

Teaching Qualitative Research Methods at Undergraduate Level: Survey Results of current provision in UK Psychology Departments

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The requirement that qualitative research methods should be taught at undergraduate level in UK Psychology is one of the most significant changes within the discipline in recent years. Responding to these British Psychological Society's requirements the Higher Education Academy working group or network of Teaching Qualitative Research Methods at Undergraduate Level (TQRMUL) exists to support psychology departments embed the teaching of qualitative research methods into undergraduate programmes.

The group has a number of objectives - to provide support for psychology lecturers teaching qualitative research methods; to provide development opportunities in teaching qualitative research methods at undergraduate level; to organize annual regional events; to provide material for a dedicated area on the Psychology Network website and to identify, promote and disseminate good practice.

As part of this effort members of the group designed a questionnaire to ascertain the amount, form and content of Qualitative Research Methods being taught at the present in UK psychology departments. This report summarises the main results of the survey and gives a characteristic overview of what is currently practised. The summary is based on data collected from 18 UK Psychology Departments.

Within any given Department, typically 3 members of staff teach Qualitative Research Methods, and 4 mark or second mark assessed work. All Departments that replied had staff who supervised final-year undergraduate projects employing qualitative methods.

In general, it appears that there is more lecture-topic teaching at level 1 but it should be noted that half of the responding Departments did not teach qualitative methods during the first year. This was offset by an increased amount of time devoted to the teaching of qualitative methods and workshop/practical teaching at level 2 (the typical 2nd year of a UK undergraduate degree).

More specifically:

In Level 1 the average number of students attending qualitative methods training is 190 with 6 class hours allocated to such methods. The teaching methods include mainly lectures, workshops, tutorials and practicals.

The topics covered included the theoretical background of qualitative research methods and outlines of particular data-collection approaches such as semi-structured interviewing and focus

group procedures. Students were introduced to methods of analysis and these tended to be taught as theoretical examples – the most typical being, discourse analysis, content analysis and thematic analysis. It would seem that during the first or introductory year the typical method of assessment of this teaching is through multiple choice formats combined with exercises that test student knowledge through identification of themes based on pre-existing given texts.

In Level 2, the average number of students attending qualitative methods training is 126 with 14 class hours allocated to such methods. The teaching methods include lectures, workshops and practicals. The various research methods and analyses covered include observation, action research, cognitive mapping, grounded theory, discourse, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the discursive method, attribution, conversation, interviews and verbal protocols. Data is either collected from verbal reports, semi- interviewing, observation of videos, everyday conversations, focus groups or provided by the provision of existing data sets. These form the basis of the various forms of analysis then undertaken (verbal protocol analysis, grounded theory, IPA or discourse analysis). During this second year, assessment typically takes the form of practical reports.

Participating Departments were also asked their views regarding the topics and methods students should have some familiarity with by the time they complete an undergraduate psychology degree. They reported that a psychology graduate should be introduced to a range of qualitative methods, be competent in at least one (“interpretivist”) method (i.e. thematic or discourse analysis, grounded theory or IPA), and that they understand forms of coding and the analysis of content of contextual data. Ideally, students should also have an awareness of basic principles of qualitative analysis (these would include questions of validity and representativeness; the interdependence of qualitative methods and different paradigms, the existence of several forms of qualitative data collection and data analysis) and have used a qualitative research method at least once.

In response to resources that might be useful to them in the teaching of qualitative methods at undergraduate level, respondents emphasised the usefulness of having a bank/pool of materials to use for teaching. These could be adapted for workshops on developing interview skills as well as forming the core material for class teaching of practicals.

Summarising respondents views on the teaching of qualitative methods, the main themes of note were,

- (a) It is important that the background theoretical perspectives underpinning different methods be taught well, so that students would understand different approaches
- (b) The relationship between different theoretical views and specific methodological approaches be clear to students
- (c) Teaching should focus on making clear that there are many different ways to collect data which forms the basis for qualitative analysis
- (d) The nature of data collection, theoretical orientation and methodological practice all depend on the nature of the particular research question being asked, and students need to understand this (i.e., it should be taught well)
- (e) Questions of representativeness, sampling, validity and reliability particular to using qualitative methods should be brought out during the teaching of qualitative methods.

In addition, it was evident that at the present time there is lack of specialist staff available in Departments for the successful delivery of the teaching of qualitative methods. The current lack

of expertise and is placing considerable pressure on a few members of existing staff so as to cover what is understood as the current syllabus. It is also the case that academics in UK Psychology Departments are being asked to widen the required range of research methods taught at undergraduate level and at the same time deliver such teaching in large-class teaching and learning contexts. This is quite a challenge, particularly in those departments where qualitative research methods have not been taught in the past, and within a pedagogic context where there are no developed discipline based formal guidelines as to the qualitative methods deemed appropriate for the discipline.

Based on the results of the survey and the concerns of academic psychologists the areas the working group concentrates their efforts in relation to the following methods and analyses: IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis), Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Conversation analysis and Thematic analysis and with specific reference to the collection of data for all methods on interviewing.

The working group considers the present time an ideal opportunity for those researchers, teachers and practitioners who use and promote qualitative methods to have input into the emerging shape of the qualitative methods curriculum within undergraduate psychology teaching (i.e. providing examples for the areas outlined above). Currently there is a resource section at http://www.psychology.heacademy.ac.uk/html/resources_teach_qsm.asp presenting examples used in practical teaching at level 2 in UK Psychology departments.