

More than an academic jaunt: Reflections on a qualitative research workshop

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Abstract

This article entails reflections of four young scholars on attending an international workshop on qualitative research. It reports on their experiences of the workshop – from the instant when they had to decide which sessions to attend to the very last day when they started the journey home – reporting on 'lessons' for the qualitative researcher. The article reports on some of the sessions attended by the young researchers, highlighting the main ideas shared by the presenters, and elaborating on the value of the sessions to young qualitative researchers. Sessions on themes such as coding, knowledge organisation, the process of data management, essential and common features of standards in qualitative research and writing your dissertation provided new insights and extended these PhD students' horizons. They gained far more from the workshop than expected – not merely increasing their understanding of qualitative research, but also by making friends worldwide and learning from colleagues around the world.

None of us had ever heard of a place called Edmonton until the day we found a pamphlet on our desks informing us of a workshop on qualitative research to be held in Edmonton, Canada.¹ Of course we all screwed up our faces at a map of the world trying to find the place – it was somewhere in the middle and to the south of Canada. What this meant to us living in South Africa was that getting there would be a really long journey. A quick visit to the workshop website revealed that the world's largest shopping centre was in Edmonton. Much good that would do us, for whom conversion from rands to Canadian dollars was a painful process.

We were four PhD students from the University of Pretoria. Ronél, Newton and I were lecturers in the Faculty of Education and Anusha had recently taken up a senior post in a government department. None of us had had any notable experience of qualitative research. Anusha, Newton and I were involved in a PhD programme that focused on education policy development and implementation and encouraged a qualitative approach to the study. Ronél was in the Department of Educational Psychology and had decided to use a qualitative approach to her study. The only common experience that we had was that we had been teachers. Beyond that our worldviews and current contexts differed considerably.

Long before we could set out major decisions had to be made. And these had nothing to do with qualitative research – or so we thought. Families had to be taken care of and plans had to be put in place. Anusha, at the last minute decided to take her family along and give them the opportunity of a holiday while she slogged away. Life savings were called on to pay for all this. Newton decided that he and his wife really needed time alone after the life changing experience of a new baby. So extended family support was called in to take care of the baby. I had to arrange for my sister to take my place while I was away. To do this she had to change the national roster of the Labour Court so that she could be placed in a court near my home while I was away. I confess that I was relieved to be away from my family. For Ronél, who did not have children to think about, leaving meant packing a bag. No matter what personal concerns we all had, we all had an immense sense of excitement.

The first 'qualitative research' decision we all had to make was to choose which sessions we wanted to attend. A detailed programme had been emailed to us and we had to choose in advance which sessions we would be attending so that rooms could be allocated appropriately and popular sessions could be repeated if necessary. Herein was the first lesson for the qualitative researcher – plan and organise the data. We found that we all had to make our own choices depending on what we felt we needed most. And we made our own plans to get there. There was no way we could all board the same plane and arrive together ready to take on qualitative research. Looking back we can see another lesson for qualitative research here – everyone has to find their own way of getting there. The same time frames, the same methods and means would not suit us all.

The four of us met up at the state-of-the-art Telus Professional Development Centre at the University of Alberta. The strong smell of the 'Tim Hortens' coffee which is very popular in Edmonton, drew us all to the breakfast table where we gorged ourselves on monster-sized muffins and bagels – both famous Canadian symbols. After quick hellos and repeated 'So which one are you attending now?' we set off for the first session. Surprisingly, Anusha, Newton and I found ourselves together at the first session on narrative analysis. It was a walk down memory lane – the session was reminiscent of tedious literature lessons of days long gone by. We were all worried when we

¹ The second *Thinking Qualitatively* workshop series: an introduction to qualitative inquiry, 6-10 August 2002. International Institute for Qualitative Methodology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

gathered at the Tim Hortens spot three hours later. This was not going to be useful and most worrying of all was that everybody else at the workshop worked in the health sector! Was qualitative research the preserve of health workers? And another thing – apart from the four of us, everybody else had an accent. It was really hard understanding what they said. Really, should people with accents present workshops? Another concern was that the majority of the participants came from 'first world' countries. Weren't they very smart there? Could we as South Africans understand what was going on? Did we know anything at all? We need not have worried though. Things turned out very well as the days progressed.

The four of us attended many of the data management, coding and categorisation, and qualitative analysis sessions with the sole purpose of unearthing ideas on how to begin analysing our data. We got more than we bargained for! The lessons learnt were many.

Tami Bereska shared her experiences on coding that she had gained while completing her PhD dissertation. It is common for students to find themselves 'drowning in data' that make no sense – the awfully deep hole before the 'aha' moment where or the results of the study come into focus. Being overwhelmed with data can be immobilising. She explained that words, sentences, paragraphs and even pages could be coded depending on what the researcher felt comfortable with. She pointed to three separate readings for the coding process. The first reading involves open coding where one searches for a basic structure, the next reading is for axial coding where one refines codes/themes and the final reading is for selective coding where one begins to show the network of themes. Some qualitative researchers suggest that coding should involve two readings, that is, an initial reading to find a basic set of themes and refine them, and a second reading that should be more focused to find the interconnections.

A different view is that that coding could be done in a single reading – there are no distinct phases or steps but it involves a shift from the abstract to the concrete. There is a need for back and forth oscillations. It was somewhat disconcerting to hear that there was no clearly **good** method that we could all happily choose. After all, somewhere in the back of our minds lurked the idea that a good recipe was all you needed to get the job done. As it turned out, it was fortunate that this was not the case. In our lengthy discussions among ourselves and with researchers from around the world, it became abundantly clear that no recipe would suit us all. (Of course Tim Hortens occupied centre spot in all these discussions!) We had to make 'coding decisions' that would suit each of us as people and that would also be appropriate to the studies in which we were engaged.

Lisa Given, in her session, proposed the *Knowledge Organisation Model* for the purpose of organising data for effective analysis. The concepts of knowledge organisation relating to relevance, precision, recall, coextensiveness, exhaustivity, specificity and consistency are key constructs of the model. The applicability of the model was illustrated with examples from her own research. This exploration demonstrated the model's resilience in organising numeric data, coding transcripts and marking up textual statements.

Lynn Meadows, in her presentation on *The Process of Data Management*, introduced the technique known as immersion and crystallisation – a technique used for becoming familiar with data. Simply stated, immersion and crystallisation constitute a systematic technique for reading and re-reading data. Usually the first pass is for impressions, the second reading for themes, the third reading is to look for other important data and a fourth reading is for alternative understandings. Such an approach is suggested for the case in which the researcher has prior experience in qualitative research. If this is not the case, then she suggests that the researcher should work with someone who does.

In all of these presentations the importance of a coding manual/scheme was stressed and the rules for good codes were considered. The use of computers for data management was also explored. Of relevance in these discussions was the fact that computers are only tools " they *cannot* do the conceptual work. Qualitative research means that one has to think and generate ideas. Neither the data nor the computer will do this.

In their fascinating presentation on *Essential and common features of standards in qualitative research*, Judy Spiers (whom we all loved and thought we should bring back to the University of Pretoria to talk about qualitative research), and Maria Mayan introduced us to the qualitative research processes and the standards that have been identified by various researchers as essential for evaluating individual studies. According to them, the qualitative researcher has to think inductively, theoretically and actively in putting together the puzzle. The five main principles of inductive thinking occur sequentially. *Description* is at the most basic level " it goes beyond summarising and the researcher has to determine what is important. When *comprehending* you evaluate from different vantage points, seeing what is important and what is not. One responds from one's own beliefs and starts to identify patterns. This process cannot be forced " it takes time. One moves from the particular to the more general when one *abstracts*. Here the trick is to abstract in small steps by coding and creating categories, then to tag and label the ideas. When abstracting one removes data from the particular to a more generalised mode of description. Finally, *synthesising* refers to the merging of ideas, models and conceptual frameworks in an attempt to create and explain the composite pattern of ideas in the literature. When *theorising* one has to look at where the data connects with the literature. *Recontextualising* means balancing the macro-micro struggle " making the general conceptual framework relevant to one's own study.

The standards proposed by Burns (1991), Ambert and Adler (1995), Elder and Miller (1995), Devers (1999) and Thorne (1997) were scrutinised with the purpose of establishing an 'acceptable' set of standards for qualitative research. As a group exercise, the participants in this session argued for what each group considered an acceptable standard. This was indeed an invigorating exercise. Again, this was a live demonstration of what qualitative research required of you – to think about the data and ways of handling the data.

A few presentations focused on writing the dissertation. The two that were particularly relevant and interesting were by Janice Morse and Judy Spiers. Janice Morse provided a very practical approach to writing a dissertation. She believes that one should begin by making a detailed outline of the results chapter. Next put in quotations (parts of interviews) – correct the quotations for grammar and delete parts that are irrelevant. Then the researcher should prepare figures and photographs that form part of the report. The researcher should write the results chapter and focus on writing for at least four hours a day. On less productive days the researcher might write up the references. Once the results have been completed, do the methods and literature review to match the results – new literature may have been introduced. One may have to leave out or add new sections. Throughout this time one should be thinking about the discussion section – what's new about the study, what's significant and what is the argument one will present in this study. The introduction should be written last of all. While the editor is checking the first draft, the bibliography can be completed.

Her suggestion was that one should begin preparing for one's defence immediately. Furthermore, one should think about turning one dissertation into a book or writing one or more articles on the work.

The workshop by Judy Spiers on *Writing your dissertation* was brilliant. In a simple, yet effective presentation she highlighted the setbacks faced by students when writing their dissertations and provided practical step-by-step approaches to completing the writing of a dissertation. She emphasised the need for keeping a diary all the time as the brilliant thoughts that emerge cannot be accurately captured at a later stage if you forget them. She said that writing ideas was more important than writing paragraphs. Also, start with things about which you are passionate. She advised that one should complete Chapter 1, the literature review and the methodology last and rather spend more energy on the summary chapter and data analysis. It is also important to remember that there is no right way! She suggested that all drafts be dated and kept, especially if one has different supervisors. It is also useful to print drafts on paper in different colours (provided you keep a record of the colours). Emotional highs and lows are to be expected during this time but one needs to remember that, 'before eloquence, there are rough drafts'.

A very powerful story was told by one of the conference attendees. She said:

In all of us we have the brainstormer (ideas person), the editor and the external reviewer. When you write you have to recognise who will be sitting with you – it may be the ideas person with you but the editor may come in unannounced and dominate. You have the power to disregard the editor, i.e. create a new file on the computer for the editor. Focus on the ideas person – do not become (prematurely) hamstrung by editing. Call on your external reviewer toward the end.

Writer's block is a nightmare for all PhD students. The advice given was to demystify the dissertation process by realising that this is not a linear process but rather a cyclical one in which one immerses oneself in cycles of deliberation. In so doing, one begins by writing parts with which one is most comfortable. Use concept maps to outline ideas and pretend not to be writing but just putting down thoughts (i.e. write ideas not sentences). The procrastination monster can be beaten by figuring out the reason for procrastinating in order to develop strategies for putting a stop to it. It is useful to remember too that one cannot work in too short a time period. Working on a draft takes the pressure off – drafts are not perfect but *must* be shared. Communicate feelings experienced whilst writing. Always consider how much has been done, not how much there is to do – and congratulate yourself on work accomplished.

The workshop did not simply give ideas on how to *do* qualitative research. It helped us to understand what qualitative research is about. From the first very day that the pamphlet arrived on our desks we began to *experience* qualitative research. Getting there, planning, making choices, thinking and embarking on a long, yet exciting journey, were all part of the qualitative research paradigm. One cannot separate one's dissertation from the context of one's life and as life regularly throws a curve ball, so does the research process.

Dissertation work is a lonely occupation – one is on one's own, writing something longer than one has ever written, and doing it without a net. This independence can make the process seem very intimidating. One may need to meet with a support group (fellow PhD colleagues) once in a while. This could help one feel rejuvenated and enthusiastic to continue. Finally, there has to be a *logical endpoint* to the work. There is no perfect thesis.

When we got back home, again taking our separate ways, we realised that the value of the workshop was not about what it *offered*, but what we could *take*. Getting the most out of the workshop depended on us as individuals. We had to *listen* for guidance we needed, *ask* for what we wanted to know and *contribute* our own experiences, fears and ideas. The fact the most

of the others were health workers did not seem to matter in the end. The research issues and dilemmas could be shared and we were able to learn from them. Even the 'bad' ideas were good because they helped us know what we did not want. And we found that being South Africans did not mean we knew less – we had similar doubts, fears, joys and experiences in our research process. All the others thought that *we* were the ones with the strange accents!

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