Using Popular Media and a Collaborative Approach to Teaching Grounded Theory Research Methods

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Popular movies were used in a doctoral-level qualitative research methods course as a way to help students learn about how to collect and analyze qualitative observational data in order to develop a grounded theory. The course was designed in such a way that collaboration was central to the generation of knowledge. Using media depictions had the practical advantage of enabling the group to create fieldnotes from a common set of data collected simultaneously in a short period of time. Fictional representations in popular media can provide the basis to learn about both the methods and foundational assumptions for conducting qualitative research, including the challenges of bracketing prior assumptions.

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology that involves the construction of a theoretical framework using the constant comparative method and an emergent design with qualitative data (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The predictive intent of grounded theory is unusual for qualitative research, but is evident in Charmaz's (1990) constructivist definition of theory: "a theory explicates a phenomena, specifies *concepts* which categorize the relevant phenomena, explains relationships between concepts, and provides a framework for making predictions" (p. 1164). Grounded theory does not involve hypothesis testing or the deductive design common to research projects involving the application of theory, but proposes instead an inductive framework to generating new theories about phenomena that are little understood. As compared to the more traditional qualitative focus on perceptions and feelings, a distinguishing feature of a grounded theory is to provide a conceptual explanation of how people describe actions and processes (Charmaz, 2006).

Students enter graduate course in research methodology with many misconceptions about the nature of qualitative research, including about the difference between an inductive and deductive approach and about how to move from straightforward descriptive coding to a conceptual framework. Probably because of years of training in a deductive, hypothesis testing approach to research, many students seem to struggle with the emergent approach of grounded theory. Many enter a second semester qualitative research course familiar with straightforward descriptive coding of qualitative data, but have virtually no idea how to move from those to more abstract themes and a conceptual framework. They rarely see themselves as capable of producing knowledge; much less as knowledgeable enough to produce a theoretical framework that emerges from data they have collected.

This paper is a multi-authored reflection about the experiences of a multi-disciplinary group of doctoral students enrolled in an advanced research methods course during the spring of 2010 that placed such a challenge in front of graduate students. These students were charged with the task of developing an original grounded theory to explain how professionally trained therapists depicted in two movies, *Good Will Hunting* (GWH; Armstrong & van Sant, 1997) and *Antwone Fisher* (AF; Paloian et al., 2002), demonstrated care to their client through observable and verbal demonstrations of concern for the client's well being and how these evolved or changed over the course of the therapeutic sessions. A hands-on, collaborative approach was used as a way not only to promote reflexivity about research methods and to advance conceptual thinking, but as a way to embody the postmodern idea that knowledge is constructed, rather than discovered. Guided research projects and a hands-on approach are valued pedagogical approaches to teaching qualitative research methods (Janesick, 2004).

Experiential, Problem-Based Pedagogical Approach to Teaching Grounded Theory

The collaborative approach used in this one-semester qualitative research methods course reflects a commitment to constructivism and a sociocultural theoretical perspective and to active, experiential learning. The constructivist lens is a departure from the early casting of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Straus and Corbin (1990), but is consistent with Charmaz's approach to grounded theory. Her 2006 book is used as the textbook for the course. With a sociocultural lens, we apply a conviction about the merits of experiential, problem-based learning evident in the pedagogical literature to the literature about teaching research methods. As Ball and Pelco (2006) noted, we believe that "learning to do research and to

critically evaluate research practices are better facilitated by training critical research problem-solving and reasoning skills than by having students memorize research terms and definitions" (p. 152). As compared to historically entrenched views of knowledge and learning as occurring within a single isolated mind, the sociocultural perspective reflects the assumption that knowledge construction is fundamentally the product of interaction within a learning community. Sociocultural theory casts learning as the personal and shared construction of knowledge (Creamer & Lattuca, 2005). Widely used by contemporary educational researchers, this theoretical perspective places interaction at the center of the learning process and underscores the contribution of active engagement and learning to knowledge construction, while at the same time challenging many academic conventions about acknowledging the contribution of individuals (Creamer, 2011).

Using a collaborative, multimedia rich pedagogy, knowledge construction within each individual is mediated by multiple elements within the social environment including: guidance from the faculty member and collaborative construction of knowledge through group and peer discussions as well as through the use of cultural tools (videos, research articles, and the textbook; Salomon & Perkins, 1998). By relying on social activity, source of knowledge brings language, culture, and context to the forefront of the learning and truth is adaptive and socially determined. Insight and learning "is not found in inside the head of an individual person; it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110).

Vygotsky considered the social environment to be critical for learning and that social interaction would transform learning experiences. Social activity is a phenomenon that helps explain changes in consciousness that can unify behavior (Kozulin, 1986; Wertsch, 1985). Bruning, Schraw, Norby, and Ronning (2004) conveyed that social interaction helped learners coordinate their cognition and internalize and transform their interactions.

Data gleaned from participant or non-participant observation have some advantages that the most typically used approach in qualitative research – interviewing – does not (Bernard, Killworth, Kronenfeld, & Sailer, 1984). This includes that, unlike interviewing, fieldwork and observations are not retrospective, nor is the focus on perceptions and attitudes. The collection of observational data facilitates deliberate attention to context and permits the inclusion of both language and nonverbal actions and behaviors in the analysis. Many popular movies are available as DVDs and as downloads that are readily accessible on multiple platforms. Using movies further facilitated the task of developing a grounded theory within the short time span of semester because it eliminated the time required in fieldwork to locate and secure access to a site. No human subjects clearance is required for the use of this kind of material. The use of popular media meant that all students had access to repeated viewing of the same data set without any intrusion in the environment. This, along with a common set of research questions, provided a common ground for interactions and feedback both in-class and through out-of-class on-line interactions in the course software in *Scholar*.

Grounded theorists continue to the debate of the possibility of using a purely inductive approach, with some acknowledging that it is unrealistic to assume that any researcher enters a research project as a *tabla rosa* with no prior knowledge, biases, or preconceptions about what they might be uncovered during the course of a research project (Hesse-Biber, 2007). The challenge to consider preconceptions and their effect on the interpretive process is part of the task of reflexivity of a qualitative researcher. It is the dominant issue raised in the brief personal narratives from four students presented in the next section.

The ways that collaboration was built into the process of data collection and analysis is discussed in the next section of the paper. Following that are brief reflections from four students who were enrolled in the course spring semester 2010. Pseudonyms are not used because each student is a co-author on the article. Each student provides a brief reflection about the challenges they faced not only in bracketing personal opinion but also in considering the multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations presented by their classmates.

Overview of the Process of Developing an Analytical Framework through Collaboration

Students developed a theoretical framework following a series of steps that parallels those captured by Charmaz (2006) in a figure of the grounded theory process (p. 11). Each step involved on-going opportunities for interaction and peer feedback. This involved writing and editing fieldnotes, descriptive coding, focused conceptual coding, theoretical sampling, and writing of various kinds of memos. As compared to a full-scale qualitative research project involving observation, fewer fieldnotes and memos were completed in order to make it possible to complete the process within the time frame of a single semester.

These steps involved, first, preparing a set of fieldnotes for each scene involving interaction between the counselor and client following a common template, with partner feedback. Students moved next to develop a preliminary coding scheme and coding dictionary.

Following the completion of the first set of seven fieldnotes, students' drafted two detailed analytical memos that fleshed out the properties of a conceptual category and providing detailed support for emerging themes by referring to interactions in specific scenes in the first movie. One student, for example, wrote an analytical memo about how the process of finding common ground about shared experiences and interests, communicated care. Research partners provided feedback about ways to refine the first draft of the analytical memo.

Following the drafting of the first set of analytical memo, students conducted a form of theoretical sampling by applying their emerging analytical framework to a second movie, AF, which depicted an evolving counseling relationship that shared many similarities as what was depicted in GWH. After developing and coding an additional set of fieldnotes from scenes between the counselor and the client in the second movie, each student selected a preliminary analytical memo to develop further into an extended memo. This provided more detail about a theme advanced about a categorical code, providing examples and quotes from interactions in both movies. Included in the extended memo was a consideration of negative cases or alternative hypothesis that seemed to counter their interpretation. This brought students to the final stage of the process where they drafted and received feedback about an individually designed figure representing their grounded theory. The figure captured the conditions, central processes, and outcomes of exchanges where caretakers effectively communicated care, sometimes through setting limits on appropriate and inappropriate behaviors within the counseling setting.

Collaboration was achieved during class meeting time through frequent face-to-face interactions and mutual give and take about different emerging conceptual frameworks. Acknowledging the legitimacy of different interpretations encouraged genuine engagement with different viewpoints, as long as they could be clearly supported with references to specific scenes from the FNs. Investigation of negative cases—where progress seemed stalled or delayed by less than productive exchanges between and adult figure and the client—again communicated the message that in qualitative research as much insight can occur through exceptions to what appears to be emerging as a common pattern, as through the commonalities.

Students' Views about Steps in the Research Process that Proved Instrumental to Developing a Conceptual Framework

Students held different views about what step in the collaborative process used during the course of the semester-long course was most instrumental to achieving the insight that anchored the final figure they drew to represent their grounded theory. Some students characterized this as a sudden burst of insight that often occurred during a class discussion—the "ah ha" moment—while others saw such insight more as the end point of a gradual accretion of small insights that became refined more clearly with time. In the next section of the paper, four students offer different views about what proved most instrumental to the conceptual framework they developed, as well as the part of the experience they found most challenging.

Fieldnotes – Michelle Ghoston

A number of aspects of developing the fieldnotes proved challenging. It was a struggle initially to know how much detail to include in them. Reading other's fieldnotes helped clarify this point for me, but at the same time got me in trouble by introducing things I had not seen or heard. My biggest challenge was in bracketing. As I am a trained mental health professional, I found setting aside my personal beliefs and biases about what constitutes professional practice was extremely difficult. The use of italics in the fieldnotes helped me to distinguish between what I actually saw and my own interpretation of what I saw. Feedback in class and from my partner helped me focus on language that described concrete behaviors and actions that helped me to limit the assumptions I was making about motives (e.g., "he frowned" versus "he is mad").

Procedural Memos – Chloe Ruff

Like most students, I first started using procedural memos simply to record a description of the process. We knew from the onset, that one purpose of these memos was to provide a form of an audit trail by documenting what we did each week in-class as a group and on our own. My first procedural memos varied between memos that were short, dry, descriptions of the class and long, stream of consciousness attempts to capture all of my ideas related to the scenes watched during the week.

I found that reflecting on class discussions and activities frequently helped me to pinpoint key insights. For example, as we discussed early scenes in GWH, I found myself disagreeing with several of my classmates regarding the appropriateness of the code "establishing dominance" to describe an early interaction between Sean, the counselor, and Will, the client, that turned violent. Where my classmates interpreted the interaction as the counselor's attempt to establish dominance, I interpreted the interaction as a boundary setting on both sides, with Sean setting an emotional or

conversational boundary and Will accepting the boundary by not fighting back. The different viewpoints helped me to fine-tune my interpretations.

At another point, I noted in a procedural memo that I began to consider the possible overlap between two categories of codes I once thought of as being discrete. Through the process of reflecting and writing, I began to see how these categories could be combined and renamed (e.g., "Negotiating Boundaries" became a subcategory of "Negotiating Control"). Thus, the procedural memos proved most valuable as a place to record my reflections and emerging ideas, especially those that were gained through collaboration.

Concept Map – Tiffany Drape

After preliminary coding of several sets of fieldnotes, a class session was devoted to drawing a preliminary concept map depicting what we saw as the emerging categories and their possible relationships. We did this initially in small groups, and then constructed an overall map with the entire class that incorporated most of the codes that were being used repeatedly. This was somewhat reassuring at this point, because it was possible to see to that many of us were zeroing on the same things. For example, many of us noted the use of nicknames in GWH as a way of personalizing the relationship.

I found the concept map particularly useful because it was the first time we stepped back to look at the larger process that might be enfolding. It was a key step in beginning to see overlapping and related codes in order to cluster them into categories and then to begin to propose hypothesis or themes about possible relationships among the codes and conditions when they might and might not occur in a positive way. It was also the first time that we thought about external conditions that could vary in other settings, but are not controllable. For example, in the interactions depicted in the videos, the clients were mandated to meet with a counselor and did so with considerable reluctance. Such conditions are contextual factors that have the potential to alter the interactions.

Dealing with Cross-Cultural Barriers – Joseph Mukuni

At the start of my Qualitative II research course, I became aware of the cultural baggage that I was carrying into the class and I was not sure how to cope with it, although I knew that I needed to put it out of the way in order for me to have effective bracketing. My cultural baggage was accumulated over the many years I spent being socialized as a male Zambian, in the heart of Africa, where I had played multiple roles at different stages of my life. Sitting in a classroom in an American university, with classmates of different ages and from different parts of the world, discussing a video on the theme of care giving in an American setting, made me aware of the cultural baggage that I was carrying.

I struggled with the meaning of some parts of the GWH even though I comprehended the spoken words. For instance, I could not understand how the counselor, Sean, could share with Will, a mere boy, some intimate things about his late wife. I also found some jokes between Sean and Will inappropriate because in my view of the world, some jokes may only be shared by people of the same age and same gender, and never in unequal encounters such as doctor-patient interactions. After observing the first few episodes, I concluded that Will was a very rude and disrespectful boy, and from then on I forgot the purpose of our task; to create a grounded theory about care-giving. After a presentation by some of my classmates, it suddenly dawned on me that I had lost my focus and had been looking only at the recipient of care giving instead of looking at the process of care-giving. My study partner further clarified my thoughts after we had exchanged our PMs.

Summary and Limitations

An unexpected result from the experience of teaching this doctoral level qualitative research course is how difficult most students find the task of being reflexive about the process used to develop their grounded theory. Students enrolled in the course found reflexivity about the process challenging while it was underway. There are multiple possible reasons for this, including that their focus was on constructing theory and, therefore, their thinking centered on identifying key aspects of the therapeutic process depicted in popular media that seemed to enhance well being, rather than the methodological steps they were taking. Another possibility is, despite on-going strategies to pinpoint where we were in the overall process, most students were so busy keeping up the assignments that they were not able to step back to reflect on the methodology until they reached its conclusion and could spend some time reflecting back on it. It may not be possible to reflect on a process in the midst of its unfolding.

Another developmentally grounded explanation for the reason students struggle with reflexivity is that while most graduate students have learned about constructivism and are convinced that they practice it, it is still deeply ingrained in them that their task as a researcher is to "find" the "right" answer. The ambiguity inherent in qualitative research can be frustrating. Some of these students find collaboration difficult epistemologically because they find listening to other's points of view unsettling or confusing. Chloe's account presented above illustrates how

struggling with different viewpoints can lead to finer tuned insights.

Many students struggled with bracketing their experiences and preconceptions. Authors discussing the process of teaching grounded theory have observed that this is one of the greatest challenges of using an inductive approach (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Michelle's, Tiffany's, and Joseph's personal accounts, each spoke to their struggles to reconcile their own expectations of a counselor and what counselor-client interactions should look like, with those depicted in the videos. Joseph's account points to how cultural differences made his task even more challenging. Every qualitative researcher sets out to understand meaning making from the participant's perspective. The fact that the observational data came from fictional media depictions and that the character's actions were probably dramatized to attract the movie-going audience, helped to foreground the challenges qualitative researchers often face in interpreting the words of participants whose experiences differ remarkably from their own.

Conclusions

Qualitative researchers have to be capable of complex thinking in order to develop a theoretical framework that is grounded in the data, but at the same time displays original insight. In the process of doing this, they have to move beyond ideas of "right" and "wrong" and to amass a convincing amount of evidence to support their interpretations. They have to be capable of moving beyond the confines of their own personal experience to understand someone else's perspective on an experience that may be foreign to them. At the same time, they have to be capable of seeing connections, juggling multiple possible explanations, while being self-conscious about the methodology they are employing. They have to trust the veracity of their own emerging analytical insights, while being skeptical of authoritative interpretations and conventional assumptions. All of these are hallmarks of the complex thinking that is required to be an effective scientist and to make complex decisions in every-day life that some describe by the label of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

The advanced qualitative research methods course described in this paper was not designed to produce any new insight about the therapeutic process. Instead, the purpose of this research methods course was to help students learn to move from open coding to creating a comprehensive a conceptual framework during the process of collecting and analyzing qualitative data. The course challenged students to create an identity as a scientist in that it asked them to incorporate a view of himself or herself as a producer of knowledge who is capable of original insight grounded in data collected and interpreted in through a systematic process. It also challenged them to see that knowledge is rarely produced in isolation or through sudden, unaccountable burst of revelatory insight, but, instead, is more generally produced through a slow and meticulous process of trial and error and substantive interaction with others equally invested in thoughtful and meaningful scientific inquiry.

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