

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PARADIGM: A DESIGN FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION RESEARCHERS

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ABSTRACT

A number of researchers have commented on the death of substantive research within the field of management, education, social science and other related disciplines. The plea to use experimental type of research has interestingly been the major area of concentration by most modern researchers. This paper outlines an alternative methodology known as the qualitative research paradigm. More recently an overview of distance education research showed that more than 80% are identified as having used qualitative methods. The qualitative research is seen as a research methodology that engages in research that probes for deeper understanding and insight rather than examine surface features. This paper outlines the key characteristics of the qualitative research methodology and further discusses the reasons for its selection

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by most students in distance open learning. There is a growing body of literature devoted to qualitative research and some of which is synthesized in this paper for the benefit of researchers and educational practitioners. The goal of this desktop research is to elaborate on and present on the major reasons for using qualitative methodologies and also to provide a basic introduction to the features of this type of research which is commonly used by distance education students.

KEY WORDS: *Research methodology, Higher Education, Qualitative Research, Quantitative Research.*

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research, broadly defined, means the kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification (Strauss and Corbin 1990). It is a phenomenological inquiry which uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomenon in context specific settings. While positivist or quantitative research uses experimental methods and quantitative measures to test hypothetical generalizations, qualitative researchers use a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context specific settings such as real world settings where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest (Patton 2001). It is the kind of research that produces findings arrived at from real-world settings where the phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally. The qualitative research is a field of enquiry that crosscuts disciplines and subject matters. It aims to acquire an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons that govern human behaviour. Data for qualitative research is generated through the **emic** and **etic** perspectives.

While quantitative data are of the kind that may lead to measurement or other kinds of analysis involving applied mathematics, qualitative

data cannot necessarily be put into a context that can be grouped or displayed as a mathematical presentation but is provided through thick descriptions with element of voice in the text. Patton (2001) noted that where quantitative researchers seek casual determination, prediction and generalization of findings, qualitative researchers seek instead illumination, deep insights, understanding and extrapolation to similar situations. It should however be noted that it is not necessary to pit the two research paradigms against one another in a competing stance. Some researchers believe that qualitative and quantitative research can be effectively combined in the same research project. Patton (1990) claims that using both quantitative and qualitative data, give insight that neither type of analysis could provide alone. However, it should be noted that, combining quantitative and qualitative data in a single study, does not mean combining the two methodologies. What identifies a methodology are the principles and philosophy that inform the research. In the quantitative paradigm, measurability and quantification are the yardsticks of verifying reality or solving a problem, while in the qualitative paradigm, reality is verified through reading meaning in **emic** perspectives ('insiders /participants' viewpoints) and in **etic** perspectives (outsider's/researcher's viewpoints).

In this article we argue that statistical quantitative research design does not take full account of the interaction effects that take place in a social setting, thus the need to choose qualitative research methodology in educational research. Drawing from the interpretivist paradigm this article is organised into four major sections. The first section examines the basis of choosing qualitative research and the key characteristics of qualitative research. The second section explores the research design and data generation strategies in qualitative research. The third section reports on strategies for analysing qualitative data. The last section highlights issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research method.

The basis of choosing the qualitative paradigm

There are a number of considerations that researchers take into account when deciding to use a qualitative research methodology. The qualitative methodology can be used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is known (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The paradigm can be used to gain new perspectives on things about which much is already known or to gain more in depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively. These are preferably used where the researcher feels that quantitative measures cannot adequately describe or interpret a situation. The use of open ended questions and prolonged engagement with respondents supports the discovery of new information which may be difficult to establish using quantitative measures. Creswell (2007) noted that qualitative researchers embrace their full involvement and immersion into the research on the understanding that the real world is subject to change and therefore a qualitative researcher should be present during the changes to record an event after and before the change occurs. It is therefore worth noting that the ability of qualitative research to more fully describe a phenomenon is an important consideration not only from the researcher's perspective, but from the reader's perspective as well. Most open distance learners prefer qualitative research mainly because qualitative methods provide reports which are rich with details and insights into participants' experiences of the world, and may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience (Berge 2009). Also the qualitative research paradigm provides more meaningful details and deeper insights to the researchers and readers.

Characteristics of qualitative research

Researchers like Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Patton (1990), Eisner (1991) and Chisaka (2007), have identified what are considered to be the most prominent characteristics of qualitative or naturalistic research and these are;

- Qualitative research uses the natural setting as the source of data and researchers attempt to observe, describe and interpret settings as they are.
- Researchers act predominantly as the human instruments of data collection through physical contacts with participants and there is need for prolonged engagement.
- Researchers use inductive data analysis.
- Reports from qualitative studies are descriptive, incorporating expressive language and the presence of voice in the text.
- The qualitative research has an interpretive character, aimed at discovering the meaning events have for the individuals who experience them and the interpretations of those meanings by the researcher.
- Qualitative researchers pay particular attention to idiosyncratic as well as the pervasive and seek the uniqueness of each case.
- Qualitative research has an emergent as opposed to predetermined design, and researchers focus on emerging processes as well as the outcomes or product of the research.
- Qualitative research is judged using special criteria for trustworthiness, credibility and transferability

It should be noted that these characteristics are not absolute characteristics of qualitative enquiry, but are rather strategic ideals that provide a direction and framework for developing specific methods and

concrete data generation techniques. The characteristics are rather interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Denzin & Lincoln 1889). Qualitative research has no statistical test of significance to determine if results count and the judgement about usefulness and credibility are left to the researcher and the reader alike.

The methods used by qualitative researchers exemplify a common belief that they can provide a “deeper” understanding of the social phenomenon than would be obtained from purely quantitative data (Babbie, 2007).

It should however be noted that in a world where numbers talk and people use the term “hard” science a failure to test hypothesis coupled with a rejection of natural science methods, certainly leaves qualitative research open to criticism.

The list below shows preferences for qualitative research

- A preference for qualitative data – understood simply as the analysis of words and images rather than numbers.
- A preference for naturally occurring data by observations and interviews rather than experiments.
- A preference for meaning rather than behaviour, attempting to document the world from a point of view of the people studied and the researcher.
- A rejection of natural sciences as a model.
- A preference of inductive, hypothesis generation research rather than hypothesis testing (Berge 2009).

It is therefore noted that qualitative research is essentially a matter of immersing oneself in a naturally occurring set of events in order to gain first-hand knowledge of the situation (Berge, 2009). Patton (2001) supports the notion of the researcher’s involvement and immersion into the research by stating that the real world is subject to change and

therefore, a qualitative researcher should be present during the change process to record an event as it occurs. This would assist the researcher to generate first-hand information from eyewitnesses. It should be noted that in qualitative research, data are generated rather than “collected”, precisely because of the inductive nature of the research process.

Research Design and Data generation strategies in qualitative research

In carrying out quantitative studies, it is vital to ensure that a truly random sample of subjects is recruited so that the results reflect on average the condition of the population from which that sample was drawn (Creswell, 2007). In qualitative research, researchers are not interested in an “on average” view of respondents. What they want is to gain an in depth understanding or insights of the experiences of particular individuals or groups through prolonged engagement and member checking. The inquiry places a premium on the strength of the researcher rather than on standardisation. The designs of qualitative studies follow a fairly detailed outline which includes the following general steps.

- Determination of a focus of inquiry which establishes the boundary for the study and provides inclusion criteria for new information.
- Determine the fit of the research paradigm to the research focus. Researchers need to compare the characteristics of the qualitative paradigm with the goals of the research.
- Determine where and from who the data will be generated.
- Determine what the successive phases of inquiry will be, where phase one will feature open ended data generation, while successive phases will be more focused.
- Determine what additional instrumentation may be used, beyond the researcher as the human instrument.

- Plan data generation and recording modes, this would include details on research questions and how faithfully data will be reproduced.
- Plan the logistics of data generation, including scheduling and budgeting.
- Plan the techniques that will be used to determine trustworthiness or generalizability and credibility.

Hoepfl (1994) sees the stated steps as necessary and crucial for the successful conduct of qualitative research designs. To make accurate situational decisions, a holistic description of events, procedures and philosophies occurring in a natural setting is needed on the part of the researcher.

Sampling strategies for qualitative studies

In using quantitative inquiry, the dominant sampling strategy is probability sampling which focus on selection of a random and representative sample from the larger population and in this case every member of the population is accorded an opportunity to be selected as a sample. The purpose of probability sampling is the subsequent generalisation of the research findings to the population. By way of contrast, purposeful or purposive sampling where participants are selected because of some characteristics is the dominant strategy in qualitative research. Patton (1990) noted that purposive sampling seeks information rich cases which can be studied in depth. Lincoln and Guba (1985), Patton (1990), Creswell (2007) and Babbie (2007) identify and describe sixteen types of purposeful sampling techniques, and these include; extreme or deviant case sampling, typical case sampling, maximum variation sampling. Snowball or chain sampling, confirming or disconfirming case sampling, politically important case sampling and convenience sampling.

However, Berge (2009) sees the maximum variation sampling approaches as the most useful strategy for naturalistic research. The maximum variation sampling strategy aims at capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participants or programme variation. Using the maximum variation sampling, any common patterns that emerge from variations are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and centrally shared values and aspects of a programme (Patton, 1990).

Maximum variation sampling can yield detailed descriptions of each case, in addition to identifying shared patterns that cut across cases; it also identifies important common patterns that cut across variations. In spite of the apparent flexibility in purposive sampling, researchers need to be aware of the major types of sampling errors that can arise in qualitative research. The major errors relate to distortions caused by insufficient breadth in sampling, distortions introduced by changes over time and some distortions caused by lack of depth in data generation at each site (Patton, 1990). It should be noted that people engaged in qualitative research are called participants and not “subjects”, as is the case in quantitative research.

Data generation Techniques in Qualitative research

The main prevailing forms of data generation techniques associated with qualitative inquiry are interviews and observations. Since qualitative research is a generic term for investigative methodologies described as ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological field participation, all these methodologies emphasise the need and importance of looking at participants in the natural setting in which they are found. This can be best done through the use of interviews and observations. Data generation in qualitative research is mainly characterised by regular interaction between variables and detailed data is ideally generated through open ended questions that provide direct quotations from participants. Hoepfl (1994) noted that the

interview strategy is an integral part of qualitative study. By using interviews and observations, the researcher seeks to establish a holistic description of events, procedures, happenings, operations and philosophies occurring in natural settings which are needed to make accurate situational decisions.

The interview technique of data generation in qualitative research

Qualitative data come in various forms. In many qualitative studies, the data base consists of interview transcripts from open ended, focused, but exploratory interviews.

Most distance learners use the interview as the primary strategy for data generation and in some cases in conjunction with observations. Qualitative interviewing as seen by Patton (1990) utilises open ended questions that allow for individual variations. Patton (1990) and Chisaka (2006) identify the three different variations of interviews as, informal conversational interviews, semi structured interviews and standardised open ended interviews. People live in an interview society, in a society whose members seem to believe that interviews generate useful information about lived experiences and its meanings. The interview produces situated understandings grounded in specific interactional episodes (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). The interview among other methods used by distance learners is considered to be the best method and strategy for creating knowledge, it is a social encounter in which knowledge is constructed, it is not merely a neutral conduct or source of distortion, but an occasion for producing reportable information. Interviews according to Eisner (1991) are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within participants. However, participants according to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) are not simply repositories of knowledge treasuries of information awaiting excavation, but they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers.

In qualitative research, the interviewer sees the world from the perspective of the participants, and it is through this that the qualitative researcher uses open ended interviews which apparently offer the opportunity for an authentic gaze into the soul of another or even for a politically correct dialogue in which researcher and researched offer mutual understanding and support. Usually interview data have direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feeling and knowledge. Data from interviews consists of detailed descriptions of activities, actions and the full range of interpersonal interactions and organisational processes that are part of the human experiences. Although interview guides usually have a list of questions or general topics that the interviewer wants to explore, they are also prepared to ensure that basically the same information is obtained from each person, but there are no predetermined responses and the interviewer is often free to probe and explore within these pre-determined inquiry areas. Interview guides also ensure good use of limited interview time and make interviewing multiple respondents more systematic and comprehensive and they help to keep interactions focused. Lofland and Lofland (1984) noted that, in keeping with the flexible nature of qualitative research methods, interview guides can be modified overtime to focus attention on areas of particular importance, or to exclude questions the researcher has found to be unproductive for the goals of the research.

The observation technique in qualitative data generation

The classic form of data collection in naturalistic or field research is the observation of participants in the context of the natural scenes. Observation data are used for the purposes of providing description of settings, activities, people and the meanings of what is observed from the perspective of the participants. Observations can lead to deeper understanding than interviews alone because they provide knowledge

on the context in which events occur and may enable the researcher to see things that participants themselves are not aware of or things that they are unwilling to discuss (Patton, 1990). In this case observers should have the skill to monitor both verbal and non-verbal clues and the use of concrete, unambiguous descriptive language. Observers may possibly watch from outside without being observed or may maintain a passive presence, being unobtrusive as possible and not interacting with participants. To a certain extent the researcher may exercise more active control over the observation, as in the case of formal interview, to elicit specific types of information. Also in carrying out observations the researcher may act as a full participant in the situation with either a hidden or known identity but maximising on generating relevant data. It should however be noted that there are five types of observations. These are external participation, balanced participation, active participation, passive participation and total participation. It should be noted that the presence of the observer is likely to introduce some distortions of the natural scene which the researcher must be aware of and seek to eliminate. In any case researchers need to consider the legal and ethical responsibilities associated with naturalistic observations. Naturalistic researchers seek participants to grant access to their lives, their mind and emotions. It is important to provide with a straight forward description of the goals of the research (Lofland & Lofland 1984).

In the observation process, participants are potential stakeholders or persons who shape the inquiry itself and as a result their dignity should be respected. As relationships unfold, participants validate the clues generated by others in the settings. In most cases observations involve looking around with only a general scheme to guide, resulting in field notes and some generated qualitative data, all observed from the participants. In the final analysis observations may confirm or disconfirm various interpretations that have emerged from the interviews or reports. The critical aspect of observation is looking and

taking in as much as the researcher can without influencing what is taking place.

Analysing qualitative research data

Data analysis in qualitative research is unquestionably the most complex and mysterious of all the phases of qualitative research and one that receives the least thoughtful discussion in research literature. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) noted that, the management, analysis and interpretation of qualitative empirical materials is a complex process involving highly technical language and systems of discourse. It entails a mastery of special sets of interpretive practices and narrative techniques. Qualitative data analysis is seen by Bogdan and Biklen (1982:145) as “ working with data, organising it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned and deciding what to tell others”. In qualitative research, researchers use inductive analysis of data where critical themes emerge out of the data. Patton (1990) has it that qualitative analysis requires some creativity, for the challenge is to place the raw data into logical, meaningful categories, to examine them in a holistic fashion and to find a way to communicate the interpretation to others. There are three major approaches used to analyse qualitative data and these are, conventional qualitative analysis, direct content analysis and summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005).

The mechanics of handling large quantities of data can range from physical sorting of papers to using some of the several computer software programmes. Contemporary qualitative studies are supported by computer programs such as, MAXQDA, NVIVO and ATLAS.ti5 although the benefits of software are mainly in storing and segregating data, rather than in processing or analysing them. It should however be noted that besides analysing data using computer software, data analysis in qualitative research begins with identification of the themes emerging from the raw data, a process sometimes referred to as open

coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During open coding, the researchers identify and tentatively name the conceptual categories into which the phenomena observed is grouped. The aim is according to Huberman and Miles (2002) to create descriptive, multi-dimensional categories which form preliminary frameworks for analysis. In the process words, phrases or events that appear to be similar can be grouped into the same category and the categories may be gradually modified or replaced during the subsequent stages of the analysis that follow. As the raw data are broken down into manageable chunks, the researcher should also device an “audit trail” which is a scheme for identifying these data chunks according to their speaker and the context.

In most cases the speakers are typically referred to in a manner that provides a sense of context (Berge, 2009). Qualitative research reports are characterised by the use of “voice” in the text that is participant quotations that illustrate the themes being described (Creswell, 2007).

The analysis of data involves re-examination of the categories identified to determine how they are linked, a complex process sometimes known by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as axial coding. The discrete categories identified in open coding are compared and combined in new ways as the researcher begins to assemble the “big picture”. During axial coding, the researcher is responsible for building a conceptual model and for determining whether sufficient data exist to support that interaction. The researcher should finally translate the conceptual model into the line that will be read by others. The research report will be a rich, tightly woven account that closely approximates the reality it represents (Strauss & Corbin, (1990). During axial coding it may be established that the initial categories identified must be revised, leading to re-examination of the raw data. Creswell (2007) noted that, in order to generate findings that transform raw data into new knowledge, a qualitative researcher must engage in active and demanding analytic processes throughout all the phases of the research. Understanding of these processes is therefore an important aspect not only of doing

qualitative research but also of reading, understanding and interpreting it. It is important to recognise that qualitative data analysis processes are not entirely distinguishable from the actual data. The theoretical lens from which the researcher approaches the phenomenon and the strategies that the researcher uses to generate or construct data and the understanding that the researcher has about what might count as relevant or important data in answering the research question are all analytic processes that influence the data. Although there are many qualitative data analysis computer programmes available on the market, these are essentially aids to sorting and organizing sets of qualitative data and none are capable of the intellectual and conceptualizing processes required to transform data into meaningful findings.

In qualitative data analysis, there are specific analytic strategies that are more commonly applied. Glaser and Strauss (1967) identified four analysis strategies which are: constant comparative analysis, phenomenological analysis, ethnographic analysis and the narrative and discourse analysis.

All these strategies of analysis originated from the grounded theory methodologies which take one piece of data and comparing it with all others that may be similar or different in order to develop conceptualizations of the possible relations between various pieces of data. Phenomenological analysis attempts to uncover and describe the essential nature of the problem and present it in a manner that a person who has no problem might begin to appreciate the phenomenon (Patton, 1990). The phenomenology analysis strategy avoid cross comparisons and instead orient the researcher towards the depth and detail that can be appreciated only through an exhaustive, systematic and reflective study of experiences as they are lived. Patton (1990) noted that although constant comparative strategies might well permit the analysis to use some pre-existing or emergent theory against which to test all new pieces of data are generated, the phenomenological

strategies typically change the researcher to set aside or bracket all such preconceptions. The data analysis approaches differ from each other in the degree to which interpretations are acceptable but they all present strategies for immersing oneself in data, engaging with data reflectively and generating rich descriptions that enlighten the reader.

Issues of Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness) in Qualitative Research

While validity and reliability are essentially tools of positivist epistemology, they attempt to fragment and delimit phenomena into common categories that can be applied to all of the participants or wider and similar situations. Although reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not viewed separately in qualitative research. Patton (1990) noted that, instead terminology that encompasses credibility, transferability and trustworthiness are used in qualitative research. If reliability and validity are to be relevant research concepts particularly from a qualitative point view, they have to be redefined in order to reflect the multiple ways of establishing truth. Patton (2001) states that validity and reliability are two major factors which any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study and analysing results and also judging the quality of the study. To understand the concepts of validity and reliability, it is necessary to present the various definitions and interpretations of reliability and validity given by many different qualitative researchers from different perspectives.

Reliability in Qualitative Research

Despite the fact that reliability is a concept used for testing or evaluating quantitative research, the idea is also often used in all types of

research. There are three types of reliability referred to in qualitative research which relate to; to the degree to which a measurement given repeatedly remains the same, the stability of a measurement over time and the similarity of measurements, within a given time period (Patton, 2001). It should however be noted that issues of reliability have received little attention from qualitative researchers who have focused on achieving greater trustworthiness in their work. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that since there can be no validity without reliability and thus no credibility without dependability, a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter.

To enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research the use of enquiry audit is crucial in which researchers examine both the process and the product of the research for consistency. To ensure the concept of reliability in qualitative research, examination of trustworthiness is crucial. The trustworthiness of a research report lies at the heart of issues conventionally looked at as validity and reliability. Thus trustworthiness in qualitative research is measured against processes such as triangulation, member checking, thick descriptions and prolonged engagement (Berge, 2009).

Validity in Qualitative Research

In conventional research, validity refers to the extent to which the findings of a study accurately describe reality. Fundamentally, all procedures for determining validity are concerned with the relationship between performance in the test and other independently observable facts about behaviour characteristics under consideration (Patton, 1990). Patton went on to argue that the determination of such isomorphism is in principle impossible, since one would have to know the precise nature of the reality and if one knew this already, there would be no need to test it. The qualitative researcher who is a

naturalistic researcher assumes the presence of multiple realities and attempts to present these multiple realities adequately. Trustworthiness in this case can be enhanced through triangulation of data. Triangulation refers to the convergence of multiple data sources and also the convergence of multiple data generation methods in the same study.

Where triangulation methods are used in qualitative research, it is typically a strategy for improving the validity and reliability (trustworthiness) of the research findings (Chisaka, 2007). It should be noted therefore that the issues of triangulation have important methodological considerations in naturalistic and qualitative research since this is used to control bias and to establish valid propositions. Although the ability to generalise findings to wider groups and circumstances is one of the most common tests of validity quantitative research. Patton (2001) is of the notion that trustworthiness is one of the criteria for quality case studies depending on the case selected and studied. In order to increase the credibility of the findings of qualitative studies Bradley (1993), Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended a set of activities that would help improve the credibility of qualitative studies and these include, prolonged engagement in the field, persistent observation, triangulation, negative case analysis, checking interpretation against raw data, peer debriefing and member checking.

CONCLUSION

The increased interest in qualitative research among open distance learners in recent years warrants a basic understanding of this paradigm on the part of the researchers. The current overview of qualitative research methods and issues represents a starting point for open distance learners interested in using or reviewing qualitative research. It should however be noted that the decision to use

qualitative methodologies should be considered carefully, because by its very nature qualitative research can be emotionally taxing and extraordinarily time consuming through prolonged engagement and member checking. At the same time it is capable of yielding rich information not obtainable through statistical positivist strategies and sampling techniques. In the past, researchers contemplating the use of qualitative inquiry were regarded as using an inferior research methodology. Fortunately in most open and distance learning institutions; the belief has totally changed to the point where qualitative research is the paradigm of choice in most universities and a preference for more open and distance learners.

Qualitative researchers have a special responsibility to their participants and their readers. Since there are no statistical tests for significance in qualitative studies, the researcher bears the burden of discovering and interpreting the importance of what is observed, and of establishing a plausible connection between what is observed and the conclusions drawn in the research report.

To do all these things skilfully, it requires a solid understanding of the research paradigm and ideally guided practice in the use of qualitative observation and analysis techniques. There are many useful research methods, the selection of which depends on the research questions being asked. Most importantly open and distance learners should rise to the challenge to find and use rigorous appropriate research techniques that address the significant questions facing their particular field. This desktop theoretical analysis has attempted to highlight the major characteristics of qualitative research design. In the process the main instruments for gathering qualitative data are discussed. This is followed by a detailed analysis of methods for qualitative content analysis. Finally issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research are elaborated in this article.

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