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<https://shop.bps.org.uk/publications/publication-by-series/qualitative-methods-in-psychology-bulletin/qmip-bulletin-issue-24-autumn-2017.html>

PUBLISHER

British Psychological Society

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Etheridge, Leanne, Hilary McDermott, Cath Sullivan, and Sarah Riley. 2019. "Teaching Qualitative Psychology at Undergraduate Level: Challenges and Responses". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/32404>.

TEACHING QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGY AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

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The Teaching Qualitative Psychology Group was founded in 2005 as a specialist teaching interest group within the HEA (Forrester & Koutsopoulou, 2008). In 2015 the group became part of the BPS QMiP section. Our aim is to explore the challenges and support good practice in relation to the teaching of qualitative psychology. At the 2017 QMiP conference we hosted a workshop about teaching qualitative methods and during the session we asked attendees what challenges they faced in their teaching of qualitative methods. Over the years we have conducted several events and workshops and we have noticed similarities in the kind of issues that emerge. In the following piece, we present five common challenges and some of the responses and practices that have been successful for us and our colleagues.

How do I fit so much in to so little space?

The curriculum space made available to qualitative methods is an ongoing issue. The QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Psychology states that graduates need to be able to ‘analyse, present and evaluate quantitative and qualitative data and evaluate research findings’ (2016, p.

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9); this is relatively vague and means that departments are able to designate curriculum space at their own discretion. Whether you have an entire module dedicated to qualitative methods or just a few lectures it can seem like there is never enough time. There is no easy fix to this but here are some solutions that may be worth trying:

- Utilise curriculum space in other modules to address relevant issues. For example, social constructionist approaches to psychology, feminism, LGBT+ psychology and critiques of experimental psychology could all be covered in a social psychology module. This also has the advantages of encouraging students to consider issues across modules.
- Can issues relating to ontology and epistemology be addressed within quantitative research methods? We often have a tendency to think that the philosophical issues need to be covered by us, but if quantitative research methods are allocated more space in the curriculum then it may be more practical for certain ontological and epistemological issues to be addressed there.
- Consider utilising qualitative research methods as assessment strategies for other modules. One of us, for example, teaches a final year media psychology module where the assessment is a thematic analysis of newspaper articles. Students have covered thematic analysis elsewhere in their programme (using interview data) and so this assessment means that students are able to practice their skills with a different type of data.
- Are there ways that you can use online discussion space to develop learning? Discussion forums have been evaluated as useful (Lineweaver, 2010) and allows students space and time to develop at their own pace.
- There are other ways in which the learning space can be expanded beyond the lecture theatre, for example Sarah Riley and Sally Wiggins have produced a video resource regarding Discourse Analysis: <http://wordpress.aber.ac.uk/discourse-analysis/>. This

could be used in a teaching session, as a follow up exercise or as a flipped classroom activity. Hilary McDermott has developed 'E-Qual' an interactive App designed to support the teaching and learning of qualitative coding at undergraduate level. This App offers students a technology-supported learning environment to compliment the teaching of thematic qualitative coding which can be used at any time within any setting. In essence, consider thinking outside of the specific research methods module to see what other space can be utilised (whether online or in another module).

How can qualitative research methods be assessed?

There are a number of ways that we assess qualitative research methods and the appropriateness of the assessment strategy will depend upon the individual requirements of the module, but here are some ideas:

- A portfolio assessment which can take place over a module or a few sessions. One of us, for example, requires students to create a portfolio of work which demonstrates that students have followed the six steps of Thematic Analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). While another uses a portfolio assessment for an entire module which includes an analysis write up and a reflexive section.
- Short answer exam questions and even multiple choice questions can be used to evaluate some areas of qualitative knowledge and the understanding of certain conceptual areas. These might also be easier to combine with assessments of methodological or quantitative areas of the syllabus.
- Research report. This is a traditional format to research methods assessments and is still the way that most empirical research methods are structured. It also has the benefits

allowing students to engage with the structure of the final year dissertation and research papers.

- Partial research report. If you are looking for a relatively small assignment one option is to give students a part of the empirical report process to complete. This could involve giving them a completed introduction and method and asking them to do some analysis and complete the later sections of the report. Similarly, one could set practical assessments that assess data collection, transcription or coding.
- Reflective assignment. Reflection is considered an integral part of qualitative research and it can be demanding for students. Depending on the structure of the degree programme their reflective activities may be limited so this is an activity that should be appropriately scaffolded.
- McDermott and Dovey (2013) describe an advanced mixed methods module which is assessed via an auto-photography task, an analysis presented via poster and exam. Thus, offering an exemplar of using multiple assessment strategies in a single module to address several learning outcomes.

There are many different ways in which qualitative research skills and understanding of relevant theoretical ideas and concepts can be addressed. Successful assessments need to work for both staff and students in terms of resources, but given the broad range of qualitative methods and the various elements (collecting data, analysis, reporting results, reflecting upon the process) there is a multitude of potential assessment strategies that could be utilised.

How can I develop my students' confidence with qualitative methods?

This is one of the biggest challenges with qualitative methods. Chances are that much of the degree programme is taught from a quantitative sciences perspective which encourages

students to immerse themselves within statistics, experiments and neuroscience; thus, qualitative psychology involves a paradigm shift. Not only this, but the approach to results is very different; students may have settled into a mindset where there is only one right answer (all hail the P Value!). It is no wonder students find qualitative methods a challenge! Asking students to work in groups can be beneficial in building confidence as it provides a structured forum for them to share while also providing a space for informal formative feedback; reassurance that they are on the right track is important. If space allows then obviously in class discussion of these ideas can be helpful to students, but an online glossary of terms (or podcasts or videos) can be useful to allow students to reflect on these ideas in their own time; for example, a short video about the importance of language or introducing the ideas of social constructionism may be useful for students. Perhaps students themselves could even produce these resources as part of an assessment.

The role of peers in successful learning has been well documented (e.g. Topping, 1998) and this could be utilised with regards to qualitative research methods. Students who have already completed the module can provide support (such as second year students helping in a first year module) whether that is through moderation of a discussion forum or providing personal support in practical data analysis sessions.

It may also be an idea to highlight the variability in qualitative approaches, for example a colleague and you could code the same piece of data to illustrate the importance of the researcher. Or the same piece of data could be analysed in several ways to show the variability within qualitative research; Forrester's (2010) edited text, for example, is directed at students and analyses the same piece of data multiple ways. This can reinforce the idea that it is ok to have variability if appropriate methodological and analytic frameworks have been followed.

Another useful strategy is to try and remind students where there is overlap between the skills needed for qualitative research and things that they have done previously. So, we could remind them that whether they are doing qualitative or quantitative analysis there is a core idea of trying to develop a 'story' that fits with the evidence. And they are likely to already have some expertise in that area. Similarly, they are used to writing arguments that are based on material that can be interpreted in somewhat different ways – this is something they will already have done when writing essays. Reassuring them that they have to do things for the first time if they are to learn can also help. You can also try reminding them that markers will know when they are having a first go at something new and mark accordingly; assignment specific marking criteria can be a useful tool to highlight this.

How can I enthuse my students about qualitative research?

The most important aspect of good teaching is enthusiasm (Revell & Wainwright, 2009). Therefore, make sure that you are utilising your passion: are you teaching about an analysis that you love? Are you using the method that you use for research? Are you teaching topics that you are interested in? Are you drawing on research that ignites your interest? What excites you most about qualitative methods? Teaching to your own interests is important in terms of enthusiasm and should be reflected on.

If you have capacity it may be worth trying to tailor your teaching to your students' interests. Do you have a cohort that particularly enjoys sessions on gender, or LGBT+ issues, or prejudice, or health? One of the most exciting things about qualitative methods is the broad topic areas that are researched and this can be utilised to our advantage. In the first session, is

it possible to ask students what topics they would like to cover (e.g. using something like Kahoot or a group discussion task)? It has been shown that student driven curriculums are more likely to result in student engagement and involvement (Bovill, Bulley & Morss, 2011). Find the 'hook' to excite your students and embrace it; this may also provide you with an exciting new challenge!

How can I convince my colleagues that qualitative research methods is an important aspect of the curriculum?

At QMiP 2017, Wendy Stainton Rogers highlighted the fact that qualitative methods are not just surviving, but are thriving; while at the same time experimental and quantitative methods are experiencing a replication crisis (e.g. Open Science Collaboration, Nosek, Aarts, Anderson, Anderson and Kappes, 2015). Wendy urged us to 'stop apologising' for being qualitative researchers. This applies just as well to teaching. Qualitative psychology has been a required part of the curriculum for over a decade and so should be well embedded. We are no longer in a position where we should have to justify space on the curriculum and so no longer having to convince colleagues. If you are in the position though where you would like more space then we would also urge the use of the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement (2016) and the BPS Research Methods Supplementary Guidance (2017) as evidence to support claims for appropriate space. In addition, if you have positive student feedback then this can also help make a case for more space and resources.

The above is by no means an exhaustive guide, but will hopefully spark some ideas about how to develop teaching practices. If you do use any of the above ideas we would love to hear from

you and find out how you and your students got on. If you would like to find out more about the group or have any comments please do get in touch.

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