Doing your undergraduate dissertation using qualitative research: Tutor reflections.

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Abstract

Completing your undergraduate dissertation using qualitative research can be a very rewarding task and presents a number of challenges which are different to those faced by those choosing a quantitative approach. In this short article, I am going to take a reflective approach informed by some of the experiences I have had supervising dissertation students in three different universities over fourteen years. Having completed a number of research projects myself using various forms of qualitative research such as thematic analysis, textual analysis, content analysis and grounded theory; I have faced some of the dilemmas and anxieties you are also likely to experience when working with qualitative data. These might include, struggling to find a focus, wondering whether you are following the right sort of procedure and trying to make sense of a lot of information. My main purpose in this paper is to highlight what I feel are some of the key issues to consider when you undertake your qualitative project.

General advice on completing dissertations

There is a substantial body of literature within the academic social science research community to support students in preparing and writing academic dissertations, research projects and theses (e.g. Bell, 2005; Clark et. al., 1997; Cryer, 2006; Denscombe, 2007; Glatthorn, 2005; Herr and Anderson, 2005 and Phillips and Pugh, 1994) as well as a number of useful research texts aimed specifically at students studying sport (e.g. Gratton and Jones, 2004, Thomas and Nelson, 2005). In addition, there are some universities who provide online advice (e.g. Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, University of Kent and University of Southampton). Such materials will often provide advice on issues such as time management, planning, setting appropriate research questions, interacting with your supervisor and getting into a productive routine. Such principles are obviously very important. Reading and acting on such advice will most likely help you towards achieving your aim of producing a good quality dissertation at the end of the academic year.

Choosing the best approach

There are many varieties of qualitative research and before you start to consider
which is/are the most appropriate for your particular study, it is worth reading a little about the philosophical underpinnings of research. This can be a little daunting and might appear to be of little relevance but it is crucial if you are to make an informed decision about your choice of method. For as Gratton and Jones (2004) emphasize quite succinctly: “Unfortunately, whilst the term ‘knowledge’ may seem relatively straightforward, there are a number of issues related to what ‘knowledge’ actually is, and the means by which knowledge can be acquired.” (p. 14). As these authors point out, as an undergraduate student, you should have at least a general awareness of the importance of debates surrounding realism and relativism as well as positivism and interpretivism before embarking on your study.

There has been a growing interest in the use of qualitative research in sport whereas, traditionally, early research tended to be dominated by positivist, quantitative approaches. Qualitative approaches to study can be useful when there is a need to understand underlying experiences, emotions and feelings related to certain behaviours. Quantitative approaches are obviously more suited in situations where the researcher is interested in looking for statistical relationships between variables and often dealing with (large) numbers. It is worth noting here that there are some authors (e.g. Silverman, 2000) who would question the appropriateness of using the terms ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ as they tend to polarize sociologists into ‘armed camps’. However, they can be a useful starting point for your thinking. Importantly, no one approach is better than another and what is vital, is making an informed decision based on the nature of your research question and the objectives of your research. You may, of course, mix quantitative and qualitative data and this might be suitable in some circumstances. The early stages of your research project can be difficult, but it is worth spending the time and effort to read the research literature and talk with your tutor to make sure that your planned ways of collecting and analysing data are suitable.

**Learning a new language**

I suggested above, that you should read the research literature; if you have decided, in collaboration with your tutor, that a certain qualitative approach is suitable, you should start to read examples of qualitative studies as they tend to use a different vocabulary and structure. This is often a narrative/ story-like approach with the use of subheadings which are used to reflect themes which have emerged in the data. This can be off-putting for some students, especially those who have been predominantly introduced to more positivist approaches and encouraged to think about conventional ways of reporting research findings. In this way, those who feel that following the ‘softer’ qualitative route to study might be the easier option, are likely to be surprised by the complexity associated with analysing words collected in interviews, or actions.
observed in different social settings. Consult with your tutor for advice on accessing good examples of reported qualitative studies in sport by authors such Andrew Sparkes (e.g. 2004), Richard Giulianotti (e.g. 2005) and Belinda Wheaton and Becky Beal (e.g. 2003), this will provide you with insights into ways you can write up your own findings.

**Discovering the storyline**

Perhaps one of the most challenging times in any qualitative study is starting the analysis of data and the associated fears of foregoing principles such as validity and reliability. Qualitative research is often criticised for being overly subjective and lacking in reliability. However, the interpretivist paradigm in which you are likely to be operating, often uses a more inductive approach where the data lead you towards discovery and the generation of new theories. Some more qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory have a fairly complex set of procedures associated with different levels of coding and analysis, whilst others are more open-ended. However, the important thing is that, whichever approach you choose, you adopt a consistent and systematic approach to collecting and analysing the data. In addition, you should be aware of, and document, the problems you encounter on your ‘journey’ and discuss these in your final report. This process is crucial to ensuring credibility in your study. You need to have faith in your approach and seek regular guidance and support throughout the period of the dissertation from tutors and colleagues.

Coding, memoing and developing categories are procedures which are characteristic of many forms of qualitative research and provide a framework for your analysis of data. It is important to keep records of all your fieldwork and data analyses (these are often presented in your appendices), and it is this that will give you, and those reading your work, confidence in your findings. Making mistakes and learning through problem-solving are a natural feature of most people’s first experiences with qualitative research. To do it very well takes a lot of experience, time and effort. As an undergraduate studying for a dissertation, which is a relatively short period of time (typically seven months), you are inevitably going to experience a challenge. However, the rewards that can come from completing a good qualitative study make this task worthwhile. Small-scale qualitative case studies can elicit tremendously rich theories in certain contexts, some of which are inaccessible to more ‘traditional’ methods.

**Final thoughts**

Completing a dissertation using the increasingly popular qualitative approach can give you the opportunity to really get to grips with what is going on in certain social situations. You are likely to experience a range of emotions, such as the sense of plea-
sure as theories suddenly seem to emerge after long tedious hours of data analysis; combined with feelings of anxiety and frustration at certain stages as the research focus appears lost amongst masses of seemingly unrelated data. The key principles I would want to re-iterate at this stage are having faith in the data itself and keeping regular contact with your supervisor for academic and moral support.

This short paper has been a personal account and I have tried to keep in mind the likely audience whilst writing in this reflective style. In this way, I acknowledge that it based on case studies with students in a relatively small number of higher education institutions and is, therefore, subject to being influenced by context and social interactions I have had with other staff and students. Despite this, I hope that it has provided something which might be useful and encourage some reader’s to consider a qualitative research project.

References


Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at the University of Kent. (2007) Plan-

