A Reflective Strategy for Learning the Methods of Qualitative Research.

Although the application and acceptance of qualitative research have increased over the last decade, there is little empirical information about how one should learn qualitative methods. This paper describes a reflective strategy for learning the methods of qualitative research that draws on experience in a graduate qualitative methods course and explores reflections prior to, during, and following the course. Reflection appeared to be a valuable approach to learning qualitative research methods. (SLD)
A Reflective Strategy for Learning the Methods of Qualitative Research

Lou Ann Sevier
East Tennessee State University

Abstract

The application and (acceptance) of qualitative research has increased over the last decade. In response, numerous text and courses have been developed in the vein of “how to conduct qualitative research.” However, empirical information with regard to “how one should learn qualitative methods” is scant. It is reasonable to assume that learning strategies are tenable for qualitative instruction.

Herein, a “reflective” strategy for learning the methods of qualitative research is described. The author’s experiences in a graduate qualitative methods course provided the impetus. The author’s reflections (a) prior to, (b) during, and (c) following the course are referenced to illustrate how one might profit from a reflective approach. (Note that guidelines for reflection within the context of learning qualitative methods are appended.)

While the use of “reflection” is not new to education (or qualitative methods for that matter) the application herein is thought to be unique. Based on the author’s experience, it is expected that instructors and students of qualitative research will profit from this learning strategy. It is the author’s belief that reflection enhances the learning of qualitative research methods.

Introduction

The summer of 2002, I took a graduate course in qualitative research methods. Up to that point, I had no experience with qualitative research. Drawing from my background in English, I thought it might be useful to capture my experiences in a reflective journal. At the end of the course, I discovered that journaling led to the following insights: (1) I learned about a new paradigm, (2) I learned about the importance of networking, (3) I finally bought into the idea of emergence, and (4) I stopped trying to start at the end. I realized that if I had not kept the journal, I would have not had those insights.

I was curious if there was already a formal reflection process for learning qualitative research methods. Subsequently, I conducted a cursory review of online syllabi for qualitative courses. To my surprise, I found no mention of using reflection to improve the learning of qualitative research methods. I was inspired to create an
instructional module aimed at using reflection to improve the learning of qualitative research methods.

Increased Application of Qualitative Research Methods

During the last decade, qualitative research has matured. Trends such as increased application, innovations and refinements regarding methodology, and increased application have been occurring. A search of Dissertation Abstractions International on the keywords "qualitative research" for the years 1990 - 2000 returned 14,836 hits. The data showed a drastic increase in application that could lead one to infer that there has been an increase in acceptance due to the fact that dissertations are chaired. In the ten-year span, the number of qualitative dissertations rose from 746 to 1888 (Retrieved September 2002).
According to Bogdan and Bilken (1998):

There is more enthusiasm for the [qualitative] approach now than ever before. Qualitative research can no longer be considered a marginal approach that mainstream researchers do not have to consider seriously. The number of sessions at the recent meetings of the American Educational Research Association reporting on qualitative research has increased dramatically (p. ix).

Strategies for Learning Qualitative Research Methods

Self-study texts and organized class work are two popular strategies for learning qualitative research methods. Texts, such as *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods* (1998) are often used in qualitative research classes. This sample textbook is segmented into 7 chapters as follows: (1) Foundations of Qualitative Research in Education: An Introduction; (2) Research Design; (3) Fieldwork; (4) Qualitative Data; (5) Data Analysis; (6) Writing It Up; and (7) Applied Qualitative Research for Education.

An advanced Google search with the key words “qualitative research” “methods” and “syllabus” resulted in a hit of 23, 600. None of the syllabi or course descriptions that were randomly selected contained a section on personal reflection.

Reflection as a Strategy for Learning

A cursory view of qualitative research method web pages did not turn up any mention of any use of a reflective approach. I found it odd given that reflection is widely used in educational contexts, that neither self-study texts nor formal classroom work (or a
combination of the two) suggested using reflection. Based on my experience (opinion) reflection enhances the learning of qualitative research methods.

Based on my review of the literature herein and my discoveries learning qualitative research methods, I have written an instructional module titled "Using Reflection to Enhance the Learning of Qualitative Methods" formatted as slides. The intent is to serve as a generic template that instructors can use and either reduce or expand the content. It is expected that instructors of qualitative research will customize the module to fit their course goals, objectives etc... so they can be adapted to existing courses for qualitative research methods.
REFERENCES


Kember et. al. (Feb. 1990). Determining the level of reflective thinking from students’ written journals using a coding scheme based on the works of Mezirow. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, (18)1, 18-30.


I would like to thank Robert G. Stewart for his advice, great insight and endless support throughout my constructing this presentation.
Reflection (Multiple Perspective Concept)

- Reflection is "a thought, idea, or opinion formed or remark made as a result of meditation" (Merriam-Webster, 10th ed.).

- "Reflection is concentration and careful consideration" (Osterman, 1990, p.134).

Reflection (Uses)

- Therapy (psycho-analysis)
- Pastime (journal keeping)
- Learning
- Method of Qualitative Research
- Dialogue Journal (evaluation)
- Professional Development (reflective practice)

"By increasing self-awareness, the reflective process creates opportunities for continued professional growth" (Osterman, 1990, p. 137).
Reflection
As a Strategy for Learning

- **Benefits**
  - Enhances communication between teacher and student
  - Assessment of learner needs and progress
  - Aids in written expression

- **Weaknesses**
  - Lack of consistent way to measure the depth and outcome of critical reflection
  - Reflective practice involves much self-reflection on the part of the teacher.

Reflection
As a Method of Qualitative Research

Distinctions become more evident when one compares reflection for learning with reflection as qualitative inquiry. Reflective field notes may be kept in the form of a journal, but they are subjective comments on the objective observations. You may speculate about what you think you are learning in the study and what the outcome of the study may be, but this journal is not intended for therapy rather “the purpose of this reflection is to improve the notes” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 123).

Reflection
As a Method of Learning

In contrast, the personal reflections are specifically about what students are learning during the course of the class.

Reflection as a Strategy for Learning Qualitative Methods

- **Adaptable**
  - Journals as a means of learning and reflection have both a long history and a strong set of contemporary advocates (Fulwiler, 1987).

- **Approach**
  - Reflect prior to, during, and after course (class).
  - Use guiding questions

  Try to reflect at regular intervals at the same time

  Use a contrast pattern of development (previous class vs. current class)

Guiding Questions

- **To be handed out before each class**
  - Examples from author’s reflections excerpts:

  1. Do you consider yourself a positivist or postpositivist? (beginning)
  2. What have you learned from this class? (compare/contrast at different points in class)
  3. How is reflection working for you? (Evaluation of process)
Guiding Reflection

"A good way to promote reflection at the end of a class period is for students to keep a daily learning log. Students jot down at least one thought they had as a result of the lesson and explain the significance of the thought. Helpful prompt questions are, 'What did I learn today?' 'What do I need to work on tomorrow?' 'In what did I do well?' and 'What could I have done differently?' The questions are often more valuable than the answers" (Marshall, 2001, p. 1)

Course Requirements/Expectations

- Materials Format for reflections (typewritten, notebooks, electronically, email interaction)
- Evaluation Will reflections be reviewed by instructor or peers? And how will they be evaluated?
- Frequency When will reflections be collected?
- Length Minimum requirement?
I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

| Title: A reflective strategy for learning the methods of Qualitative Research |
| Author(s): Lou Ann Sevier |
| Corporate Source: |
| Publication Date: 2002 |

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2A</th>
<th>Level 2B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)</td>
<td>PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC ARCHIVAL COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)</td>
<td>PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Sign here, please

Signature: 
Printed Name/Position/Title: Lou Ann Sevier/Professor/1001
Organization/Address: East Tennessee State University
Telephone: FAX: 310-3120
E-Mail Address: sevier@etsu.edu
Date: 7 Nov 02
III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:  
Address:  
Price:  

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:  
Address:  

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:
ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
1129 SHRIVER LAB
COLLEGE PARK, MD 20742-5701
ATTN: ACQUISITIONS

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
4483-A Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland 20706

Telephone: 301-552-4200
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-552-4700
e-mail: info@ericfac.piccard.csc.com
WWW: http://ericfacility.org

88 (Rev. 2/2001)