Mentoring Graduate Students in Conducting Qualitative Research

written by Karen Keifer-Boyd, Professor In Charge, Art Education

I have had an opportunity to develop skills and strategies for mentoring graduate students in conducting qualitative research by teaching courses on qualitative and feminist research methodologies, and from directing 11 dissertations, 3 masters theses, and several honors theses over the past 13 years, as well as serving as a member on numerous graduate committees. With the definition of research by the Federal government that the Institution Review Board (IRB) follows in adhering to the Federal regulations on research, it is always a challenge to guide students through ethical dilemmas and legal regulations. According to the federal regulations (45 CFR 46.102(d)), “Research means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.” Qualitative research is exploratory and provides context-bound insights, that is, findings are not generalizable.

In critical praxis-oriented research, TRUTH is defined as consensus construction of the combined quantity and quality of information that provides the most powerful understanding that leads to action. Qualitative research involves questioning “what is acting and how” (Latour, 2005, p. 60).

Mentoring qualitative studies involves guiding graduate student researchers in critical self-aware strategies for reciprocal reflexivity of data and theory. These strategies include seeking to understand the worldviews of research participants through a dialogic research design. In submitting IRB proposals for conducting research with humans, the researcher must specify the interview questions that will be asked. In a dialogic research practice it is difficult to peg the “round” methodology into the “square holes” on the IRB form. However, one or two relevant questions can be prepared by articulating a clear theoretical frame for data collection and analysis. In practice the researcher can use the key questions to generate two or more hours of dialogue, by listening to and probing deeply into the research participants’ understandings relevant to the research purpose without mediating their responses. This takes practice.

Due to the rapport, length of time, and confidentiality that is needed, it is often not possible to include graduate students in observing an experienced researcher involved in dialogic research. However, graduate students can practice with peers interested in learning feminist research methodologies of reciprocity and reflexivity. Careful review of video or audio recordings will reveal missed areas to clarify, and use or misuse of the researcher’s verbal and body language to expose ideology, reveal contradictions, and mediate toward the purpose of the study.

Most art education students whose research I supervise conduct qualitative research, sometimes involving observations in schools, and sometimes involving interviews via email or in person. There is a growing trend to gather data from blogs and online community sites. When students are new to the requirements of Institutional Review Board approval for research with humans, many ask: Can I use my observations from my own teaching? Can I use the responses from email exchanges?

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I encourage graduate students to attend Office of Research Protections (ORP) workshops (http://www.research.psu.edu/orp/education/offerings/) by circulating the information of the ORP sessions, and I include links to information on these sessions on my graduate course sites. Additionally, I developed my own presentational materials on ethical considerations, including the rationale for and the process of seeking IRB approval. I also encourage graduate students to contact ORP for assistance when needed. Further, I present specific lived experiences as scenarios for discussion and consideration of what is the most socially responsible ethical action that maintains the integrity of the research purpose.

To complicate ethical concerns further, arts-based qualitative research often involves artmaking and viewing, which as a sensory experience can bring to the surface deeply held emotional associations and memories of traumatic experiences. Below are a few “true” scenarios that have served as eye-opening discussions of ethical conflicts and difficult terrains in mentoring graduate students who conduct qualitative research.

Scenario 1: With IRB approval and an eager teacher supported by the principal of her school to participate in professional development for the purpose of revising her art curriculum to include a cultural approach to the integration of computer technologies, what could go wrong? An influential school board member, who is in a position of power to prevent the research, feels as though a cultural approach to the study of art will harm the students. What is necessary to reveal about the focus of the study and to whom? Which words might inflame and complicate matters?

Scenario 2: Parental consent is needed for those younger than 18 years of age. The study concerns gay youth involved in artmaking that explores identity. Some of the gay youth in the project have not revealed their sexual identities to their parents. How can parental consent be requested for a study about gay youth, if the gay youth are fearful about parental response, which may take the form of violence, confinement, over scrutiny, and being “kicked out” of the home? There are other avenues that ORP will suggest to the researcher to consider such as requesting a waiver of parental consent.

Scenario 3: A component of the study involves children creating art about social and personal injustices. One young child’s artwork expresses a rape incident in which she is the victim. What is the researcher’s responsibility?

Scenario 4: In a study of feminist collaborative art pedagogy, community visitors’ response to an art installation is that it is “more than art,” due to the emotional impact of the work. One space evoked associations with rape and another space brought to mind associations with child abuse. Some of the student artists, who were interviewed individually regarding the pedagogy they experienced, broke into tears as they described the turmoil and challenge to create from personal experiences informed by research of the issue. Additionally, in private such rapport was developed between interviewee and researcher in which anger toward another was expressed. How does one present the findings with integrity without emotionally harming or diminishing the participants’ views and experiences?

There are no easy answers, but answers must be found when one finds oneself in such situations at different stages of the research. The scenarios provide a way to discuss the importance of wording in introducing a study, the need for consent forms, reciprocity, rapport, allowing participants to turn off the tape player and tell you what they need to communicate, and care in writing up and presenting qualitative analysis. Some scenarios may seem “unsolvable” but the IRB wants to work with investigators to find solutions.

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