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A Scaffolding Approach Using Interviews and Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

This article examines how educational scaffolding was used in a graduate research methods course to encourage student mastery of two qualitative research concepts, interviews and narrative inquiry. Findings suggest that scaffolding resulted in students' mastery of both concepts as well as students' increased attention to quality of interview questions and outcomes. Further implications suggest scaffolding would be useful in combining other qualitative topics such as integrating content analysis skills with research designs such as phenomenology, grounded theory, and case studies.

Keywords: Narrative Inquiry, Interviews, Qualitative Methods, Scaffolding

Introductory courses in research methods often offer a survey of topics designed to expose students to a range of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools and research designs. Based on a review of the table of contents of popular research methods textbooks such as *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods* (Creswell, 2013) and *Practical Research: Planning and Design* (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016), common research designs taught include observations, narrative inquiry, grounded theory, phenomenology, and case studies. Data collection tools usually include observations, interviews, and content analysis. As reported by Cook (2008), instructors often rely on the chapter ordering of textbooks and present compartmentalized topics to students; limiting students' abilities to appreciate the interactions among related topics. Further, compartmentalizing topics requires mastery of each topic without necessarily understanding relationships among topics. Because research designs such as narrative inquiry often require the use of qualitative data collection tools, such as interviews, a

scaffolding approach to application-based projects allows students to demonstrate mastery of complementary designs and tools.

In foundational work regarding active learning, Bruner (1960) relates the concept of knowledge construction to active learning. Vygotsky (1978) posits learning course development across two levels, actual and potential development, with proximal development explaining the gap between the two levels. Proximal development relies on students' problem solving abilities, often guided by adult supervision. Active learning coupled with independent yet guided learning are foundational to the concept of scaffolding. Scaffolding, as defined by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976, p. 90), enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts. Though research on scaffolding usually focuses on children (e.g., Langer & Applebee, 1986; Pinantoan, 2013), the idea of a novice, per Wood et al. (1976), translates easily to new graduate students engaged in learning unfamiliar material.

As described by Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003), scaffolding involves a graduated structuring of learning activities intended to build learner responsibility, resulting in internalization of skill mastery leading to higher cognitive functioning. Using Greenfield (1984) and Wood et al. (1976) as guides, Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) identified eight Scaffolding characteristics that warrant consideration by instructors while developing support structures, to include: 1) providing structure; 2) functioning as a tool; 3) extending learner range; 4) allowing learning to accomplish task otherwise considered impossible; 5) helping to ensure learner success; 6) motivating learners; 7) reducing learner frustration, and 8) helping learners accept increased responsibilities.

The active-learning exercise that will be described uses scaffolding in the adult-learning graduate classroom as the foundation to integrate a qualitative research method data collection

tool with a qualitative research method design. The instructor uses all steps of scaffolding, as depicted by Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003), throughout the assignment. The specific assignment, instructor support and resources, as well as student reflections are discussed.

Method

I taught a 14-week graduate research methods course that was the first course in a 15-course sequence in a student affairs in higher education graduate cohort program (n=11) at a medium-sized, Midwestern university. Prior to this semester, I sequenced the course such that qualitative assignments comprised the first half of the semester followed by quantitative methods for the remainder of the semester. Inspired by Cook's (2008) piece on introducing the scientific method during a single lecture as an example of avoiding compartmentalizing materials, I reconfigured my standard course syllabus such that the qualitative data collection tool of interviewing and qualitative research design of narrative inquiry report were integrated into one assignment. As I integrated the assignments, I purposefully considered scaffolding while developing the updated assignment. Further, as part of the assignment deliverable, students were required to provide personal reflections on their experiences with conducting interviews and using narrative inquiry.

Procedure

Prior to this homework assignment, students had independently completed an observational assignment in which they were required to make observations of a phenomena of interest, to collect and code data, to generate descriptive statistics, to identify themes, to discuss aspects of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and to reflect upon their experiences. Examples of observational topics included observing compliance-related behavior regarding recycle bin usage, payment methods at gas stations, behaviors of riders on public transportation,

and impacts of social media usage on group interactions. During the class debrief of the observation assignment, students expressed opinions indicating a level of discomfort with conducting the member checks, which provided a logical segue to interviews as a data collection tool in qualitative research. Based on my experience teaching this course, I anticipated the students' reactions, and generally followed the flow of the course textbook where interviewing was the next topic discussed. For this course offering; however, I felt students might embrace the interviewing assignment if it was integrated with another learning outcome; specifically, a narrative inquiry report.

Providing Structure

Prior to assigning the project, students read assigned materials in the course textbook (Mertler, 2016), heard a class lecture on interviewing as well as narrative inquiry, and viewed an online video depicting usage of interviews designed for narrative inquiry projects. I provided an assignment sheet instructing students to generate a research question based on their recent experiences with their observational assignments, if possible. If a student wanted to engage in a topic based on an area other than the observational assignment, this was an acceptable alternative. Students were instructed to solicit a participant to interview with the purpose of conducting at least a 20-minute interview. Students were required to transcribe at least 10 minutes of the interview interaction. Students were required to restory or retell the information gathered from the interview and generate a narrative inquiry report in an attempt to address their research questions. As part of their submissions, students were required to provide written reflections on their experiences with the narrative inquiry process.

For clarification, sources to understand narrative inquiry and interviews were discussed and distributed to all students prior to class lectures. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) defined

narrative inquiry as a way of understanding experiences via "collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (p. 20). Interviews as a research tool are differentiated among unstructured, semi-structured, and structured interviews (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016).

Functioning as a Tool

As required by the assignment, students were required to submit the name of their interviewees, rationale for interviewee selection, and interview schedules to me for approval prior to interviewing. Many students needed assistance realigning the order of interview questions and were provided feedback indicating that more questions would likely be required. I also verified with appropriate University officials that instructional review board approval was not required for this assignment and shared the information with the students. Further, students who required access to recording and transcription devices were directed to appropriate University resources to borrow necessary equipment. Finally, two examples of narrative inquiry articles were provided to students along with suggested heading titles for their reports. Headings included: 1) introduction/background; 2) research objectives; 3) participants(s) and setting(s); 4) methods and techniques; 5) analysis/findings/discussion of themes/interviewee's story; 6) limitations of study, and 7) commentary and concluding remarks.

Extending Learner Range

In order to push students beyond their comfort zones, I requested they seek individuals for their interviews who were not friends, but rather acquaintances or co-workers. Students were also provided instructions and guidance on interviewing; however, students could select the format (face-to-face, telephone, skype) as well as manner of recording (audio, visual recording,

iPad, social media application, software). I provided basic instructions on formatting the interview transcripts, but students were required to manage this process individually.

Allowing Learner to Accomplish Task Otherwise Considered Impossible

By requiring the students to generate interview questions and to receive approval prior to conducting interviews, students were prepared to conduct the interviews. Students were encouraged to pilot test their interview questions, to practice with their recording devices, and to learn information about their interviewee via available resources (online, personal network).

Helping to Ensure Learner Success

Students were given two weeks to complete the assignment and could contact me for assistance, additional guidance, and feedback if needed. All aspects of the assignment, to include external resources, were discussed at length in class to ensure students' understanding. Students could discuss their projects with class peers but were expected to complete their own work.

Motivating Learners

Students were reminded that assignments are intended to be high challenge/low threat opportunities for learning. I reiterated that understanding the process of using the qualitative data collection tool and research design was the purposes of the assignment, not necessarily the quality of the interview.

Reducing Learner Frustration

All course resources were made available via the class's online learning platform. Additionally, students were not required to provide the audio or video of their interviews. The assignment was debriefed in class, so students could share their successes and failures to validate they were not the only ones having "ah ha" moments. Students also received immediate instructor feedback in written and verbal forms.

Helping Learners Accept Increased Responsibility

Students were responsible for all aspects of managing the interview process, to include soliciting interviewees, generating interview questions, recording and transcribing data, and using the exemplars of narrative inquiries as guides. Students were also held to a rigid assignment deadline as well as submission formatting guidelines.

Results

A portion of the assignment required students to reflect on lessons learned from the process of conducting the interviews and restorying the information for the narrative inquiry report. Interestingly, no student noted difficulty following the examples for the narrative inquiry. From an evaluation perspective, 8 of 11 students followed the articles provided as exemplars to guide their report and produced quality products. The three students who did not use the exemplar articles as a guide appeared to have difficulty in the restorying the information. These students also included the transcripts from the interview directly into the body of the narrative inquiry report rather than submitting separately as instructed. Further, students were able to navigate the requirement of providing 10 minutes of transcription, though students did note some learning opportunities. Students' written reflection comments highlighted their experiences with the transcription experience. As examples, one female student commented, "On a funny note, I set up the iPad, assumed it was recording, but it did not record anything. Luckily, the Nikon camera was operating as it should during the interview. It was also difficult to transcribe the interview with all of the background noise from the tabletop game going on next to us."

As second example related to the transcription experience is the written reflection comment from another female student who utilized the assistance of two interpreters.

The interviewer has a hearing loss and uses hearing assistive devices called cochlear implants, which are placed on either ear to allow the interviewer to have access to sound, though not in the capacity of an individual who has normal hearing skills. While the interview with subject (name redacted) was not a concern with the interviewer's ability to use cochlear implants through a quiet, one-on-one setting to conduct the interview, the transcription of the interview is subject to error. When the interviewer did the transcription, the assistance of two certified American Sign Language interpreters was used. These two interpreters listened to the voice recording of the interview and relayed what they heard through the use of American Sign Language interpretation for the interviewer to retain as the interviewer typed down what they observed through the visual interpretation.

The student's reflections were insightful and encouraging, as this student effectively employed the narrative inquiry method and also realized the transcript would benefit from a member check. Though the campus's Office of Disability Services suggested the student complete an alternate assignment in lieu of the narrative inquiry, the student was confident she could (and did) complete the assignment as intended.

Students also provided written reflection comments on their experiences with generating interview questions and conducting the interviews. Compared to comments from students from previous courses where the interview assignment was not integrated with the narrative inquiry, or

any report, these students appeared to comment on the need for quality questions needed to generate information for the restorying (See Table 1).

Table 1

Sample of Student Reflections regarding Interview Questions

Student 1	Through this experience, I have learned that a quality-like interview can easily include emerging topics and questions to cover with the interviewee.
Student 2	I would have created even more questions. After the first couple minutes of the interview, I had gone through most of my questions and started asking more impromptu questions throughout the remainder of the interview
Student 3	If I could re-do the interview, I would ask more questions about experiences he had in his previous security-related jobs that led him to want to continue policing and become a [redacted] University police officer. I should have been more specific in some questions, such as asking him to clarify which trends he sees in non-compliance when on-campus vs. off-campus. .I would ask more semi-structured questions in my next interview in order to draw more information out of him.
Student 4	If I could do the interview again, I would include a few more questions relating to the participant's feelings about retention
Student 5	For future interviews, I will attempt to improve the quality of my unstructured questions. I will also continue to work on remaining silent to allow the interviewee to tell their story, and to not influence how they answer
Student 6	Toward the end of the interview, I had to backtrack to different topics to think of questions to reach twenty minutes. It was difficult and I wished I had more preplanned questions. I found this surprising because I felt as though I had plenty of questions

I forewarned students that their supply of interview questions would likely be exhausted before 20 minutes of interviewing was achieved, as interview length could vary depending upon how willing the interviewee was to share information, to respond to prompts, and to engage in conversation. I did review all interview questions and made suggestions for increasing the number of questions, but based on students' comments, they did not always add enough questions. As the 20-minute interview length was chosen to ensure students made appropriate efforts at achieving assignment goals and to make sure the interviewee's time was appropriate used, I was pleased to see the comments regarding the need for more questions. This assignment,

as intended, allowed students to learn a basic concept of interviewing, the need for thorough preparation, in a low threat/low risk environment. Sometimes students only need exposed to a concept one time for it to resonate, and students' comments indicated they did grasp the concept of preparation required for an interview.

Discussion

Considering positive comments made by students during the class debrief of the assignment and graded performance on the assignment, the integration of the interview data collection tool and narrative inquiry research design appeared to be successful. One male student commented, "I had a lot of fun with this assignment as it let me kind of use some of the things I picked up as a Journalism undergraduate student." A non-traditional female student with two children also attending the university shared, "This was the first interview I have ever performed, so this experience gave me the opportunity to work on my interview skills and also gave me better understanding about the effort that goes into educational research." I was pleased that students connected the interview and narrative inquiry with minimal difficulty.

Research methods courses are often taught in a linear fashion, though research is not conducted linearly. Qualitative tools, designs, and methods are usually presented in the beginning of textbooks (e.g., Leedy & Ormrod, 2016) followed by quantitative tools, designs, and methods, and then mixed methods approaches. The integration of interviewing and narrative inquiry is just one example of how scaffolding can be used in the research methods classroom. Examples of other integration ideas for the qualitative portion of the course include 1) interviews and content analysis, 2) interviews, content analysis, and grounded theory, 3) interviews, content analysis, and phenomenology, and 4) interviews, content analysis, and case studies. Discussions

of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and related facets (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) can also be integrated into these examples.

Following the instructional scaffolding guidance provided by Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003), output from these integration examples could also serve as the foundation for introducing the quantitative tool of surveys, as evidenced by a comment from the female student with a hearing disability. She reflected, "There are several ways I could go with this approach, and I would be eager to expand on this study if probable." Variables as unobservable constructs, measurement, and survey item development as well as discussions of quantitative and mixed-methods would logically follow. By purposefully using a scaffolding approach throughout the research methods course, instructors can present research concepts from its qualitative origins through the empirical uses of quantitative and mixed methods approaches.

The student affairs graduate students participating in this assignment provided a motivated sample to use for the initial attempt at using this assignment. As part of their remaining graduate program curriculum, they will be required to conduct interviews and to complete qualitative research in at least two more courses. As the students gain mastery of the interviewing skills and narrative inquiry reporting process, this research methods assignment should provide an appropriate foundation for the scaffolding of future courses in their curriculum. Based on student reflections and my understanding of the student affairs curriculum, I intend to add a requirement for video, in addition to the audio, currently required for this assignment. I can build a follow-on assignment that focuses on content analysis and coding, as the students will be able to review the video and audio for accuracy as well as assessing nonverbal behaviors of both the interviewer (student) and interviewee.

This scaffolding effort was used in a face-to-face classroom environment with demonstrated success. As course materials were provided in electronic format, and the actual lecture time was minimal, this assignment would translate well to an online or hybrid classroom. Further research opportunities include assessing students' mastery of compartmentalized assignments with assignments designed with a scaffolding intent in face-to-face, hybrid, and online environments.

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