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Decoding Each Other through Coding: Sharing Our Unlikely Research Collaboration

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This narrative is a story of our cross-disciplinary collaboration. While teachers and researchers in English studies often share stories of teaching, we too infrequently share those of research. The consequence is that the everyday, lived experiences of conducting inquiry and doing research—the key intellectual activities in *all learning*—become muted, if not hidden. In response, we relate here our journey of teaching and learning the method of qualitative coding.

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It's late Wednesday afternoon, as we're finishing our first collaborative coding session. The two of us look up from our laptops. We have papers, notes, and hot tea spread across the small, round table in Beth's office. We've each just reviewed the same bit of transcript, a document representing one of Beth's interviews conducted with writers and tutors who meet regularly in campus and community writing centers. Now we're ready to compare our qualitative "codes," or labels for recurring patterns that we've added to the transcript. These codes reveal the themes and outliers we've identified through analysis of the data.

By this point, Beth has reviewed this and other transcripts many times, as she conducted and transcribed the interviews for her dissertation research in composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies. Now a faculty member at Marquette University, Beth has been working with these transcripts for years, yet still finds new ways of interpreting what she reads and continues to be curious and surprised by what emerges. In contrast, Adrianne has never coded before. As a doctoral candidate in Victorian literature and a research assistant (RA) in Marquette's English Department, Adrianne has performed a range of research tasks from locating and copying sources to checking references and editing manuscripts. This coding project is her first venture into qualitative research, and she's still making sense of new terms like "qualitative analysis" and "coding."

On this late Wednesday afternoon, the two of us compare our initial coding categories, and we find more common ground than one might imagine. We both note the importance of tutoring relationships and the ways in which roles are conflated (e.g., a tutor is also considered a writing confidant, a friend, a student, and a colleague). Alongside these patterns, we also notice some intriguing differences, such as how we understand what it means when a writer says she values the tutor's "voice" and having that person's voice in her head. Does a coding category like "VOICE" refer only to one's literal speaking voice or the voice represented through writing or even imagined, perceived, or desired voices? Such questions open, for us, the ongoing discussion, rethinking, and refinement of coding categories.

At first, our collaboration may seem unlikely, if not misaligned. Neither Adrianne's studies in literature nor her typical work as an RA directly apply to this project. Given our different disciplinary orientations, research interests, and methodologies, it's possible that we never would have met (or at least not collaborated) within our department. Yet, whether coincidental or serendipitous, this unlikely collaboration has led to our own research-and-writing relationship. Together, we have analyzed a number of interview transcripts, furthering Beth's research agenda and giving Adrianne hands-on research experience, while we are learning to think more creatively together. Through an ongoing process of teaching and learning qualitative coding—a process that began with our side-by-side coding on this Wednesday afternoon—we've learned and taught each other to see the same data in different ways. We've built a collaborative relationship that has allowed for mentoring beyond the coding project, and we've considered the value of sharing research stories like the one we relate here.

Seeking a Research Partner (Beth)

As a qualitative researcher, I appreciate having multiple people—multiple analysts or reviewers—involved in processing, discussing, and especially *coding* data. Not only do multiple perspectives bring new insights into a project, but multiple perspectives also raise new questions that help with seeing and re-seeing emergent patterns. Over the years, I have worked closely with interview transcripts—reading them line-by-line, noting patterns within and across interviews, and linking codes with prominent categories within my conceptual framework. That said, when returning to the transcripts after conducting a series of follow-up interviews, I knew that a fresh approach would help me to fill in gaps and cover new ground.

In our department, faculty members submit requests to be paired with RAs, all of whom are graduate students in literary studies. Luckily, Adrianne and I had been matched with each other previously, and so she was familiar with my larger project focused on relational communication (and identifying how writing relationships can bolster writers and their assertions of epistemic rights). When I asked Adrianne if she was open to learning qualitative coding, she showed willingness to learn and began reading both methodological guides and documents framing the project, including grant proposals, initial findings, and one of my previous articles. I also shared with Adrianne the full methods chapter of my dissertation, which included (1) names of codes and sub-codes, (2) definitions, and (3) examples of each. The following is an example of one initial code, which we revised and folded under a broader category of "RELATIONS" through our re-coding process:

> ***NOT ALONE***—coming to recognize that you're not alone, not an anomaly; being vulnerable with/to another person; hearing others' stories and finding strength together
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> Example from Jane (pseudonym), writer in the main writing center:
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> "You know dissertations can be a very dreadful experience. It's alone. Because nobody can help you with the writing. You have to do it yourself. It's a very lonely journey that you are doing. But this long-term working with [Tutor's Name] and developing a relationship—not only does she know my dissertation, but I know she will be very happy when I start collecting data. She *was very happy* when I finished my collecting data. 'Oh! That's wonderful.' I would always tell her what's the status: 'I'm now going through IRB, going through [Hospital Name's] IRB. Now I can do this. Now I can do that!'"

While reviewing these materials and reading interview excerpts like the one above, Adrianne also completed training modules for Marquette's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and reviewed some of my past coding (to get a sense of the process). From there, we began working in a shared google folder, where Adrianne and I constructed documents to define and refine our coding categories, to organize coded and uncoded transcripts, and to document questions and concerns. As Adrianne added to these materials, we also met

weekly: at first, checking in about our research goals, then coding together, then coding separately, and finally with Adrianne coding on her own and reporting on each week's findings. The process was emergent and spanned more than a year's time, leading to in-depth conversations ranging from discussion of writing and writing centers (the focus of the study) to comparisons of qualitative coding with other research methods (particularly with close reading, the method Adrianne is using for her dissertation research).

Discovering My Inner Coder (Adrianne)

None of my previous RA responsibilities involved data analysis, so coming into this project, I wasn't sure what to expect. What I learned is that unlike some of the more clerical tasks associated with my research assistantship, this work truly engaged me *as a researcher*, as someone who needed deep intellectual engagement to make sense of "raw data." Although I was not involved in gathering the data, I critically analyzed it as a true collaborator in research.

Even at the beginning stage, I was excited about qualitative coding: though this method of reading text was entirely new to me, it reminded me of the close reading method I often use as a literary scholar. Right away I saw similarities. With both qualitative coding and close reading, the researcher pays careful attention to the written text, looks for recurring themes that shape meaning, and pinpoints evidence in the text itself. With both methods, the researcher brings their own theoretical perspectives and personal subjectivities, which shape the analysis in particular ways, even when efforts are made toward the most fair or unbiased reading possible. And with both methods, the researcher wants others to *trust* their analysis and, therefore, works to ensure that readings/findings are reasonable to others.

After our initial coding session on the Wednesday we describe, I began reading and reviewing transcripts on my own. I became confident after coding alongside Beth, feeling reassured that our codes mostly aligned. However, we also quickly discovered some differences when we coded the same sections, which alerted us to the need for a few additional coding categories in some cases, and the need to collapse categories in other cases. As an example, within just a few weeks, I saw that the code "VALUE" could mean anything the participants valued: from visiting the writing center and working with a particular writing partner/tutor to developing a regular writing practice to just writing itself. The potential variations and *many* sub-codes of "VALUE" became too numerous to count, and the category ceased being useful as it began to describe all responses rather than any unique pattern/phenomenon.

Even as I worked to add, refine, and define codes and sub-codes, I wanted to be sure that my coding didn't change the focus of Beth's qualitative inquiry. After all, every categorization indicates a new way of reading the text and encourages a new interpretation of the broader pattern/phenomenon. Therefore, I met with Beth often, gained familiarity with the research questions, and also practiced keeping a list of tentative changes (e.g., new sub-codes and suggested deletions) that we talked through before implementing.

In addition to the actual qualitative coding, much of my work involved writing clear definitions and compiling illustrative examples of the various codes and sub-codes. This

definitional work involved noticing connections and cross-referencing categories whenever they appeared to overlap with regularity. As the list of codes and sub-codes grew and grew, I eventually had a document of twenty-six pages and fourteen primary codes. Such a long list reflected the subtlety of codes and the noting of outliers in addition to recurring themes. Yet, the long list also became impractical and overwhelming to use. As I conflated and clarified codes and sub-codes, I was able to trim the list to two pages with six codes—a more manageable list that represented the data more clearly.

Throughout this process, I discovered that researchers must know their data well—and must have sifted through multiple iterations and explanations of likely categories before settling on ones that *best* describe patterns. Though time-intensive, this process also results in the "thick description" that ethnographers and other qualitative researchers hope to achieve in their reports. For my part as an RA, making important decisions and determining relationships among codes/sub-codes heightened my interest in the work. My experience as an RA no longer involved the semi-drudgery of collecting and reproducing materials, but required my interpretation of it. I really enjoyed the room for interpretation and creativity in the research process. The more I could clarify the codes, the more I wanted to understand the meaning of their relationships, and in this way, I could see myself truly contributing to original research.

De-Coding Each Other through Coding

We share here our stories side-by-side to highlight the teaching and learning involved in research activities, hoping to emphasize a mindful, relational approach to learning via research. Many of us participate in collaborative research, many of us spend our time sorting through large data sets or textual materials, and many of us supervise or work as RAs. Though our narrative only scratches the surface of much larger matters, we hope that by sharing it, we invite and inspire others stories of research. Imagine if we took seriously the mandate to record research as "learningful" experiences in need of narration, in need of unveiling messy and relational processes of meaning-making.

In our case, we appreciate what the other person contributed to this coding project. As a faculty member, I (Beth) especially appreciated having another person involved in research, making what could be a solitary process social and relational. Thinking *meta*, Adrianne and I were building our relationship and coming to understand each other (i.e., de-coding each other) as we were coding participants' self-reports into *why* relationships matter in the writing process. Not only did we come to value the other's insights, questions, and sometimes-challenges—preventing a too-easy or too-simple coding schema—but we also learned to value the other's disciplinary training and position.

As a research assistant, I (Adrianne) especially valued the opportunity to do meaningful research work (beyond piecemeal or clerical tasks). Even as I was challenged by working outside my primary research area, I also brought the habits of mind and my experience of reading texts closely into qualitative analysis. More than just seeing similarities between coding and close reading, I used my training in literary studies to participate in cross-disciplinary research and to learn another methodological approach. Further, the hours spent coding led me to think more about the ways I approach texts and to think in terms of "patterns" and "outliers" (the language of qualitative analysis).

This learning now lingers in the back of my mind as I continue with my own dissertation research, seeking to explain why texts matter and what they have to say, similar to what participants communicate through interviews.

On that Wednesday afternoon, now several years ago, we opened ourselves to learning with, alongside, and from each other. Not only were we learning from the participants and their interview transcripts, but we were also learning from each other's backgrounds, disciplinary orientations, and ways of understanding the world. Openness to such learning and teaching typically defines collaborative research, yet needs to be developed and practiced again and again within faculty-RA relationships and mentoring. Just as qualitative coding asks us to look and look again, we ask you, as readers: Where might unlikely collaborations be found in your life? How might they enhance your research projects? And how might we consider research itself and related research relationships as part of our expanded perspectives on learning?