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Going in thinking process, coming out transformed: Reflections and recommendations from a qualitative research course



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ABSTRACT

This article presents reflections and suggestions of an instructor and students from a doctoral-level qualitative research course. Given qualitative research courses often lack guidance for best practices and the well-being of doctoral students learning qualitative research is often overlooked, the purpose of this article is threefold: 1) to provide an introductory skeleton for designing a qualitative research course that is structured for classmates to interview each other throughout the semester, what the authors call a *student-as-researcher-and-participant* design; 2) to provide student reflections from the course; and finally, 3) to offer recommendations for using a student-as-researcher-and-participant design for a qualitative research course.

1. Introduction

When I (DM) designed my advanced qualitative research course to teach for the first time, my goal going into the course was to provide students with a rigorous learning experience, having them practice five common approaches—as identified by Creswell and Poth (2018)—to designing qualitative research over the course of the semester. Like other scholars who have documented their experiences teaching qualitative courses, focusing on *process* or teaching particular aspects of qualitative research was my goal (e.g., see Brailas et al., 2017; Boström, 2019; Henderson et al., 2008; Lapum & Hume, 2015; Levitt, Kannan, & Ippolito, 2013; Miskovic & Lyutykh, 2017; Navarro, 2005; Nutov, 2019; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012; Orange, 2016; Richards & Haberman, 2017; Wang, 2013). I aimed to ensure students were introduced to a survey of topics such as phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, coding, creating themes, and positionality statements, among others. While process was my goal entering the course, by the end of the semester, we were all *transformed*. We were transformed because as part of the course, I asked my doctoral students to interview each other throughout the semester. They were not just researchers throughout the course; they were also study participants. While scholars have published on designing qualitative research courses in various modes (e.g., see Carawan, Knight, Wittman, Pokorny, & Velde, 2011; DeLyser et al., 2013; Miskovic & Lyutykh, 2017), there is limited scholarship documenting the

experiences of students who interview each other during a qualitative course.

I asked them to develop research investigations related to doctoral students, so they could all serve as participants for each other throughout the course; I thought this would be convenient, and again, help them learn *process*. Nevertheless, rather than asking basic questions (e.g., What do doctoral students eat with their busy schedules?) that would simply help them learn the processes of qualitative research, my students asked deep, meaningful questions (e.g., What are the experiences of new mothers in doctoral programs?) that were therapeutic, emotional, and personal. Given qualitative research courses often lack guidance for best practices (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012) and the well-being of doctoral students learning qualitative research is often overlooked (Velardo & Elliot, 2018), the purpose of this article is threefold: 1) to provide an introductory skeleton for designing a qualitative research course that is structured for classmates to interview each other throughout the semester, what we call a *student-as-researcher-and-participant* design; 2) to provide student reflections from the course; and finally, 3) to offer recommendations for using a *student-as-researcher-and-participant* design for a qualitative research course.

2. Course introduction

The course, “Advanced Study in Qualitative Research,” is the fifth

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methods course and second qualitative course for students pursuing a Ph.D. in the Annsley Frazier Thornton School of Education at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky. The text for the course was [Creswell and Poth's \(2018\)](#), *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (4th ed.). Within the syllabus, I also directed students to some of, what I (DM) consider, foundational texts (e.g., [Charmaz, 2014](#); [Moustakas, 1994](#); [Yin, 2018](#)) to explore specific research designs in more detail.

2.1. Assignments

Assignments and grading for the course included 1) participation, 2) establishing a research problem/investigation, 3) writing a positionality statement, 4) conducting a literature review, 5) choosing a theoretical framework, and 5) writing five research briefs ([Mitchell, 2019](#)). Initially, the course included a final exam; however, as we moved through the course, I learned that the research briefs were never brief and students were working tirelessly as researchers and participants during class sessions, leading to the transformation we experienced. Because of this, I removed the final exam and transferred the points to participation, and they deserved every point given to them for participation. Excerpts from the syllabus used for the course is included in the appendices (see [Appendix A](#)).

Participation required students to attend class sessions ready to participate as researchers and as research participants for their classmates. It also required them to do the weekly readings, so they could bring up ideas to discuss with the class prior to my brief weekly lectures ([Mitchell, 2019](#)). Four assignments were completed within the first two class sessions: the *research problem/investigation*, *positionality statement*, *literature review*, and *theoretical framework* assignments. The *research problem/investigation* assignment asked students to identify a topic to research during the course of the semester. The topic was related to graduate students, and the topic did not change as students were introduced to five common research designs: narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, and ethnography ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)). The *positionality statement* assignment asked students to reflect on their positionality in relation to their topic of exploration. The *literature review* assignment asked students to conduct a brief, two-paragraph literature review on their topics of exploration, as again, modeling the process was the intent of the course. Finally, the students identified a theoretical framework to use throughout the course and drafted a theoretical framework section to use for their papers. Once a student demonstrated competency in drafting a positionality statement, literature review, or theoretical framework section, these sections of the paper remained unchanged throughout the semester and were used as appropriate in future papers ([Mitchell, 2019](#)).

Lastly, students were asked to write five *research briefs* of four-to-five pages, one for each research design, formatted to model publications in academic journals in education and the social sciences using [American Psychological Association](#) (6th ed.) guidelines ([Mitchell, 2019](#)). In actuality, the briefs resulted in an average of 8–20 pages and I reflect on this adjustment in the next section.

2.2. Class structure and transformation

The class was structured to be experiential in nature. Since we offer classes using a weekend cohort model and were using classmates as research participants throughout the course, I did not want students to have to spend too much time with data collection and analysis outside of the class. So after a recap of the previous research designs and readings, a discussion of the readings for the week, and a brief lecture, students spent a bulk of class time drafting research questions and data collection protocol procedures, collecting data through interviews, focus groups, and other methods (e.g., photovoice, journaling, observations), transcribing, coding, and writing up themes and findings. Having them practice during class also gave them the opportunity to ask classmates or me questions

throughout the process. I found that setting aside time for each activity and making sure the class stayed on schedule were important so that each student could get what they needed, particularly during the data collection exercises, so structuring class time became just as important as preparing for lectures when planning for class sessions.

To ensure students had a pool of classmates to interview when they were ready for data collection, students were assigned to groups, and when a group was called, they were given priority to collect data, and the other groups acted as research participants during that time. When the next group was called, students who had served as researchers transitioned to research participants for the other groups. When designing the groups, I also made sure students had access to classmates who fit the criteria for their research investigation. This was when the transformation began to happen, during the data collection time in class. I often had to go find students because going over time during data collection sessions became somewhat commonplace. I noticed that students were coming back refreshed, exhausted, emotionally drained, teary-eyed, and continuing conversations. I also learned that students were sharing personal stories I had not anticipated. This was when I removed the page limit restriction on the assignments because they were less interested in the process and more interested in honoring the stories and lived experiences they were hearing. During this time, I also introduced conversations about trust and confidentiality because I did not expect the research questions students explored or the personal stories students willingly shared.

Still, I was focused on process as the students were being transformed. It took me serving as a participant before I realized the time, care, energy, emotion, and vulnerability students were giving their classmates for each class session. I first participated in a group discussing the quality of life during graduate school and hearing their stories, as they honored mine as their instructor was meaningful. I also experienced the emotions, the honesty, and bonding they were experiencing the entire semester. I realized that the class that I designed focused on process, was transforming them as students, researchers, colleagues, professionals, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and friends. It was at this point I canceled the final exam and transitioned those points to participation points. They were learning much more than what they would demonstrate on a final exam about definitions and research designs, and they were giving so much of themselves week in and week out. At this point I also began planning for the next version of the class by taking notes on ways I could improve the class experience for future students who might also engage in this transformational learning experience created by the students. Whether it was something special about this first group of students I taught or something that will be replicated again, they taught me to become a better instructor of qualitative research.

3. Student reflections

Within this section, we offer reflections from students who were interested in co-authoring this article and reflecting on their transformational experience in the course. Prompts for this reflection came from students continuously sharing throughout the semester that the class sessions were therapeutic, emotional, personal, healing, and transformative. Students were asked to reflect on the following questions: How was the course a transformational educational experience for you? How did the course help you learn qualitative research? What follows are their reflections.

EB: As an educator, I believe praxis is the best form of teaching. Reading the source material and hearing lectures from an expert gives one a foundation, but applying the skills in a collaborative, real-world situation provides a lasting lesson. Our qualitative class was one of the most transformative courses in my doctoral journey because Dr. Mitchell crafted an authentic experience that placed teacher and students as equals. On the day that I submitted my application to enter the Ph.D. program, I found out I was pregnant with my first

child. Throughout my pregnancy and time as a new mother, I felt very isolated in my doctoral cohort. However, this class gave me the opportunity to bond with other new mothers who were sharing the same lived experience while pursuing a degree. I was able to complete interviews and focus groups while making co-constructed meaning of our journey. Therefore, not only did I find a passion for the humanizing purpose of qualitative research, but I also experienced a therapeutic healing process with my network of peers. Moreover, I was able to write five separate research briefs using grounded theory, phenomenology, narrative, case study, and ethnography all in one semester. By maintaining the same general central research question throughout the course, I was able to truly decipher between each qualitative methodology through my approach to theoretical frameworking, data gathering, and data analysis. In this course, I strengthened as a student, scholar, colleague, teacher, and most importantly, mother. I am forever grateful.

JC: Prior to this course, we took an introductory qualitative methods course. I was apprehensive about qualitative research, having completed three quantitative statistics courses before taking the introductory qualitative course. I did have some experience with qualitative methods from a mixed methods course in my master's program and the introductory qualitative course. I still entered this course a little unsure about my ability to do qualitative research. The class was really focused on us gaining actual experience conducting each of the five qualitative research approaches. Instead of the instructor lecturing or moderating a class discussion for the class session, we recapped the things we read about the particular approach, the instructor clarified ideas for us, and let us get to work developing research questions and planning our studies. I really appreciated him helping us think through research questions that fit the approach and our research topic. The interesting twist to our studies was that our participants would be our classmates. I felt comfortable interviewing and being interviewed by my classmates that were in my cohort. Initially, it was a little awkward asking classmates from other cohorts probing questions about their experiences with race. But after about the second study, it was like this unspoken sense trust fell over the whole class. It even enhanced my interviews and focus groups with members of my cohort. I felt really connected to my participants and their stories. My focus quickly went from "am I coding this right?" to "what is the best way for me to present my participants'—my colleagues'—stories?" It helped me realize the power and responsibility I had as the researcher. In the end, it didn't even really feel like a class. It was like going to practice, dissertation practice.

OO: This course was transformative because the content was experiential in nature, and the topics researched were consequential in purpose. The content was experiential in nature because it stretched beyond the educational experience that I typically receive. We were not just reading about the varying types of qualitative designs, we were conducting them. We did not only discuss how positionality of the researcher matters in qualitative analysis, but we also lived it out each time we met as a class. These experiences challenged my thinking about qualitative research in general, helping me understand its depth and importance. The topics were also consequential. Each student chose a topic to research for the whole semester, analyzing it from a different perspective with each type of study. We each chose deep, relevant, and important issues like race, relationships, gender, or human connection. This created a classroom environment where I could learn a lot about qualitative research. The course helped me learn about qualitative research because of the repetition. Completing data collection five different times for five different studies helped me understand what it takes to write a qualitative paper with rich, thick description. The descriptive feedback was important, too. Our professor provided detailed feedback on how to improve but also acknowledged our strengths, allowing us to focus on our areas of growth. That helped me understand how to develop strong, data-

driven categories and themes, changing my writing style for the better.

SV: Over the course of the semester, I often heard members of class say, "That was therapeutic!" That was also my experience. My personal journey in the Ph.D. program has been, for the most part, isolating. Having the ability to choose my topic of inquiry—the experience of new mothers in a Ph.D. program—helped me to continue to heal that part of my life. More than that, seeing the topics others chose—largely in part to understand and heal themselves—helped me to see that, while my isolation was specific to motherhood, I was not alone in feeling alone. All of us were feeling somewhat isolated because of the transformative nature of this degree. And that made me feel connected to the journey, to the shared experience, to the people in the classroom. I particularly benefited from focus groups because I was able to share and learn and see myself in others. Like I might expect therapy to be, I will say it was also exhausting to interview and share on such sensitive topics. It opened up raw feelings and took time to recover afterward. This course, more than any other, helped me to understand qualitative research. By going through the process multiple times, I found which approaches worked for particular questions and interests I may have. I also learned how important stories are to the shared human experience. We all want to be seen—whether that's through our own stories or through seeing ourselves reflected in others.

PC: I consider this course a transformational experience as it shaped me in not one but two ways. The first way caused me to engage in a new way of learning concepts, theories, and other qualitative approaches by serving as the instrument or conduit through which information must move. This effort alone helped me to become more expansive in my quest to capture and create through the lived experiences of others. The second captured me in a way that I did not expect. To hear, read, and share information related to my life in various conversations caused me to reflect deeply about my personal and professional experiences. I found myself feeling really full and grateful to not only be who I am but to also be involved in the work and service to which I have been called. This course helped me become a better qualitative researcher as it opened my academic eyes to critical aspects of the different types of approaches and methods of collecting data while helping me to discover more about who have to be in the process. I began to distinguish the differences between approaches due to the active way in which we as students were expected to be involved in the course. Lastly, it was motivational to witness my peers speak so highly of their own transformational experiences. I believe the objectives for our course were exceeded. What was supposed to work for our course worked and changed a few lives in the process.

NS: I spent three years entrenched in reading on literacy, vulnerable populations, the value of perspective, and the importance of connection. I did not fully understand the vulnerability in discussing and living some of these issues until I took this course. My research problem throughout centered on expectations in doctoral programs, which felt tame in the beginning. I did not anticipate how open and honest my classmates would be about the internal and external pressures they experienced, nor did I anticipate how their stories would resonate with me. I started drawing connections between my experiences and my peers, and in those moments the principles of bias and reliability became real; they were not concepts I read in a book, it was my reality. I internalized the process as we worked through different designs and was able to more quickly draw connections between themes, ask questions to reveal richer stories, and placed more value on differing perspective. We revisited the research process, adapting to meet the specific demands of each design. Such close work made the comparisons and contrasts between the different designs more concrete. After this course ended, not only did I understand qualitative research better, but I also understood myself and my classmates better. We spent three years together, but I fully

appreciated them and their experience during this course. Their honesty encouraged me to be more open in the interviews in which I participated, and by voicing my own story I came to understand myself better.

4. Recommendations

Given our transformational experiences throughout the course, we offer the following six recommendations for an instructor who might design a qualitative course using a student-as-researcher-and-participant design. Like [Richards and Haberlin's \(2017\)](#) work, the recommendations offered are ways *both* the students and the instructor believe future offerings of the course might improve future students' experiences.

1. When designing a course like this, trust is crucial. If trust is not already in the room, it is difficult for anyone to feel brave enough to be open. In our experience, all it took was one person embracing vulnerability to set the example. When students were more elaborate and open in their responses, the data was richer, and the experience was more rewarding. While trust is crucial, the instructor did not spend enough time at the beginning of the course discussing trust given the focus on process, his anticipation of basic questions, and the unanticipated transformational experience for the class. Given this, ample time should be given to discussing trust and confidentiality among the class, even if publication or presentation are not anticipated outcomes from the course. We recommend drafting trust and/or confidentiality agreements for the class as part of the syllabus. Not only is it practice for conducting qualitative research with confidentiality, but perhaps it builds more trust right at the beginning of the course. An example agreement is included in the appendices (see [Appendix B](#)). In addition, as [Aluwihare-Samaranayake \(2012\)](#) notes, caring for emotional content is an ethical concern for qualitative researchers, and this quickly emerged during the course.
2. Because of the emotional nature of interviewing and being interviewed on potentially sensitive topics, we recommend saving time at the end of each class session to do a reflection or decompressing activity. Again, [Velardo and Elliot \(2018\)](#) note doctoral students' well-being is often overlooked as they collect and analyze data. In support of their work, we recognize students often felt they needed a place to put their exhaustion from the class sessions, but instead, took it home with them. Given this, we offer students in this type of class structure would appreciate reflection time. For example, like others have practiced in qualitative research courses (e.g., see [Orange, 2016](#)), journaling might be an appropriate reflection activity.
3. Further, we recommend that there be some "close the loop" sessions, or sessions to further reflect on the course after the completion of the course. "Close the loop" sessions would provide those who wish to continue working on, or talking about, issues that may have come up for them over the course of disclosing specific information. These sessions could also serve as spaces where students further develop as qualitative researchers. As an example, like [Miskovic and Lyutykh \(2017\)](#) used an online learning management system to deliver a qualitative course; using an online learning management system for "close the loop" sessions might prove beneficial for continuing conversations after the course is complete.
4. Originally, our course syllabus called for five research briefs—four to five-page papers—documenting students' studies; however, we quickly found that the topics selected had deep meaning. Therefore, most students found themselves writing lengthy papers (e.g., twenty-page papers) for each assignment due to students' internal fire to find the themes and the implications of their unique studies. The instructor recognized this transformative experience and modified the syllabus accordingly to allow for freedom and flexibility in the page length. Ultimately, instructors should be cautious about hard limits to allow for deep learning, but also balance deep learning with a manageable grading workload.

5. If the course is designed for doctoral or master's students, we recommend students use this course as an opportunity to test out potential dissertation or thesis topics. While students' research questions during the course might not directly align with their eventual dissertation or thesis topic, students should use the course as a chance to stretch the way they approach and understand their topics. For example, within our course, there was a mandate to relate topics to graduate students. However, students who were exploring, e.g., race and racism for their dissertation tied their exploration to graduate students and race and racism.
6. If students do not investigate questions related to dissertation or thesis topics, students should at least choose a topic that matters to them personally. It will keep them engaged, as well as help the student understand the importance of positionalities in qualitative research.
7. Finally, while every student in this particular course shared they were transformed, we acknowledge this transformation might not happen for every class or every student who participates in a course structured using the student-as-researcher-and-participant design. Given this reality, we recommend having alternative ways for students to engage in the course ready for implementation. In addition, allowing students to co-shape the course by adjusting items throughout the course might be beneficial as well.

5. Conclusion

In her autoethnography, Laux wrote ([2018](#)), "I think to be a good researcher, you need to have an understanding of yourself and the extent to which you experience subjectivity in your work. In addition, it is impossible to separate the self from one's research" (p. 1498). The students in my (DM) course modeled Laux's reflection during the course, learning more about themselves, as they learned about their peers and became better qualitative researchers. My students moved from process thinking to transformative thinking, enriching our learning community, and demonstrating the power of bringing their whole selves to the research as articulated by [Hordge-Freeman \(2018\)](#). In addition, they transformed me as an educator. I backed off of rigid, pre-determined requirements; adjusted the course as needed; reflected on future versions of the course; served as a participant in some of their research processes; and became more vulnerable as an instructor. I knew when I mistakenly, yet instinctively, announced my fiancée and I were expecting our first child well before we were making it public, I too was transformed.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

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Appendices. Supplementary data

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