viewpoints. I stress the adoption of a critical stance, the importance of one's personal reactions (objectified as transference within other parts of clinical psychology), and the validity of research topics (women among others) that might appear ignored elsewhere. However, I try to avoid an over-identification (in my opinion) of traditional science necessarily with oppression or 'patriarchy' – though this, of course, should and does remain open to question by students!

The usual practice of providing reading lists and handouts is presumably helpful to students, but can be daunting without guidance when materials are difficult and diverse. The reading list was augmented with descriptions of the contents' coverage and utility. The key texts and some papers were present throughout the teaching for students to consult. Some of the references contain advice and guidelines for projects specific to clinical psychology and a critical stance towards them is encouraged (Craig, 1996; Turpin; 1997; Elliot *et al.*, 1999). In addition, handouts provided concrete examples and definitions of some key terms within qualitative research.

## Evaluation

As part of the entire programme of clinical training, students complete a standardised form of quantitative feedback on content and delivery together with space for free response. Typically, although the feedback is positive, it is non-specific and of little value in evaluating this course. Within the large group context I have tried to augment this form with the use of focus groups to both illustrate a further method of data collection and provide a context for reflection. Time constraints have tended to limit feedback from this exercise and I have considered asking focus groups to provide feedback in either written form, or a form of their choice though this remains a hope for the future. Another strategy I have adopted with smaller groups of clinical psychologists has been that of 'sending a postcard'. Usually, participants use the free space to make comments, criticisms and suggestions. Some give more detail and others less; and importantly, comments can be made anonymously if desired.

Some of the themes of positive comments surrounded enjoyment and 'good fun' as well as 'thought-provoking'. Clear positive comments were made about group discussion and practical exercises particularly on grounded theory - although one participant 'got lost in the discourse analysis'. While one person thought that 'one needed a background in qualitative research methods to get the most out of it', another thought it at a 'introductory (sic.) level' and requested more 'worked through applied research questions' and 'use of language/ analysis/ interpretation'. Given my explicit attempt to be 'emancipatory' – one psychologist reported that she found the sessions 'opening up avenues', and 'liberating and tying up at the same time!' Several felt 'motivated ... to actually do some qualitative research'. One interesting comment was that it was 'hard to identify with the politics'.

## Modifying future practice

A consistent feature of my own reflection following teaching has been my under-estimate of time allowance when teaching qualitative methods (as opposed to other research methods). Valuable contributions have come from students when exercises and discussions are allowed to 'run over time' – an unanticipated 'emancipatory' feature. In future, I am allowing more time for these elements of teaching!

Determining the level of teaching has proved a thorny issue given the range of students' experience – feedback clearly indicated some felt it 'difficult' and others within their range. My approach has been to provide thought-provoking materials and pose demanding questions for novice and experienced researcher alike: in the hope that each may work with these materials and questions at their own level. Further emphasis on this approach is needed, though I suspect that there is no complete answer to this issue. Continued feedback is an essential element to this issue, and the qualitative feedback from both focus groups and individuals is important here. My experience has been that feedback exercises also help to stress the participatory role of students in influencing one's choice of content and approach.

It was also apparent from feedback that the coverage of grounded theory and related post-positivist/critical philosophy was relatively successful. It was more difficult to cover constructivist approaches and discourse analysis (the methodology chosen to illustrate constructivism in practice). It is possible that this is an intrinsically more challenging task. Analysing discourse is not an approach learnt overnight and possibly the exercise 'attempted too much'. This is not to argue that one should shy away from 'difficult' topics, as I received positive comments about coverage of philosophical issues. At present I use the 'Queen's speech on the death of Diana' as a text for analysis. It is an

admirable piece for observing very rich and subtle use of language as well as multi-layered appeals to religious and political discourses. However, its length (417 words) may overextend the exercise adding difficulty to an already challenging task. The politicised nature of much constructivism/post-modernism within social science was a difficult aspect to cover, and one I had earlier shied away from teaching. Psychology as a discipline has not stressed its political aspect, and Foucauldian discursive approaches are probably alien to the majority of trained psychologists. Although this is an important aspect of qualitative research, there are issues about how and what to cover within it. Whether one stresses politicised aspects of the theory and practice of psychology perhaps ultimately depends upon one's opinion of critical psychology. As the topic shortly arises again in the teaching calendar, I have decided to give greater coverage to discursive methods and room for political reflections in an attempt to improve this aspect of teaching.

The effort and personal resources needed for preparing for innovative teaching is not negligible. This preparatory 'cost' might not be the most efficient in a 'cost-benefit' analysis and indeed the majority of this teacher's practice has received far less attention to detail. However, Cowan (1998) makes the point that as greater innovation and reflective practices gain ground in higher education, students become educated into being active stakeholders in their own educational process. This necessarily places different (and what may be perceived as greater) demands upon the university teacher. I have the perhaps forlorn hope that by adapting to an approach that places more emphasis on students managing their own learning one can help to lessen these demands.

## Key points

- An experiential approach to teaching qualitative research methods usefully supplements didactic teaching.
- Using a diverse set of teaching methods and materials retains students' engagement and benefits the enjoyment of all.
- Discourse analytic methods present a challenge for both the teacher and students, and this can be usefully acknowledged and discussed within one's practice.
- Varied and engaging forms of feedback can provide richer detail than 'standardised forms' and can help illustrate the methodologies being taught.
- The increased costs in time and effort for university teachers are a significant factor in delivering innovative teaching. This may militate against greater investment despite greater effectiveness. However, as the culture of higher education reflects developments in teaching practice, greater emphasis on teaching may help mitigate this burden.

## References

- Bannister, P., Burman, E., Parker, I., Taylor, M. & Tindall, C. (1994). *Qualitative methods in psychology: A research guide*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research*. London: Falmer.
- Cowan, J. (1998). *On becoming an innovative university teacher. Reflection in action*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Craig, G. (1996). Qualitative research in a NHS setting: Uses and dilemmas. *Critical Psychotherapy*, 6, 180-86.
- Elliot, J. (1991). *Action research for educational change*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Elliott, R. *et al.* (1999). Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 38, 215-229.
- Fry H., Ketteridge, S. & Marshall, S. (1999). *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education: Enhancing academic practice*. London: Kogan Page.
- Koppala, M. & Suzuki, L.A. (1999). *Using qualitative methods in psychology*. New York: Sage.
- Lewin, K. (1952). *Field theory in social science*. London: Tavistock.
- Nightingale, D.J. & Cromby, J. (1999). *Social constructionist psychology: A critical analysis of theory and practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Potter & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London: Sage.
- Richardson, J.T.E. (Ed.) (1996). *Handbook of qualitative research methods for psychology and the social sciences*. Leicester: BPS.
- Stabb, S.D. (1999). Teaching qualitative research in psychology. In M. Koppala & S. Suzuki (Eds.), *Using qualitative methods in psychology*. London: Sage.
- Turpin, G. (1997). Standards for research projects and theses involving qualitative methods: suggested guidelines for trainees and courses. *Clinical Psychology Forum*, 108, 4-12.
- Woolgar, S. (1988). *Science, the very idea*. Chichester: Ellis Horwood.

## Correspondence

**Oliver J. Mason**

School of Psychology

University of Birmingham

Edgbaston

Birmingham B15 2TT.

Tel: 0121 414 3836

E-mail: o.mason.1@bham.ac.uk