

TEACHING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: CASES AND ISSUES

Rosalind E. Hurworth. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 2008, 283 pages.

It is hard to think of anyone in a faculty position in adult education who hasn't wondered about the best way to teach students qualitative research methods: How much focus on establishing the research questions? How best to look at data collection methods? To stress methods or methodology? Whether to teach practical research or more academically oriented research?

The questions of course design, implementation, and assessment are endless, though the typical semester is usually only 12 weeks and actual in-class time is limited. In this book, Rosalind Hurworth has done the proverbial heavy lifting of these questions and reports on what she found from her case study research of nine courses in seven different institutions in Australia and England. She collected data from participant observations and interviews, conversations, journals, and a variety of course materials and documents (p. 32). What emerges is an extensive and rich report of how faculty in these countries teach qualitative research methods, the challenges they encounter, and the decisions they make. Hurworth's study sheds light on the dilemmas and practices of professors who struggle with teaching qualitative research every day. Although the data come from the United Kingdom and Australia, she might well have been in Canada, so familiar are the issues.

In 12 chapters, Hurworth traverses a wide territory, from "What Others Have and Haven't Told Us About Teaching Qualitative Research" (Chapter 2), to the complex interplay of "Contextual Factors" (Chapter 5), to the "Relationship Between Theory and Practice" (Chapter 6), and on to "Assessment" (Chapter 8). In short, it is what we might expect of qualitative research on qualitative research—rich and thick data that allow us to think about how this might apply to our own classrooms in higher education.

There were many times when I nodded in agreement with Hurworth's observational data, such as when she documents faculty members' frustration with students challenging the naturalistic paradigm and wondering if it is credible research. After 30 years of qualitative work in education, we have a right to wonder when the paradigm wars will end. I identified, too, with her questions about how to balance teaching theory with encouraging research practice. She wonders, and the faculty participants do too, whether or not to assign a full-fledged qualitative project given the length of time scheduled for the course and the sometimes limited preparation of students to undertake an actual project. She sagely reminds us that in the natural sciences, students have years of cumulative training before they actually undertake research. Not surprisingly, education faculty have to work assiduously to balance the tension between theory and practice in qualitative research; Hurworth does a fine job of showing the complexity of this issue (p. 133). She found considerable support for assigning research projects even in semester-long courses. About half the faculty she studied required students to plan and complete research projects; others assigned some combination of proposals and research designs. Most faculty in the study agreed that in a perfect world they would require all students to complete a full project. To

underscore the importance of actually carrying out a research project, Hurworth devotes one full chapter to “Management of Student Projects” (Chapter 9), including the inherent challenges such as late starts, trouble with locating and retaining participants, and physical safety concerns when students go into the field.

As useful as many of the discussions in this book were, I kept waiting for there to be more focus on research ethics approval. Ethics generally, and not the research ethics board (REB) approval process, is given some attention, but not the level of attention it requires. I am painfully aware of this issue in the Canadian context, where all research with human subjects must pass REB approval—perhaps this is more of a concern in this country than elsewhere. Quite apart from this book, I wonder if faculty will be loathe to assign research projects now that research ethics approval is a requirement for students. I would also have liked to see more attention given to issues in qualitative research such as insider-outsider debates, the nature of subjectivity, and power and conflict. From my perspective, these issues are perhaps the most interesting dimensions of qualitative research, and it seems a shame they were not given more play.

Apart from absences, the only real oddity in this book is Chapter 11, “Final Recommendations,” which contains several pages of brief and numbered recommendations for teaching qualitative research. Suggestions such as “multiple choice tests and examinations should be avoided” (p. 245) and “lecturers need to provide examples” (p. 244) seem a little elementary given the complex and challenging nature of qualitative research. Likely the author debated this inclusion herself, because she chooses not to end the book with these lists. Rather, she closes in Chapter 12 with an extensive collection of resources (i.e., journals, websites, books, data analysis software) that alone makes this a book to buy. All in all, this is an interesting book and a useful one for those adult educators who reflect on research and their teaching, and want to make both better.

A final point: If you haven’t heard of Sense Publishers out of Rotterdam, take note. This is a relatively new and highly credible publisher with a growing line of established writers such as Carlos Torres, Paula Allman, Stephen Billett, Stephen Kemmis, and others. I’d say Hurworth chose this publisher well, and I, for one, will be following the Sense Publishers collection with interest.

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