

A leap of trust: qualitative research in a musical community of practice

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Abstract

This article explores the process of determining an approach to the analysis of qualitative data collected as part of a case study research project involving children and teenagers from a community of musical practice—an all ages community-based fiddle group in central Scotland. The researcher's overarching goal is to find ways to increase ongoing participation in playing a musical instrument by people of all ages. The article does not present the findings of the study, but instead explores the notion of the reciprocal *leap of trust* that occurs between researcher and case study group, and the effects the arising mutual obligations and responsibilities have on research decisions regarding data analysis. The author describes her experience of data collection in the field and suggests that decisions regarding data analysis are influenced equally by the research participants and herself, as researcher. There is a shared narrative. The research itself a reciprocal *leap of trust*.

Key words: case study, community of musical practice, enjoyment, motivation, musical participation, traditional fiddling.

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This article sits within the context of a qualitative case study exploring the individual experiences of school-aged participants in an all ages community-based fiddle group in central Scotland (the “case study group”) aimed at understanding motivation and the end value defined as *enjoyment*. The overarching research goal is to find ways to increase ongoing participation in playing a musical instrument by people of all ages.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach which aims to understand the lived experience of the research participants within the context of the social world, or ‘everyday reality’ (Blaikie, 2000). The study examines the effect the group’s participation characteristics have on motivation, and the extent to which these participation characteristics influence individual perceptions of the quality of musical experience. Active research and ethnographic approaches were

considered in the planning stage, however the data collection timeline was conducive to neither. Importantly, I believed that the research question and topic, for the purpose of a Masters thesis, did not require the deep investigation and intrusion that these approaches demand. Nor did I wish to take advantage of the trust and generosity of the case study group.

A mixed methods ‘*rapprochement*’ (Burgess & Bryman, 1999) design framework focuses principally on a qualitative data collection phase, with a quantitative data collection phase for the purpose of validation and to support the researcher’s understanding of the case study group context. The quantitative phase employs an online questionnaire to collect contextual data from case study group members of all ages describing individual understandings of the group participation characteristics (i.e., rules, values,

agreed terms). The qualitative phase involves semi-structured one-on-one interviews with eleven participants aged 18 years and under to gather information to understand the link between quality of individual subjective experience and the group's participation characteristics. The approach to the qualitative phase of data collection might more accurately be described as qualitative with ethnographic borrowings (Wolcott, 1997) which support the ethical imperative to ensure the integrity and authenticity of the young voices of what I think of as 'cherished' (p. 337) participants, and the philosophical responsibility to permit each voice to be heard.

This article has arisen from my effort to adopt an honest and transparent approach to reporting founded on 'sensitivity inherent in all research interactions and reporting, and personal qualities with regard to fairness and thoroughness' (Moore, 2014, p. 120). It utilises deep documentation and reporting as a means of protecting the integrity of the voices and stories of all participants, including the researcher. The discussions are limited to the qualitative data collection component of the study, and describe the process to determine the approach to data analysis. The article does not discuss data interpretation. The notion of the *leap of trust* occurring between the researcher and consenting research participants is considered as an ethical thread entrusted to the researcher to weave through the study.

A leap of trust – background and context

As an early career researcher, my experience to date has been of a process driven by the dynamic interactions of rational intention, creative instinct and causality. I set out to explore the potential for research to affirm and validate my personal experience of playing music within a community-based group founded in the aural-based fiddle tradition of the Scottish and Scottish Diasporas. In this community of musical practice, I have

found people of all ages and abilities engaged in music-making with creativity and generosity, or what I think of as the capacity to make a *leap of trust*. I have also experienced a heightened sense of *enjoyment* in playing music. As a professional, conservatoire-trained cellist, teacher and arts administrator, I have found myself wondering what my path in music might have been like had I experienced this form of music-making earlier in my career. In a few short years I have developed an intimacy with my instrument that the many years of purposeful—not to mention expensive—education within the classical paradigm had failed to foster. I have also discovered the essentially social nature of the activity and the associated benefits relating to social connection, social affirmation and personal identity.

For the purpose of this article, the *leap of trust* is defined as a reciprocal understanding or agreement to operate according to the ethical and social codes and values that characterise musicians and music-making in the broad Celtic tradition and which mirror, to an extent, the informal shared music-making tradition or *session culture*. Session culture is defined as an informal, social, community-based music-making and music-sharing experience based on principles of inclusion, tolerance and equity, sustained by a protocol of democratic, shared leadership (Cope, 2002).

In undertaking a preliminary literature review to refine and focus my topic and research question, I read Peter Cope's paper titled 'Community-based traditional fiddling as a basis for increasing participation in instrument playing' (1999). The paper reporting on an action research project undertaken in a small Scottish town resonated strongly with my personal experiences. A search led me to a document, 'A Personal View – Peter Cope' (2008) about the community-based fiddle group that arose from his study.

My own involvement with the fiddle group in Melbourne led to plans to attend Fiddle Frenzy, a traditional music festival held in Lerwick, Shetland Isles, and presented the opportunity to undertake

data collection in Scotland. I initially contacted two community-based groups, one in a major city and the other in a small village in central Scotland. While both groups responded with interest, the group based in central Scotland responded with immediate enthusiasm and the leap of trust that characterises the world of music-making I wish to explore, triggering my own leap of trust in response. This *reciprocal leap of trust* acted as a seal on our agreement. From that moment on, I consulted with the group, provided information and advised of university ethics requirements and processes. In return, the group agreed to provide me with access to members and the opportunity to undertake fieldwork during my brief visit in August 2014.

Thus, I did not *purposefully identify* the case study group. Instead, the group was revealed to me in the writing of its founder, Peter Cope, through a process of enquiry motivated by my own experience of music-making. This was a highly subjective and intuitive process, during which I was acutely aware of my own particular research lens or perspective and the risks this might present were I not to adopt a rigorous, honest and disciplined approach to case study research. In awareness of my own subjectivity, I strived to disclose and control it in order to present a sense of objectivity. Yet, my subjectivity was the very thing that provided the starting point for this research. In recognising this essential human mediated struggle between objectivity and subjectivity (Eisner, 1998) the study demands an ontological approach which navigates the interaction between multiple perspectives and views. Thus, I have adopted an approach founded on a congruent researcher voice in which I seek not to conceal my subjectivity, but to acknowledge and develop it as an essential tool. As a consequence, the subjectivity of both researcher and participant is heard as a pedal note in this paper which sounds as a reminder of my philosophical stance proclaiming that, as individuals, we are all entitled to be *the author of our own world*.

A leap of trust: Methodology decisions and researcher privilege

The qualitative data collection phase

The qualitative data collection phase focuses on gathering data about individual's feelings and perceptions suitable for analysis as a way of understanding each participant's subjective experience of playing the fiddle and participating in the group to explore the research question: How does the individual perceive the quality of the musical experience?

The approach to data collection was driven by resources, which included researcher finances and time constraints. As a self-funding research project, I was in a position to spend three days in the village, with the dates scheduled to permit my attendance at the group's principle activity—the Friday night session—and one of the group's performances at a local community festival. The approach was also driven by my decision to allow the group, on behalf of the members, to moderate the extent of researcher intrusion. As in Australia, privacy is a concern in Scotland, so the group undertook the recruiting of interview participants. Given the time constraints, it was agreed in advance that the majority of interviews would be held during the Friday night session, and any additional interviews would be scheduled during the weekend to follow. All members of the group were advised of the research project through a project information and consent form together with a link to the online questionnaire distributed by email three weeks prior to my visit.

The participant observer

While my theoretical research approach changes and evolves in direct relation to this ongoing study and is therefore not a static or permanent state of understanding, at this point I consider myself a 'privileged, active observer' (Wolcott, 1997, p. 336) due to the degree of participation I experienced in the field work. By invitation rather than request I found myself participating in the group's Friday

night session, performing with the group at a local community concert, attending a local session and engaged in conversations with members of the group. This position of researcher privilege brings risks. As a participant observer, I naturally found myself trying to fit within the cultural system of the community of practice. Given the reciprocal leap of trust, there was a sense that we all belonged to the same cultural system—as members of community-based fiddle groups founded in the Scottish tradition—which gave rise to my concerns about the risk of over-identifying with the group, and displaying too much empathy and self-disclosure in the qualitative data collection phase.

The interviews

Six primary students participated in individual interviews, three girls and three boys. Five secondary students participated in individual interviews, three girls and two boys. Parental consent to participate was gained at the time of the interview, with the participant's consent gained through an audio-recorded assent protocol prior to the commencement of the interview. Ten participants played the fiddle as their principal instrument, with one playing fiddle but indicating another instrument as his principal instrument. The participants had learnt the fiddle for periods ranging from under 12 months to 8 years. Individual interviews were conducted in the participant's home (a parent was present in two interviews) or the venue used for the group's Friday night session. Two interviews were conducted in Lerwick during Fiddle Frenzy.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used as a guide to create some consistency of focus while permitting the participant to guide the interview. The questions were ordered and grouped, so all interviews tended to follow a similar structure, however this order was not fixed. The interview questions focussed on playing the fiddle and being a member of the case study group, and were constructed to elicit personal stories and accounts. The questions were designed to encourage the

participant to focus on personal experiences and feelings, and were informed by a preliminary analysis of the quantitative data collection phase (on-line questionnaire). Questions were formulated as a mix of closed and open-ended, with a pattern of questioning regarding activities, such as practice, followed by open-ended questioning regarding resulting feelings or understandings regarding these activities. This approach was designed to create a sense of cause and effect, reflecting the research exploration of the link between participation in the community of practice and the nature of the subjective experience. The interviews took on average 25 minutes and were audio recorded with the consent of each participant. I planned to take notes during the interviews, however found that writing undermined my relationship with the participant due to breaks in eye contact and limitations to verbal and physical feedback and cues.

My intention prior to undertaking the interviews was to endeavour to minimise the extent to which my personal way of seeing would influence the interview process, however this proved extremely difficult in the interviews. The leap of trust characterising negotiations with the group was equally present in interviews with the children and teenagers. In asking a child or young person to share their feelings with a stranger, a relationship is needed which supports the participant to trust the researcher. The essential vulnerability and fragility of this interpersonal dynamic was present in all interviews and, as a consequence, I chose to represent myself as openly and congruently as possible within the constraints of ethical and academic guidelines. Despite efforts to minimise disclosure of my research lens, in many of the interviews there is a discernible pattern which tracks a process of relationship building, followed by participant self-disclosure, which is then acknowledged and affirmed by researcher self-disclosure. This dialogic process led to some pivotal moments in the interviews.

Reflections on the interviews

Two siblings who are members of the case study group were, by coincidence, in Shetland attending Fiddle Frenzy. At the suggestion of their mother, both interviews were held during this week as the family would not be at home in central Scotland at the time of my visit. I had some concerns about undertaking the interviews at this time. I felt that the slight familiarity and small amount of background knowledge collected through casual interaction with both the children and their mother might differentiate these interviews from the ones I expected to do in the village. I also felt concerned that my researcher stance and focus might be in some way compromised by the fact that I was in the middle of an intense week of personal music-making and learning. Of additional concern, I was in the same class as one sibling and we had sat together for a day before I became aware that she was a member of the case study group. Both interviews were held at the Shetland Museum - one interview was held in the class venue and the other was held on a bench outside. The first interview is interrupted by the return of the class tutor and the second is affected by noise and an interruption by the other sibling.

Five interviews were undertaken during the case study group's Friday night session in the village hall. In order to comply with child protection requirements, the interviews were held in an adjoining room. As a result, the session in the room next door is highly audible in the recordings. Interview participants were coordinated by a committee member and monitored as required by a group committee member or parent.

Four interviews were undertaken in family homes with parental consent. In the case of two siblings, the interviews were undertaken separately, however the other sibling and/or mother (and dog!) were variably present. These were the only interviews in which the parent was in attendance. While I experienced some concern about this differentiation with the other interviews, I felt that the most important imperative was to ensure that

the children and parent were comfortable with the arrangement, and decided to be guided by their actions. I explained to the children that I would interview them one at a time, however did not ask or encourage the other to leave the room. Nor did I discuss arrangements with their mother, instead taking her lead. As a result, these two interviews might almost be considered as a single interview. The siblings shared a couch through much of both interviews, and their mother sat in the room for periods of time. There is some interchange between all three individuals, as the children clarify details with their mother and interject in each other's interviews.

The second interview with the younger sibling contains a pivotal moment in which the mother became a bit more vocal and there are some exchanges between three of us. This unplanned occurrence has proved essential in my acceptance of the uncontrollable variables differentiating all the interviews, and the process of determining an approach to analysing the interview data. In listening to and transcribing the interviews with this family, I recognise my personal struggle to achieve objectivity, but also realise that my subjectivity is one of the multiple perspectives which, rather than suppressing, must be acknowledged and managed in a congruent and cohesive manner. The interaction in which one of the siblings affirms that he loves his instrument, which is followed by my saying I love my cello and his mother saying she loves her fiddle represents a catalyst moment. Without my love for my cello and this music, I would not have been in this privileged position of being welcomed into the group with such trust and generosity.

Determining an approach to data analysis

The initial stage of analysis involved my preparation of verbatim transcripts of the interviews. The ethnographic borrowings within my approach to data collection lead to the decision to personally

prepare the transcriptions. This enabled me to listen to the words of each interviewee in the context of the interview and examine the interactions between the participant and myself. While an examination of academic theses reveals that editing of transcripts to encourage improved flow of reading is accepted practice, I decided to work with unedited transcripts as I felt that the reading and analysis of the interviews might be compromised.

Given the relatively small amount of data generated from the interviews, and the absence of a requirement to undertake any variable analysis, I undertook a manual indexing of the data using Microsoft Excel. This process commenced with the trial coding of three interviews to establish a set of common principles and measures organised into 'slices or bags of indexed data' (Mason, 2002, p. 150). The primary purpose of this stage was to get an overview of the data, to devise a means to identify, locate and retrieve topics or themes, and to check that the analysis system addressed the research question. The process resulted in the development of a series of codes for the purpose of indexing the data (Froehlich & Frierson-Campbell, 2013).

It soon became clear that the system would serve the purpose of identifying, locating and basic data retrieval, however the potential for the retrieval of data in a format suited to comparison was unresolved. Given my professional experience working with Excel for the purpose of managing records and scheduling, I recognised that using this system for anything more than case-study analysis would prove cumbersome and unreliable, particularly retrieval mechanisms required for cross-sectional comparison. I had also become aware that Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Systems (CAQDAS) were becoming a standard in much qualitative research, so decided to undertake a trial of NVivo. Having utilised a number of database programs professionally, I was keen to explore NVivo's capabilities and quickly found myself sufficiently comfortable with the program to efficiently code a trial of six interviews, and explore the program's analysis and reporting

features. The program permits sophisticated micro indexing, retrieval and analysis (both within- and cross-case), however I observed that the initial closeness and intuitive understanding I had developed through doing the interviews, listening to the audio recordings and manually transcribing the recordings was being lost in the process. Furthermore, I felt that my indexing of the data was becoming perfunctory and mechanical, I was losing sight of the research question and my 'overuse' of the program capabilities risked compromising the quality of my analysis of the individual interviews.

At this point, I returned to the *leap of trust*. As a privileged researcher, I hold in trust audio recordings of interviews with eleven young Scottish fiddlers. This precious data has been collected through a remarkable reciprocal leap of trust. A *reciprocal* leap of trust because, in the case study group's gesture of trust in me, I, as researcher, have made a leap of trust in them. This manifests most clearly in my instincts regarding transcription, editing, indexing and analysis of the interviews. All my decisions regarding the handling of these interviews reflect the strong desire to preserve the integrity and authenticity of the voices of these young participants and recognises human subjectivity and individuality. Reimer (1989) proposes that the purpose of art is the education of feeling, and so too the purpose of this study is feeling. My early efforts to index the data served to remove the subjectivity and individuality from the words of the young participants and contravened the essential nature of my agreement with both the participants and the case study group. In saying the words 'I'm only interested in what you think. There are no right or wrong answers.' in the assent protocol, and inviting participants to share their individual feelings, I said to each child and young person 'You are unique and it is your very uniqueness which interests me.'

In every way, this research project demands an alternative approach. In focusing on 'playing' rather than 'learning', in situating the research within the world of traditional music in an informal,

community-based fiddle group, and in selecting this particular case study group, I have placed the study assertively outside the bounds of formal learning with its standardised testing and formalised curricula. At this point, the writings of Jennifer Mason (2002) about the benefits and risks of CAQDAS resonated strongly with my experience and lead me to realise that my approach would have to be more organic, creative, intuitive and respectful of the need to maintain the integrity of each individual interview participant's story.

On reflection, I recognise that my instinctive research approach is a dynamic interactive one in which I both lead and am led, in a manner perhaps similar to Jonathan A. Smith's notion of phenomenology as 'peering and appearing' (2011, p. 10) with the mutual illumination that occurs in the process. As a result, I have borrowed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology for data analysis. IPA has permitted me to immerse myself in the qualitative data as individual 'cases' and as if 'diving for pearls', extract 'gems' (p. 6). IPA permits the exploration of data creatively and intuitively. It offers the best way to narrate the story of this research and the stories of the individuals involved, and to allow each individual participant to tell their own story as the author of his or her own world.

Discussion

The complexities of qualitative data analysis extend far beyond the limitations of this brief article. Our responsibilities as qualitative researchers cannot be undervalued, particularly when we are working with vulnerable and precious participants such as children. Evolving approaches and computer technologies support and assist us in all aspects of our work, and programs are becoming increasingly seductive in their capabilities and ease of use. In my professional life I have experienced the transformative value of new technologies and systems, however this is not always the case. Sometimes a simple word document and highlight

tool (or even paper and pen) has a place in our researcher toolbox.

The decisions I have taken regarding my approach to qualitative data analysis reflect the *leap of trust* I am weaving throughout this study, and echo my philosophical stance asserting the need to celebrate *becoming and being human*, today as much as ever. When I think of music, I think of a unique and individual *felt* experience starting with a leap of trust in self. There is risk in putting bow to string, in creating sound where there is silence. Yet, there is also the sense of an instrument against the body, the sound of a tune in the head, the experience of fluid communication between instinct and fingers, all of which combine to create this wonderful sound or language we call music. Most importantly, in my experience, there is the deep and moving connection that occurs between humans when playing music together. This study is about *feelings* as a means to understand motivation to play music, both alone and with others. It seeks to understand or make sense of the subjective experience of individuals within a particular social group and cultural context, and therefore the theoretical approach to the use and representation of the data collected must protect what is essentially and unquestionably subjective. And as we all know, this relies on what is *human*, the researcher and those we have the privilege to research.

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