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# Shared Journaling as Peer Support in Teaching Qualitative Research Methods

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### Abstract

Teaching qualitative research methods (QRM), particularly early on in one's academic career, can be challenging. This paper describes shared peer journaling as one way in which to cope with challenges such as complex debates in the field and student resistance to interpretive paradigms. Literature on teaching QRM and the pedagogical value of journaling for metacognition are reviewed. The two authors describe key points about their teaching contexts and then demonstrate with journal excerpts how they developed (a) clarity, (b) confidence, and (c) connection through two years of co-creating their journal. The article concludes with recommendations for shared journal writing as well as ways to extend it.

### Keywords

Journaling, Metacognition, Qualitative Research Methods, Pedagogy, Teaching

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## Shared Journaling as Peer Support in Teaching Qualitative Research Methods

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*Teaching qualitative research methods (QRM), particularly early on in one's academic career, can be challenging. This paper describes shared peer journaling as one way in which to cope with challenges such as complex debates in the field and student resistance to interpretive paradigms. Literature on teaching QRM and the pedagogical value of journaling for metacognition are reviewed. The two authors describe key points about their teaching contexts and then demonstrate with journal excerpts how they developed (a) clarity, (b) confidence, and (c) connection through two years of co-creating their journal. The article concludes with recommendations for shared journal writing as well as ways to extend it. Keywords: Journaling, Metacognition, Qualitative Research Methods, Pedagogy, Teaching*

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Teaching qualitative research methods (QRM) to graduate students can be a very rewarding and enjoyable experience, but it can also involve considerable challenges. In particular, the sustained prevalence of positivistic thinking results in a poor understanding of and—at times—active resistance to alternative paradigms. Professors experience difficulties when students do not accept or understand that knowledge is created in multiple ways or when they realize that qualitative research is more difficult than previously assumed. Thus, because of the particular challenges of teaching QRM, peer support is vital for professors, particularly those teaching it for the first time. However, little has been written about this topic.

In this paper, we (the two authors) describe how we supported each other during two years of teaching QRM by co-creating a shared journal. This shared journal made explicit our thinking about what we were teaching and how we were teaching it; thus, we approach this paper from the perspective of metacognition. This concept was first introduced by Flavell (1976), who defined it as “one’s knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them” (p. 232). Much work has been done in this area since Flavell first introduced the concept, and there are different views on the current definition (Iiskala, Vauras, Lehtinen, & Salonen, 2011; Sandi-Urena, Cooper, & Stevens, 2011; Zohar, 1999). One recent definition is that metacognition occurs when individuals “plan, monitor, and evaluate their own cognitive behavior in a learning environment or problem space” (Sandi-Urena et al., 2011, p. 324). People who are metacognitive demonstrate awareness about their thinking processes (Griffith & Ruan, 2005), and our shared journal does just that.

We begin this paper by briefly reviewing the literature on teaching qualitative research methods and on the pedagogical value of journaling. This is followed by a description of our teaching contexts. Then, we show how through the sharing of weekly journal entries, we assisted each other through the challenges of teaching QRM, encouraged each other to think more reflexively about our teaching approaches and our understanding of QRM, and offered valuable resources to each other. Drawing on examples from our journal entries, we organize our remarks centered on three benefits we gained from the journals: (a) clarity, (b) confidence, and (c) connection. Recommendations for shared journal writing conclude the paper.

### **Challenges of Teaching Qualitative Methods**

Some students may feel quite energized by qualitative research, as it resolves dissonances regarding quantitative research (Eakin & Mykhalvoskiy, 2005; Reissetter, Yexley, Bonds, Nikels, & McHenry, 2003), which students are often introduced to in research methods courses or multiple statistics course prior to taking a QRM course. Yet, QRM courses can also create difficulties for students due to its “disruptive capacity” (Eakin & Mykhalvoskiy, para. 31). The prevalence of positivistic thinking in research and in academia, in general, results in many students being resistant to learning about qualitative methods or having difficulty understanding or accepting alternative, more interpretive ways of knowing (Booker, 2009; Eakin & Mykhalvoskiy).

Students may expect that there is one right way to conduct research (i.e., write their theses and dissertations, carry out their research, and complete their assignments). They may also be surprised at how difficult and complex qualitative research is as they grapple with issues such as methodological congruency, validity, sampling, and reflexivity. The open-ended nature of qualitative research, such as what is observed and interpreted in an ethnographic study or how coding proceeds, evokes anxiety in students as they worry about whether or not they have done an assignment correctly or will earn a high grade in the class (Eakin & Mykhalvoskiy, 2005). Students may approach qualitative data analysis with feelings of terror (Franklin, 1996). Personalities and learning preferences may also make it difficult for some students to deal with the more open-ended nature of qualitative research (Reissetter et al., 2003).

Students can have high expectations of what they will learn in a QRM course, but the breadth and depth of qualitative research methods makes it impossible for them to know everything after taking only one course, often taught in one semester. However, there is also only so much QRM learning that can take place in the classroom, even if it is taught in more than one course. As Delyser (2008) notes, “qualitative research is about doing, so lectures and discussions are only a start” (p. 236). Qualitative learning can take place in many ways beyond formal instruction (Morse, 2005).

Adding other layers to this issue are characteristics of the educator and pedagogical environment. Individuals who teach qualitative courses may be anxious about doing so, and many of them may be self-taught (Delyser, 2008). Such self-teaching, similar to teaching students, may require “a major re-focusing of a researcher’s orientation to science and methods” (Franklin, 1996, p. 242). They may experience antagonism from colleagues (Delyser, 2008) who are opposed to having a qualitative course in their midst. QRM courses are often taught by junior/untentured faculty (Eakin &

Mykhalvoskiy, 2005), raising issues about having untenured (and unprotected) faculty teaching such demanding courses (i.e., considering the role of students' course evaluations in tenure decisions). Finally, those teaching QRM for the first time may be caught off-guard by the presence and strength of students' philosophical resistance (Borochowitz, 2005).

Some scholars have published about their experiences of teaching QRM, noting philosophical/epistemological resistance as a key issue (e.g., Booker, 2009; Borochowitz, 2005; Breuer & Schreier, 2007; Delyser, 2008; Eakin & Mykhalvoskiy, 2005; Franklin, 1996; Hunt, Mehta, & Chan, 2009; Reisetter et al., 2003) and providing advice regarding how to manage such resistance. These authors note that peer support, such as meeting with other qualitative researchers while teaching, is helpful (Eakin & Mykhalvoskiy, 2005; Franklin, 1996). Although they describe students' resistance, the teachers rarely provide candid detail about how they actually experienced and dealt with this issue. Some accounts of students' "shifts" in thinking are documented (Reisetter et al., 2003), but little documentation exists on how the educators themselves shift. How do teachers develop as they teach these courses? How do they think about their teaching and *their* learning? Instructors' experiences of teaching QRM may differ based on their approaches to learning, their qualitative "mindset," and so on (Breuer & Schreier, 2007; Reisetter et al., 2003), but little is known about this.

Teaching experiences are rarely shared. "In normal daily academic life there is little time to reflect on issues of teaching, and even less opportunity to connect with others with similar experiences in similar institutional locations" (Eakin & Mykhalvoskiy, 2005, par 40). The importance of speaking frankly with colleagues about common difficulties in teaching qualitative research has been noted (Eakin & Mykhalvoskiy, 2005), but this is rarely found in the literature on teaching qualitative methods. Shared journaling between peers teaching QRM courses is one way, we contend, that such dialogues can be made visible, which in turn offers a useful mechanism for QRM instructors.

## **Journaling**

Journaling is an important tool for educators as it enhances one's learning through the "examination, clarification, and critique of pedagogical ideas and practices" (Kaplan, Rupley, Sparks, & Holcomb, 2007, pp. 358-359). It can be helpful in both an immediate, short-term sense and at a later date, contributing to professional practice over the long term. For example, in reading one's journal entries from previous years, "there are opportunities to identify themes and patterns, make sense of fragmented events, feelings and meanings and explore aspects of professional practice" (Alterio, 2004, p. 321).

Several types of reflective entries may be included in a journal. Various educators have suggested different conceptualizations of reflections (e.g., Hatton & Smith, 1995; Schön, 1987; Van Manen, 1977). Hatton and Smith (1995) described four types of reflection: (a) descriptive writing, (b) descriptive reflection, (c) dialogic reflection, and (d) critical reflection. The first type, descriptive writing, involves only describing events without reflecting on the events themselves.

For example, an educator might report on a teaching strategy used but not include the reason for the inclusion of that strategy or reflect on its effectiveness. Descriptive

reflection rectifies this omission, incorporating metacognition into the reflection as an educator begins to think about how they come to know certain things and how and why they teach a certain way. Dialogic reflection involves a deeper level of reflection resulting from taking a step back from an event. A range of alternatives and viewpoints are considered, with the complex nature of a situation and any associated incongruences acknowledged. Critical reflection considers the larger sociohistorical context in which actions are occurring. Journals consisting only of descriptive writing are the least helpful in terms of stimulating pivotal pedagogical insights. The other three reflections are important to include when journaling, although critical reflection is often least commonly found (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

Most journaling publications focus on individual journal writing rather than a co-constructed process and outcome occurring between two or more individuals. Several educators (e.g., Alterio, 2004; Cowie, 1997; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Kaplan et al., 2007), however, have commented on the value of shared journal writing. In a study of preservice teachers, Kaplan et al. (2007) compared journal writing over e-mail listservs with traditional journal writing. They found that requiring students to interact with each other (i.e., share their journals) increased the reflective component compared to the content found in individual journal writing. Individuals feel that they have learned more through sharing their reflections with others (Alterio, 2004). Peer coaching may also reduce feelings of isolation and help individuals expand their pedagogical knowledge base when they see alternative points of views and multiple ways of dealing with situations (Hauserman, 1993). In another study of teacher preparation, Hatton and Smith (1995) found that shared journaling among students increased the amount of dialogical reflection, noting the value of working in critical friend dyads, described as an interaction occurring within a “safe environment” that “encourages talking with, questioning, even confronting, the trusted other, in order to examine planning for teaching, implementation, and its evaluation” (p. 41). Collaborative exercises have also been examined with regard to metacognition (e.g., Iiskala et al., 2011; Sandi-Urena et al., 2011; Shamir, Mevarech, & Gida, 2009).

The benefits of journal writing, whether individual or collaborative, are typically discussed with regard to preservice or teachers-in-training (e.g., Boud & Walker, 1998; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Kaplan et al., 2007). Rarely does the literature address how individuals might continue with journaling once they are in a teaching position, or more specifically, in a post- secondary teaching position. Cowie (1997), a teacher who described an experience of sharing journals over email, is one exception. Identified benefits included learning about new teaching ideas, identifying ongoing concerns, and clarifying one’s own pedagogical beliefs. He noted, however, that his experience of journaling was not carried out in “real time,” but rather journals were written and shared with his partner after the course was finished. However shared, “real time” journaling that contributes to both short- and long-term pedagogical awareness and effectiveness in teaching QRM courses has not been described.

## **Our Context**

Journal writing by university professors is rarely mentioned in the Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) field, but Áine had been inspired years earlier ago by a powerful article (Allen, 1995) written by an HDFS professor in which the author reflected on coming out to her class as a lesbian. In this article, Allen used entry examples from a “teaching diary.”

Áine thought the teaching journal was an intriguing idea but was never motivated to keep a one until late 2007 at which point she was preparing to teach a QRM course for the first time. While preparing to teach this graduate level course, Áine recognized her anxiety about doing so, even though she had requested to teach the course and was excited about doing so. This anxiety was not related to lack of support at her university or in her department, in which much qualitative research was being conducted. Rather, it was a generalized anxiety about teaching a full course on qualitative methods for the first time and teaching it in (for) a faculty other than her own. She decided that this would be an important opportunity to write down her thoughts and experiences in a journal for the first time. A month later at a yearly conference both of us attended regularly (we had not attended graduate school together; we had met each about seven years earlier at this conference and had been rooming together for several years by that point), Áine mentioned her plan to Elizabeth. Elizabeth responded positively to the idea, adding that she, too, was teaching a similar course at the same time. She suggested that she might also keep a journal and our discussion then led to an agreement that we would share our journals with each other. Without having any background in the value of shared journaling, we anticipated that it would be helpful, thinking that it could provide each of us with emotional and practical support.

We shared our journal entries weekly by email, each one copied and pasted into the same Word document. Thus, the document became a shared construction. The first year’s journal was 77 pages long (single-spaced); the second year was 60 pages long. Entries included not only descriptions and reflections of how our classes went but also responses to each other’s questions and concerns, and all four types of reflections (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Occasional emails or summaries of phone conversations were also copied into the journal. Furthermore, we often exchanged resources such as suggested assignments and readings. After the first month, our entries took on a conversational tone rather than a “Dear Diary” format when Áine commented on her discomfort in referring to Elizabeth in the third person; Elizabeth agreed.

We want to point out three factors about our individual circumstances leading up to our journaling experience. First, we were both untenured. Áine was in the fifth year of a tenure track position and her application for tenure and promotion was being assessed at that time. Elizabeth was four years into a tenure track position, with a successful tenure and promotion application two years in the future. We both wanted to do a good job of teaching such an important yet challenging course, and the role of student evaluations in tenure decisions was present in our minds.

The question might be asked why neither of us turned to others at our own universities or departments for support during this pre-tenure stage. Like others, our mutual mentorship and support of each other developed out of “previously established relationships with colleagues” (Mullen & Forbes, 2000, p. 39), but this was not

necessarily planned. We did not keep our plan secret—both of us openly mentioned to other departmental members that we were engaging in this journaling exercise with an outside colleague.

Ultimately, the fact that we were both teaching the course at the same time and under similar circumstances (teaching on our own for the first time) was key. This exemplified the “same boatness” factor that plays an important part in peer mentoring relationships (Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill, & Bannister, 2009, p. 13). Moreover, we became cognizant of the fact that if we had approached someone at our respective universities, such relationships would have probably played out as “in-person” meetings. There are certainly benefits to in-person conversations, but we would have missed out on the advantages of keeping a journal. The written history of our dialogue was invaluable, as it showed our progress while teaching the course the first year and helping us prepare for our course the second year.

Second, the circumstances under which our courses were being offered differed from each other. Elizabeth’s QRM course was required for the HDFS PhD students in her program, and this was seen as a positive step toward acceptance of qualitative research. This one required QRM course, however, was offered alongside four statistics courses. Thus, the strong signal about the importance of qualitative methods was tempered by the fact that students could still leave the program with a belief that quantitative methods were more important and more highly valued than qualitative methods. Moreover, requiring students to take the QRM course could mean that some students in the course who not want to take it and were resistant to interpretive modes of inquiry. In contrast, Áine’s students were mostly Education Masters students, with some HDFS and other social sciences students. This elective course was the only QRM course offered at her small university. Other general research methods courses were offered, and these typically included qualitative methods content but ranged in amount depending on the department, course, and instructor. As already stated, however, qualitative research was at that time conducted in many departments on her campus. An unexamined assumption on her part was that students who were choosing to take the course would be more open to the content than those forced to enroll. Additionally, she did not expect to have non-Education students coming from strongly positivistic disciplines such as psychology, which, in fact, did occur. Our mutual experiences quickly reinforced the point that untenured teachers often need to revise their pedagogical idealism (Mullen & Forbes, 2000). Educators new to teaching qualitative methods may be unprepared to deal with students’ philosophical resistance (Borochowitz, 2005), and this may happen regardless of whether students choose to take or must take the course.

Third, the two disciplines in which we were teaching our courses—HDFS and Education—are informed by multiple paradigms. In HDFS, however, a “polarizing” positivist/postmodernist dichotomy exists, which highlights the political nature of theorizing (Bengston, Allen, Klein, Dilworth-Anderson, & Acock, 2005). Education, the faculty in which Áine was teaching her QRM course, has a wider variety of influences, including post-modernism.

There are qualitative journals in education (e.g., *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*) but not in family studies. Acceptance of and interest in qualitative research has grown in the last decade, and some argue (e.g., Shehan & Greenstein, 2005) that qualitative methods have become centrally placed in the family



studies field in recent years. We certainly see high percentages of graduate students in both HDFS and Education conducting qualitative theses and dissertations, and we see increasing percentages of qualitative research in family studies journals over the past 20 years (Humble, 2012). Nevertheless, many journals in both fields are overwhelmingly filled with quantitative studies; by and large, quantitative research is more valued than qualitative research.

Given such conditions, our shared peer journaling experience was an especially helpful mechanism for our QRM courses. After two years of journaling and then reflecting on and analyzing our journals, we argue that journaling is a compelling tool for QRM instructors. To support our claim, we delineate the benefits we gained from peer journaling in the next section.

### **The “3 C’s”: Clarity, Confidence, and Connection**

With some irony, we have reformulated the “3 C’s” characterizing modernist principles as an organization device to present the benefits of peer journaling. The “3 C’s” used in the positivistic paradigm are control, certainty, and closure (Mumby, 1997; Stewart, 1991). In contrast, the “3 C’s” characterizing our peer journaling experience are clarity, confidence, and connection.

As previously mentioned, an important aspect of our peer journal included sharing resources. Our exchanges resources were both tangible (e.g., articles and activities we found useful in our own classes) as well as abstract (e.g., idea and knowledge exchanges). We conceptualize peer journaling as a continuous exchange of resources. In the following subsections, examples of our resource exchange are infused in the discussion of each of the “3 C’s.”

**Clarity.** QRM suffers from considerable lack of clarity, even for basic, fundamental aspects of research design. As a case in point, it is common for the analytic process of discovering “themes” to be used in various and sometimes drastically different ways. For example, themes may be offered as indicative of a pattern, as frequencies of an experience, or as the salience of an experience (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). Other contested notions include trustworthiness, validity, and triangulation. Such jargon and conceptual confusion creates difficult conditions in which to teach. The process of exposing our questions, musings, and vulnerabilities in the journals assisted us in thinking about how we had come to understand QRM. It helped us gain a sense of lucidity of salient issues in QRM (e.g., terminology and conceptual debates about rigor) as well as our pedagogical approaches (both daily class interactions as well as broader goals for the course).

A concrete (and seemingly simple) benefit we gleaned from peer journaling was increased clarity of larger conceptual QRM debates as well as clarity regarding actual terms. The following two excerpts demonstrate an exchange that we had about such issues:

*So, I have been reading up a bit more on phenomenology. . . . In the first article, I started to understand a bit more about different types of phenomenology, but I was a bit confused because they seemed to be using*

*terms that I hadn't seen in Richards & Morse's (2007) book. They talked about the difference between descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. In reading this, I realized that I was certainly "schooled" in interpretive phenomenology, having taken a full year course with Max van Manen. However, I was confused because in this article, they talked about descriptive (Husserl) as using the concept of bracketing, whereas interpretive doesn't, yet I'd learned from van Manen that bracketing was something we do! This mystery was solved for me when I read the second article, which noted a different type of phenomenology, "Dutch phenomenology," which combines aspects of both descriptive and interpretive, which is clearly what I learned from my Dutch educator, Max van Manen! So there was one mystery solved. In reading the first article though, I was really struck at how positivistic the descriptive phenomenological approach sounds— particularly through the use of bracketing (that you can actually put aside what you know as you go to study the topic) and in its assumption that there is some essential nature-universal nature (eidetic structures) to be discovered out there about an experience, and that "the essences are considered to be represent the true nature of the phenomenon being studied" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 728). That sounds so positivistic to me! (Áine)*

*You posed some intriguing questions about bracketing being a positivistic notion. I suppose it is and it isn't. It definitely felt different than the way I learned quantitative research designs, especially experimental designs, although both of these share the same premise—removing and minimizing potential influence/bias. BUT, with quantitative research, it is less about the researcher him/herself and more about controlling the design. With bracketing, there is an acknowledgement that one is biased and one tries to suspend this while conducting the study and then the bracketed material is brought back in during the analysis and discussion portion of the research. Phenomenology also acknowledges that one can never completely bracket all bias. Thus, I lean toward thinking that the descriptive phenomenology I conducted mostly fits in the post-positivistic paradigm. I know there have been some considerable debates about bracketing in the field. (Elizabeth)*

Shared peer journaling also helped us delineate and examine goals for each class period and the course in general which, in turn, helped foster clear goals throughout our courses. While actively thinking about the course, Elizabeth wrote:

*I also think that I need to give students some feedback on their questions when they are the leaders. The questions are not that great and I probably should have collected the leader's questions ahead of time (like a few days before) so that I could give proper feedback and then the discussions might flow better. I have found that some discussion leaders tend to get hung up on really small details in the readings and miss some of the major*

*points, and/or the questions tend to be descriptive/lower level and not at a higher level of thinking. . . . I also have decided to collect their questions each week. Like you, I have asked each student to prepare two to three questions for each article. I think that by collecting them each week, I can get a better sense of their reading comprehension, effort, and see where their focus is and then address concerns in the following class. I think that right now I don't have a good sense of the "pulse" of the class.*

In a similar vein, exchanging tangible resources in our journals helped us to be more careful in our contemplation of class activities and assignments. Our resource exchange included how to use material resources more effectively or in different ways than we had initially intended. In the following example, Áine shared her musings about one of Elizabeth's assignments and how she might use it in her course.

*And, yes, please send the exercise on a student saying he/she wanted to do qualitative research. It sounds interesting. Do you think students would respond to it better and/or be able to answer it better if it came at the end of the course? It seems like it might be an interesting exercise to try at the end of the course as an alternative to doing a review of a qualitative article. Hmm, my wheels are spinning!*

Such musings helped Elizabeth form more specific goals for assignments as well as develop a clearer vision for the course in general. In so doing, we both reconsidered the ways in which we used assignments, including the timing of assignments and the benefits of revisiting previous assignments later in the course.

**Confidence.** Our increased clarity was accompanied by growing certainty in our knowledge of QRM and our ability to teach QRM to graduate students. Peer journaling helped ease the occasional anxiety we felt which was likely a general anxiety that individuals who teach qualitative methods can experience (Delyser, 2008). This anxiety may also have emerged over time as we realized the extent and intensity of some students' resistance to the material. We generally became more comfortable and confident in our teaching as well as our scholarship. Overall, a major benefit of peer journaling was our deepening confidence about uncertainty in QRM. For example, Elizabeth grew in her confidence of teaching about the "messiness" or ambiguity accompanying qualitative research. She wrote:

*I remind students of my pedagogy—putting the text in the center and we surround it and we are all implicated in each other's learning. I told the students that I will start out simple and sometimes will make more severe/rigid divisions than actually do exist but I do so as a heuristic tool. Later, I complicate things.*

Our journals are filled with multiple examples that reflect our enhanced feelings of confidence. The following journal excerpts provide examples of our articulations of self-confidence and awareness of our initial and developing qualitative "mindsets" and

their influences on our teaching. These excerpts also show encouragement and reflection about our growth as instructors.

*I already feel better about the upcoming class. I thought I could only generate three to four ideas I wanted to point out but as I was writing, more ideas/points came to me. This is energizing! I also should say I feel better about going to [the next] class... When I first started teaching I did [would write down major points] but it was more in outline form— never like this where I am writing complete sentences and working through ideas in a more meaningful [and explicit] way. (Elizabeth)*

*On a final point, I think it is good to think “developmentally” in terms of the class, in the way that you are doing. Starting out slow, giving clear definitions, but easing them into more complicated ideas as the term progressed. I’m not sure if I moved the students easily into the course by having them do the transcribing assignment right off the bat. However, the transcribing is fairly straightforward in some ways, and there’s nothing like “baptism by fire” at times, right? (Áine)*

*I love that you are having the students revisit their responses from their first day of class. That is an excellent technique to help track their changes in thinking. I’m eager to hear what they wrote. (Elizabeth)*

*I told them the tension I have with teaching them “skills” or focusing on the abstraction. (next week, by the way, we are going to a lesson on NVivo... a consultant is in town and I didn’t want to miss it... although it is not the best timing for the students... I told them that the course would “orient” them to qualitative software but they are not ready to code yet). I also mentioned you (in a general sense—I didn’t give your name or school or anything!) and how you and I dialogue and you are more skill-focused early in the class than I am. (Elizabeth)*

*Interesting point about how some of us approach the course more “skills-based” than others. You could have identified me, that wouldn’t be a problem. I have let the students in my class know that I sometimes correspond with a colleague at Texas Tech about teaching our courses. Lyn Richards, in her great 2005 book on “Handling Data” says that considering issues around methodology as well as handling data are both important and there are pros and cons for whichever is done first. I’m trying to do both at the same time, with not much time to do it in! I need to spend more time on methodologies, something to work on. However, most of the students in the class, I think, have to take a course called “Focus on Research Literacy,” which is “designed to make students aware of and understand the various assumptions underlying research paradigms in education...”, so they do get more methodology content in this other class, but whether it comes before or after this class is the question. Before*

*would be better, but you can't control that kind of thing and it's not a prerequisite, and I doubt it would be made into one. Still, I can dream, right? You are also helping them develop certain skills through the activities you're using, such as the observation activity. I'm hoping to do that activity. I was going to do it next week, but now have to reschedule it. (Áine)*

*The more I teach this course, the more I learn that it's a fine balancing act. We'll always be learning and fine-tuning as we go along. Writing the journals has been really beneficial to me, to get my thoughts down as soon as possible—so that I can go back the following year and really be thoughtful about the changes I implement, based on what's written in my journal. (Áine)*

*Last night I re-read my whole journal from last year, and that was really helpful. After reading it, I could see how my confidence in epistemology increased during the term, although I realize I still have far to go. More and more, I realize that I am not a paradigm purist, and that many others are not as well. (Áine)*

**Connection.** As evidenced in the aforementioned excerpts, the peer journaling fostered a sense of connection between us. Thus, we consider “connection” as the third substantial benefit that flowed from our peer journaling experience. As is the case in academia in general, there is a danger of new faculty experiencing isolation. Feeling isolated might be especially pronounced when teaching QRM because usually only one faculty member in a department (or campus) may teach or be well-versed in qualitative methods. Feeling connected was experienced in many ways. In a basic way, the feeling that someone else was going through similar things offered considerable comfort. We frequently shared our vulnerabilities and anxieties about the course and, in response; we normalized such feelings and experiences and offered each other encouragement. Additionally, in a more abstract manner, we began to feel more connected to the larger QRM literature and other scholars in general.

The journals provided us a safe place to share our musings, concerns, questions, triumphs, and disappointments. We offer the following entries as other examples of the ways in which connection emerged. In this first excerpt, Áine responded to Elizabeth's admittance that she was disappointed about her cohort of students during the second year:

*Ok, I am now looking at your reflections from your previous class. Sorry to hear things are feeling disjointed for you. It's funny how we sometimes expect that we'll have similar experiences to a previous course, yet the class can be completely different. Hopefully things will settle down.*

Along similar lines, the next example illustrates the way in which connection was fostered through providing specific suggestions to each other. This excerpt occurred after Áine wrote about a particularly challenging class involving students' resistance to course material. Elizabeth responded:

*I remind students of our charge as learners in the classroom and how we ALL are implicated in the process. We have to help each other learn, which means we all have to contribute meaningfully and, for some, this means more work outside the classroom, if they are struggling intensely. The “text” (all the readings I’ve chosen) are at the CENTER and we surround it. We work from the text, trying to understand the text and make connections among the readings. I continually remind students to stay “grounded” in the readings. I often say, what would Morse argue? I sometimes say it is not that I’m NOT interested in your opinion but we need to first understand the text... then later you can express your opinion.*

*Thanks, Elizabeth, for your encouraging words in response to my last journal entry. All of your suggestions are really helpful, particularly the first one, which I’m going to focus on. As well, I may try to pull out the paradigm assumptions behind what students are saying, get them to stop and consider what paradigm is underlying their comments, as (my other colleague) suggested and as I think you have kept track of as well. (Áine)*

These exchanges were enjoyable, and Elizabeth conceptualized reading Áine’s entries as a “treat.”

*I can’t wait to read your entry, Áine. I know you sent it a few days ago and I told myself that I couldn’t read it until I finished this entry. Reading your entries are like a little “treat” for me. Our dialogue is so fun. Thanks for all your insights and musings. It is always enjoyable.*

**Concluding comments.** Upon reflection of the benefits we gained from peer journaling, we conclude that the substantial gains included “3 C’s”, but “C’s” that were different from those identified with positivistic research (Mumby, 1997; Stewart, 1991). For us, our gains consisted of increased clarity, confidence, and connection. Peer journaling helped us sort through and make sense of complex QRM debates that, in turn, engendered an increased confidence in our ability to teach and our knowledge of QRM. As we were gaining clarity and confidence we were also forging a strong sense of connection with each other and the QRM field in general.

## **Recommendations**

Based on our experiences, we provide two types of recommendations. The first set of recommendations focus on shared peer journaling; the second set provide suggestions for extending such journaling. Before doing so, however, we also want to strongly suggest that prior to teaching a QRM course for first time, educators should read published work on the challenges of teaching QRM, including this article and the publications referred to in this article. Professors teaching QRM courses can also provide their PhD graduate students with recommendations to read in the future should these

students find themselves teaching QRM courses. Being transparent about the process of teaching QRM is beneficial in assisting new and future QRM instructors.

### **Shared Peer Journaling**

To maximize benefits from peer journaling, we offer several specific recommendations for QRM instructors to consider when peer journaling. Our suggestions relate to carefully choosing a journaling partner and writing journal entries.

First, we recommend that a peer journaling partner be chosen carefully. Find someone you are comfortable with, and who, ideally, is teaching the course at the same time as you are. For many professors, particularly those who are untenured, this may be someone from another university (Mullen & Forbes, 2000). If you are the only person teaching a QRM course at your university, you will need to go outside of your university to find someone. Find what works for you. Consider working with someone who is not from the same PhD program from which you graduated. Being trained in qualitative research by different people/programs may contribute to more stimulating conversations by bringing different insights to the conversation.

Find someone who is a peer. In our experience, being at a similar academic level (i.e., both untenured) was especially beneficial. We found that the non-hierarchical nature of our relationship promoted honesty, minimized feeling vulnerable, and helped us both conceptualize our exchanges as mutually beneficial. However, a more experienced mentor may also work if the relationship feels comfortable and safe, and certainly experienced mentors can learn from their mentees.

In terms of specific suggestions for writing journal entries, we offer the following recommendations: Write down your thoughts and try to schedule time to do so. Have follow-up phone conversations or in-person meetings if necessary, and afterwards write down what you talked about and what insights you derived from the conversation. Consider copying email conversations into your journal or enter notes following phone conversations to document your thoughts and dialogues over time. This written history will be beneficial to return to at a later date.

Be timely. Write entries as soon as possible after each class so that you can remember the content and any associated emotions related to the class in full detail. Add to the journal whenever you feel the need (e.g., while you are preparing for a class, you may have some thoughts you want to write down). Additionally, send your journal to your partner regularly, such as once a week, so that your conversation is ongoing. Long breaks may result in a loss of momentum or connection.

Be authentic. Be as honest and frank as you can in your reflections and encourage your partner to do the same. We found that it was only when we really started being open about the questions we had that we really started benefitting from our collaboration.

Maintain confidentiality. Use pseudonyms or general descriptions of students in your journal entries; do not identify them by name.

Include critical reflection. Include all levels of reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995)—not just descriptive writing, but also descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection, and critical reflection. We found our shared dialogue to be more helpful when it moved beyond description to abstracting, similar to qualitative research. As Elizabeth wrote:

*[As] I am writing this, I realize that I need to be careful not just to write about what happened (like your one student did) but also include my thoughts/feelings/ reflections of what is happening. I realize that you and I need to give enough description for each other so that we are able to understand some of our thoughts/feelings in context.*

Ask for feedback. At times, we commented on each other's entries but we were not able to comment on everything. If there was something especially important, we would directly ask the other person for feedback. Occasionally we did not limit our discussions to just the two of us—we included others in our written conversations when necessary and incorporated their feedback into our co-constructed journal.

Cultivate a spirit of debate. Many of our exchanges were supportive and encouraging and we frequently agreed about issues, but there were times when we were not in agreement. We took these opportunities to question each other and our exchanges were especially informative.

Focus on the interplay between you and your partner. Peer journaling can be a powerful tool especially if the exchange is central to it. Otherwise, the experience can feel like a journal for oneself. Solitary journal writing has its benefits, of course, but the benefits can multiply when a peer is responding, commenting, and questioning, all resulting in dialogical reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

Consider how long the shared journaling will continue. For some individuals, it may only serve a purpose early on in teaching QRM whereas others may want to continue the process for a longer or indefinite time. For us, the first two times we taught the course were the most helpful. We continue to provide support for each other, but the nature of that support has changed over time.

### **Possible Extensions for Shared Journal Exchanges**

Based on our experiences, we have also realized that there are ways in which shared journal writing could be extended and/or structured differently.

Participants in shared journaling may wish to consider creating more focused exchanges. In addition to their regular entries, they could agree to write out responses and dialogue on paper about specific topics. For example, they could ask themselves to answer similar questions they are having students discuss in their courses.

More than two people could participate in a shared journaling experience. Several times we included emails from other people, and we agreed that inclusion of these insights from others was helpful and advanced our dialogue.

Áine had students maintain a journal throughout the course, reflecting on their experience in the course and their reactions to course material. This, too, could be structured as shared peer journaling, in the way that other researchers have suggested (e.g., Alterio, 2004; Cowie, 1997; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Kaplan et al., 2007). With today's classroom technologies, shared journaling could take place on-line and could potentially include more than two students. Web-based programs such as Moodle could assist with these types of reflections. Many professional organizations have sections or groups focusing on qualitative research. These groups may want to consider setting up a peer mentoring process for untenured faculty teaching QRM courses or those new to



teaching qualitative methods. Shared journaling could be offered as one way in which peers can mentor each other.

### **Conclusion**

The value of journal writing has been clearly documented in educational research, but such discussions typically focus on individual rather than shared journal writing and are geared toward preservice educators rather than individuals already in teaching positions. We have argued that shared journaling can be a significant source of support for those teaching QRM for the first time as well as an opportunity to engage in metacognition. Using excerpts from 2 years of journal entries, we demonstrated that our shared peer journaling contributed to increased clarity of qualitative debates and concepts, enhanced confidence in teaching a QRM course, and created a greater connection with each other. Suggestions for both using and extending such peer journaling were also presented.

Although we did not directly access the outcome of our peer journaling for our students, we can confidently argue that our students positively benefited as a result of our process. For example, Elizabeth began implementing a transcription assignment after journaling about the importance of practical skills with Áine. As a result of adding the assignment, students indicated they had a greater appreciation of the time and effort required in transcribing. Moreover, as a result of transcribing, reading and reflecting on Poland's (1995) article on transcription, and comparing transcripts with classmates, students were able to articulate their understanding of transcribing as an interpretative process and to make connections to issues of rigor. Researchers have commented that teachers who engage in metacognition result in students who are able to do so as well—reflective teachers develop reflective students (Buckheit, 2010).

Additional benefits are likely to have occurred through our increasing confidence in dealing with challenging situations such as managing student resistance in the classroom and in resource sharing that enhanced course content. Furthermore, being open about our journaling exercise may have served as an important role model for students in terms of the journal writing that Áine was requiring them to do. Janesick (2004), in fact, lists a number of ways in which “researchers in training may benefit from the practice of journal writing as a qualitative research strategy technique” (p. 155).

Occasionally we shared snippets of our shared conversations with the students, being open about our dialogues and healthy differences of opinion, and the students may have benefitted from the sharing of these metacognitive processes. Future research may want to explicitly explore the impact of shared instructor journaling on student learning. Collaborative exercises can contribute to metacognition, yet to date few adequate assessment tools for evaluating metacognition have been developed (Sandi-Urena et al., 2011).

Although sometimes offered, behind-the-scenes thoughts and emotions regarding the difficulties inherent in teaching QRM are seldom seen in the literature. The ways in which we think about what we are teaching and how it impacts student learning can also be explored more in-depth. We hope that sharing our journey will encourage future additional frank and honest conversations about the challenges inherent in teaching qualitative methods.

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