

Seeing the World Anew: The Lessons of Qualitative Research

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by [Nadine Dolby](#) February 15, 2016

In this commentary, I reflect on the value of qualitative research methodology classes. As I show in my discussion of the classes I teach, what students learn from the class is not solely a methodological approach to inquiry, but a different (and for many, a new) way to ask questions, and as I suggest, to see the world anew.

Nothing against qualitative research. Its just that qualitative research cant answer my research question.

The gospel among graduate students in the introductory qualitative research course I teach is thisthe research question is paramount and the methodology follows. I teach on a campus with many well-known and highly ranked graduate programs in science and engineering. Students in education disciplines, and from departments across the university, enroll in my class to fulfill a qualitative requirement, and many are interested in studying undergraduate teaching and learning. Students consistently assure me that while qualitative research is undoubtedly interesting in a quaint and idiosyncratic way, *their* research question must be examined through quantitative and experimental methods. They repeat a mantra that follows logic they absorbed in their first year of graduate schoolresearch questions come first and those questions determine methodology.

We start my course with a deceptively simple issuewhat exactly is a qualitative research question? Students read Jane Agees (2009) essay on the process of developing these types of questions to prepare for the second class. Agees process is understandably rich, lengthy, and complexit examines how a research question is driven by passion, and subsequently refined to be situated within a field, crafted to be meaningful, and theoretically grounded. We discuss Agees essay as a class and students feel confident they understand how to write a qualitative research question. They are nervous and excited about what comes nexta short field trip to various parts of campus and the adjacent commercial area known as The Village. The class is always largeusually about 22 studentsso they divide into small groups to explore their community with new eyes. Students are asked to write three to five in-depth qualitative research questions based on their observations, prior knowledge, context of the campus and the community. They follow this with conducting short, exploratory interviews with students, shopkeepers, local residents, and others. I wander around, run into groups, confer with students as

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they work, and speak with other groups on my cell phone.

My expectations are modest. The vast majority of students have never written a qualitative research question before, and many have never or rarely read research based on qualitative methodologies. Conversations following the field trip hint at the abundant possibilities in qualitatively exploring familiar and naturalistic settings.

We return to the classroom about an hour later. Students write their qualitative research questions on the chalkboard as we prepare each group to lead a short conversation about their process, questions, and how their inquiries can be answered through qualitative approaches. Discussions begin once the board is full. I glance at the questions and realize that, once again, most are not qualitative. They are instead inquiries driven by a lifetime of immersion in ways of thinking that prioritize numbers, objectivity, causation, and experimental design (Porter, 1995). We slowly, carefully, and deliberately analyze each question as a group over the course of the following hour. We unmask the silent and hidden assumptions about knowledge and truth that are buried deep within sentence structure, word choice, what is said and asked, and what remains unsaid and unasked.

Many students are stunned. They assumed it was a simple and easy task, and I suspect many did not think it was challenging or serious. The field trip and subsequent conversations force students to begin appreciating the rigor and depth of qualitative methodology. Perhaps most importantly, the exercise uproots the gospel that research questions come first and methodology second. What is laid bare is a more uncomfortable reality how we have been taught to think plays a critical part in restricting what we see, and the questions we are able to ask. Students who have been taught only to: see cause and effect, value experimental design, and have faith in what they understand to be objectivity, truth, and numbers, will not simply devalue qualitative research they literally cannot see the world view it encompasses. Dozens of qualitative questions float through my head as I walk around campus with students they are different every year because the context changes. I am saddened that my students walk the same streets but are engulfed in a very different, and often more limited, way of making sense of the world.

My students are committed, hard working, accomplished, and intelligent. They are also the products of educational systems that have substituted training for education, not just in the U.S. but around the world because my students come from dozens of countries. These systems no longer value academic subjects that broaden perspectives, open doors, and promote creative and expansive thinking namely, the arts and humanities. Some fields in the sciences also

promote this broader mode of thinking, and there is plenty of evidence of the power of this interdisciplinary approach (Bekoff, 2006; Edwards, 2008). Much of this potential is lost on my students because to succeed in their chosen fields, they have become experts at taking standardized tests and memorizing context-free *facts* and *knowledge*. Their formal schooling experiences have not taught them is that research questions can only follow, not lead this is what qualitative research has the potential to teach. Researchers cannot begin to ask questions and unravel problems about things that we cannot see nor understand. How we choose to think about and analyze the world determines the questions we ask. Qualitative research demands that we not simply answer a research question, but that we have the courage to ask questions that are bold and transformative. As my class shows me every semester, this is the enduring value of teaching and learning qualitative research not as a technical and prescriptive method but as a way of seeing the world anew.

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