

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

S. B. Merriam & Associates (Eds.). (2002). San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass, 439 pages.

Over the last decade, the understanding, application and publication of qualitative research in adult education has grown. Along with this growing acceptance, qualitative research has evolved into a myriad of perspectives and approaches, creating a need for greater clarity and guidance on how to conduct, write and think about it. Sharan Merriam's latest edited book makes great strides at addressing this concern. In a pragmatic manner, she provides an informative and scholarly discussion of the dominant approaches to interpretive qualitative research and supports them with a collection of thoughtful studies highlighting each approach.

The book begins with a brief overview of interpretive qualitative research and some of its related approaches, followed by a chapter on how to evaluate and assess descriptive research. These two chapters set the context for the rest of the book, a collection of eight different approaches: basic qualitative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, ethnographic study, narrative analysis, and critical and post-modern research. Each approach includes an introductory overview along with two previously published studies selected from a variety of disciplines designed to highlight its uniqueness and inherent characteristics (e.g., education, religion, counseling psychology, curriculum and instruction, sociology, adult education). Each study is then followed by a reflexive piece from the primary author about his or her experiences in conducting qualitative research.

A number of gems in this book will help faculty and students in their teaching and practice of qualitative research. It offers a variety of thoughtful research studies, such as the provocative content analysis from a critical perspective of a popular children's story, "Tootle", which reveals "an account of schooling, work and being an adult in a capitalist society" (p. 331). This is an excellent example of a typically overlooked data source that has the potential to reveal much about the curriculum of a field. Most of the studies are well written and offer excellent instructional models for coursework. In addition, they should encourage researchers in adult education to explore overlooked or under-utilized areas and means of applying qualitative research (e.g., content analysis, narrative).

This book also focuses on assessing and evaluating qualitative research, offering a solid introduction to the question of “what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘quality’ qualitative study?” (p. 18). A series of thoughtful questions are provided that shine a critical light on the major components of a qualitative study, from establishing the research problem and presenting the findings, to writing the discussion section. This reflective analysis led me to further question why each of the different studies were selected for this book. For example, what is the significance of each study? Is it soundly based on the description of its methodology? Is there adequate and descriptive data for support of the findings? Does it address implications for theory and practice?

Another beneficial feature is the reflective piece by the lead author of each study. These brief discussions about the challenges associated with conducting qualitative research are frank and informative. They include comments about the personal struggle of establishing rapport with study participants and the challenges associated with interviewing participants from different cultures and languages. In addition, they provide insight into the important, less obvious nuances of conducting qualitative research, such as tailoring personal appearance and data collection tools used by a researcher when “going native” in a cross-culture study and reflecting on how far a researcher should “push” a content analysis of a text. These pieces also offer a sense of universalism, so as students struggle with qualitative research, they can see that their experiences are not unique and isolated.

In general, the book seems to offer a logic for understanding the more commonly used approaches of interpretive qualitative research. However, at times I struggled not only with the selection of different approaches, but also with the choice of the exemplar studies. For example, the selection of a case study as one of the eight qualitative approaches could result in greater confusion than clarity. Making sense of the difference between a case study as an *approach* of qualitative research and as a *unit of analysis* of qualitative research is challenging for many novice and experienced researchers. A case study is often seen as a bounded unit studied in ethnographic research and not an approach to qualitative research. I believe it would have been more beneficial if the case study had been focused on as a unit of analysis and discussed within the examples of ethnographic research or basic qualitative research. This would have allowed other qualitative approaches, such as action research to be discussed, an area that continues to receive marginal attention in adult education. Furthermore, it was not clear how Tisdell’s study on Spirituality and Emancipatory Adult Education could be considered basic qualitative research. A more appropriate category would seem to be

critical or postmodern qualitative research, particularly since a critical post-structural feminist theoretical framework informed the study. The selection criteria in this particular case seemed to focus more on how the research question was asked and the data collected and analyzed, with less significance on the researcher's positionality and its relationship to the research experience. Even though Merriam briefly discusses the reasons and challenges for her selection of the different approaches of qualitative research, I believe more explanation is warranted and necessary. Providing greater detail of how qualitative research has been organized in other texts and what qualifies a study for a particular approach would have not only offered greater clarity to Merriam's own choices, but would also shed light on the field as whole. Even though readers may find some of the selections confounding, the choice of approaches and related studies should promote a healthy debate and could ultimately lead to a greater understanding about the nature of qualitative research.

Overall, despite my minor concerns, I found the book an excellent addition to the teaching and learning of qualitative research, which will hopefully spawn other similar texts that will also provide insightful examples of research and practice accompanied by thoughtful reflective pieces.

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***LIFELONG LEARNING IN A CHANGING CONTINENT:
 CONTINUING EDUCATION IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF
 EUROPE, BY MICHAEL OSBORNE & EDWARD THOMAS***

NIACE (Ed.). (2003). Leicester, UK, 538 pages.

The European Union recently set itself the task of becoming the most dynamic, competitive knowledge-based economy within ten years. Consequently, education and training have become major foci of attention for governments, educators, and policy makers throughout Europe. In particular, continuing education and lifelong learning are being regarded as increasingly important, not least in the higher education sector, where many European universities are expanding their continuing education provision to provide the diverse programming needed by individuals, business, and society.