



The Daily Research Assistant

An exploration of computer-based research assistantship tasks

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Collecting and Downloading Data

As a research assistant for Donna Knowles, Claire Johnson has learned much about coding and using qualitative analysis software. Claire's overall major assignment involves the analysis of electronic reflections written by students.

Before Claire could proceed with the analysis of the electronic reflections, several steps had to be completed.

First, Claire needed to understand the qualitative analysis software and its capabilities. Donna explained the tasks involved in compiling the collected data, downloading the information into the software program, and analyzing the data.

Second, Donna and Claire re-formatted the electronic reflections created by the students to allow straightforward processing.

Third, Donna demonstrated to Claire how to download the information so that Claire could continue downloading the rest of the collected data. As Claire indicates, "Initially, she told me how to do it, then I worked on my own...downloading, I did myself."

After the downloading was complete Donna explained to Claire that both of them would begin the coding process together. This research learning process allows Claire an opportunity to grasp the coding process with Donna's assistance so Claire can continue coding on her own. As Claire indicates, "I think after 3-4 sittings, I will be doing the coding myself."

Fast Computers and a Good View

When I asked Claire where she works, she listed off three places: (a) home, (b) the M.Ed. lab, and (c) in the big main computer lab. Being able to work from any computer workstation allows

Claire not only the freedom and flexibility to get her work done as her schedule permits, but allows her to take advantage of different computers suited for different parts of the downloading task. Claire describes how having the choice of computers helps her work to the best of her ability:

You have to copy everything, sometimes, things will not work on the computer I work on [at home], it's slow or something..., then I come to Brock to do that. The computers in the [main lab] are very fast and especially when I am downloading, I like to work on them.
(interview transcript)

When asked where she likes to work, Claire responds, "I work in the big computer lab in the university. It has a good view outside and I like to sit there and work there."

The Lost Files

Donna Knowles, Claire's research assistantship supervisor assigns tasks to Claire that are essentially all computer based. Therefore, Claire spends a lot of time learning not only the benefits of using technology in research analysis, but also some of the drawbacks.

As indicated by the sub-title, The Lost Files, an incident occurred concerning files that Claire had inserted into the qualitative analysis software. Claire explains, "It seems that when we first downloaded everything and transferred it to [the qualitative analysis software] a lot of files were missing. Now I have AGAIN downloaded the files and they have transferred."

It seems that Claire doesn't mind too much when technology works in a noncompliant way. Looking on the positive side, Claire says, "As long as we get things done on time and time does

not get wasted because of the technology, it's okay."

So what actually happened to the lost files? Claire replied, "I had all those files in the original data, I don't know what happened and why it did not transfer." The mystery of the lost files was eventually solved. To find out more about lost files, follow the link to the "Mystery Solved" article.

Learning About Technology

Claire Johnson feels that the biggest advantage to working on her research assistantship is learning about qualitative research analysis software. As a researcher, Claire has never previously conducted research using this type of software so she is appreciative of the experience to do so. As Claire said, "This experience will be very useful to me."

How useful will this experience be? Claire feels that taking the time to work on qualitative analysis software is a learning experience in understanding how analysis programs work and the kinds of problems that occur while using them. During an interview, Claire mentioned,

Sometimes I get stuck over very small things, which are very simple, which any person who is using computers should know that. But I get stuck, sometimes in my mind, the mindset is "Oh I will ask [Donna]" or "I will go and ask the computer person when I reach Brock," then I realize, it was so simple. I learned myself. (interview transcript)

Donna Knowles, Claire's research assistantship supervisor, is careful to include her research assistants in all aspects of the research process. Using technology is one of many important ways to conduct qualitative analyses. In Claire's research assistantship, using technology is obviously important as Donna points out, "The qualitative coding is the real research stuff. The other part, the transferring of files, is more using the technology, which is obviously an important part – an essential part [in this research]."

Claire's view on technology is also positive, despite some of the drawbacks she has

experienced using technology in research. As Claire indicated, "Sometimes it so happens that we end up spending more time because of the technology. Why are we doing it on [qualitative analysis software]? So, that towards the end, the technology will help us. I think it really will help us."

Computer-Based Research Assistant Skills

Claire has some previous research experience as a researcher in her home country. Claire's previous research knowledge directs her inquiries as a researcher currently in her research assistantship with Donna.

When asked what skills she has learned as a research assistant, Claire immediately interjects, "New software that I will use for my project. I can use this kind of software." Although Claire has learned much about analysis from learning a new type of software, she is clear that using this qualitative analysis software does not exempt her from conducting quality analysis. Claire indicates,

Analysis: you have to do it on your own. I have worked before also as a researcher. I know in analysis, you have to be very specific and you should have an eye for detail. You should try to read everything. You can't miss a single point; otherwise you will miss the essence of the thesis. (interview transcript)

However, Claire acknowledges that she has learned much about analysis while working with Donna Knowles. Claire stated, "I really liked working with Donna. I don't see much myself that Donna is able to see." Working together, Claire has learned from Donna's strengths as a researcher and as a learner.

