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Teaching Qualitative Research Methods

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Teaching Qualitative Research Methods

2/13/2019

The spring semester is underway at UW-Milwaukee, despite the multiple blizzards we've had here in Wisconsin. This semester, eleven graduate students are taking my course on Qualitative Research Methods in Rhetorics, Literacies, and Community Engagement. In this post, I'll share a bit about the course to set the scene for my students' posts this semester. Here's an excerpt from the syllabus: "To achieve the learning objectives for this course, everyone will work together to design, implement, and conduct a preliminary analysis of a qualitative research project on the linguistic resources of UWM students. We will take an asset-approach to exploring what innovative ways UWM students write and speak in their daily lives.

...What this project will look like depends a lot on how engaged everyone will be in the process and what we all decide we want to do with it. I hope you'll reach the end of the semester with a good sense of who you are as a researcher, what informs the ways you research, and what you might take from this class into future studies or work. I also hope everyone finishes the semester with two things: pride in the work that they've done (individually and collaboratively) and confidence that they've learned something and developed as a researcher along the way. With these goals in mind, the 'end product' of this process becomes less of a focus, since wherever we end up in May is exactly where we should be at that point. Hopefully, if we do not meet the goals we set up at the start of the semester, we still have learned a few things throughout the process that would positively inform our approaches to research and collaborative work in the future. After the semester is over, some of you may decide to stay on as part of the research team with this study and we can pursue grants and future steps together."

My idea behind this design was to give students the space and time to experience the complexities of qualitative research, while also getting hands-on experience with designing a qualitative study, "collecting" data, and doing a preliminary analysis. These courses are often taught in a way that sets students up to do some portion of their own research projects, but for a variety of reasons, I thought that the experience of collaborating as a class on a single project that could be developed beyond the semester might be a better approach. Students will also write at least one entry per week in a "field note" journal and I want that to be a space for whatever is most useful for them--reflecting on the process, noting something they observed in their daily lives, or working through ideas for the project.



The blog posts that you'll see this semester are an extension of those field notes. I've asked them to write "From the Field" posts (and I'm defining "field" very broadly) about their experiences and highlights from class, readings, and research activities. You'll soon see what the students are thinking about the process so far, but my take is that we're off to a challenging (yet productive) start in taking on the ambiguity of a new project, the ways small details make a big difference, and how we have to constantly return to our proposed schedule to adjust and revise based on the groups' needs. It's unlike any class I've ever taught, and I imagine it's unlike any class most (if not all) of them have ever taken. It's risky and we're going to make mistakes along the way, but if I've learned anything from my seven years doing qualitative research, it's that this type of work--working with people, communities, and other researchers--requires an ability to adapt and a set of skills that are difficult to teach by just giving a lecture or assigning readings. So, I'm trying something different with the way I've set this up, and we'll see how it goes. I hope you'll join us each week and see what kinds of conclusions, reflections, and research findings we come up with together.

-Rachel B-P