

Building Interdisciplinary Qualitative Research Networks: Reflections on Qualitative Research Group (QRG) at the University of Manitoba

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As qualitative research methodologies continue to evolve and develop, both students and experienced researchers are showing greater interest in learning about and developing new approaches. To meet this need, faculty at the University of Manitoba created the Qualitative Research Group (QRG), a community of practice that utilizes experiential learning in the context of social relationships to nurture social interaction, create opportunities to share knowledge, support knowledge creation, and build collaborations among all disciplines. While many other qualitative research networks such as the QRG may exist, little has been published on their early development or the activities that contribute to the growth and sustainability of active collaboration. To address this gap, the authors of the paper will share the steps taken in developing the QRG, including a needs assessment identifying members' strengths and support needs, regular communication through a listserv, to the successful workshop based on the community of practice concept. Lessons learned during the initial development of the QRG are shared with the intent of contributing ideas for developing and supporting qualitative research in other institutions and prompting further consideration of ways to support and enrich every generation of qualitative researchers. Key Words: Community of Practice, Qualitative Research, Reflection, Development, Network, Collaboration, Support.

Students of qualitative research have often questioned the “how-to” of qualitative inquiry and tend to rely on experiential learning processes to guide their qualitative research endeavors. However as qualitative research methodologies continue to evolve and develop, both students and experienced researchers may be showing greater interest in learning about and developing new approaches. Within the academic setting, we are likely to find untapped resources—from the experiences of established qualitative researchers or from the novel approaches being explored by a new generation of qualitative researchers. Yet, how often do we seize the opportunity to network with others and make the most of such rich learning opportunities? Furthermore, how are these learning networks and relationships nurtured?

The purpose of this paper is to document and describe the development of a “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the example of the University of Manitoba Qualitative Research Group (QRG; Home Page: http://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/human_ecology/clch/qrg_web/index.html). Through a needs assessment of its members, we were able to create a foundation based on learner input and examine the strengths and weaknesses of QRG's initial development. We will

reflect upon and discuss its development within the context of qualitative research as a continuously developing and growing methodology. While many such networks may exist, little has been published related to the early development of qualitative networks or communities of practice or the process of building and sustaining such networks. This paper will share the steps taken to develop a qualitative research network with the intent to inform future development and support of qualitative research at our institution as well as others.

Background

The historical development of qualitative research can be described by referring to developmental periods. These reflect a time when researchers were beginning to be more vocal about the assumptions that were being made about persons and their subjective experiences relative to their individual contexts, especially when they were described primarily in statistical and numerical terms within a positivist framework. The idea that statistical analysis could provide an unbiased and objective view was increasingly being questioned (Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

The Chicago School (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) emphasized that social processes were open ended and emergent and they studied action and addressed temporality. They imparted new meaning upon otherwise positivist objectives where research was defined through objectivity and a presupposed rationality. Qualitative inquiry was then further developed by subsequent researchers and became known as a method which afforded opportunities to hear those whose voices had not yet been heard in a research context (Glaser & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Glaser and Strauss wrote *Awareness of Dying* in 1965 and then developed a widely used textbook on grounded theory in 1967. In this evolution beyond the Chicago School, it has become clear that qualitative research is a refined set of approaches including diverse methodological opportunities such as symbolic interaction, ethnography, narrative theory, and participatory action research. A body of other qualitative references evolved including Berg (2003), Kirby and McKenna (1989), Bogdan and Biklen (1992) which are now in wide use.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) would say we are currently in the *fractured future* and the eighth moment. Similarly, Polkinghorne (2006) wrote a seminal article in which he discussed two generations of qualitative researchers. The first generation deepened our understanding of human and social phenomena beyond the physical realm. It is the second generation of qualitative researchers who focus their attention on the development of a *human science* that is the processes and methods for actively engaging in qualitative inquiry. Polkinghorne stated that qualitative research as a field was emerging now to refine methodological intricacies entailed in this kind of inquiry. Similarly, Hallberg (2006) beautifully described the emergence and evolution of the foundational grounded theory, from Glaser and Strauss (2008) through to Strauss and Corbin (1990) and on to Charmaz (2006), ending with the provision that grounded theory once again become the foremost method with which to conduct qualitative research. Increasingly, however, grounded theory was seen more through a constructivist's lens than through its more traditional positivist framework.

Considering Polkinghorne's (2006) historical framework, we may be now witnessing another generation of researchers in academic units. Many of the current

contributors to qualitative research have spent their research lifetimes doing excellent work as well as mentored a new generation of researchers who are now well into their own qualitative research. Lessons have been learned about theoretical frameworks and methods, and even publishing qualitative data, and preparing grant applications – all requiring those engaged in research endeavors to be more fluent and knowledgeable about what it means to be a qualitative researcher. However we must also acknowledge that research environments are changing dramatically. Young academics will explore and develop beyond the historical framework as described and are inevitably intrigued with how and where their qualitative practices fit and shape the bigger picture. They are publishing in *open access* journals, and reaching further into new domains such as utilizing data management programs (e.g., NVivo) and visual data collection online (e.g., YouTube). Technology is quickly becoming a core aspect of any researcher's tasks and influencing the development and dissemination of research in unprecedented ways. This new era has also seen the emergence of *mixed methods* (Creswell, 1994) as two paradigms have come together. Progress of qualitative research as well as the environments that shape research, are dramatically different than in earlier generations. The Qualitative Research Group at the University of Manitoba has been established to support the wide array of qualitative researchers and fits neatly into this new vision for the future.

Describing the Qualitative Research Group (QRG)

The QRG was started in the early spring of 2008 based on an invitation to those on campus interested in qualitative research to come to a brown bag lunch. Ten people arrived, with students and faculty from diverse interdisciplinary backgrounds. A two hour brainstorming session generated a primary vision statement, prioritized objectives with an action plan set within a time frame, and then delegated roles for those who wanted to continue involvement.

By December 2009, the QRG grew to over 100 participants working in medicine (community health sciences, medical rehabilitation, pediatrics, neurosurgery), nursing, dental hygiene, social work, sociology, anthropology, education, disability studies, human ecology (i. e., nutrition, family social sciences), women's and gender studies, engineering, and library science. Initially members were primarily from our "home" University but this has grown to include participants across the Prairies and more recently, across Canada as well as visiting scholars. The electronic newsletter is sent out on the first of each month announcing local, national, and international conferences, noon-hour discussions on methodology, research findings, journals and books, and other initiatives of interest. This has become an important means for informing members of opportunities for qualitative researchers to come together and build resources.

Building Capacity through *Communities of Practice*

Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) initially conceptualized *communities of practice* suggesting that learning can take place in the context of social relationships, rather than simply through the traditional didactic means of knowledge acquisition (Li et al., 2009). They identified three essential criteria for the

community of practice: the domain, the community, and a specific set of practices. The *domain* creates the common ground and outlines the boundaries that enable members to decide what is worth sharing; the *community* creates a social structure that facilitates learning; and *practice* indicates the type of knowledge and how it is being shared. In particular, communities of practice began to appear in health care education and the medical literature in the early 2000's. These communities were based on social opportunities where the communication about professional practices could lead to the sharing of specific kinds of knowledge. They could be further represented through formal training sessions, informal discussions, and multidisciplinary opportunities and often, conducted in virtual arenas. Ultimately, four characteristics describe communities of practice: a). social interaction, b). knowledge-sharing, c). knowledge-creation, d). identity-building.

The vision of the Qualitative Research Group (QRG) at the University of Manitoba is to engage in the same kinds of tasks; a). to nurture social interaction between qualitative researchers, including *mixed methods* where quantitative research is a suitable complement; b). to provide opportunities for researchers and students utilizing qualitative research to share knowledge; c). to provide a support base through which the same researchers might develop/create new knowledge and d). to promote collaborative opportunities among a wide range of interdisciplinary researchers across Manitoba, the Prairies, Canada, and internationally.

Qualitative Research Group Activities

Needs assessment. In the spring of 2009, the QRG developed an anonymous online needs assessment survey seeking member input regarding qualitative research development and how their expertise might fit within the QRG action plan. In particular, the survey aimed to determine what the members' needs were with respect to qualitative research and how QRG might develop to meet those needs. Within one of the QRG electronic newsletters, we explained the purpose and anonymity of the survey and provided the link to the online survey. We did not seek ethics approval however the respondents provided implied consent by anonymously providing their responses. The survey was a point from which to start learning about QRG members and to be better able to create a qualitative research resource that would be meaningful and useful to its members.

A total of 36 surveys were completed and returned, representing an approximate 45% response rate. University faculty produced the majority (63.9%) of the responses followed by students (22.2%) and University staff researchers (11.1%). Only 11% of respondents reported no experience with qualitative research, while 39% reported 1-10 years and 50.1% reported more than 10 years. There was a substantial percentage (13.9%) reporting more than 20 years of experience with qualitative research.

A large percentage of respondents (63.8%) were willing to share knowledge around specific topics related to qualitative research. These topics included (in order of ranking) writing, participatory action, narrative, ethnography, grounded theory, software use and video/photography. Although faculty most often reported a willingness to share knowledge, a number of students were also willing. Faculty was the only group who reported knowledge to share around funding opportunities for qualitative research. There

were no significant differences among the various disciplines and the topics for which they were willing to share their knowledge. In this particular sample, the more experienced researchers appeared less willing than less experienced researchers to share knowledge around Ethnography.

Table 1 shows the topics that respondents would most like to learn about and indicates there is a wide range of interest in various topics. Other topics of interest, although mostly with regard to other qualitative methodologies, included ethics, analysis, and writing. When comparing the various disciplines, there was no difference in the topics they were most interested in learning more about. However, the health delivery disciplines (i. e., medicine, dental hygiene, nursing) and social work reported significantly more interest in writing about qualitative research than the others. Notably, one respondent remarked “anything” would be of learning interest further promoting the theoretical and practical utility of a qualitative research network in addressing needs and interests.

Table 1. *What would you most like to learn about?*

Topics	Most important (%)	Somewhat important (%)	Least important (%)
Software use	61.3	38.7	0.0
Participatory Action	54.8	38.7	6.5
Writing about QR	54.8	35.5	0.0
Narrative	48.4	48.4	3.2
Video/photography	38.7	29.0	32.3
Ethnography	32.3	48.4	19.4
Grounded Theory	25.8	32.3	41.9

Respondents were also asked to rank their interest in the topics they would like the QRG network to address. A large majority felt the topics were considered most or somewhat important (Table 2). Again, the various disciplines as well as comparisons between faculty and students showed no significant differences among their responses. Researchers with a wide range of years of experience appeared to be equally interested in all the topics listed. The more experienced researchers (generally more than 10 years) reported less interest in publishing challenges and tenure and promotion.

Table 2. *What topics would you like QRG network to address?*

TOPIC	Most important (%)	Somewhat important (%)	Least important (%)
Identifying funding opportunities for QR's	77.4	19.4	3.2
Dissemination of QR	67.7	22.6	9.7
Interdisciplinary collaboration	64.5	29.0	6.5
Building community partnerships	61.3	29.0	9.7
Funding priorities for qualitative research	58.1	41.9	0.0
Collaboration with quantitative researchers	54.8	32.3	12.9
Publishing challenges	54.8	35.5	9.7
Tenure and promotion in relation to QR	32.3	29.0	38.7

The format of choice for professional development was a half day workshop (71%) however a substantial number (more than 50%) were also interested in customized group and individual consultation. There was a marked preference for onsite/in-person (45.2% to 71%) rather than online delivery (2.9% to 16%).

The key areas of praise for the QRG were that it was a resource and informative means of communicating and providing updates between qualitative researchers. As well, the network provided a helpful and useful opportunity to engage with other researchers. There were minor suggestions for change around the newsletter format with one individual expressing the fact that QRG needs more publicity.

First annual QRG workshop 2009. The QRG sent out a *call for papers* in November 2008 announcing the first annual QRG workshop for May 2009. The goal was to have individuals present on and discuss current research that was qualitative in an interdisciplinary and yet non-threatening format. Over 40 participants (i. e., faculty, students, community) registered for a round-table format by sending in an abstract that was then reviewed by the selection committee. Only those participants who were presenting could attend to avoid having a non-participating audience. Initially, the successful abstracts were sent by email to all registered participants so they could state first and second preferences for the roundtables. Then, a selection committee used the abstracts and people's stated preferences to guide who was seated at which table. Participants were allocated to tables drawn on large flip charts taped onto a wall, where revisions and re-organization could take place as the criteria for seating was considered. Seating was also organized according to methodologies described and when suitable, corresponding topics of research. As well, we aimed for a combination of senior junior faculty and senior/junior students at each table totaling up to five participants per table. A final map of each table's participants was used to print in the program and used to guide people the day of the conference. All abstracts and contact emails were also printed in the program. Two tables only were set up in each room so that lively conversation within

each table was encouraged. The roundtable format proved to be very successful given the comments and positive energy throughout the day and the subsequent evaluation.

A Keynote Speaker presented on key issues facing qualitative researchers to all participants in the morning, and we also presented the findings from the needs assessment survey to the whole group. Other smaller announcements and presentations had been organized around the lunch hour where food was served to all participants in a large room. In this way, the participants had a chance to engage in the large group and get to know people they had never met, as well as being engaged in discussions about research in the smaller groups. This was the first opportunity for the larger *community of practice* to meet in person and it allowed for the participants to get to know each other and build new networks, to articulate concerns and issues with their own research, and even to initiate new directions for their qualitative research and expertise. It was apparent by the positive evaluative comments on the workshop, that this event presented an important opportunity for participants to come together and discuss their research and to begin to develop the idea that we were indeed a *community of practitioners*.

Reflection and Discussion

One of the initial challenges to forming a Qualitative Research Group (QRG) was identifying potential participants who were dispersed among two campus sites. Not only were their individual research agendas highly variable, they also had unique alliances and disciplinary commitments. Was a focus on methodology enough to unite potential members? How could we achieve a sense of community despite some apparent disparities? When comparing researchers across medical, arts, and social sciences faculties, it became evident there were some unique, disciplinary variations with regard to language, data collection, sample populations, as well as the objectives and outcomes. However, being mindful of interdisciplinarity as a thriving part of our emerging research communities, we chose to focus on elements of qualitative research—the common ground that could bring us together. Li et al. (2009) state that an action research methodology might encourage individuals to contribute and become more involved in the group's formative development. The development of a listserv for monthly newsletters and the 2009 workshop became the first steps toward developing this idea. Furthermore, becoming a *community of practitioners* was particularly important as we consider the thinking that accompanies qualitative methodologies and strategies, and how experts as well as students can share in the learning (Morse, 2005).

The interdisciplinary connectivity of the listserv in particular and the success of the inaugural workshop were initial steps in fostering support through resource sharing (i. e., expertise, space, equipment) and cultivating greater grassroots campus engagement and collegiality. Not only would people consider new research partnerships across disciplines but they may also consider new ways of asking research questions, and support new methodologies (within qualitative) for collecting data. Certainly, our survey respondents indicated that their needs were quite diverse and yet the members welcomed almost any kind of interaction and learning related to QR. The need to be in-touch with one another, and the benefits of multidisciplinary were deemed invaluable.

Hunt, Mehta, and Chan (2009) discuss the lack of clarity and isolation experienced by new learners embarking on qualitative inquiry. Unlike the set rules of

statistical analyses, qualitative research data can be dynamically analyzed, but calls for collaboration and networking in order to feel supported in one's approach, especially at the novice level. This also seemed to be supported by our group. Peer support and mentorship are particularly salient elements to relevant learning models targeting qualitative methodologies (Hunt et al., 2009; Morse, 2005). We were pleased to identify our own local experts who were willing to share their learning and guide the next generation of qualitative researchers. In addition, the learners may also be encouraging the *teachers* to seek out new ways of qualitative practice. How technology will interface with qualitative research is becoming a more common discussions: YouTube, Skype, and online focus groups are all examples where younger qualitative researchers must forge into new territory in order to assist ethics protocol developments, how and where papers are published, and which grants get funded. Here, a new generation of researchers would do well to be supported not only by other more senior mentors, but also a collaborative climate with same stage peers and colleagues.

The Qualitative Research Group has recently created a new interfaculty Advisory Committee which includes senior members of the University research office. Gaining the support and advice of relevant stakeholders is part of what will continue to help a network such as this one thrive. Accessing support for further training and development can only be done in partnership with more senior and established qualitative researchers. As these researchers are increasingly holding positions at the highest levels of a university's research office, the future of qualitative developments looks bright. Certainly, some of the earlier struggles of the first generation of qualitative researchers will be replaced by new struggles but also successes. A community of practice is vital in assisting that vision for the future.

This paper describes a case in point and lessons that were learned will be considered for the future development of QRG at the University of Manitoba. However, by sharing these lessons, we hope to contribute ideas for the development of similar kinds of networks that focus on qualitative training and education. Since no documentation of similar discussions was found, we can assume that little formalized reflection on the process of capacity building is occurring in the context of developing qualitative researchers in the sense of a *community of practice*. We set out to discover a process of capacity building with regard to developing qualitative researchers and found a practical means of supporting the growth of QRG through the *community of practice* conceptual model. We also discovered that while there are similar networks and research groups, there was no description of obvious partnerships or higher level coordination of these groups. There are rich opportunities to learn about when qualitative *communities of practice* work and when might they fragment or discontinue. Reflecting on the development of the QRG has generated additional questions. What infrastructure is necessary to maintain a vibrant community? Who are the stakeholders? Also, some aspects of qualitative research continue to frustrate qualitative researchers and we need to continue to seek ways of supporting their research activities. How can we bring ethics review committees on board who are less familiar and perhaps even less open to novel approaches such as online recruitment? How are we going to continue to encourage funders in a cost-restrained environment to appreciate the value of qualitative data with or without quantitative data? How is qualitative work merging with mixed methods, if at all? It is our hope that further investigation continues to inform future development and

encourages sustainability of qualitative research networks and the growth of qualitative research in general.

Conclusion

A thorough investigation of the literature revealed a paucity of information related to the development of qualitative researchers networks or communities of practice that might support and nurture qualitative researchers. It is critical not only that similar kinds of networks are being initiated, but that the process of capacity building and community development between qualitative researchers be documented and reflected upon.

The history of qualitative research has demonstrated the evolving utility and increasing diversity of many exciting methodologies. The notion of a local support network seen as a community of practice has been very well received by participating faculty and students within a range of disciplines, suggesting that the QRG is well positioned to offer support that would further the development of current researchers, regardless of discipline or experience. By doing so, this network can promote the value of qualitative research support for faculty and students in their use of traditional as well as emerging qualitative methodologies, especially as our research environments change into the future. The QRG can foster important collaborations among a wide spread and interdisciplinary group of qualitative researchers.

Since communities of practice are seen as essential in the formation of not only practical but also theoretical knowledge, we propose that the proliferation of qualitative centers around the world ought to be accompanied by well documented and theoretical reflection not only about their structure and formation but also about their sustainability. Shedding light on lessons learned in similar kinds of communities could provide useful pedagogical information, curriculum ideas, prevent errors and promote better practices. In this way, we may contribute towards a new *moment* or *new generations* of communities of practice set within the rich historical context of qualitative research.

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