

# Educational Researcher

<http://er.aera.net>

---

## Research news and Comment: Confessions of a Quantitative Educational Researcher Trying to Teach Qualitative Research

William M. Stallings

*EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHER* 1995; 24; 31

DOI: 10.3102/0013189X024003031

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://edr.sagepub.com>

---

Published on behalf of



<http://www.aera.net>

By



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Educational Researcher* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** <http://er.aera.net/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://er.aera.net/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.aera.net/reprints>

**Permissions:** <http://www.aera.net/permissions>

---

# Confessions of a Quantitative Educational Researcher Trying to Teach Qualitative Research

WILLIAM M. STALLINGS

The idea for this article grew from a chat with Alan Peshkin at the 1993 AERA Annual Meeting. As I was walking through the exhibit area, I noticed Professor Peshkin, clean shaven, sitting at the Longman booth. Because Professor Peshkin is a former colleague and because I use his textbook (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), I thought I might pick up some hints on teaching qualitative research. Parenthetically, for over 25 years I have taught measurement and statistics. In describing my professional training to Professor Peshkin, I mentioned also that I have an AB and MAT in sociology and that, as an undergraduate, I had taken several courses in anthropology. Professor Peshkin responded that my background was better than most of the "first generation" of professors of qualitative research. I've been chewing on that "first generation" label since last year. This article is the result.

Although I have no formal training in qualitative research, for the past 2 years I have taught a graduate course entitled "Ethnography in School and Community Settings." Because of the terminal illness of one faculty member and the failure of a formal search, I have become the "little Dutch boy with his thumb in the dike." Through this article I can share my successes (some) and can ask for help in those areas that need improvement (many). Most of all, I wish to initiate a dialogue with those of the "first generation" who, although not trained formally in the area, nevertheless teach qualitative research methods, either as a unit in the introductory educational research course or as a "stand-alone" ethnography or qualitative research course.

Following Van Maanen (1988) the perspective of this article is that of a "confessional tale," a tale whose "concern [is] how the fieldworker's life was lived upriver among the natives" (p. 75). Obviously, the natives are my ethnography students. A secondary perspective, in a pedagogical if not philosophical sense, is constructivism, as used in science and mathematics education. In the language of realtors I am having an open house so that others can examine my construction of qualitative research and its instruction, and perhaps suggest some additions and improvements.

## Background

Perhaps a few autobiographical "facts" (I'm reluctant to use this word now) would set the stage. In a small way I have been involved with educational evaluation since the late 1960s. I have seen that field change from being a specialty of educational psychology and measurement to a pluralistic enterprise. From afar, I have observed Bob Stake and Egon Guba undergoing professional paradigm shifts from traditional quantitatively based methodology to some version of qualitative evaluation.

On a personal recreational side, I started reading literary theory a decade ago. I read novels by David Lodge and Terry Eagleton, delved into Terence Hawkes, pointed out to my wife the name and the significance (pun intended) on the name de Saussure on a plaque in Charleston's Huguenot church, and heard (but not understood) talks by Derrida and Eco. Most of all I was stimulated by an essay (long since misplaced) of Frederick Crews in the *New York Review of Books*. I interpreted his essay as arguing that social science theory and literary theory were converging. From all this browsing and listening, one recurrent theme was dominant: There is no privileged reading of any "text."

To help me understand my colleagues in social foundations, I audited a course in the philosophy of science. Since then I have worked through D. C. Phillips, a little Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Carl Hempel, and a tad of Feyerabend, Harré, and Rorty. I've done a lot of poking into *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Although my understanding is primitive, I have learned enough philosophy to follow the arguments about the incommensurability of qualitative and quantitative paradigms and not to flinch at the mention of the Duhem-Quine thesis. I even recognize names like Hans-Georg Gadamer, Imre Lakatos, and Paul Ricoeur.

## What I Do in my Course

When it became clear that there was no one to teach our qualitative research course, my chair offered me one quarter off research leave to get tooled up. I began by trying to develop a syllabus. After much thrashing about and a good deal of reading including the chapter on the teaching of qualitative research in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research in Education* (Webb & Glesne, 1992), I decided to customize the syllabi of my predecessors, Scott Enright and Sheryl Gowen. What follows is a synthesis of their ideas and mine.

After an introductory lecture or two and after having done some reading in the texts, each student must come up with a research question (foreshadowing question), find an appropriate site, and gain entree. During the term, research applications (e.g., interviewing techniques, ethics, sampling, etc.) are coordinated with readings. Students write brief reports on each of the research applications. In these reports they reflect on their experiences and the readings. I provide a written reaction to each report. In addition, the students break up into small groups for informal discussion of their common problems. I require each student to give an oral book report from a list appended to the course syllabus. Substitutions are allowed. Available choices include theoretical or methodological books (e.g., Patton,

1990; Spradley, 1979; Strauss, 1987) and ethnographies or other examples of qualitative research (e.g., Dunier, 1992; Latour & Woolgar, 1988; Rubin, 1967; and Wolcott, 1973). Most students choose ethnographies. Perhaps because of the southern tradition of story telling, my students give entertaining reports. As a capstone exercise, students apply the methods, perspectives, and concepts of qualitative research by actually doing a mini-research project. Each term I have at least one guest lecturer. Mine have included a nurse who does Heideggerian qualitative research, a human resource development specialist who did her dissertation on the job interviews for middle management, and a film maker who chronicles the "Elvis Cult." I inherited the sponsorship of a qualitative research support group. This group meets quarterly for a pot luck supper followed by a talk on qualitative research. Often, the speaker is a former student who has successfully completed her dissertation. The ensuing discussions have been as stimulating as the talks themselves.

### Hits and Misses

I have reanalyzed the 26 research reports of my last class. (I have permission to use them as data.) My students were surprisingly skillful in describing settings; they were ingenious and creative in finding sites and gaining entree. Sites varied; for example, neighborhood bar, pawn shop, health spa, church, public library, and preschool. Students have an ear for dialogue. Students underused records, archives, documents, newspapers, newsletters, and so forth. With the exception of psychology majors, my students did not have strong backgrounds in the social or psychological sciences. Consequently, they found it difficult to use social or psychological theory as "a conceptual template with which to compare and contrast results" (Morse, 1994, p. 221). Many had trouble with research questions, both in coming up with them and in phrasing them. I wonder how important research questions are for a short-term project. Analysis is a weak component of my students' papers. Obviously, 9 weeks is a very brief period in which to conceptualize any research project, carry it out, analyze the results, and write it up. Still, I get little sense of sifting, organizing, and rearranging the data in the search for patterns, themes, or grounded theory. (I must add that it is also true that my own grasp of qualitative analysis is so tenuous that I give minimal instruction or advice on this topic.) And few attempted to interpret their data from the perspective of those whom they studied.

What has worked for me? Answer: Media! I begin by showing Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, a dramatic and tragic tale of medieval Japan that involves multiple realities as perceived by participants and onlooker. However, I am still working on good discussion questions. I have a collection of AERA tapes on areas relating to qualitative research. Students like especially (and borrow) Harry Wolcott's "Ethnographic Research in Education" (1980), Bob Stake's "Seeking Sweet Water: Case Study Methods in Education Research" (1980). My favorite is Howard Becker's "Theory: Necessary Evil..." (1991). I have noticed that in this age of virtual reality most students have a short attention span for lectures on audiocassette format. Another AERA resource of some interest is the 1991 videotape on publishing qualitative research.

I am still tinkering with my qualitative research course. And I have some questions about what I do now. For example, I have not monitored student field notes or journal entries. Should I? I could require a sample page of annotated field notes as part of the research project. When I once suggested that students turn in their field notes and journals, along with their reports, I was greeted with groans of dismay and scowls of disapproval. Some felt that journal entries were too personal. There are activities or exercises that I could provide. For example, just as statistics students need practice solving problems, so do qualitative research students need practice in coding, categorizing, and searching for themes in ethnographic data. Can anyone recommend 5 to 10 pages of field notes, either published or in the public domain, that I could assign as a practice exercise? For another example, in science and the arts students learn by analyzing and evaluating exemplars. I should devote more class time to critiquing published qualitative research. Smith and Glass (1987) offer a useful set of "issues to be raised about the qualities of naturalistic students" (p. 278).

### Conclusion

At my institution I have many colleagues of my age and experience cohort who are trying to teach themselves and their students qualitative research. This is especially true of my immediate colleagues who teach psychometrics, statistics, sampling, design, and meta-analysis; from casual conversations at AERA, I sense the same is the case on a national level. My hope is that this article could stimulate a dialogue among the "first generation" of traditionally trained professors of educational research who have been called upon to master and teach qualitative research. Of course, I also welcome any advice from the "second generation."

### References

- Dunier, M. (1992). *Slim's table: Race, respectability, and masculinity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (1988). *Laboratory life: The construction of scientific facts*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Morse, J. M. (1994). Designing funded qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 200-235). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Rubin, L. B. (1976). *Worlds of pain: Life in the working-class family*. New York: Basic Books.
- Smith, M. L., & Glass, G. V. (1987). *Research and evaluation in education and the social sciences*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Webb, R. B., & Glesne, C. (1992). Teaching qualitative research. In M. D. Le Compte, W. L. Millroy, & J. Preissle (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research in education* (pp. 771-814). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Wolcott, H. (1973). *The man in the principal's office: An ethnography*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.