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An investigation of a Qualitative Research course at a U.S. University

by Angela L. E. Walmsley

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Action research is typically performed by people who want to do something to improve their own situation (Sagor, 1992). Often, it is also collaborative, involving participants with different roles in the situation; together they plan, analyze data and discuss the results, and then share the findings with others in a similar field or situation who may be able to benefit from them. While action research can be used in a variety of settings, the project I present here is specific to education and teaching. I carried out an action research project that investigated aspects of a graduate qualitative education research course offered during the summer 1999 session at a U.S. university taught by a professor whom I shall call Dr. Griffith. An important anticipated benefit of this project was the evidence it would provide on students' perceptions of Dr. Griffith's teaching and organization of the course and the opportunity he would then have to make changes in the light of the findings. But as a graduate student nearing the end of her doctoral coursework, I too expected to benefit from the study. In the future, I hope to teach similar types of courses as a faculty member and so, having already taken the course and being familiar with the material, I thought that being a participant observer and carrying out an evaluation of the course would give me useful insights both about graduate teaching and about carrying out action research.

Ideally, action research needs to continue into a second cycle, third cycle, or more, in which the outcomes and planned changes are observed and evaluated again (Carr & Kemmis, 1983). Action research can be divided into the following steps: problem formation, data collection, data analysis, reporting of results, and action planning (Sagor, 1992). The problem formation is the realization that improvements can be made to existing practices. However, Carr & Kemmis (1983) state that formulating a problem does not have to be the initial step. In fact, a period of analysis and observation may be necessary before the issues or problems become clear. After discussing the structure of Dr. Griffith's qualitative research course with him, I developed three research issues based on: the use of class time, the influence of the textbook, and the benefits of the assignments. Dr. Griffith did not start with specific problems that he wished to investigate, but he was interested in discovering any improvements that could be made to his course, based on the three topics chosen. These I addressed as follows: Considering the use of class time, I observed if students were actively involved in class discussions and activities. Second, I focused on how much the students read the book and if the assigned readings were useful to them. Finally, I investigated which assignments were most helpful to the students.

Procedure

Before describing the methods of data collection, I should start by explaining the need for triangulation. Triangulation means collecting different kinds of data that bear on an issue so that

each can be used to cross-check and throw light on the others (Altrichter et al., 1993). Ideally, the results of each kind of data analysis will corroborate the others, thus allowing the overall findings to be presented with greater confidence (Hopkins, 1993). Conversely, the lack of such corroboration is an indication to the researcher that the issue requires further investigation. Most researchers suggest that collecting and analyzing three different kinds of data is usually sufficient to validate the project (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Traditionally, the kinds of data that are triangulated are interviews, observations, and document review, but surveys are sometimes included. Considering my research questions, I felt a document review would not produce much information as no documents were available to me regarding the students. Therefore, my data collection consisted of interviews, observations, and a student questionnaire.

The people who participated in the study were the members of the summer qualitative class. The first data collection strategy used was observation. I observed the qualitative research class during at least two of the four meetings per week, each session lasting approximately three hours. As a participant observer, I recorded field notes while watching the lecturer and students during class. Because I was involved with the class, I feel positive relationships were fostered before interviews. Developing relationships in action research can create an effective research atmosphere as the students feel comfortable before they are required to participate in interviews or a survey (Stringer, 1996). The next data collection strategy used was interviewing. The interviews were done on a voluntary basis and tape recorded, and each lasted approximately fifteen minutes. The last data collection strategy used in this project was the distribution of a questionnaire. Thirteen students responded to the questionnaire, which included some Likert style questions and some short answer, free response questions. The student questionnaire was given during one of the last few days of class in order to obtain as full an evaluation as possible of the course. While the administration of a questionnaire is often thought of as a quantitative research technique, it can be beneficial as a qualitative technique, particularly when it is used descriptively (Grady, 1998). In the following sections, I will describe the collection and analysis of the data in more detail and present some findings from the research. Each of the three issues - class time, readings, and assignments - will be discussed in terms of all three kinds of data collected so that the concept of triangulation can be more fully appreciated.

Class time

Concerning class time, I found that the first few sessions I observed were mainly lecture with no class activities and little discussion. Dr. Griffith asked some free response questions to which many members of the class responded together. He also asked questions which individuals answered, and the same people continued to volunteer. Dr. Griffith rarely asked a particular student a question; therefore, questions in class tended to lead to a more relaxed atmosphere. Students obviously felt free to ask questions during the lecture; however Dr. Griffith tended to answer all questions without other students' input or class discussion, and little discussion evolved from them. Each member of the class sat quietly and took notes, with little interaction between themselves and the teacher. When asked a question, students offered suggestions readily but there was little discussion. Therefore, if more discussion is to occur, it may be advisable for Dr. Griffith to both invite discussion and encourage students to address each other and not simply the professor.

The fifth class session consisted of the following group activities: each member discussing a recent assignment within a group, each group walking around the campus taking notes of their observations, and the members of groups reviewing pictures as a document review. These activities changed the atmosphere of the class, as was apparent in the sixth class session, which was much more open with many more people freely responding and offering opinions for discussion. While Dr. Griffith still provided most of the answers, two different people offered their own personal suggestions during class discussion. Having a class activity such as discussion or project earlier in the semester might help in creating this more open atmosphere, which was remarkably different than any of the previous class sessions I had observed.

The next data collection strategy used was interviewing. Concerning class discussion, one student said, "You feel very comfortable in discussing things in the class," while another said, "... he often started class with discussion or asking us if we had any questions." Two of the students suggested the use of more discussion. For example, one stated, "... there's not much discussion where questions and comments go ... he doesn't pose it back to the class and say what do you guys think. That may be a strategy for engaging people, you know." Many of the students also stated that they really liked discussion best, particularly discussing the papers.

For example, one student stated, "I liked the fact that we discussed our first papers because otherwise you go to the work of writing the paper, but other than having him read it, it's nice to hear other people's insights and thoughts and where they are coming from because there are so many people with varied backgrounds." Another student said, "I didn't know how I felt about being elected to read a part of my paper to the group but that's part of it too -- getting out there and standing up and doing something orally." One student had a suggestion for sharing the first assignment, "I didn't like it because it was hard within groups of three to choose just one paper to present to the class. Really they were all good and it's too bad we couldn't all share something about it. I don't know that we needed to report back -- maybe just leave them as is or everyone shares something."

Some of the students interviewed suggested the use of more group activities and gave some ideas. For example, one stated, "if there was a part I would change it would probably be more group work. Maybe I might even have someone or people do projects together -- a qualitative interview with someone in the class." One student interviewed missed the one day of class when the observation walk, discussion of the pictures, and the discussion of the first assignment were done in class; therefore, this person felt that very few activities were part of class; thus spreading out the activities is a suggestion. One particular activity that was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews was observing the campus. Many students liked this activity and found it beneficial. For example, one stated, "I liked the little observation walk! It was a place we'd all been but hadn't really paid much attention before. It was good and I enjoyed it a lot."

One question addressed whether the instructor engaged all students in activities and discussion. All students interviewed agreed that he did involve students in the activities. For example, one stated, "Certainly in the activities everyone participated." Another said, "You are always going to have those few oddball people who are introverted and never seem to participate but I think he does a good job of trying."

However, concerning the involvement of students in discussion, one student stated, "There are certainly some people who tend to want to talk more than others, umm, I think everyone has spoken a little bit but I'm not sure how much conscious effort he has made to draw out the people who are quieter." Another student stated, "There is a comfort level in discussion as he doesn't make you feel uncomfortable especially if you say something that isn't what he was looking for." A suggestion by one student is, "... sometimes when students would give an answer, he would change it when writing it on the board. So maybe perhaps, if you are asking for ideas then leave them alone." One student stated, "There are a couple of people who have had minimal verbal participation unless he called on them directly which he has not really done. Maybe that's because it's a condensed course. Maybe over a course of 16 weeks he would get around to calling on every person and drawing out those other people. But our class goes by so quickly that there isn't much opportunity and he would take from the ones who were more open and who naturally just jump in." This student seemed to feel that the reason the instructor did not engage all students in discussion was because of the time constraints of the course -- an issue to be aware of during the regular semester. Also, since the students felt that discussion was non-threatening, supporting more of it might be beneficial.

The last data collection strategy used in this project was the distribution of a questionnaire. Concerning the class activities and discussions, the majority of students felt that both the class discussions and activities were beneficial. Furthermore, most (69%) believed there were adequate class discussions. Also, most felt that the lecturer involved all students equally during class time. From the Likert style questions, the majority of the class had positive responses to the use of class time as it was presented. One of the short answer questions asked members of the class to make suggestions regarding the use of class time. The most common suggestion was made by four different people, and that was to encourage more small group activities. For example, one student wrote, "More of the small group activities ? found these to be very beneficial." Two students suggested more discussion. Other responses from the questionnaire include, "The activities were useful -- pictures, sample transcripts, etc. Please do something like this almost every evening." "At the end it started to get boring. Brainstorming advantages and disadvantages of all the methods of data collection was tiresome. Perhaps more group work would have helped." "Class time was used effectively and with the students' questions in mind."

Therefore, from all three data collection sources, it can be concluded that the students felt comfortable participating in class activities and discussion. While they felt free to speak in the class, they encouraged Dr. Griffith to use more class discussion and activities because they found them so beneficial. Based on the interviews and the survey, the students felt Dr. Griffith involved all students equally. Therefore, this would be an issue to look for in the observations during the next cycle of action research of this course.

Textbook

Researching the usefulness of the book is difficult through observation because it is personal to each student. However, I did notice that the majority of the students came to class with their books and notes, and most students' books included highlighting or underlining. These procedures indicate that at the early stages of the course, students were reading the assigned readings. Dr. Griffith also stressed the importance of the book and referred to it specifically at

least a couple of times during most classes. Dr. Griffith emphasized reading ahead in the book in order to start on the third assignment, about which many of the students were worried. Most people did follow along in the book during the lecture and, during the second session that I observed, students referenced the book at least four times when asking questions. Students continued to reference the book throughout the classes, and many followed along or read part of the chapter during the class. Therefore, I feel many were using the book in conjunction with the lecture and assignments.

The students interviewed stated that they completed most or all of the assigned readings. Many responded with a percentage such as 80% or 95-100% while one student stated, "a good amount." Another student said, "I get the readings done with no problem before class. She's a fast read." However, another student questioned the claims of having read all the assigned readings from other members of the class by stating, "Oh I've completed 100% which is not true of everyone." As with many classes, the lecturer might suspect that the students read most at the beginning and then read less as the course progresses. One student commented about this: "The first couple of nights I was very conscious and trying to read ahead of time, umm, the last couple I think I found we weren't sitting and discussing the text in class so it wasn't as critical to have read it ahead of time. So, if I found something had to go, I figured it was ok and didn't really matter because he knew we were talking about things that went beyond what was in the text or it just wasn't problematic if I hadn't read it so I'm probably being less good about reading it ahead of time than I had been." Therefore, the lecturer needs to be aware that some students feel this way and may utilize the book less than expected.

However, all students interviewed found relevance in the reading assignments to both class and their written assignments. Concerning class, one student stated, "The readings were sometimes a different perspective on it, or different examples, but it made everything in the class make sense." "I think the readings reinforce what he is teaching in class." Regarding the assignments, one student said, "I have read it because I think maybe it will help when I have to write the papers, so I've read it with the goal of the paper in mind." Another said, "I think that the readings do help for the assignment. I do think that what he says complements that." "I found some of the readings more relevant with this last paper in having to go out and do the interviews, write the interview questions -- reading through that chapter was particularly helpful." Therefore, students found the book and readings helpful not only in class, but particularly when working on assignments, especially the last one.

In general the students had a high opinion of the textbook and liked it very much. For example, one stated, "I think it's well written, easy to read. I like it the best of any of the textbooks I've had to read so far." Another stated, "I liked the book because it was also down to earth and it gave you examples -- useful things. So rather than just talk about it in general terms it gave guidance. I felt I could do qualitative research with that book. Some books I've bought are not useful at all and this one seems to be very user friendly." Some of these students indicated the usefulness of the book as a reference guide for the future. One student said, "It's going to be a shelf copy. One of those things you are going to keep within an arm's reach on your desk. Something I will flip through for reference purposes."

From the survey, the majority (54%) stated that they found the book helpful. When asked if they found the assigned readings overwhelming, only 8% of the students stated almost always, with 15% saying sometimes, 46% saying not often and 31% saying never. Therefore, there was a range in answers about feeling overwhelmed, which may relate to taking the course in the shortened form during intersession. Dr. Griffith was interested in finding how much of the assigned reading people completed. Therefore, I posed this question once in the form of the Likert scale and once as a free response question. In terms of the Likert scale, 31% of the students stated they always read the assigned readings, 46% saying almost always and 23% saying sometimes. The free response gave a better indication because the students were allowed to write as a percentage the amount they completed reading. Only one student stated as low as 40% while two stated 100%. The average percentage was 78%. Overall, the students found the book helpful and useful in class and for assignments, and most read a large amount of the assigned readings.

Assignments

Concerning the issue of assignments, observations led to fewer results because the topic of homework and assignments is personal to each student and not discussed as often during class. Most were worried about the last (third) assignment, which was the most demanding. This assignment required the students to perform a miniature qualitative study. Dr. Griffith tended to spend at least some time each class discussing the next assignment and also the final paper.

It can be assumed that most were content with their first and second assignments because, when they were handed back, very few people seemed concerned or distressed. Both assignments allowed students to express their opinions, which one student particularly liked. Concerning the third assignment, some students felt uneasy about whether they had completed the project totally correctly.

The assignments were rated positively by most students interviewed. All liked the third assignment best. For example, one student said, "The third assignment I thought was really good." Another student said, "I think it was good because it tied together everything that we had talked about. So, I liked it except it was harder than I thought. Overall, the final project was good and tied together everything he tried to address in class."

While the students interviewed liked the first and second assignments, many gave suggestions for changing and improving the assignments. For example, one suggestion was "I think I could have benefited from looking at some other topic dealing with qualitative research that I felt that I needed more study on or some way to communicate with him about that as opposed to him picking one thing for everybody. Some choice might be better because you have to go back and read more through those chapters that pertained to it, and I think that might have helped us to learn more in a particular area."

From the questionnaire, the majority of the class (58%) stated that they never found the assignments overwhelming and that they found them helpful in understanding the topics of the class. One free response question asked which assignments they felt were most beneficial. Overwhelmingly, the third assignment was chosen as being most beneficial. While the third

assignment was the most worrisome to the members of the class, it appears to have been the most beneficial based on all three data sources. More analysis of the first two assignments may be useful for future research projects, particularly if they are changed to be made more helpful and individually relevant.

Besides the three main issues researched, I gave the class the option of making any other comments or providing any other information they felt necessary. The last question in the interviews asked for other comments. Many just reiterated their suggestions, but overall they thought the course was very good. For example, one stated, "I like it and think it's a good class," and another stated, "I mean he does a good job ? I really like him as a professor." "I really like having no statistics! He makes qualitative very do-able by normal people and not mathematicians!" "I thought it was an excellent class. I felt he made it seem logical." Also, the last free response question in the questionnaire asked for any further comments. While many did not respond to this, at least five students indicated that it was an excellent course.

Results and Action Planning

As indicated by the last free response question, I feel most students considered that the course was very well run and beneficial. While there are small suggestions for the instructor throughout this paper, there were no overall negative comments made to me in the surveys, interviews, or observations. I also feel that triangulation was successful as I gained much the same information from the surveys, observations, and interviews regarding the research questions.

In conclusion, concerning class time, most felt class time was beneficial and used wisely. One suggestion would be to include more class discussion and class activities. One student's suggestion of dividing each session into part lecture and part activity would be an answer to the issue of possibly not enough student participation. Dr. Griffith may want to consider asking more opinions of the class to encourage group discussion rather than answering most questions himself. Many students felt the lecturer involved everyone to the best of his ability and that most participated well. Overall, students were pleased with what they accomplished during class time. As an observer, I personally feel that the class was open to discussion and activities, but was slow to become active in either. Having a class activity or discussion session earlier in the course might help with this, as I found a remarkable difference of participation after the session when students shared papers with each other, observed around the campus, and looked at old pictures as document review. Therefore, getting students involved earlier might lead to more class discussion and activities from the beginning.

Regarding the textbook, the students stated that overall they read the book a large majority of the time (the average again being 78%). Most were very open about discussing the assigned readings and the book, and many found the book useful and helpful. The interviews particularly showed me that the students indicated they would continue to use the book as a reference in their other courses and/or dissertations. One issue to consider is whether it is more beneficial to remain with only one textbook or increase the reading and books during the regular semester. Using only one book seems to have been highly effective with this class.

Concerning the assignments, all found assignment three extremely helpful, even though they had much anxiety throughout the class concerning it. Good suggestions include looking at other qualitative projects or allowing the students to choose their own particular issue in qualitative research that is more important to them to investigate in the other assignments.

In conclusion, I found that the class is well taught and well received. However, I wanted to find out to what extent Dr. Griffith had used the results and suggestions despite the class being successful. Therefore, I interviewed Dr. Griffith during the sixth week of the fall university term about any changes he had made in the qualitative research class he is currently teaching. He stated that he found the project and results very helpful, and has made a number of changes upon reflection. For example, he has started the group activities earlier, as he is more aware of the timeline in terms of getting the students to know each other better and work together. Another important change is that he is aware of the benefit of having less teacher dominance in the class. Instead of answering most questions himself, he solicits students' answers more. Concerning the assignments and book use, Dr. Griffith has taken some of the students' suggestions from the study and has continued to use the same book that the students liked, and he has changed the second assignment to one that he thinks may be more pertinent to the students' interests. Possibly most importantly, Dr. Griffith stated that, because of the study, he was able to reflect on the outcomes and suggestions and has transferred some of the changes to his other classes as well as his qualitative research class. For example, Dr. Griffith stated that he "has less teacher dominance in answering questions in all classes." Furthermore, Dr. Griffith states that he will continue the cycle of research and assess his teaching and classes again -- particularly the shortened summer qualitative class. I believe that Dr. Griffith has found this research project helpful in making changes to his qualitative research class as well as to his teaching style overall.

As a possible future instructor of graduate students, I feel I have benefited greatly from this project. First, I understand better what would be involved in carrying out such an action research project in my own class. Second, I have become more aware of my own teaching style and reflect more on my own teaching of undergraduate students. Most importantly, I have learned that, even in a class that is well taught and well received, changes can always be made to improve it, and now I have the skills to be able to do this based on research. If I were teaching such a class, I would most likely carry out the research myself. I feel confident of being able to do this now that I have completed this action research project.

Concerning this project, the results may possibly have been affected by my presence, as I was not a regular member of class. While I feel I developed positive relationships with most members of the class, my presence most likely could have affected the study. Therefore, I feel that doing the action research myself in a future class would eliminate any problems that might result from the presence of an outside observer. Another important thing to note is that all of this information was collected with respect to the intersession class, therefore Dr. Griffith may have to address issues differently when teaching and researching a full semester class. One issue that could have been developed more in the study was the overall effectiveness of the teacher. I did assess the issue of class discussions and groups activities, but did not dwell as much on the actual teaching style of the professor. Many students alluded to issues of teaching style, such as teacher dominance; therefore, his teaching style became an obvious issue that could be evaluated more in another study.

In conclusion, this action research project was beneficial to both Dr. Griffith and myself. Dr. Griffith has stated that, while he found it helpful and is currently making changes to his courses, he plans on continuing the action research project for his qualitative research class into at least a second cycle of analysis. I, as well, will continue to reflect on my own teaching and consider implementing action research projects in my own classes. As I hope to teach graduate students in research classes in the future, I am pleased to have developed skills from this project that will help in teaching similar types of courses.

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