Study Of Contrasts – Reflections On Teaching, Learning And Training In The Realm Of Qualitative Research Methods.

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Abstract

We present a qualitative case study of our evolution from teachers of market research to educational collaborators who co-develop qualitative researchers. The case illustrates the effectiveness of using contrasting backgrounds, ontologies and research interests as mechanisms to enable student learning and to facilitate our own development as qualitative educators and researchers.

Background

This paper is about the development of collaborative teaching of qualitative research methods. So, why is this not in an education track? Despite having considerable discussion of teaching methods we consider this primarily as a qualitative case study about developing qualitative research skills and believe that it has important implications of the development of the stature of qualitative research in marketing academia. The case has been developed by articulating our individual memories, interrelating these in a series of discussions where we also considered the nature and meaning of our educational approaches and via analysis of our separate and collective teaching materials and the texts and literature associated with qualitative research and teaching. Selection of material to include was based on material that enabled a broad sketch of the case context and where critical incidents were included whenever possible. Also included was as much possible on the nature and purpose of contrast as a mechanism for growth in teaching, learning and research.

We bring contrasting backgrounds, expertise in different areas of marketing, different research interests and orientations and contrasting epistemologies to our teaching collaboration. The teaching approaches we utilize have evolved to ever-more-multi-method ones that use this contrast as a way of generating student learning of qualitative research methods. This is at variance with the standard thinking about team-teaching –"a situation in which two teachers share a class and divide instruction between them" (Richards, et al 1992: 375). In contrast, we share the responsibility for instruction as we cover the same material but with each approaching it from our particular research stance. The remainder of this case further explains this approach, linking it with learning outcomes, professional development and research outcomes and returning throughout to consideration of the value of contrast as a device for development.

The Genesis of Our Qualitative Teaching

Most marketing degrees incorporate the teaching of market research methods. However the focus of these subjects is most often on survey methodology, the couple of weeks given to all other methods usually present them as means to assist in generating a survey. Teaching of research methods is often simple training, i.e. the basic tools to collect and analyze data but with no sense of the implications for theory and measurement of using one method over another. The ontology that accompanies this training is likely to be firmly (though implicitly) positivistic and the idea of

alternative stances with associated methods of doing research is not considered. We too have taught in this way in the 1980s and 1990s.

However we each came to see the importance of teaching qualitative research methods to better meet students' and industry's' needs. An important wake-up call came about ten years ago when we began teaching together after some years of working separately. Our collaboration involved the joint coordination and teaching of the capstone market research subject at the University of Technology, Sydney which took the form of a comprehensive, semester-long group project undertaken for an organization seeking market research.[1] During this period, we were ever-more-frequently approached by organizations that had research problems that required qualitative research for effective solutions. Initially we refused these, as surveys enabled student application of the skills they had learned in Introductory Market Research and were easier to manage and assess.

But we were in danger of being "left behind." Qualitative research was being more widely used and commercial research providers were utilizing increasingly sophisticated qualitative techniques with good effect. Cost, ethics and decreasing cooperation by the over-researched community were rapidly changing the market research environment. Structured instruments, particularly mail surveys were (and are) receiving less and less response. This changing environment also affected each of our research agendas as we increasingly used qualitative research methods. We came to believe that our responsibility as market research educators included introducing students to industry's preferences and practices via research training in qualitative techniques.

Here value of "contrast" in teaching first became apparent. Each of us began trying different approaches to student training that reflected our evolving research interests. Lynne, coming from the commercial research sector and with research interests in consumer behaviour and advertising (and hence more likely to supervise and train students doing projects in those areas), developed training methods for group interviewing. In contrast, Louise had some consulting experience but was primarily an academic researcher and working in business-to-business marketing areas. She focused on developing diverse depth interview skills for questioning and analysis and on the utilization and combination of multiple sources of data into a case study.

Our parallel paths and systematic swapping of stories (see Brown and Duguid 2000 on the nature and role of informal social learning) led to the development of a portfolio of research training techniques whereby we could train student researchers in qualitative techniques who could then complete a commercial project - all in sixteen weeks. Training consisted of workshop sessions dealing with the management of a qualitative project, development of question guides and recording frames for observation, practicing interviewing and analysis of the effectiveness of various questioning techniques, analysis of notes, summaries and transcripts and communication of results in presentations and reports. It is now the case that within the capstone, students complete twelve major research projects per annum with over two-thirds of them including a substantial qualitative component. Subsequently these

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[1] Applications of Market Research (AMR) is entirely a group-based project completed by a class of 25-36 students who are placed in one of three to six groups of four to seven members each.

training methods have been adapted and utilized in other classes where projects involve substantial primary research.

The Genesis of Higher Degree Qualitative Research Education
Similar gaps existed in the education of Higher Degree Research (HDR) students. HDR students at our institution were required to undertake coursework in marketing theory and advanced quantitative techniques, similar to the practices of a number of other Australian institutions. Historically this had made sense, as HDR students were strongly encouraged to undertake surveys that were more publishable (in mainstream US journals) and because there were supervisors with the necessary expertise in this method. Most students came with marketing degrees and hence as we have discussed, had had little if any exposure to qualitative methods and therefore were not disposed towards undertaking qualitative research. However increasingly HDR students presented themselves from commercial and non-marketing backgrounds and were interested in doing non traditional research incorporating substantial qualitative research but found there was no training available for them. We began by giving them our training materials designed for the undergraduates and then, with the support of our School, five years ago we undertook to design an academically orientated qualitative research methods subject.

In co-developing this subject a couple of issues emerged. First, our orientation to that date had been entirely concerned with how to <u>do</u> qualitative research. It focused on training students to quickly and appropriately collect fairly simple, commercially valuable information. For HDR students we wanted to move beyond simple training and teach <u>about</u> qualitative research (along the lines of teaching theories of measurement rather than simple rules to guide research behaviour). Second, we had never collaborated in research and were unaware of how different our ontologies were. We discovered that a strong relativist and a critical realist with some positivistic leaning have rather different ideas about the teaching about and doing of qualitative research!

Once again our contrasts proved valuable. Rather than compromising, we developed a subject that celebrated diversity of ontology and method. We found that a foundation of common ground – belief in the importance of self-insight, serendipity and rigor (discussed below) - enabled us to educate students in the core values of doing qualitative research. At first unintentionally, in the classroom we found ourselves engaging in dialogue that not only exposed students to multiple possibilities in approaching research but gave both of us insights into our own approaches. As Burbules (1993) says, "Dialogue is not fundamentally a form of question-answer communication, but an engaging ` social relation" and this is what we developed. Our demonstration of diversity challenged students to consider their own philosophies of research and make informed choices about research method based on these and contributed to the development of a respect for those with different ontologies – something that is unfortunately sometimes lacking in the marketing community. For many of the students this was their first exposure to a classroom situation where dialogue between the presenters of the material was the foundation for its delivery. It is important to mention that this method of delivery is inclusive and others present are welcome to join in. The students became eager participants in these generating many of the discussions, frequently through interrogating one or other of the presenters as to their response to the material being presented by the other. We must stress that these

are HDR students who have enjoyed and benefited from having had in the classroom the opportunity to develop their own rather than a prescribed approach. (This is not the approach that we currently take with our undergraduates.)

Qualitative Research Education as Contrast
An informal review of the topics covered in the burgeoning short courses and subjects about qualitative research for academics showed us a focus on training - how to design research, collect information, analyze this and apply it to a research problem. However at the core of our approach to qualitative education is a belief that it is necessary to understand yourself as a researcher and to be able to communicate this to others. This requires an understanding of the nature of qualitative enquiry with all of its richness, serendipity, "mess" and contradiction - upon which we spend considerable time.

This contrasts with the other main tenant of our approach – our belief in the centrality of rigor. To build the credibility of qualitative research requires that the results that emerge and the process that led to these results are trusted. Some texts have proposed that this means that qualitative research should reflect, as much as possible, the processes we find in quantitative research methods (eg Miles and Huberman, 1993). Such authors advocate practices such as large sample sizes, reductionist analytical frameworks, working within strict, pre-determined theoretical guidelines, etc. This, it is argued, reduces bias and increases replicability. In contrast we argue that such approaches decrease validity and turn potentially good qualitative research in to second rate quantitative research. The serendipity that is at the heart of great qualitative research is lost in such approaches and the potential for discovery and knowledge substantially diminished (see Wilkinson and Young 2004). Instead, central to rigor in our approach to qualitative research is a meticulous "chain of evidence." We advocate detailed documentation from the beginning of a project including articulating preliminary thoughts and ideas, their development into decisions about how to design research, the experiences that guide and influence the research and analysis process. This enables the reasoning that led to particular decisions about focus and approach to traced and communicated. The journal we advocate also charts the development of qualitative thinking and enables students to reflect on their own progress as researchers. As such it facilitates a core goal of the subject - the understanding self as a researcher and the ability to communicate this.

This is reflected in the subject's non-linear organisation. Themes associated with the underlying philosophy of thinking and researching qualitatively are returned to throughout the subject, to highlight our core message of the self-aware, serendipitous yet rigorous researcher at the heart of the qualitative process. This stable core contrasts with the divergent views that increasingly emerge when we discuss theoretical frameworks, research design, various data collection methods and analysis. The concept of the individual journey as a researcher is one that qualitative researchers have long held to be of interest both from the perspective of increasing the transparency of the process and for self development. Our experience suggests that it is an approach that is of value to all HDR students regardless of approach. Even the most positivistic of students, once exposed to the discipline of a field journal may adopt it for all aspects of their research, both qualitative and quantitative. For example, one of the most positivistic of our past students is now never found without her journal. She is not and doesn't want to be a qualitative researcher but she is an

avid journal keeper and brandishes it, with all of the zeal of the convert, noting down insights, references and directions for future research.

We both believe that the qualitative researcher should be true to themselves and the problem at hand. Hence our differing ontologies and interests have led us to adopt different practices in our own research. For example one us believes in triangulation at all levels of the research process and hence advocates research designs that include multiple methods, multiple interviewers, multiple approaches to analysis. In contrast, the other of us believes that reality and hence our abstractions of it are profoundly socially constructed and feel strongly that qualitative research should not be multi interviewer and that triangulation adds little if anything. The dialogue that we orchestrate to discuss the implications of our different "world views" and practices is an important learning and development tool (in line with the Anderson-Hunt debates of the 1980s of the relativists versus the positivists and the subsequent emergence of realism in the core of marketing philosophy; see Anderson 1986, 1988a, 1988b, Hunt 1984, 1990, 1992 Peter, 1992, Siegel 1988, Zinkman and Hirshman 1992). These debates have also shaped for each of us the evolution of our own research as we confront and debate our demons. As a result, one of us has become increasingly "qualitative" moving from using qualitative work to inform quantitative enquiry to focusing on an understanding of deep process and its evolution through semantic analysis. The other has become more multi-method and programmatic in research orientation, looking at the insights that interplay of qualitative and quantitative methods can provide.

Conclusion
As much as possible we attempt to reflect the nature of qualitative discovery within our teaching. It is spontaneous, messy, conflicting and surprising. We attempt to communicate this to students and to engineer situations where we are messy, conflicted and conflicting and surprised! We also attempt to incorporate the qualitative thinking and good practice of the commercial sector into our teaching and we believe we are better academic researchers because of it. In contrast with much of marketing where business draws knowledge of cutting edge processes from academia, we believe that in qualitative method the reverse is true. It is the practitioners who are in the main leading the charge and we are often their students (see for example Ereaut and Imms 2004, Whiting 2005). The potential synergies that can emerge in the relationship of our academic and our commercial researcher selves is captured in the metaphor of "honey bees" (Tinson 2005) where the symbiotic relationship of bees and flowers was considered. We see ourselves as bees, pollinating various research and teaching sectors with our ideas. But we would argue that this metaphor can be taken further; the social properties of bees also reflect elements of qualitative enquiry. Bees have evolved cooperative strategies to improve their foraging behaviour that depend on imprecise direction, the clustered texture of their environment and the variety of bees in a hive (Beekman and Wilkinson 2004). This captures nicely our approach to qualitative research – both as educators and researchers.

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