Choosing Research Methodology: Why Phenomenology Appeals to Me

Frances Ann Whittet

For my dissertation research project for my 'Masters in Health & Wellbeing' I wanted to understand more deeply, the lived experiences of online lecturers in regard to giving feedback and feedforward. The key aim here was a desire to develop further insight to inform practice for all online lecturers and Module Leaders, particularly those new to the role.

Once I settled on a research question and aims the next step was to find a feasible research methodology. From the outset my research was going to be a qualitative study using online semi-structured interviews. As participants were not part of an "intact cultural group" and were anonymised to one another, an ethnographic approach was not appropriate (Creswell 2014: 14) nor was grounded theory as I did not want to create new theory (Blaikie 2010). After reading some research papers examining **lived experiences** I felt that the most appropriate approach was that of phenomenology as I wanted to bring together rich descriptions of the "essences of the experiences" (Creswell 2014: 14). Instead of trying to answer "why" any impact had occurred, I wanted to answer "what" the impact was (Blaikie 2010: 18-19). In simple terms, the purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a setting.

It is important in phenomenology that my own experiences didn't overly influence interpretation of the data (Smyth *et al.* 2016). This meant I had to bracket off these experiences, however even though I needed to maintain a "conscious ignorance" throughout the project (Chan, Fung & Chien 2013: 4) my insights into online lecturing helped me understand what to ask and what to look for in my literature review so as not to let it colour the view (Chan, Fung & Chien 2013). Before I started the data gathering I reflected on my personal understanding of the subject under exploration. I kept a reflexive diary, and I acknowledged that by having an insider position I could be insightful into the need for the research, and trust could be deepened because I would be "sensitive to the issue and …likely to temper" the "arguments accordingly" (Denzin & Lincoln 2011: 662). To enhance accuracy I opted for a minimum of 10 Module Leaders as a credible representation of online lecturers (Green & Thorogood 2009) as they all lived the experience of online

lecturing, so were a purposive sample; their thinking forming the "facts" of this study (Goulding 2005: 302).

I tried to design the research with the intent to cause the smallest possible burden on participants. Burdens to participants included having to formulate their responses in writing; as well as having to interpret the questions, and "assess, retrieve and organize relevant information in their memory, then evaluate whether the information is relevant" (Stacey & Vincent 2011: 609). Even though face-to-face dialogue is considered "so important to interview communications" (Salmons 2012: 2) participants were chosen because of their fluency and competency in email communications. This was in fact a bonus as online lecturers need to be able to communicate this way and can discuss their experiences within their comfort zone. An ethical advantage of the online interview is that the participants can control the time and depth of their responses. This might at times have been inconvenient for me, but in the long run, allowed me to gather well considered and meaningful responses (James 2015). One great advantage was that I could store data as received, and therefore made no errors in transcribing.

My choice to use email interviews with semi-structured interview questions was based on a number of advantages including: no financial or time cost of travel; no transcription needed; secure storage of data; and participants fluency using email convenience in responding. As James (2015:10) points out: "participants are empowered to respond to the researcher's agenda in a considered way".

Interviews were framed by a number of semi-structured open-ended questions, which meant that participants had the opportunity to develop themes and elaborate wherever their thinking took them. These open-ended questions also gave me freedom to ask for clarity and to probe a response more deeply (Chan, Fung & Chien 2013). Flexibility was a key factor (Smyth *et al.* 2016) and 'listening' was essential so that understanding was maximised (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez 2015). Clarifying interpretation and reflecting back perceived meanings are also important (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez 2015), as exchanges of information are aimed at discovering the real accounts of phenomena (Groenewald 2004).

To ensure I was on the right track I decided to undertake a small pilot study using a convenience sample (Green & Thorogood 2009) which let me test the research questions and the way I was going to ask them. I also took time to have a professional discussion with my pilot participant to ensure my questions made sense and I didn't have too many potentially resulting in "interview fatigue" or too few, causing the interviewee to stall (Stacey & Vincent 2011: 607). Trust and high rapport can enhance the quality of data (Bennett 2014), so knowing and trusting my colleague's evaluation of her experience with the pilot study, encouraged me that my research questions were well balanced.

Gathering the data and analysing the results

For my study, interview questions were arranged in three small themed clusters which were sent at intervals of approximately two weeks, then followed by a final fourth question asking for thoughts on the interview process experienced. I asked participants to keep using the same email thread so that the data was easy to find, both for them and for me.

I decided to adopt a framework analysis approach. This is a way of reorganising data into codes, or themes, in order to summarize the main points in a way that helps answer the research question. It allows for a systematic analysis, and according to Gale *et al.* (2013) it is well suited for analysing semi-structured interview data; and I maintained my reflexive notes. I chose my data analysis method at the proposal stage because this was stressed by Gale *et al.* (2013) as important; as the method has to match well with the study question and aims. This method also allowed me to analyse data from the first cluster at the same time as gathering data for subsequent questions (Lacey & Luff 2009). This was an advantage because I had an increased sense of focus and of moving forward.

I needed to be really familiar with the data so I immersed myself in it to know it. This allowed me a clearer understanding and helped me find the richness of what was being said, which increased my accuracy in interpretation (Goulding 2005; Gale *et al* 2013). I read over transcripts line by line in order to label (code) the information that could be relevant. I systematically compared these codes with others found from each and every transcript. This "open coding" also meant that unexpected data could be placed within the framework under 'other', which is important (Gale *et al.* 2013:4) as it increases trustworthiness (Elo *et al.* 2014). I used a tree diagram along with sticky notes to form clusters of initial codes to emerge and create corresponding categories; known as "indexing" (Lacey & Luff 2009:14; Gale *et al* 2013:2). I used these to form columns which I headed with the most suitable title which described what they represented. I then interrelated them and put them into further groups forming the preliminary analysis. I enjoyed the visual display of data as it helped me to gain a picture of my findings. This approach will reveal richly textured insights. I wrote up part of my dissertation which was accepted for online publication by the 'International Journal of Health Promotion and Education' (Whittet 2020).

I would certainly recommend using this methodology, although you should not underestimate time required to code and theme the data.

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