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# A Book Review of Marilyn Lichtman's Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide

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## **A Book Review of Marilyn Lichtman's *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide***

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This review offers you a blend of two perspectives on Marilyn Lichtman's book *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide* published in 2006 by Sage Publications; that of a graduate student beginning PhD studies along with that of a dissertation supervisor, teacher, and editor. At times our voices converge and at other times we speak individually.

Sally: I read this book for the purposes of writing a review and invited Karen to read it as an entrée into doctoral research studies.

Karen: I read this book from a beginner's perspective. Overwhelmed by the literature about qualitative research, the invitation to read and review Lichtman's work was a gift; it offered a starting place to clarify my own understanding of the traditions, influences, and new advances that will impact my own choices as a qualitative researcher.

*Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide* does exactly what it sets out to do. The back cover says that the book "Provides those new to the field with a blend of practical and theoretical information on conducting qualitative research in education." Lichtman writes with a welcoming, confidence-building style that gives permission to be curious and open to the possibilities that qualitative research offers. Each chapter ends with examples of the exercises and activities that Professor Lichtman assigns her own students, allowing insight into the step-by-step competency building that is required to hone researching skills.

In the preface Lichtman invites us to make meaning of her writing and to own our interpretation. "You will need to decide what is important and what you accept. Since qualitative research has no right answers, this puts you in a state of flux" (p. xvi). Aware of the complexity that beginning qualitative researchers face as they make decisions about their own research designs, Lichtman opens Chapter 1 with the anonymous quote, "Anyone who isn't confused here doesn't really understand what's going on" (p. 3).

Karen: Permission to be confused was exactly what I needed to dive in.

Part 1 of the book focuses on traditions and influences in qualitative research. Chapters 1 through 4 offer an introduction and overview of the field, insights from the past, and a chapter titled, "Learning How to be a Qualitative Researcher." There are comparisons and contrasts between quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and the

author is committed to discerning the differences between the two. Sharing her own evolution as a researcher, Lichtman writes about her early, firm commitment to the traditional, quantitative viewpoint, believing "...if we could get the 'real' or 'true' data, we could find the answers" (p. 38).

Throughout the book, Lichtman reminds us of ongoing opposition to qualitative research. "I remember one colleague who asked me whether I had lost my mind when I said I was interested in research methods that were qualitative" (p. 42). Citing Eisner and Peshkin (p. 1, 1990), Lichtman refers to the traditional positivist belief that "To conduct experiments and surveys was to be scientific; to do otherwise was to be soft – wrong – or muddle-headed" (p. 42). Lichtman's preference for and commitment to qualitative research is front and centre through the entire book. "I think traditional research, by its very nature, is sterile and impersonal" (p. 35). She encourages all of us to embrace the social-action-based philosophy that supports effective qualitative research. "Be an advocate, not an apologist" (p. 56).

Lichtman offers a list of 10 critical elements of qualitative research. These elements provide a firm grounding for a novice qualitative researcher. They can act as a compass when researchers somehow get off the path or pulled back into the traditional scientific paradigm.

Chapter 5 explores various approaches to qualitative research, and discerns for us the similarities and differences among ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenological inquiry, case studies, feminist research methods, and the combination of designs possible with a "generic approach." Lichtman warns us that these are not always easy concepts to understand, and wraps up the chapter stating, "By now you might find that your head is swimming..." (p. 79). The perfect conditions for learning!

Part 2 of *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide* is "Gathering, Organizing, and Analyzing." Lichtman guides us through the "How to" section of the book with Chapters 6 through 9 that focus on how to begin a qualitative research project, the role and function of a literature review, and tips for learning about others through interviewing and observing.

Lichtman offers pragmatic examples and advice for one-on-one interviews, focus groups, online interviewing, and observing others in action, acknowledging the advancements being made with technology. She offers rich excerpts from her own classes to demonstrate the power of well-conducted data gathering approaches. With sections such as "Some Do's and Don'ts of In-depth Interviewing" and "Issues and Challenges with Online Interviewing" the book outlines several frameworks and starting places for successful data collection.

Part 3 of the book is titled "Putting it All Together," and in Chapters 10 through 13 Lichtman guides us through steps for making meaning from our data, communicating our ideas, and judging and evaluating our research (and others' research), and she explores issues around self-reflexivity and subjectivity in qualitative research.

Chapter 10 begins with, "One of the dilemmas is that qualitative researchers do not agree on how the data should be analyzed – many approaches or paradigms are silent about what analysis should be performed" (p. 160). Lichtman then cites Thorne (as cited in Lichtman, 2006), who reminds us that "qualitative data analysis is the most complex and mysterious of all of the phases of a qualitative project, and the one that receives the least thoughtful discussion in the literature" (p. 160).

From this complexity, the author manages to make some very clear points. Lichtman tells us that making meaning from data is an iterative, circular, on-going process that is a combination of both process and interpretation. She posits that there are two different ways to conceptualize data analysis in qualitative research: identifying themes and telling stories. Lichtman encourages us to clarify our own views about the process of data analysis, and she underlines the importance of the researcher's pivotal role in making meaning of the data.

As the researcher, you are the best equipped to make sense of the data. Using others to verify your interpretations assumes that there are 'right' themes to find or that some "findings" are better than others. Get rid of that assumption. (p. 166)

In the *Epilogue*, Lichtman invites us to keep abreast of the evolving field of qualitative research. Shining a spotlight on the power of the Internet and our ever-growing access to information, the author captures several rich resources (journals online and in print) for further reading and exploration. She concludes the book with a thorough glossary, reference list, and index creating a user-friendly piece of writing that invites re-reading.

Karen: While *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide* was a delightful starting place for me, it also left me with many unanswered questions. Upon completion of the book, I found myself feeling excited about the prospect of beginning my own research journey, but also wondering if I was up to the challenge. And perhaps that is the author's intent, as she repeatedly reminds us that many beginning researchers are seeking clarity and want to be told "exactly how to do it," looking for the one best way to conduct qualitative research. In Lichtman's own words, "If you are uncomfortable with ambiguity, have difficulty putting words on paper, and need high structure, you might find qualitative research frustrating" (p. 19).

Sally: Readers should not let the word "education" in the title mislead them. The numerous and well-placed exemplars are from the field of education, but the principles and practices are easily applied to any discipline. The characteristics and "how to's" of qualitative inquiry are clear and forthright. I would recommend this book for those being introduced to qualitative research both at the undergraduate and graduate levels of study.

Marilyn Lichtman is a retired professor of educational research and has taught both qualitative and quantitative research courses throughout her career. She is currently on the editorial boards of *The Qualitative Report* and *Forum: Qualitative Social Research (FQS)*, both online journals committed to exploring qualitative issues.

Karen: Her teaching experience shines through her writing, and as a beginning researcher and humble student, it was the ideal starting place for me. I feel that the ball is now in my court, thanks to Lichtman's gentle invitation onto the court, and her well-placed serve.

### Reference

Lichtman, M. (2006). *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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### Author Note

Karen Dawson is a leadership development consultant combining coaching, facilitating, teaching, and improvisation in her practice. She serves as Associate Faculty at Royal Roads University and The Banff Centre. At the beginning of PhD studies through Tilburg University and the Taos Institute, Karen is intrigued by social constructionist ideas and their application to her research journey and her life work. Karen can be contacted by email at: Karen@createnow.ca

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