



HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Nurse Educ Today. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2018 March 01.

Published in final edited form as:

Nurse Educ Today. 2017 March ; 50: 8–11. doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2016.12.001.

Co-creation of a Pedagogical Space to Support Qualitative Inquiry: An Advanced Qualitative Collective

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How does one charged with the responsibility of teaching advanced qualitative methods within a university setting determine goals for such a course while considering the diverse needs of students? Historically, qualitative research has been taught at the university-level using traditional didactic approaches. More recently, instruction in qualitative research has evolved to include “pedagogical approaches that challenge conventional assumptions about

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

the world and how researchers know it” (Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011, pp. 701–2). Extant literature on teaching qualitative research demonstrates a divide among qualitative scholars (Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011). This divide has persisted since the 1980s, and represents two relatively different perspectives. One perspective follows a conventional approach to qualitative inquiry with teaching focused on research designs, methods, and techniques (Booker, 2009). The other perspective, a non-conventional approach, emphasizes critical and postmodern views of epistemological and ontological principles with an emphasis on social justice, equity, values, and the politics of knowledge production (Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011; Olesen, 2011).

Teaching qualitative research in the health sciences can be very challenging (Chen, 2016; Eakin & Mykhalovskiy, 2005). In nursing, researchers utilizing qualitative research methods have been establishing the importance and significance of the naturalistic paradigm for the broader nursing scientific community over many years. Gradually, the value of qualitative research to our understanding of issues relevant to health and illness was legitimated in both academic and practice applications (Wuest, 2011). The naturalistic paradigm allows the investigator to explore the experiences of individuals, families, and communities, and extends to the examination of the socio-political structures that influence health equity and well-being (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Fifteen years ago, the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing (SON) Doctoral Curriculum Committee identified a need for an advanced qualitative methods course and this new course needed to move beyond a traditional qualitative research methods survey course. From this initiative, the Advanced Qualitative Collective (AQC) was established by a faculty member through the use of non-conventional methods of co-teaching and co-learning. This paper aims to describe how the AQC, as a teaching method that is learner-centered and learner-driven, reaches beyond the positivist paradigm to meet the needs of predoctoral and postdoctoral fellows with a deeper interest in qualitative research and how the collective can serve as a model for other scholarly qualitative research groups looking to move beyond conventional educational strategies.

A Contextual Understanding

History and setting of AQC

As part of the core courses in the doctoral program, a survey course exposing students to the variety of qualitative methods is offered. The Doctoral Curriculum Committee at the SON requested from a standing faculty member, and expert in qualitative methods, to serve as the faculty facilitator (this role is described later) for the yet unnamed course. Cognizant of the faculty facilitator’s own past experiences as a student, and her intuition that a didactic approach does not serve a naturalistic paradigm, the faculty facilitator charted this new directive. In hopes to eschew being a proscriptive teacher, a student-centered learning collective formed the basis of this advanced course, even though it represented a sharp departure from the historical traditions at this institution.

The SON offers a doctor of philosophy degree with two courses in naturalistic inquiry, one is required (the aforementioned survey course) and the other is an elective – the AQC.

University-wide, several qualitative research courses are available for students from several disciplines. Yet, no courses in specific types of qualitative inquiry, including phenomenology, grounded theory, or participatory action research, are available. Despite these limitations, mentorship in qualitative research methods is available from faculty members with qualitative expertise and from the AQC. These resources provide opportunities for students to explore various qualitative methods and to delve into specific types of qualitative inquiry.

The Stance of the AQC

Broadly, the AQC is a co-created and fluid entity that evolves and reinvents itself to meet the pedagogical needs of its members. The fluid nature of the pedagogy is experienced through flexibility and movement across the continuum of qualitative methods, between the conventional and non-conventional approaches depending on the needs of its members. The intention is to support the development of researchers at various stages of qualitative research expertise, and to meet the diverse needs for knowledge acquisition and research critique.

The use of “collective” reflects the philosophical underpinnings of the pedagogical strategy embodied by the group. The collective interprets a Marxist approach to education, emphasizing collaboration, societal analysis, and critical approaches to research (Banfield, 2016; Jones, 2011). This goes beyond an introduction to qualitative methods to in-depth learning about, working within, and critiquing of particular approaches in the qualitative paradigm. The collective is faculty-mentored, but student-centered. The group seeks egalitarianism and consensus in decisions over course content, decorum, and use of time. The collective also provides space to engage in discourse to recognize and challenge the assumptions of dominant views of health research, which influences each member’s scholarly endeavors. The collective members conceive of and implement their research on human well-being, recognizing that research is neither independent of the society in which it is conducted, nor the institution in which it is learned.

Members and Faculty Facilitator

The collective meets weekly throughout the year and is comprised of doctoral students and post-doctoral fellows ranging from novice to more experienced. The members include fellows from several disciplines across the university. Members share common interests in qualitative research and have diverse needs and levels of competence. Some members register for the course and receive course credit for one semester of participation, but remain active throughout the course of their academic development. Others participate on an as-needed basis.

Based on the diverse interests of the membership, class discussions cover a wide range of topics related to qualitative research, including critical theories and philosophical paradigms of inquiry (such as phenomenology, grounded theory, critical race theory, feminist theory, intersectionality, etc.), qualitative methods/methodologies, data analysis, ethics, and dissemination. One to two students, depending on their phenomena of interest, lead the weekly discussions.

Although the AQC is student-centered, the role of the faculty facilitator is essential to the group's continuity and success. An expert in qualitative research and methodologies, the facilitator is the constant member among the ever-transforming collective. The faculty facilitator works with the students registered for the course on an individual basis to build their methodological foundations, while challenging and motivating the entire membership to explore their phenomena of inquiry. She also works with the registered students on specific evaluation criteria for the course (pass/fail or letter grade based on student choice) that address the unique learning needs of the students. The faculty facilitator meets with registered students at the beginning of the semester to develop a personalized plan that meets the needs of the student. The plan varies and can include an annotated bibliography, proposal writing, data collection and/or analysis plan, revision of manuscripts, leading one or two weekly discussions, etc. The faculty facilitator and the student follow-up closely to achieve the targeted plan and the faculty facilitator provides a final evaluation for the course (pass/fail or letter grade). The faculty facilitator's direct involvement in each of the collective's meetings is variable depending on the agenda and needs of the collective. She extends opportunities for the AQC members to network with students, faculty, and leaders both within and outside of the university, and enables an environment and sense of community that fosters curiosity, trust, exploration, collaboration, and discovery.

Dynamics of Collective Construction

The goal of the AQC is to create a space for co-teaching and co-learning qualitative research methods, where members are safe to take risks, to discuss ideas critically, to debate the personal and the political aspects of research, and to discover novel forms of scholarship and knowledge production. The following section will discuss the specific functions of the AQC.

Functions of the AQC

Co-creation of the AQC library—The AQC relies on a diverse, substantive electronic library of written materials co-created by its faculty mentor and members. The electronic library reinforces the pedagogic dynamics of learning, teaching, and analyzing within a peer-directed environment through periodic revisions to its collection. Sections of the library become more robust as individual members add content related to their current research. It is also a place for members to explore and share literature on emerging areas of qualitative inquiry, such as auto-ethnography, reflexivity, and member checks.

Research refinement—The AQC provides its members with opportunities to develop and refine their research designs and manuscripts. Members who are in the process of developing research projects and/or manuscripts bring their research ideas, data, and manuscript drafts to the meetings. The members discuss and critique the ideas and documents, recommend relevant references, and suggest alternative designs and data analysis techniques. Through group interactions, members concretize and clarify their research questions and methods, and receive critique and feedback of written research plans and grant proposals. This process of peer review provides guidance on avoiding possible pitfalls in research endeavors.

Analytic Review—The AQC is a source of peer debriefing through analytic review, instruction, reflexivity, and collegial support. Recursive instruction makes it possible for a method or theory to be introduced and illustrated through a member's work. Recursiveness permits AQC members to go back and forth between the different phases of their research allowing for revision and refinement (Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011). Experiential diversity fosters integration and collaboration between less experienced members, who are learning about qualitative research and its theoretical underpinnings, and more seasoned members who are in the midst of conducting their own studies, analyzing data, or disseminating findings.

Analysis and interpretation are enhanced in the collective environment that enhances the credibility and confirmability of research findings. For example, AQC participants have shared interview transcripts, coding schema, initial interpretations, member checks, and reflexivity. The collective dialogue is an avenue for learning, questioning, uncovering biases in interpretation, and ethical research practice (Constantino, 2008).

Collegial support and counsel—Collegial support is a transforming and empowering aspect of the AQC. The collective encourages discussion of political and ethical aspects of research, contentious topics, and challenging aspects of the research process through peer debriefing (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). For example, research topics of recent participants included institutionalized racism, ageism, intersectionality of sexuality, gender, and identity, and the dynamics of family life and communication during palliative and end-of-life care. Members feel comfortable sharing the joys and challenges of research endeavors, as well as how lives committed to research influence our other roles as nurses, friends, partners, parents, and activists.

Benefits and Challenges

The AQC provides opportunities to engage with rarely addressed and emerging concepts and methodologies in qualitative inquiry. Discussions around these concepts help members make important decisions about their research and understand their positionality in relationship to the questions they ask and research they undertake to their work. For example, the collective has discussed differing approaches to the concept of member checks. The collective debated the use of traditional approaches versus unconventional approaches. Debates around member checks provided a better understanding of how narratives, stories, and lived experiences are constructed and what approach aligns with the qualitative method used. Another example is discussing the research ethics inherent in navigating roles as both researchers and healthcare providers, especially when conducting observations and interviews in clinical settings. Reflecting on and critically debating the power dynamics between the roles of researchers and participants, healthcare providers and patients, and researcher to providers, have been beneficial to members in understanding ethical principles in varied settings. Other benefits include personal growth and increased socialization into the role of researcher. Members learn how to develop their scholarly voices and identities by engaging in discourse with colleagues. Being a voluntary endeavor, the AQC provides a sense of shared experiences and genuine commitment to qualitative inquiry, education, and research.

Despite these benefits, the AQC is not without challenges. Members join the group with their own research and methodological interests as well as varying levels of knowledge. Membership diversity is a strength, but can create challenges particularly for members who are not familiar with the topic and/or the qualitative work being presented. Conversely, the needs of the person seeking feedback or critique may not be met when the group is constituted by individuals who lack knowledge and experience with particular qualitative research methods.

The fluidity of membership is also a challenge. Some members are more sporadic in their attendance, while others attend on a consistent basis. The facilitator is not always present and expects senior members to take the lead. Senior and more expert members are important to group dynamics, co-learning, and the level of feedback. Inconsistent attendance of senior members alters the group dynamics and can leave the group comprised of more novice members who have not yet developed the expertise to provide feedback on work in particular methods and traditions. These challenges are addressed through on-going discussions of unresolved topics.

Conclusion

The teaching and learning of qualitative research are strongly linked to the cultural and institutional environment and require more than methodological training in order to produce high quality researchers (Eakin & Mykhalovskiy, 2005; Hazzan & Nutov, 2014). Many challenges face qualitative researchers and educators in the health sciences including nursing, where the education and research climates are significantly positivist.

The AQC was created as a collective space for co-teaching and co-learning qualitative research to meet the pedagogical needs of doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows. The AQC members engage in a critical, collaborative and dynamic forum that addresses the challenges that face teaching and learning qualitative research. The stance and philosophical underpinnings of the AQC and the dynamics of collective construction are a strong foundation for the recursive instruction and co-learning that makes the collective meaningful to its members. This style of education is beneficial as the group continues to evolve to a point where it is able to self-sustain, and offers different experiences of learning and scholarship for members. This example of a non-proscriptive, student-centered pedagogical approach creates a space for new emerging methodologies to be considered alongside traditional research methods, in a continuously evolving peer-learning and peer-teaching environment.

Access to peer review and support is critical throughout the development of qualitative research projects and can be the basis for understanding the broader stance of naturalistic inquiry. Membership in the AQC offers a network of colleagues and collaborators for qualitative researchers who work and learn in predominantly positivist-oriented health research institutions. More importantly, the AQC challenges the conventional pedagogical approach to health science education in both of the naturalistic and positivistic paradigms.

Acknowledgments

Funding Acknowledgment

Sarah Abboud, Kim Mooney-Doyle, and Terri-Ann Kelly were on a Ruth L. Kirschstein NRSA T32 funding (T32NR007100); Justine S. Sefcik was on a Ruth L. Kirschstein NRSA T32 funding (T32NR009356) and NRSA Individual F31 funding (F31 NR 015693); Terease Waite was on Ruth L. Kirschstein NRSA Individual F31 funding (1F31NR013847-01A1); Sara Jacoby was on Ruth L. Kirschstein NRSA Individual F31 funding (5F31NR013599-03), all at the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing.

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