



The Collaborative Researcher

An exploration of collaborative research assistantship practices

A publication by Annabelle Grundy Research Association

Collaborative Analysis

Analyzing students' reflections using qualitative research analysis software is an enjoyable and collaborative effort between Claire Johnson and Donna Knowles. Claire describes the overall process:

We are coding the reflections [that students wrote about their learning]. First we read the text, then we try to pick out the meanings and we try to assign codes. We have standard codes and we make new codes when we see a new kind of message and it is interesting. (interview transcript)

There are three major reasons why the research analysis needs to be carried out in a joint manner. First, Claire and Donna are working together on a first set of data as a way for Claire to learn about the coding process. This is preparation for the second set of analyses that Claire will be completing on her own. This process of teaching and learning is called scaffolding where three steps of teaching and learning occur: (a) teacher models practice, (b) teacher and student engage in guided practice, and (c) student engages in independent practice (Mackeracher, 1996, pp. 160-161). Teachers use their knowledge of a subject to initiate discussion and ask learners questions that prompt them to answer in a logical way. As Donna explains, "It's conversations about how to determine the codes. Because we are sitting next to each other at the computer screen, I hear her thinking because we're talking aloud as we do it."

Second, the collaborative arrangement allows for discussions between Claire and Donna in order that the best codes be assigned to each section of data. This is especially acute when new codes need to be created for new data that don't fit the established code structure. Claire describes the collaborative procedure as being a necessary one:

We have to read the text together, and we have to understand what it is and what it means. The

code structure is developing continuously and if additional information comes up we give those new codes. We have the codes, and we discuss it before we assign it a code and sometimes we may differ. For example, Donna may say it is one code and I say, "no, this is the code." We continue to discuss to reach a consensus. That's the reason we are doing it together. (interview transcript)

Third, conducting analyses jointly allows Donna to help Claire to recognize codes that might otherwise be missed due to different educational and social perspectives. As Claire describes:

When I code for the second section myself, there is one particular code that suggests the confidence level of the student. When we were discussing our different perspectives, Donna pointed out that as a professor she may be able to see some characteristics that I might not necessarily see and vice versa. I don't see what Donna is able to see. I'm a student here, and in this particular example, I am unable to see the confidence, the competence level in the students' reflections. (interview transcript)

It is clear that the collaborative arrangement is not only a productive undertaking, but also a satisfying learning experience for both parties involved.

Mentorship as a Form of Learning and Collaboration

When Donna Knowles works with research assistants, it is not just about the research. As she explains, "I'm concerned with their overall experience as a graduate student, about teaching, research, service commitment. And certainly emotional and maybe even spiritual help in that whole process."

It is these additional attributes that Donna offers that have provided Claire with the guidance that

she needs to succeed and thrive as a research assistant and a graduate student at Brock University. As Claire indicates:

I have numerous questions since I'm an international student and I really do not know many rules here. So through Donna I come to know about the rules and also various Education professors. For example, I really didn't know the spring term was for only two months. Or, that the summer term is actually for one month. Because of this I can plan my program more effectively. That's been very useful. (interview transcript)

While working on her research assistantship tasks such as the downloading of data into the qualitative research analysis software, and the coding of a second analysis set, Claire looks to Donna for guidance and feedback on a continuous basis. Donna mentions, "At the beginning of our meetings occasionally [Claire] might ask a question about her [analysis progress]." Claire claims that the meetings are a great learning opportunity for her when she says, "[Donna] is a learned person in the way that she analyzes. Sometimes, I catch myself thinking, 'I never thought of that' and that's great."

Claire feels that while she has worked on her research assistantship tasks that she has learned a lot about the research process from Donna. Claire explains that sometimes while she codes the students' reflections that she has trouble assigning certain codes that involve a multitude of options. For example, while assigning codes to students' reflections that signify negative, positive, or mixed feelings, Claire might be thinking that the code is "mixed." As Claire explains, "Donna will [respond] with a specific thing and she will give some reasons. [When this kind of intervention occurs], this thing sometimes happens – that's learning."

Donna describes another situation that validates this reflective learning and understanding process:

In those conversations, when she would look at their message and say the same things that I had listed, that gave me confidence that she had learned a coding technique. Then she can go away and do that separately in the other section. Hearing her respond to and being able to identify the codes is part of that. (interview transcript)

Benefits to Working Collaboratively

When asked if her experiences have been rewarding, Claire states that it has been very positive, and that she has learned a lot. It seems that when she started an in-depth coding of the students' reflections, that the research project became very interesting and relevant to her, personally. Donna explains:

In our conversations, [Claire] sometimes compares her experiences to what she's hearing from the students as she's reading their [reflections]. So, she's commenting about how she wished she could have done some more -get involved more- which she hears the students talking about how they're learning and we're evaluating. And at the same time she's sitting next to me doing research. So indirectly I see that as a statement from her that the experience is positive. (interview transcript)

Additionally, Donna describes how the analysis process has probably been rewarding for Claire in that it has provided Claire with new and exciting experiences. Donna says:

We've sat together and done some coding. So, I think that's been rewarding for her. And she's getting a grasp for how to do that kind of coding to now engage in the software program that we're using. And because of the content of the research it's also reflecting on student's learning, which I think has indirect positive benefits for her. (interview transcript)

Claire also feels that her experiences have been very worthwhile because she has not only learned how to use qualitative research analysis software, but she plans on using it for her exit requirement for the M.Ed. program. In that respect, she has learned about the software and what kinds of problems may come up while using this type of software in her own research. It has also been an enjoyable experience for Claire working collaboratively with Donna. As Claire shares, "I learned about analysis and I really liked working with Donna."

