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“I Don’t Like Ambiguity”: An Exploration of Students’ Experiences During a Qualitative Methods Course

Although some of the literature on teaching qualitative research methods courses has included students’ experiences during courses, these experiences have not been made a primary focus of study and examined systematically. To gain a fuller understanding of students’ experiences during a graduate-level qualitative methods course, 13 reflective journals were analyzed. Eight major categories emerged from the analysis: (a) struggling with a new paradigm, (b) changes in perspective on quantitative research, (c) struggling with phenomenological and other qualitative concepts and practices, (d) becoming more aware of one’s role in the research process, (e) challenges faced during the research process, (f) gaining new insights into the research process, (g) gaining new insights into phenomenology and the qualitative paradigm, and (h) valuing phenomenological and other forms of qualitative research. Implications of the findings for designing and teaching qualitative methods courses are also discussed.

Alors que certaines recherches portant sur l’enseignement des cours de méthodes de recherche qualitatives incluent les expériences vécues par les étudiants qui suivaient les cours, elles ne sont pas axées sur ces expériences et n’en ont pas fait l’objet d’étude systématique. Dans le but de mieux comprendre ce que vivaient les étudiants inscrits à un cours du deuxième cycle sur les méthodes qualitatives, nous avons analysé treize journaux à réflexions. Huit catégories principales sont ressorties de l’analyse: (a) la difficulté de saisir un nouveau paradigme, (b) les changements de perspective sur la recherche quantitative, (c) la difficulté de saisir des concepts et pratiques qualitatifs tels ceux phénoménologiques, (d) la conscientisation grandissante quant à son propre rôle dans le processus de recherche, (e) les défis s’étant présentés pendant la recherche, (f) l’apprentissage de nouveaux concepts touchant la recherche, (g) l’apprentissage de nouveaux concepts en phénoménologie et le paradigme qualitatif et (h) la valorisation des types de recherche qualitative telle la recherche phénoménologique. Une discussion suit sur les implications des résultats pour la conception et l’enseignement de cours de méthodes qualitatives.

Although once limited almost exclusively to the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, qualitative research has in the last few decades become well established in fields such as education, nursing, and communications. Qualitative researchers now find themselves with a wide variety of methodologies and paradigms to choose from (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), and the number of books and articles dealing with qualitative research continues to grow steadily each year. Similarly, the number of qualitative methods courses offered at most institutions has increased gradually (Glesne & Webb, 1993). Despite these

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trends, however, relatively little has been written about the teaching of qualitative research itself. Moreover, much of this literature tends to focus on teaching philosophies, course activities and assignments, and/or authors' experiences of teaching qualitative courses (Ahola-Sidaway, 1993; Charmaz, 1991; Eisenhart, 1989; Hutchinson & Webb, 1990; Janesick, 1983; Keen, 1996; Kleinman, Copp, & Henderson, 1997; Lareau, 1987; Liebscher, 1998; Page, 1997a, 1997b; Rist, 1983; Sells, Thomas, & Newfield, 1997; Sherman, 1990; Talley & Timmer, 1992; Wolcott, 1997; Yates, 1997). In some cases, course syllabi, lecture topics, and other important course information are also included (Lareau, 1987; Page, 1997a; Sells et al., 1997). Several articles have also focused on interviews with prominent qualitative researchers about their experiences of teaching qualitative courses (Nyden, 1991; Strauss, 1988) or surveyed faculty who teach qualitative research courses (Glesne & Webb, 1993).

Only two of the above articles (Keen, 1996; Kleinman et al., 1997), however, have explicitly addressed students' perspectives and experiences during the courses described. Keen focused on his use of a teaching strategy that involved having students work collaboratively on an ethnographic research project. Quotes from students were used to capture their experiences of conducting fieldwork observations and intensive interviews and writing a qualitative report, as well as their overall impressions of the course. Kleinman et al., however, examined a number of issues that students encountered during qualitative courses, including having less control and structure, dealing with issues of impartiality or neutrality in research, learning about the complexities of qualitative analysis, and struggling with the demands of good qualitative report writing. Nevertheless, both studies focused primarily on the teaching of qualitative methods, and students' experiences were drawn on only to enhance discussion of various instructional strategies. Thus neither article made students' experiences its primary focus or examined these experiences in a comprehensive and systematic way.

My aim in this study, therefore, was to make students' experiences during a qualitative course the focus of inquiry and to examine the full breadth of these experiences. Given the incompleteness of our understanding of students' experiences with qualitative research, I wished to identify the various themes (i.e., categories) in those experiences and to then consider the implications of these themes for teaching qualitative courses. First, I discuss the context for the study, followed by the study's design and the results of the analysis. I then examine a number of implications of the findings for designing and teaching qualitative methods courses.

Context for the Study

The course described in this article is a graduate-level, introductory qualitative research methods course offered in a Faculty of Education at a Canadian university. It is an optional, single-semester course, and many of the students who take it are interested in completing a qualitative master's thesis or dissertation. The class normally includes from 15 to 20 students, and for the semester described in this article 20 students were enrolled. The course is open to both master's and doctoral students, and master's students normally outnumber doctoral students, usually making up just over half of the class. Most of the

students are completing degrees in the department, although students from other departments in the university are sometimes enrolled in the course.

At the time that I taught the particular course described in this article, I had completed a doctorate, was a sessional instructor, and was familiar with a variety of qualitative methodologies and qualitative paradigms. I had taught the course during a previous semester and also had considerable experience teaching as a graduate student and as a sessional instructor. As a graduate student I had been exposed to a variety of qualitative methodologies, but chose to concentrate on phenomenology (both my master's thesis and my doctoral dissertation had involved the use of a phenomenological method). In teaching the course, my methodological leanings continued to be toward phenomenological inquiry, and I situated myself in a hermeneutic paradigm (Schwandt, 2000). Nevertheless, I also valued transparency of method (e.g., the use of an audit trail and member checks and disclosure of relevant aspects of oneself in the reporting of findings), provided that it was appropriate for the qualitative methodology being used. I should add here that although I conducted phenomenological research and positioned myself in an interpretive approach to inquiry, I recognized (and made clear to students) the legitimacy and value of other qualitative paradigms and qualitative methodologies.

Because of its comprehensiveness, I used Patton's (1990) book *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* as the main text for the course. I supplemented this book with a number of articles and book chapters that deal with specific topics such as grounded theory (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986), phenomenology (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; Valle & King, 1978), case study (Berg, 2001), ethnography (Berg), participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989), interviewing (Becker, 1986), and data analysis (Tesch, 1987). These articles were generally well received by students, although some of the phenomenological and other qualitative practices and terms presented posed difficulties for some students (see the discussion of the theme "Struggling with Qualitative Concepts and Practices" below).

I structured the course so as to provide students with exposure to what I saw as important topics in qualitative research, including the history of qualitative research, qualitative and quantitative paradigms, commonly used qualitative methodologies, ethical issues in qualitative inquiry, designing qualitative research, formulating research questions, participant selection, interviewing and other forms of data collection, analyzing data, writing up qualitative findings, and evaluating qualitative research. I organized these topics so as to be consistent with students' progress during a qualitative research project. From this list of topics it may be apparent to the reader that although students were required to complete a phenomenological research project (discussed below), a large portion of the course did not deal specifically with phenomenological research. For an introductory qualitative methods course, I considered it essential to provide students with a broad treatment of all the above topics. Early in the course, I made it clear to students that phenomenology constitutes only one form of qualitative inquiry, and beyond learning about specific aspects of phenomenological research, students gained an understanding of various methodological issues as they relate to qualitative inquiry in general. I also exposed students to other qualitative methodologies (e.g., ethnography,

grounded theory, case study, participant observation), although my treatment of these was necessarily more brief.

As an introduction to qualitative inquiry, the course involved a considerable amount of direct instruction. Nevertheless, class discussions and group work were an integral part of the course. A constructivist approach to learning has always informed my teaching, and in addition to providing students with one-on-one guidance during each stage of the research that they conducted, I used in-class exercises to assist students in developing a research question, engaging in ongoing examination of their role in the research, developing an interview guide, conducting an open-ended interview, and analyzing data phenomenologically. Given the problems that students generally experience in analyzing qualitative data, two three-hour classes were devoted to in-class group work in which students analyzed interview data that I provided.

As mentioned above, one of the course requirements, students completed a phenomenological research project on a topic of choice. This involved exploring one participant's experiences using in-depth, open-ended qualitative interviewing, which I have found to be well suited to the time constraints imposed by a single-semester course (Liebscher, 1998). The project required students to develop a viable research question, develop an interview guide, conduct a brief phenomenological interview (of approximately 50-60 minutes), transcribe and phenomenologically analyze the material collected, and develop a written report of the findings. I made clear to the students that the research project when viewed as qualitative research was "artificial" in some respects (e.g., the briefness of the interview and the inclusion of only one participant), but that it was nevertheless a valuable learning experience.

The phenomenological procedure used by the students for the research project is similar to those developed by Colaizzi (1978) and Osborne (1990). I chose this phenomenological method because it involves a clear step-by-step procedure for analyzing descriptive data and therefore provides students with considerable structure. The first step in the analysis involves reading the interview transcript entirely several times to gain an overall sense of the participant's experience of the phenomenon. Phrases or sentences that reveal an aspect of the participant's experience are then excerpted. The meaning of each excerpt is paraphrased using "the language of common sense enlightened by a phenomenological perspective" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 55). Based on the paraphrase, one or more themes (also referred to as first-order themes) are formulated to represent the meaning of each excerpt. These themes are then clustered into more abstract themes (also called higher-order themes). Higher-order themes (and the themes they contain) are then integrated into an exhaustive structural description of the participant's experience of the phenomenon. A member check, the final step in the analysis, involves checking with the participant to determine if the description, and the analysis in general, accurately reflect her or his experience of the phenomenon.

Other course requirements included completing a bracketing¹ assignment, which involved critical self-analysis and discussion of the perspective that the student brought to the study of the phenomenon chosen for the research project; completing an assignment that dealt with the student's qualitative interview; and keeping a reflective journal. Students were required to make

regular entries in their reflective journals during the 14-week course (Ahola-Sidaway, 1993). The journal was intended to give students an opportunity to reflect on the various course readings, lecture material, class discussions, and their experiences while completing various stages of the research project. The journal entries, therefore, dealt with a variety of topics, including those related to phenomenological research, other qualitative methodologies, and qualitative inquiry in general.

I encouraged students to get into the practice of using the journal to think about and work through ideas, issues, and problems and explained that the journal was intended to be an ongoing record of their thoughts and questions. Students were encouraged to make entries as often as possible, but a minimum of one entry per week totalling no fewer than two single-spaced pages was required. The journals were graded midway through the course and again at the end of the course. Although this undoubtedly influenced what students chose to include in their journals (and how they chose to say it), I found that they were often surprisingly candid in expressing their views about the material that we were covering and at times my own perspective on some of this material. Still, the grading of the journals probably influenced to some extent the nature of the entries and ultimately my findings.

Procedure

The reflective journals offered a unique and in-depth view into students' experiences during the course. It was only after the course was completed, however, that I considered the possibility of studying the students' experiences during the course as expressed in their reflective journals. Thus during the course, students were unaware of any such potential use of their reflective journals. Approximately six months after the course had ended, I obtained ethical approval from the university to undertake the study and subsequently sought students' participation. Some of the students were no longer in the department, and I had no means of contacting them. Ultimately, I was able to contact 14 of the 20 original students. Of these, 13 expressed an interest in participating in the study (the student who declined to participate did not make clear the reasons for the decision). I met with each student individually and discussed the nature of the study and the issues of confidentiality, anonymity, the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and other aspects of informed consent.

This convenience sample consisted of 12 white women and one white man (7 master's students and 6 doctoral students). Most of the participants were in their late 20s, although ages ranged from mid-20s to late 40s. Ten of the participants were enrolled in master's- or doctoral-level counseling programs and had prior experience in counseling-related settings, whereas the remaining participants had previous experience in educational or other settings (e.g., business). The journals that were analyzed ranged in length from 15 to 74 pages.

I completed a whole-text analysis of the journal entries using an approach that is consistent with several commonly used analytic procedures (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I first read each journal in its entirety several times to develop an overall sense of the student's experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Using a line-by-line approach, I excerpted

relevant textual material from each journal entry. Each of these excerpts was then coded (i.e., one or more phrases was formulated to capture the explicit and implicit meaning of each excerpt). When all the journals were analyzed in this way, codes were compared and similar codes clustered into categories. Eight major categories emerged from the analysis and are discussed below. It should be noted here that although some of the students' experiences were clearly reflective of idiosyncrasies of my course, these categories are probably relevant to other qualitative courses. Excerpts from the journals are presented in their original form, with students' spelling, punctuation, letter capitalization, and underlining preserved. Information about the excerpt, including the participant's pseudonym and the journal page number for the excerpt, is also included with each excerpt. In some instances, information has been inserted in square brackets to enhance clarity or to provide necessary context. As mentioned above, the students' journals covered a wide variety of topics, ranging from those that dealt specifically with phenomenological research to those that dealt with qualitative research in general. This range of concerns and emphases is apparent in the excerpts included.

Discussion

Struggling with a New Paradigm

Many students experienced difficulties as they gained exposure to the qualitative paradigm. Early in the course I discussed Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) five "moments" or historical periods in the development of qualitative inquiry. I emphasized that the field of qualitative inquiry is marked by diversity and encompasses a broad range of qualitative paradigms from positivism and postpositivism to poststructuralism and postmodernism. Students' transition from a quantitative to a qualitative paradigm often involved difficulties in understanding various aspects of the qualitative paradigm itself. Some students embraced the paradigm relatively quickly, whereas others displayed varying degrees of resistance (Eisenhart, 1989; Kleinman et al., 1997). Often resistance seemed to me to be closely tied to earlier training in quantitative research methods. In their journals students sometimes described an undergraduate education that focused exclusively on the quantitative paradigm and its criteria for evaluating research. These beliefs in quantitative research are often so ingrained that students are unaware of just how deeply they are held (Kleinman et al., 1997). Many students had, either intentionally or unintentionally, adopted a realist perspective, viewing reality as something "out there" to be studied and understood objectively. Their earlier training, therefore, provided them with few, if any, bridges to understanding or relating to a new research paradigm. As one student explained, "There is always an uneasiness in exploring something new, but it makes it even more difficult when there are no direct comparison [sic] to what you have already experienced in your life" (Elaine, p. 4).

Some students described their adjustment to the qualitative paradigm as confusing, frightening, frustrating, or creating uneasiness. Some of their journal entries reflected a growing sense of concern that their acceptance of beliefs associated with the qualitative paradigm was simultaneously undermining cherished beliefs about the existence of immutable "truths." Some students

also realized that it would take time to shift paradigms, and questions about the “new” paradigm emerged frequently.

I struggled with comparing qualitative and quantitative research, with the battle ended in an agreement to disagree. I resolved that the two paradigms are more similar than different but should not be compared on differences because it is a useless struggle. I have gone through bouts of frustration and feel as though I am spiralling. One day I have a connection and understanding about qualitative research, and the next day I have a hundred more questions. This process is very tiring and taxing. (Stacy, p. 24)

Changes in Perspective on Quantitative Research

Although some students began the course with an understanding of the limitations inherent in quantitative research, others did not. As some became more comfortable with various aspects of qualitative inquiry and its philosophical assumptions, they began to question their belief in the assumptions underlying quantitative inquiry, including its presumed objectivity. They began to experience doubts about the validity of quantitative research and the value of its findings. For example, one student began to reconsider the significance of the honors thesis that she had completed as an undergraduate:

As I am reading the text[book], I recognize that this course, research-wise, is a shift for me in terms of thinking. My undergraduate training and thesis was quantitative, including ANOVA's and a path analysis. I got lots of ooh's and ah's within the department and at conferences over the path analysis. But now I think, what does it really tell me? No one even informed me when I was contemplating my research question that a methodology other than quantitative even existed. (Gail, p. 1)

Changes in students' views about quantitative research also occurred after I introduced the phenomenological practice of bracketing. After becoming familiar with the nature and purpose of bracketing in phenomenological research, many students felt strongly that quantitative researchers should be required to engage in a similar practice. Some wrote that quantitative researchers should go as far as to discuss their presuppositions about their research topic and provide relevant personal background in reporting findings. The following student's journal entry highlights how bracketing helped her to view quantitative research differently, challenging her image of the quantitative researcher as a detached, objective observer.

Phenomenological researchers try to account for their biases and ways of interpreting by “bracketing.” By allowing the reader to see a researcher's biases, he or she can make their own judgements about the study. I like how this thought and reflective process is a criterion to be included in a qualitative study. It shows an honesty that doesn't seem to be reflected in quantitative studies. This is giving me a new perspective on quantitative research as well—how objective can their studies be when the researchers do not even have to qualify their own biases? (Stacy, pp. 10-11)

Struggling with Phenomenological and Other Qualitative Concepts and Practices

Many students experienced difficulty understanding and/or accepting a variety of phenomenological and other qualitative concepts. Some of the more frequently discussed concepts included lived experience, surface meaning (i.e.,

manifest content), deep meaning (i.e., latent content), prereflective experience, and empathic neutrality.² Some students also discussed how they found comfort in the fact that other students were also struggling with the qualitative literature. For example, one wrote,

The one good thing about this course content is that it actually stimulates a lot of discussion between classmates. Those who get it trying to explain (or convince) those of us who question it. It's really interesting to hear everyone's point of view about it—but it's also interesting and/or satisfying to hear that other people have the same struggles as well. (Rebecca, p. 8)

A number of phenomenological and other qualitative research practices and research design issues also posed problems for students. Their concerns involved issues such as bracketing, purposive sampling, appropriate sample sizes, the generalizability of qualitative findings, or the evaluation of qualitative research. Students expressed many of their concerns about qualitative concepts and research-related issues during class time or one-on-one meetings with me. I found that my efforts to explain the issue(s) involved were usually successful in clearing up students' misconceptions or confusion. Concerns about the issue of evaluation were by far the most frequently discussed in the journals. Some students, particularly during the first half of the course, were troubled by the lack of universal criteria for evaluating qualitative research and the apparent "subjectivity" or arbitrariness associated with assessing the value of a qualitative study. The following excerpt is typical of students' concerns about this issue.

How does one decide when qualitative research is credible? I would think if someone had an interest and pursued it qualitatively, how could anyone argue against its credibility? It was obviously important to one person. This may be stretching the idea, but how could a journal, and how does a journal decide which qualitative studies are "credible" enough to publish? (Stacy, p. 2)

For some students, concerns about evaluation also reflected a more personal stake in this issue, as expressed in the following entry.

One of my biggest concerns is the criteria in which a qualitative piece of work is evaluated. More specifically, I am concerned that the defense of my qualitative thesis will depend on an "instinctual level" emanating from my board [i.e., thesis committee]. (Amy, p. 4)

I attempted to provide students with satisfactory answers to their questions about the evaluation of qualitative research, but a difficulty that I encountered involved my having scheduled this topic to be formally discussed during our last (3-hour) class. I understood the importance of this topic for students, as well as their sense of urgency in getting satisfactory answers to their questions, but the problem I faced was one of providing them with adequate explanations at earlier points in the course when doing so would require most of a three-hour class. Most, if not all, instructors have faced similar problems at some time, and when questions about evaluation arose, my strategy was to provide students with a relatively condensed explanation and to promise a detailed discussion of the topic at the end of the course.

Becoming More Aware of One's Role in the Research Process

Many students described how they became more aware of their role in shaping various phases of their research. Many students described how this process of self-examination began at an early stage in the research process, as they completed the bracketing assignment. For example, one student described how she began to reflect on her "baggage" at that point.

As I wrote my bracketing assignment I began to notice all of the "baggage" I bring to the issue of domestic violence, and I'm sure that there are many presuppositions that I have missed. What might have been valuable would have been to share my assignment with a friend and have them challenge any of my thoughts. (Elaine, p. 11)

Examples illustrating bracketing were also discussed in class, and feedback that I received suggested that this information was important in guiding students' own process of self-analysis. Some students also found that classmates, as well as others outside the course, were helpful.

Some students also described how new presuppositions emerged during various phases of their research, particularly during the interview and analysis stages. In the following excerpt a student discusses her uncertainty about the role of bracketing during the analysis, as well as the role that the interview played in her efforts to monitor her own subjectivity.

After the interview, I thought of more ideas and thoughts that I needed to bracket. I am also finding it very difficult to suspend these biases now that I have done the interview and now that I have written my literature review. I find myself using themes noted in previous research findings... not because of the fact that they are included in my data but because the label is so fitting. Is that bad? (Suzanne, p. 36)

Challenges Faced During the Research Process

All the students wrote about their experiences of undertaking the research project. The most commonly discussed phases of the research were the initial period prior to interviewing, the interview stage, and the analysis stage.

Getting started

A variety of students' concerns were apparent early in the research process as they prepared to collect the materials that they would later analyze. Some students expressed excitement and a sense of challenge at the prospect of undertaking their own qualitative research (Kleinman et al., 1997), whereas others were apprehensive about the perceived size and complexity of the project and saw it as an intimidating, ambiguous journey. Students sometimes wrote about their need for structure (Glesne & Webb, 1993; Kleinman et al., 1997; Sells et al., 1997) and described their reactions to the ambiguity and other characteristics that they associated with qualitative research. For example, one student wrote,

I am beginning to feel more comfortable with the process of qualitative research; however, I don't know if it's because my interview is looming largely ahead and I'm forced to think about it, or because I believe that I can actually "do it." The ambiguity still scares the hell out of me. I was looking at my daytimer and reflecting on how little time I have for ambiguity! (Amy, p. 9)

From this entry it is also clear that course-imposed time constraints served to increase Amy's anxiety about qualitative research. Time pressures and meeting a deadline for submitting the research project were issues that appeared in many of the journals.

Students' doubts about the general adequacy of their research skills were also evident in some of the journals. They sometimes also discussed their concerns about more specific skills such as their writing ability:

My second concern regarding qualitative research surrounds my literary skills or shall I say, lack thereof. Especially in hermeneutical [phenomenological] research, the researcher must have exemplary literary skills, and I know that at this point in my life I fall below the mark.... Another doubt in my mind to challenge the balance—can I successfully complete a qualitative piece of research?... Oh, the agony of learning (insert sarcasm here). I continue to strike that balance between the challenge/excitement vs. the doubting/running back to the familiarity of quantitative [research]. (Amy, p. 5)

The interview process

Many of the students expressed apprehension about the interview process. This often involved concerns about unduly influencing the participant through the interview questions asked, phrasing interview questions inappropriately, or not being able to collect rich interview material. Concerns about the perceived costs of not eliciting rich interview material (i.e., research project and course grades) were evident in a number of the students' journals and seemed to add to students' apprehension. But as one student stated, the actual process of conducting the interview resulted in "things beginning to make clearer sense" (Gail, p. 9). In fact some students even found the interview to be a pleasurable and rewarding experience:

I thought now would be a good opportunity to reflect on my interview with my participant for the class project. Overall, it was a wonderful experience. I learned so much during the interview and I feel good with the knowledge that I have obtained rich data. I understand now how important it is to have an articulate and open participant willing to talk honestly about their experiences. (Suzanne, p. 35)

The analysis process

All the students wrote to varying degrees about their experiences of analyzing their interview material. Much as in other stages of the research process, some students experienced excitement and anticipation before beginning the analysis (Kleinman et al., 1997), whereas others felt anxiety or panic. As one student wrote, "I look at my transcript prior to beginning the analysis and there is this sense of panic. What if there is nothing there?" (Carol, p. 13).

Students also discussed their experiences of analyzing their interview transcripts. Without the familiar analytical tools and writing conventions of quantitative research, many students began to feel anxious and insecure. Confusion, loss of confidence, discomfort, feelings of insecurity, and feelings of being overwhelmed or overloaded were common reactions at various stages of the analysis. Also, as Kleinman et al. (1997) have noted, "Without rules or tests to fall back on, students feel the weight of responsibility for authorship" (p. 484). The above reactions were sometimes evident in the early stages of the analysis

process, as in the following entry describing a student's frustration in identifying relevant excerpts in her interview transcript.

I am now faced with the never-ended process of data analysis. My main concern is where to start and how to efficiently identify key excerpts. I am looking at this HUGE transcript and feeling very overwhelmed! How and where do you start? My first attempt of identifying excerpts left the whole page highlighted. There must be an easier way! I am still afraid of the whole paraphrasing exercise. I honestly think that with only 3 weeks left of school.... this is not going to get done! I need a miracle! (Suzanne, pp. 36-37)

During a later stage of the analysis, a common theme was frustration with the ambiguity and perceived lack of structure associated with the process of developing themes to capture the meaning of excerpts. For example, one student wrote,

I know now what it means to feel "immersed in one's data," "dealing with ambiguity." I don't like ambiguity—I don't like feeling like I don't know what I'm doing. I get a sense that I'm really close to figuring all this stuff out. I know that the light will eventually turn on in my head—eventually. I just hope that it happens before this course is over. I'm trying to do paraphrases/themes but I just can't seem to find the words that accurately describe what I'm wanting to say. Maybe it's because I'm usually high on caffeine—WIRED!! (Rebecca, p. 21)

This student's vivid description reflects similar feelings of other students, as well as those sometimes experienced by more advanced researchers during the analysis process (Kleinman et al., 1997).

It was apparent from the journals that some students' difficulties extended well into the final stages of the analysis, as they worked to refine the analysis and develop their written submission. Some journal entries described students' uncertainty about the type of language to be used in writing up their findings, when to include quotes, or which information to report. Feelings of overload continued to be experienced by some students:

Tonight is our last class. Despite this fact, I remain overwhelmed by the final project assignment. There's just *so much* information! I keep paring it down but then I'll discover some other nuance previously overlooked. Talk about immersion in the data! I feel more like I'm being consumed by the data. (Terry, p. 70)

Gaining New Insights Into the Research Process

As students continued to work with their analyses, many of their difficulties were resolved, and ultimately most viewed the hands-on experience as beneficial. They also described how during the analysis they became aware of important aspects of phenomenological inquiry and of qualitative inquiry in general. Some of their insights about qualitative inquiry involved the important role of language, including the inherent limitations of language for capturing lived experience and human meaning and the importance of word choice in representing participants' experiences (Strauss, 1988). Other new forms of learning included recognizing the need to develop a high tolerance for ambiguity in qualitative research, as well as the need to distance oneself regularly from the analysis.

Students also gained insights into the research process as a result of influences outside the research project itself such as class activities, readings, and

discussions with myself and other students. For example, a student described as follows how in-class analysis exercises helped her to develop a deeper appreciation of the significance of language in representing participants' experiences.

We've been analyzing meaning units in class—a very useful activity. I'm amazed at how *difficult* it is and how subtle changes in words can make such tremendous differences in meanings. The simple words "self-care" meant different things to different people in the class. The debate surrounding this exercise made me realize how careful one must be when conducting analysis. (Terry, p. 43)

Other insights included the centrality of the researcher's role in phenomenological and other forms of qualitative inquiry. That is, some students became aware of the importance of the researcher's expertise, prior experiences, and personal background on the research process, as well as the reflexive nature of their attempts to capture the participant's perspective.

Gaining New Insights Into Phenomenology and the Qualitative Paradigm

As the course progressed, it was also evident that students began to understand more clearly phenomenological methodology, the qualitative paradigm in general, and a number of other qualitative concepts. Some of these insights were more philosophical or foundational in nature. For example, some students described how they became aware of the self-defining nature of human beings, the perspectival nature of knowledge, the fundamentally interpretive nature of understanding, and the unattainability of objectivity. As Glesne and Webb (1993) found in their survey of faculty who teach qualitative methods courses, students acquire more than just skills, they "learn another way to view the world and see that they can be *constructors of knowledge* [italics in original]" (p. 263). Students also described how they developed insights into specific phenomenological concepts such as the hermeneutic circle, the life-world, coconstitutionality, essence, and bracketing, for example.³

It should be noted here that although class discussions, discussions with me, and course readings played a key role in students' learning, the use of examples of qualitative research was also important. For example, the following excerpt describes a student's experience of reading a phenomenological study and the role it played in providing her with a more complete understanding of phenomenological research.

I just read a study about couples separating. My reaction surprised me in its intensity.... I have a son aged 6. I could identify strongly with many of the reactions cited in this study. My reaction was "Wow!" Even though reading it was sometimes very painful and guilt-provoking, I couldn't stop reading it. It made the concept of essence come alive for me. I could see my son in the children described and my heart bled for all of them.... Anyway, I now feel I have a much stronger sense of what is meant by the "lebenswelt" or "life-world." ... Reading this has illustrated for me far more about phenomenological research than everything I'd read about it to date. Books and articles describe ideas about a methodology but this thesis helped me *experience* it. (Terry, pp. 33-36)

Valuing Phenomenological and Other Forms of Qualitative Research

Some students began the course with an already established belief in the value of qualitative research. In their journal entries some of these students described how their view of qualitative inquiry was based on a relatively long-standing belief in the assumptions underlying the methodology, previous experience conducting qualitative research, or the compatibility that was seen between counseling and qualitative research. For some students, however, the value of qualitative research only became apparent during the course. At various points in their journals some students described how they came to realize the value of phenomenological research and qualitative research in general, and to appreciate the importance of the individual's perspective, the importance of understanding as a goal of research, and the applicability of qualitative research in real-world settings.

Some students also viewed phenomenological and other forms of qualitative research as less limiting than quantitative research. A number of students described how they were quickly attracted to the nature of the researcher's role in qualitative inquiry and how this brought about changes in their view of themselves as researchers. As one student wrote in his first journal entry,

It [i.e., qualitative research] seems to provide a rich ground of possibilities to explore, in creative ways, and the researcher's tacit or intuitive knowledge has a place, whereas before, they were not the means of objective social science. I have this strange feeling that I can have a personality in this process: Before I had to remain invisible. (Justin, pp. 6-7)

It seemed that ultimately all the students came to recognize the value of qualitative research. Nevertheless, at the end of the course several students remained ambivalent about qualitative research, describing it as a love-hate relationship.

Implications for Teaching Qualitative Methods Courses

One of the dominant themes to emerge from the analysis is the high level of anxiety that many students experienced during the course. As Hutchinson and Webb (1990) have noted, students feel anxiety "at every step in the process" (p. 311). Student anxiety increased at various stages of the course, often as new topics and phases of the research process were introduced. Exposure to a new paradigm, and the subsequent intellectual and emotional adjustment required, can result in considerable stress. Similarly, each stage of the research process—whether it involves formulating a research question, bracketing, collecting data, analyzing data, or writing up findings—has the potential to produce new anxiety. As Kleinman et al. (1997) have found, this has the unfortunate effect of evoking resistance and fears from students, who feel that "we not only violate the scientific canon but unfairly put them in an anxiety-producing situation" (p. 470). Not surprisingly, the analysis phase of the research seemed to pose the most difficulties and generate the most anxiety. I have found that during any given stage of the research process, students' anxiety levels begin to decrease as the requisite skills develop and the tasks involved become more manageable. The next stage, however, poses entirely new challenges, and students' anxiety levels increase sharply once again. I have generally found that this cyclical

pattern repeats itself during the various phases of the research project (and the course in general), taking a cumulative toll on students.

Of equal importance, students' anxiety and frustration at each stage of the research process directly affected their feeling of competence about meeting the requirements of that stage, as well as their more general feeling of competence about doing qualitative research. Feelings of success and a sense of making progress were vital for maintaining self-confidence during the remaining phases of the research project. More specifically, achieving success and developing feelings of competence at each stage were crucial to maintaining self-confidence and focus and avoiding demoralization and cynicism about the project and qualitative research in general. Many of the strategies that follow are aimed either explicitly or implicitly at addressing the issues discussed thus far.

Like a number of other instructors (Glesne & Webb, 1993; Janesick, 1983; Keen, 1996; Lareau, 1987; Liebscher, 1998; Nyden, 1991; Rist, 1983; Wolcott, 1997), I consider it important to include a significant experiential component in a qualitative research course (for another perspective on this issue, see Page, 1997a, 1997b). As Nyden (1991) notes, "You have to go out and do it, dirty your hands" (p. 396). A research project provides students with practical, hands-on experience in designing research, collecting and analyzing qualitative materials, and reporting findings. Despite the difficulties posed by the project, many students wrote (or discussed with me after the course had ended) that they found the experience of completing a phenomenological research project to be essential to understanding phenomenological research (and qualitative research in general) and to developing the necessary skills to conduct subsequent research. Readings, including published qualitative research, and discussions of methodological issues in qualitative inquiry were generally seen as valuable, but as providing incomplete understanding. I have found that by *experiencing* qualitative research first-hand, students are able to come to a fuller understanding of qualitative research and qualitative concepts and practices.

In discussing the value of the research project, students often mentioned the crucial role of step-by-step guidance. I have found one-on-one guidance at each stage of the analysis to be crucial to alleviating student anxiety. Such guidance, as well as other forms of mentoring, are time-consuming but essential (Nyden, 1991). More generally, it seems important to provide students with adequate guidance during various stages of the course itself. In my experience, most students are far less likely to seek out-of-class guidance about questions, unclear material, or other issues when these are not seen as affecting their grade directly. I suspect that this is due in large part to competing course demands and the hectic nature of day-to-day graduate student life.

Providing adequate in-class practice with various stages of research such as data collection (e.g., interviewing skills), organizing and analyzing data (e.g., transcribing, excerpting, developing themes or codes and categories), and writing up qualitative findings is also crucial for a course with an applied component. Similarly, using research examples that include a variety of qualitative methodologies are also important for increasing students' understanding of these methodologies. Related to these strategies, enough class time also needs to be made available for students to share their own experiences of conducting

their research (Glesne & Webb, 1993). In addition to allowing students to learn vicariously from others, thereby increasing all students' understanding of the research process, sufficient time for sharing has the benefit of helping to reduce their anxiety level.

Many of the recommendations made thus far also have the effect of providing students with additional structure. Most of the students were concerned about the uncertainty and lack of structure that they associated with phenomenological research and qualitative research in general (Kleinman et al., 1997; Sells et al., 1997). Compared with quantitative research, the relative lack of structure in qualitative research proved to be a difficult adjustment for many of them. Although many students' desire for a formulaic approach to doing phenomenological or other forms of qualitative research is sometimes frustrating (Glesne & Webb, 1993; Kleinman et al., 1997), I strive to provide students with as much structure as possible. This can involve using the strategies mentioned above, as well as providing detailed guidelines for interviewing, organizing and analyzing data, and developing the various sections of the written project. But in my efforts to address students' pleas for more structure, I also stress repeatedly the need to be tolerant of ambiguity and contradiction during research (Kleinman et al., 1997) and to be patient and not strive to achieve closure too quickly (Strauss, 1988). As one student wrote in her journal summary, "My comfort with ambiguity has been my biggest strength in this whole process" (Elaine, p. 21) Ultimately, however, the issue of structure is one with which I continue to struggle. Kleinman et al.'s (1997) words accurately capture some of my thoughts on this issue: "How can we get more students to find uncertainty exciting rather than scary? We are still learning" (p. 470).

More generally, it also seems important to provide students regularly with more direct forms of reassurance. This can be done in a variety of ways, including adequately acknowledging various forms of student progress, assuring them that their research skills will continue to develop, assuring them that other students experience much the same kinds of things, and urging them not to panic (I emphasize that help is always available and that specific help is provided at each stage of the research process), for example. In my efforts to reassure students, I also encourage them to share their feelings and experiences with each other, as well as to seek support from others outside the course (Hutchinson & Webb, 1990). I believe that to some extent the ability to provide students with support of this kind depends on one's capacity to appreciate the anxiety and stress that they experience when a new paradigm challenges epistemological and ontological assumptions, or a new form of research offers far less structure, for example. The insights that I have gained from the reflective journals have certainly deepened my own understanding of what students experience during my course and influenced my development as an instructor.

The themes that emerged from my analysis of the reflective journals suggest that students derive a variety of benefits from taking qualitative research courses. The path to reaping these benefits, however, can be demanding and stressful (Kleinman et al., 1997). Moreover, the nature and magnitude of these demands may differ from those encountered in other graduate courses. The insights that can be gained from examining students' experiences during qualitative courses, however, can help to inform the design and teaching of

these courses and enhance students' ability to meet the challenges of qualitative inquiry.

Notes

1. The phenomenological practice of bracketing is similar to other forms of positional reflexivity (Macbeth, 2001) in that it is an ongoing mode of self-analysis: a systematic monitoring of one's own subjectivity. It allows the researcher to become more aware of how her or his position (e.g., gender, ethnicity, race, culture, class, age, personal background, theoretical commitments, biases) permeates all stages of inquiry. Although some writers argue that reflexivity is not in itself a methodological procedure for removing distortion, bracketing involves efforts to set aside specific presuppositions (i.e., assumptions, beliefs, biases, personal motives) about the phenomenon of interest. The researcher may be more or less successful in doing so. In discussing bracketing with students, I made it clear that some aspects of this methodological practice are unique to phenomenological inquiry. I emphasized the need to make a conscientious effort to engage in systematic self-reflection during all stages of inquiry so as to disclose relevant aspects of oneself that are brought to the inquiry process. I stressed the importance of bracketing for fostering openness to the phenomenon as experienced and expressed by the participant. I also discussed the value of including information about the returns from this self-reflection so as to allow the reader to better understand the perspective from which the research was conducted.
2. Discussion of these phenomenological and other qualitative concepts is beyond the scope of this article. The interested reader may wish to refer to the discussions in Berg (2001), Denzin and Lincoln (2000), Polkinghorne (1989), and Valle and King (1978).
3. Discussion of most of these phenomenological concepts is beyond the scope of this article. Excellent discussions of these and other important aspects of phenomenological inquiry can be found in Colaizzi (1978), Polkinghorne (1989), Valle and King (1978), and von Eckartsberg (1986).

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