

# Qualitative Research: Boot Camp for Editors

Speaker:

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During the Philadelphia CBE meeting, a friend lamented the lack of knowledge about “best practices” in the editing profession, knowledge based on thorough research about such factors as the order of editorial tasks and the physical environment. We all develop personal systems, and some of these have been codified and published, but is there any research to back up the recommendations? Valerie Florance, in her “boot camp for editors”, introduced the concepts and methods of qualitative research, which just might be appropriate for this type of

inquiry. Through her experience in both anthropology and information sciences, Florance has developed a well-organized approach to this complex topic.

In the 2-session presentation, editors accustomed to dealing with the IMRAD system learned that many of its principles simply do not apply in qualitative research. There is no null hypothesis; the study design is emergent, developing as the study proceeds; and the researcher is overtly acknowledged as a component of the study. Furthermore, the researcher takes a holistic approach to the situation under study, rather than trying to isolate a single factor. Thus, prediction and control are impossible; instead, comprehensive understanding (of a culture or of learning methods, for example) is the goal.

As its name implies, qualitative research does not rely on quantitative analytic techniques, such as statistical procedures. Instead, enormous data sets are reduced by coding

methods, and the researcher looks for patterns while preparing a descriptive report. The report is then discussed with the participants (qualitative research typically involves human subjects) to ensure that the analysis makes sense to them, even if they don't agree with the conclusions (what Florance calls the “Aha! test”).

Qualitative research can take the form of case studies, surveys (for example, using guided interviews or questionnaires), historical-document analyses, standardized observational research (for which coding, the assignment of descriptive labels, might be needed), ethnography, and so on. The data might consist of words, images, sounds or records of behavior, or some combination of these.

Such studies yield “tons of data”—for example, hours of taped interviews. The researcher must then annotate the field notes gathered during the sessions with participants, look for and code the concepts in the

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field notes, and organize the information. He or she would then go on to develop alternative views of the data. Scientific editors will recognize the steps of looking for contrary evidence, having peers check your methods and interpretation, and creating an “audit trail” so that someone else can follow in your footsteps; these also apply in qualitative research.

The final report should be comprehensive, should present sufficient compelling evidence for the researcher’s interpretation, and should consider other perspectives. The context of the study should be conveyed through “thick description”, so that the reader can judge how well the situation and its protagonists compare with those elsewhere.

Florance illustrated her discussion with some of her own research: an observational study of hands-on instruction in library information management and an attempt to design a clinical extract for patient-centered problem-solving (for a description of this study, see *CBE Views* 1996;19(2):20). Participants in the CBE sessions got a feel for the complexities of and possible variation in the data analysis when they were asked to code data from the observational study, categorizing the comments and questions of students in the hands-on course. Another core technique for qualitative analysis is constant comparison, whereby the researcher develops definitions of data categories from the features of similar events.

Important aspects of qualitative research that also apply to the quantitative form include the examination of internal and external validity (the study’s credibility and transferability, respectively), reliability, dependability, and confirmability.

In addition to guiding the hands-on exercises in her sessions, Florance supplied a short bibliography on qualitative research and selected readings from the main sources. We editors might only rarely call on knowledge of qualitative research methods as we go about our daily work, but Valerie Florance’s boot camp has opened a window on how we might discover more about our own profession. 