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Walk with Me: A Qualitative Research Journey

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Abstract

While there have been numerous textbooks written on qualitative research, providing experiential opportunities can assist students to 'become' qualitative researchers rather than just 'doing' qualitative research. Becoming a qualitative researcher can be a transformative process where the student is invited to "walk with" the instructor while learning. Using invitational theory as a framework, the qualitative journey of an instructor and a Master's nursing student are explored. Strategies utilized are presented.

Introduction

Qualitative research can be described as being both an art and a science. Teaching these two components can be challenging for educators. On one hand the "mastery of facts, philosophies and procedures are important [and necessary aspects of] qualitative inquiry" (McAllister & Rowe, 2003, p. 302). On the other hand educators are called upon to stimulate "analytic skills [which] require a degree of playfulness, [passion], engagement, and creativity" (p. 297).

A growing number of manuscripts are being written on the subject of qualitative research (Flick, 2018; Roth & von Unger, 2018; Saldana, 2018; Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017; Thurairajah, 2019; Williams & Moser, 2019).

These resources are chiefly prescriptive and represent the ‘doing’ of qualitative research. Text-based materials can become cold, lifeless, and flat if not infused with experiences which breathe life into course work. Providing the experiential aspects of qualitative research assists students in a potentially transformative process where they learn to ‘be’ qualitative researchers rather than to merely ‘do’ qualitative research.

McAllister and Rowe (2003) suggest that teaching qualitative research is an endeavour that requires educating students in both “doing” and “being” (p. 296). It is proposed that a holistic learning experience consists of a melding of both ‘doing’ and ‘being.’ This experience can be mediated by educators who invite students to walk with educators in joint student-educator journeys to become qualitative researchers. Metaphorically this could represent the educator and student walking along a mountain trail—side by side. The student walks, not ahead of the educator nor behind the educator, but rather alongside the educator. In this way concepts, passion, and a sense of wonder can be taught and modeled which may sustain students as qualitative researchers long past the confines of the course itself. The purpose of this paper is to describe strategies to infuse both ‘being’ and ‘doing’ into qualitative research courses. Strategies utilized in two research courses at a large, online university are presented. Discussion of the merits of these strategies is illustrated through two perspectives: the educator who developed and taught the course and a graduate student who took the course taught by the same educator. Invitational theory provides a framework for the discussion. Implications which arise from the discussion are outlined.

Background

Invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 2016) suggests that learning occurs in response to human interaction and is best achieved in the presence of trust, optimism, respect, and intentionality. Further, the presence of all four elements results in learning environments which invite, nurture and support learners (Predmore, Kushner, & Anderson, 2017). Welch and Smith (2014) suggested that invitational education needs to “develop a bridging point between the various educational approaches, such as cognitive, social, and behavioural” (p. 9). The educator purposefully ‘invites’ students (Matyo-Cepero, Varvisotis, & Lilienthal, 2017; Moore & Black, 2018; Usher & Pajares, 2006) and in essence says, “Walk with me.” The result is a milieu that is safe, caring, enhances wellbeing, increases confidence, and ultimately allows students to “see themselves as able, valuable, and responsible” researchers (Rubin & Babbie, 2016; Usher & Pajares, 2006, p. 13). This type of learning milieu allows students a sense of freedom in not only expressing opinions, and ideas as unique individuals, but also allows experimentation with conceptions and resources in new ways by both educator and

student (Matyo-Cepero, et al, 2017). Through this students learn “playfulness, passionate engagement and creativity” (McAllister & Rowe, 2003, p. 297) as they explore, practice, exercise, and express their “thoughts, concerns, confusions, revelations, and insights” (p. 301).

Beginnings: Two Perspectives

The Educator’s Perspective

Some years ago, I was tasked with developing an online graduate course in qualitative health research. Traditionally, graduate courses in qualitative research provide instruction about design and methodology. As a teacher, I wanted to move beyond the content and somehow instill a passion for qualitative research in my graduate students. As Yeats (n.d.) said to educate in such a way that “it is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire” It is one thing to be able to cite the tenets of qualitative research. It is quite another to be engaged with the phenomenon of study in a way that incites passion and the development of skills of interpretation and meaning making. It is one thing to read about a particular methodology, data collection strategy or analytical approach, it is quite another to carry it out. A goal for the course was to have students learn the theory and skills but also to come out of the course feeling a passion for qualitative research in a much deeper and more meaningful way. Another goal for the course was to facilitate the students to “think qualitatively” (Richards & Morse, 2013, p. 15) and to really understand what it means to “think qualitatively” and to “be” qualitative researchers (Glesne, 2016).

In a search of the literature on teaching qualitative research, we found an inspiring article that speaks to teaching and learning about qualitative research and bringing concepts to life (McAllister & Rowe, 2003). McAllister and Rowe wrote about the importance of inspiring and engaging students to “learn not only the content and research skills required to conduct good qualitative research but also the art of qualitative research” (p. 296). In their article, they called attention to the skills of doing and being through a discussion of educational strategies. They noted that

being a qualitative researcher involves attributes such as compassion, passion, integrity, tolerance of ambiguity, willingness to play with ideas, knowledge and inquiry, commitment to viewing the social world from the viewpoints of the people being studied, valuing of detail and willingness to inject something of themselves into the research process and its outcomes. (pp. 296-297)

Inspired by strategies identified by McAllister & Rowe, drawing on my own love of photography, experiences, and beginning with the metaphor of walking a path, the Advanced Qualitative Methods for Health Research graduate course was born and

subsequently redesigned for a university wide offering (Moore, 2019). Students were invited to “walk with me,” their professor, as we explored the landscapes of qualitative research together. Haigh describes this approach as a ‘learning invitation’, a “courteous request to engage with education” (p. 306).

The Student’s Perspective

Taking my single undergraduate research course proved difficult. The concepts were difficult to grasp and I finished the course feeling I was a master of nothing. As I went on to engage in graduate studies there were significantly more required research courses. I took the first of three graduate courses and could describe my experience as learning a bit of everything and yet coming away with nothing substantial. I still failed to grasp the concepts of research in any meaningful way. When I enrolled in the second research class, composed of two distinct sections of quantitative and qualitative research, I struggled through the quantitative research portion and wondered how I would fare in the qualitative section of the course. I simply felt lost. I still wasn’t grasping the concepts to any great extent and again experienced feeling that while I had an elemental knowledge of research, I was master of none of it. It had become a paradoxical situation to which I had no solution.

Meno’s paradox, which is encapsulated as the Socratic problem (Merleau-Ponty, 2005), was certainly forefront as I tenuously began the qualitative section of the course. Upon reviewing the assignments for this last half of the course, I wondered how I would accomplish them. Even qualitative terminology was an enigma. I, as Meno, struggled with unanswered questions: “

How will [I] set about looking for that thing, the nature of which is totally unknown to [me]? Which, among the things [I] do not know, is the one which [I] propose to look for? And if by chance [I] should stumble upon it, how will [I] know that it is indeed that thing, since [I am] in ignorance of it?” (p. 431).

It wasn’t until I started my last research class, Advanced Qualitative Methods for Health Research, that I was finally able to grasp the concepts. As Morse (1994) so aptly put, “the only way to learn to do ‘good’ work [was] to find a mentor who [would] teach [me] to *think qualitatively* (p. 4, italics in original text). Both ‘doing’ and ‘being’ were infused within the course parameters and the course came alive for me. From the very first unit of the course I felt as I had been invited to walk with my professor in a journey that can be described in no other way than simply magical. In the four months that we explored the qualitative terrain together I came to sincerely appreciate the gift of her presence and expertise as we thought and approached the social world together (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

While in an online classroom of 17 students, I felt as if I was personally being mentored. Learning became a creative enterprise and an expression of freedom to explore the various facets of qualitative research. The paths that we travelled together taught me to think in a new way—qualitatively. I began to interpret the world around me differently as I viewed learning through a qualitative lens. It was as if I had put on glasses which allowed the fuzziness of qualitative research to come into focus and I could ‘see’ for the very first time.

I completed the course energized, enthusiastic, and significantly more confident as I went on to prepare for my thesis. While I still wasn’t a master of qualitative research, I felt that I could ‘do’ qualitative research and ‘be’ a qualitative researcher. As a result of the creative teaching strategies of my professor, a passion for qualitative research was born that would be nurtured and sustained throughout and beyond my thesis work.

Teaching Strategies

Six strategies were utilized in developing and teaching qualitative research (Janzen, Perry, & Edwards, 2019; Kanzki-Veloso, Orellana, & Reeves, 2018; Scharp & Sanders, 2019). These strategies were incorporated throughout the online study guide that students used to work through their course (an online paced course running throughout a 15 week semester): (1) invitations, (2) use of metaphor and photography, (3) Socratic questioning and online dialogue, (4) stories, (5) multimedia and (6) creative assignments designed to stimulate thinking and develop skills

Invitations

An important aspect of teaching from my point of view as an educator is to create an environment that facilitates learning and that encourages a climate of trust and respect in which students feel comfortable entering the discussion, raising questions, and challenging viewpoints. In the first week of the course and prior to beginning the actual work of the course, I send a “letter” to my students with a photo of me, introducing myself, telling them a little about who I am, what they can expect from me as their teacher, my goals for them in the course. I also post a short YouTube video called a “Me to You” video (Melrose, Park & Perry, 2013) that I have created in my home office designed specifically for the class as a way of encouraging the students to get to know me and see me in my own working environment, a way to seem more real to the students. I send a piece written by Robin Sharma called “Enjoy the Path not Just the Reward” which invites them to think about not just the end goal of the course but about the joys along the way.

The first invitation is to walk with me throughout the next fifteen weeks and to enjoy and savour not just the reward that comes at the end of finishing a course, but the learning and growth that occurs in working towards their goal. As Sharma (1999) says

the real value of setting and achieving goals lies not in the rewards you receive but in the person you become as a result of reaching your goals. This simple distinction has helped me to enjoy the path of life while, at the same time, staying focused on meeting my personal and professional objectives. (p. 82)

I then invite the students to introduce themselves, share a photo, blog or video if they choose and to share something they would like the class to know about them. This simple strategy serves to “set the stage” for the kind of classroom I want to create and it gets the students involved in participating in a discussion forum within the first couple of days of the course. It also allows me as the course professor to show that I value students as individuals and it begins to create an online community of learners.

Use of Metaphor and Photography

Each course study guide is designed with a group of modules, along with specific learning outcomes that guide the student throughout the semester. Each module begins with a photograph and metaphor to introduce and frame the unit’s study topic. For example, the metaphor of a tapestry and a photograph of an intricate quilt is used to introduce the topic of “Issues of Design in Qualitative Research” noting that research, like a quilt, “creates something new by rearranging the pieces” (Salter Goodwin, 2001). In another course unit, a photograph of a difficult mountain path is used to illustrate the process of writing in qualitative research with the accompanying quote, “I learn by going where I have to go.” (Theodore Roethke cited in Cameron, 2002).

Socratic Questioning and Online Dialogue

Each week, the course study guide introduces the unit, a selection of readings, videos and learning activities, while the professor provides a contextual summary and invitation to the students to join an online dialogue by posing some questions designed to clarify concepts, probe assumptions, question and challenge viewpoints and perspectives, and at times to question the questions themselves. Examples of these kinds of questions are:

Table 1: Questions to Frame Socratic Dialogue

1	How are assumptions, paradigms, and interpretive and/or theoretical frameworks used in designing and conducting qualitative research?
2	What is the role of qualitative research in an era of evidence-based practice?
3	What is the role and relevance of “reflective writing” in the research process? What is its relationship to reflexivity?
4	Consider some of the different ways to display or represent data. Are there some that resonate with you more than others? What impacts how you might represent the data in one of your own projects?
5	. Identify contemporary dialogues and debates on quality in qualitative research and reflect on how these contribute to the credibility of research.
6	What is the role and relevance of “reflective writing” in the research process? What is its relationship to reflexivity?

The online discussion forum for each unit is focused on dialogue and extending the discussion rather than just answering questions while the professor serves to monitor the discussion and to participate (judiciously) in the discussion or add questions to challenge/extend the discussion.

Stories

As course professor, I share examples from my own program of research that continues to influence how I teach and how I am in the classroom. Stories from my own challenges and successes model for the students, the life of a researcher who not only ‘talks the talk’ but ‘walks the walk.’ For example, leaving an interview with a research participant who shared a powerful experience of how she struggled to find hope following the death of her son by suicide, impacted me profoundly as it generated the memories of losing a dear friend to suicide just one year prior. Sharing stories with students from my own research practice opens up opportunities to talk about the importance of reflexivity in the research process. These experiences can serve to breathe life into concepts that the students are studying.

Multimedia

The use of multimedia strategies provides opportunities to tap into the creative processes and “infuse life” into a course. In adapting an idea from McAllister & Rowe (2003), I created a multimedia show using images of nature that I have photographed in countries around the world. This was set to relaxing music and the students are invited to watch the show and respond to questions:

Table 2: Questions for Reflection on Video

1	What is being conveyed in the images?
2	What do you think the author is trying to depict?
3	What did you see? What did you hear?
4	What meaning do you take from this video?
5	How do you think your own values and beliefs influenced your understanding of what you saw?
6	As you read your classmates responses to these questions, what are you noticing?
7	In what way do these questions and their answers help you understand the process of qualitative research?

It is easy to see how these questions can easily provide “fodder” for the dialogue mill that allows the professor to guide the discussion around the major philosophical underpinnings and tenets of qualitative research.

Creative Assignments

Assignments are designed to facilitate students developing skills in generating and analyzing data, and “writing the story” (Glesne, 2016) from those data. Assignment guidelines allow for creativity in how students approach their topics and they offer opportunities to individualize course material to the students’ areas of practice.

For example, in the first assignment, students are asked to scan the popular press (for three to four weeks) and collect articles that reflect the health care of Canadians. Students create a research question that provides a focus for their search. This assignment simulates the ‘working experience’ of qualitative researchers, as they collect raw data. Students create reflexive and methodological journals to document their activities and decisions along the way. Students code and analyze the data, and explore how their data address the research question. They complete their assignment by “writing the story”. As students ‘write the story’, what becomes evident is the variety of perspectives and interpretations about the same topic based on how students conceptualize and respond to the task. The course professor uses this variety of approaches that students take, to illustrate dimensions of qualitative research, such as: contextual nature of qualitative research, how knowledge is constructed, multiple perspectives, and how personal experience influences the lens through which the researcher views the world and makes sense of their data.

Discussion

The Educator's Perspective: Evaluating Strategies

As an educator, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the feedback from students when thinking about my hopes for the qualitative research courses. Examples of these learnings are illustrated best in the students own words:

I think that my biggest learning moment came progressively, but then all of a sudden, I realized that I have so much to learn not only about my topic of interest or my proposed methodology, but also about myself as a person, a mother and a partner, a counsellor, and a novice researcher.

This is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life, but in a new way.

The integration of theory and practical application has made this a tremendous experience for me. Thank you for providing an environment where we can be open and honest. Professors are also key to my success in a course. Their participation and guidance helps to create a group or class dynamic which fosters interaction and participation.

Thank you for taking the time to not only truly teach us (yes...I am hitting on a theme here!) but also in sharing part of your story with us. The slide show exercise really gave me a time for reflection, and brought up some emotions and thoughts about myself. Truth is, I tend to bury myself in work to deal with hard things, and "tuck away" the emotions that are associated as I often feel I do not have the time. I should know better...working in mental health, I know the flood gates will eventually open up.

I have often said that my greatest teachers are my students. It is them who inspire me to strive to be a better teacher and to find ways that will help them seek out and find answers to their questions.

In health care practice, practitioners participate with people through periods in their lives when they are joyful such as at the birth of a baby, but also at times when they may be most vulnerable, such as during times of severe mental or physical illness and death. The world of qualitative research offers a myriad of opportunities to discover and understand the breadth and depths of such experiences through narrative, poetic, photographic, performative, hermeneutic and phenomenological forms of inquiry. Butler-Kisber (2010) discusses the "need for researchers to have access to transparent accounts of inquiry processes, on the one hand, to show rather than just tell and as a result to produce more trustworthy and credible accounts of thematic, narrative and arts-informed processes" (p. 149). As students participate in

these processes, they have opportunities to add to the evolving nature of qualitative inquiry. Glesne (2016) says that

qualitative inquiry is a search that leads into others' lives, your discipline, your practice and yourself. You cannot be sure of where you will end up, but you invariably get caught up in the search and make steps forward.... True research does not end. Instead, it points the way for yet another search. (p. 285)

In walking the path with students through learning qualitative research, the teacher and students together come to understand that qualitative research can come full circle in knowing a phenomenon and that in coming full circle, understanding increases, broadens and invites a continuing search for yet deeper knowing and understanding. Telling the story is always more complicated than just reporting the facts as you try to represent the experience of the research participants. As T.S. Eliot (1962) cited in Patton (2002) once said "we shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time" (p. 144).

The Student's Perspective: Evaluating Strategies from an Invitational Framework

As a graduate student, some of the most meaningful learning was encapsulated in (1) the metaphors and photographs, (2) the multimedia slide show and (3) creative assignments. The metaphors and photographs which were positioned at the onset of each unit gave a continual invitation to participate as well as engage with the course materials, the professor and other students. In this way, invitations were both student-generated and teacher-generated which is a hallmark of the invitational classroom (Moore & Black, 2018).

The multimedia slide show and the accompanying reflective questions and answers which were shared in the online forum created a positive classroom culture. Again, the invitation to participate was purposeful and allowed for both private and public feedback (Moore & Black 2018). A sense of community was developed between professor and students—individually and collectively which was pivotal in maintaining an invitational classroom (Melrose, Park & Perry, 2013). As a result, wellbeing and confidence in the growing ability to be qualitative researchers was enhanced (Moore & Black, 2018).

The creative assignments were especially appreciated. An invitational milieu is characterized as being safe, and free from judgement and ridicule (Melrose et al., 2013). Engaging in the 'Heath of Canadians' assignment demonstrated willingness on the part of my professor to encourage my creativity and also 'see' what other

students might not 'see.' I learned both by 'doing' and in a developing sense, by 'being' or having the opportunity to 'become' a qualitative researcher. For a time I became immersed in data collection, analysis and finally conveying the results of my research in a short paper.

This strategy was free from prescription and encouraged experimentation with both the concepts of coding and interpreting the data (Luk-Fong, 2018). For me, this was particularly meaningful when I interpreted the data totally different than any of my classmates. I had developed an overarching theme and five subthemes from the data that I had collected from the media. I was deeply struck that the data would tell a 'story' and the themes represented what the data were 'saying' if the data could speak. Instead of responding with conventions of a 'right' way to interpret the data, my professor instead probed deeper into how I developed the themes. This communicated caring and a genuine interest in me and my analysis which assisted in further developing an invitational environment (Melrose et al., 2013).

From this experience I learned that my personal expression of ideas and opinions were valued and encouraged as I experimented with the data in new ways (Melrose et al., 2013). This reinforced the contextual nature of qualitative data and the presence of multiple realities. The experience allowed me to engage deeper with not only subsequent data as I continued to learn about qualitative research, but allowed a sense of freedom to explore and learn more without constraint or criticism. This initial experience paved the way for the passion of my professor regarding qualitative research to be transferred to me. In the transition from merely 'doing' qualitative research, I truly felt as if I was 'being' a qualitative researcher. I became transformed as a result of my experiences in that course. While the journey that my professor and I took together eventually became finished 'for then' as the course came to a close, it was very evident that my journeys 'yet to be taken' as a qualitative researcher had only just begun.

Implications

There are several implications that arise from the discussion related to qualitative teaching strategies. The foremost may be that educators and course designers in essence 'become' the cornerstone of any course development and delivery. We believe as Parker Palmer (2017) notes that TEACHING MATTERS.

Further he says that

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The methods used vary widely.... The connections made by the teachers are not

held in their method, but in their hearts— meaning heart in the strictest sense,
as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the
human self. (p. 11)

By providing continual invitations to “walk with me” students that may otherwise experience feelings of being ‘lost’ within the tenets and procedures of qualitative research, have continual opportunities to ‘walk’ the qualitative landscapes and mountains together with an experienced educator-guide. When students feel their skills related to ‘doing’ qualitative research are tenuous at best, the educator can guide students to the paths that have more sure footing. Positive feedback and encouragement may have a tremendous effect upon students in persevering through courses where qualitative research is introduced for the first time.

Providing opportunities for creativity and freedom to explore landscapes through various strategies also may represent pivotal actions that educators can employ in engaging students. Professors who are passionate about qualitative research can act as catalysts to infuse their own passion and excitement into their students. This may “inspire [students] and [help them] maintain an open mind” about qualitative research (McAllister & Rowe, 2003, p. 297).

As students move through the processes of ‘doing’ qualitative research, it is posited that they can come to a point of ‘being’ where they can see themselves as qualitative researchers, perhaps for the very first time. Metaphorically, reaching the summit of the mountain and together looking down upon the landscape below can assist students to engage in their own journeys past the confines of qualitative research courses. It has long been suggested that success begets success. Inviting students to “walk with me” has the potential to generate some of the greatest teaching and learning moments—for both students and educators.

Conclusion

We have presented the experience of teaching and learning about qualitative research through ‘being’ and ‘doing’ from the perspective of student and teacher. Through the creation of an online classroom environment, which drew on aspects of invitational theory that encouraged students and fostered self-belief in a supportive and caring environment, students were able to learn and experience both theoretical and experiential aspects of qualitative research.

The journey was not always easy but we can extrapolate from Glesne (2016) and say that whether you are researching climbers in the Rocky Mountains, a village people in a mountain community in Nepal, or the lifestyle of climbers at Everest base camp, “you will never understand it all, but you will know where to look next,

what new questions to ask, and what sense it might have for yourself and others” (p. 284). This is the journey of a qualitative researcher and the challenge of the qualitative research teacher. The idea of “walk with me” reflects the important process that students and teachers encounter in their respective research journeys.

Endnotes

1. Since original publication, Katherine Janzen has gone on to be a loved associate university professor who has inspired students, developed a theory of learning, authored and published numerous articles, and was lead author on text book *Artistic Pedagogical Technologies*.
2. This article updates and extends our previous paper “Walk with Me: A Qualitative Research Journey” published in *Academic Exchange Quarterly* (2012 by Sharon Moore & Katherine Janzen). References and teaching strategies have been updated.

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