

**The Qualitative Research Network: Working Cross-Campus to Support Qualitative
Researchers at the University of Massachusetts—Lowell**

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The University of Massachusetts-Lowell Qualitative Research Network (QRN) was initiated in 1999 and has blossomed over the years into a cross-campus organization of faculty, staff, and students dedicated to supporting the understanding of qualitative research methods and expanding the breadth and rigor of their use on campus. In this paper we will briefly describe the history, development, and current scope of QRN and then we will focus in on two areas of particular concern to us: 1) issues facing the development of interdisciplinary qualitative research courses or programming; and 2) the growth of our work with qualitative research software. We will conclude with a few words of wisdom based upon our experience trying to grow support for qualitative research in the higher education environment.

History, Development and Current Scope of the Qualitative Research Network

In 1999 at a luncheon for new faculty, a couple of like-minded souls (qualitative researchers) discovered their common interests and wondered if there were others like them on campus. With the support of the campus Research Foundation, a call went out for a meeting to bring together qualitative researchers from across campus, and the response was hearty—about 30 individuals eager for contact with other qualitative researchers. Thus was born the University of Massachusetts-Lowell's Qualitative Research Network.

The all volunteer group trundled along through its first few years, building a modest track record sponsoring speaker events and meetings for campus members. Faculty members with funded support pitched in, donating the services of a research assistant and some stray dollars for meeting expenses. The value of our work in these first years was that we began to learn who did qualitative research on campus and what kinds of products (dissertations, grants, papers, books) had been created by campus members using this methodological approach. We started the tradition of a mini-conference at which (initially just graduate students but now graduate students and faculty) share their research in a semi-formal venue. We were a loosely-knit crew of fanatics who enjoyed being together; anyone was welcome to join us.

Times, however, were changing. Our campus, like many across the nation, has entered a period of dramatic renewal, as the old guard changes to the new. In our case this has meant the retirement of our Chancellor of many years as well as the retirement of many, many older faculty, the bringing on board of a new Provost with a dramatic vision

for transformative education (and a strong supporter of qualitative research), and the hiring of a huge number of new faculty members. Most important to the QRN, new internal funding became available to support interdisciplinary initiatives. The QRN Steering Committee decided to apply for these funds with the hope that we would be able to develop a sturdier foundation from which to operate the group and develop new services for the campus. We applied, and we were successful!

We have now had two years of funding that have supported a course buy-out for the QRN Facilitator (myself) and dollars to support a research assistant (Cindi Jacobs, my co-author). At the same time, the University also used other funds to purchase a site license for QSR's NVivo, a qualitative research software package. Thus in addition to what have become our traditional functions—sponsoring speaker events and campus-wide meetings of qualitative researchers and communicating with interested campus members about events in the qualitative research world—we now had dedicated financial support and a mandate to broaden our activities. In this next period of QRN's life, in particular, we were charged to: 1) develop graduate-level interdisciplinary qualitative research courses; and 2) develop support for the use of qualitative research software use.

Issues Facing the Development of Interdisciplinary Qualitative Research Courses

“Interdisciplinary” is a hot term in today's academic world, but despite its popularity many barriers exist to developing interdisciplinary work in higher education. QRN may have encountered all of them in the last two years as it sought a means of expanding the kinds and number of graduate-level qualitative research courses on campus. We were naïve to think that the barriers would drop as soon as we identified them. Two years later we are chastened and wiser, but still optimistic.

The first phase of QRN's new work could be termed the 'investigative phase'. We learned everything we could about qualitative research instructional activities on campus and the ways that qualitative research offerings were organized on other campuses in the Northeast, particularly at schools similar to ours.

There were three instructors at UML offering graduate level qualitative research methods courses: 1 course in Education (doctoral students only); 1 in Nursing (doctoral students only); and 1 in Regional, Economic, and Social Development (masters and doctoral students). The three instructors shared syllabi and met to discuss commonalities (of which there were many) and differences (of which the major one was the emphasis on qualitative research software in the course offered by the Graduate School of Education). In addition, we scoured the program catalog for signs of any other courses offering qualitative research methods in some form at the graduate level. While we found several courses listed as program evaluation, few of these were currently being taught. There were no other master's level courses that could fit into this category.

From our surrounding institutions of higher education in the Northeast, we also collected descriptions of graduate level qualitative research course requirements for a range of social science programs similar to the ones we offered at UML. Through this investigation we found, for instance, that we have the only doctoral education program in the area that does not require qualitative research coursework, although fully one-half of the dissertations produced by this program are now conducted with qualitative research methodologies. We learned that some of the schools in the Northeast have a rich offering of qualitative research courses, while others offer a more basic array of courses.

Finally, we also sought out information on graduate programs/options or certificates that were offered nationally or internationally in the area of qualitative research. As you know, there are very few examples of this level of institutional support for qualitative research methodological training, and two of those are sitting right here.

This initial investigation demonstrated to us that there was a lack of qualitative research training available on our campus, but it did not answer an equally pressing question—what kinds of skills do UML faculty possess in the area of qualitative research methodology and, if given the chance, how would they want to share these skills in formal courses? To answer this question, we asked faculty to participate in the development of a “Fantasy Catalog” of qualitative research courses they would like to create. This turned out to be a highly effective way of unearthing information about faculty skills and desires in the arena of qualitative research. Nine responded with course syllabi and biographies describing their training in the field of qualitative research. An additional four simply provided biographies. We knew that our responses were only partial and did not include all possible participants. However, even with only this partial response we were overwhelmed with the richness of skills available on campus. There were possibilities for wonderful classes in narrative analysis, oral history, case study approaches in health policy, visual data analysis, feminist approaches, and philosophical foundations of qualitative research. The biographical sketches described individuals with excellent, high level training in their area of methodological interest.

Unfortunately, we also learned that these individuals were unable, for reasons related to program structure, to share these skills with student audiences at the graduate level. Some taught in programs that were confined to undergraduate students and had no

options of sharing advanced methodological skills with graduate students. Others taught in programs that had been taken over by national accrediting requirements that, in the interests of efficiency, had eliminated all but those courses required for a national or state test in their field. Still others found themselves in departments with too few faculty available to offer more than the required courses, leaving no opportunities for the development of electives in the program. In many programs, the lack of a qualitative research requirement meant that qualitative research classes, even if listed, garnered too few students to be offered. There was great talent and a great desire to share skills and knowledge, but there were innumerable administrative and structural barriers.

We were perplexed by the challenges we had encountered and spent time talking with senior administrators about our findings, specifically the Dean of Continuing and Corporate Education who has responsibility for campus online learning programs and much experience with cross-campus issues. We also spoke with the faculty chair of the Transformation Team on Interdisciplinarity. These colleagues were not surprised by our findings and the obstacles we had identified to developing interdisciplinary offerings, and while many possible administrative and policy changes were in the offing, the current limitations were the current limitations.

Despite our knowledge of the challenges, the QRN steering committee decided to press forward and offer a competition for Faculty Fellowships—stipends for summer work to be used by selected faculty to develop qualitative research course offerings. To qualify for a fellowship, the proposed courses had to provide focused training in qualitative research techniques, and be designed to be numbered at the 500 level to allow for participation from both upper level undergraduates and graduate students. We also

asked applicants to provide information that would help us to cross-list the course with other programs on campus. The fellowship application required a description of the course and the signature of the program chair, demonstrating her/his support and willingness to insure the class would be offered at some point over the next two academic years. We were prepared to offer four stipends; we received two applications. They are, however, stellar classes—one in feminist methodologies and the other in ethnomusicology. We heard from other faculty members that they had considered the possibility of applying, even debated it in program meetings, but in the end the structural barriers held sway and the applications were not forthcoming. We are ecstatic that our efforts have led to the birth of these two new courses on our campus. Given what we know of the barriers to developing new courses and to working across disciplinary and programmatic lines, we feel that these two courses represent a significant success for QRN's efforts. We continue to hope for bigger things, but we are more than satisfied with what we have achieved thus far.

In the next section of the paper, we discuss a parallel thread of action—our work to develop support for qualitative research software.

Building Support for Qualitative Research Software

Qualitative and quantitative researchers, teaching side by side in graduate schools of education, are by now settling into familiar if not peaceful coexistence. Qualitative research has come to comprise a substantial portion of both dissertations and peer-reviewed publications in education. Now, among qualitative methodologists, another divide has emerged, between users and non-users of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS). As the benefits to transparency of process and analytical capabilities of QDAS

become better recognized, training in the use of these tools becomes an increasingly important element of doctoral training.

At present, within a department's faculty, doctoral students are likely to encounter both users and non-users, and students may even prepare their dissertations under the guidance of a committee that combines both. This situation presents several challenges to doctoral students and their advisors. How can students be assured access to training in QDAS? How can user-students, and their user-advisors, respond most effectively to skepticism and other forms of resistance from non-users? At the University of Massachusetts Lowell, QRN is playing a role in bridging the divide.

Our approach has been to make the campus rich with QDAS observation opportunities, training, and support resources. Four key activities are described below. All of the activities have relied heavily on the existence of the campus-wide Qualitative Research Network and the two-year grant QRN received from within the university to support excellence in qualitative methods teaching and research. The activities described below have been carried out with those resources.

Readily Available Software

After reviewing several of the available QDAS tools, the QRN elected to request that the university purchase a site license for NVivo 7. While the cost of the site license far exceeded the initial grant to the QRN, the request was successful, in part due to the Network's ability to demonstrate the number of existing and potential users on campus. Initially, approval was granted for 50 seats. These were rapidly filled and the license cap was raised to 100 seats. At present, 81 seats are in use. Approximately one third of the licenses are installed in classrooms or laboratories. This use of the site license in group

settings has greatly increased the capacity for teaching methods courses incorporating NVivo, and has made the software available for research group meetings.

Training

Again with the support of the QRN's internal seed funding, we have developed introductory (one full day) and intermediate level (one half-day) training courses. The initial offerings of these courses were very well subscribed by doctoral students studying qualitative methods in upper level research courses, those engaged in dissertation work, and a small number of faculty and staff. Response to the course content was strongly positive, and we (a small group of faculty, doctoral students and post-doctoral students) are now developing additional alternate formats for presentation of these courses.

The relatively low response rate among faculty, however, has been a concern. A greater number of trained graduate students, while beneficial in one sense, in another sense merely serves to widen the gap between users and non-users. As we considered our understanding of faculty needs, obtained from QRN surveys and informal observations and conversations, three aspects of faculty needs seemed important. First, a time constraint was obvious. Without the pressing motivation that the upcoming dissertation project creates for graduate students, faculty had far less incentive to take time away from already demanding schedules to develop a skill of (to the non-user) dubious value. Second, we felt it was important to offer training in a setting and structure that was explicitly respectful of faculty's distinct status in the university community. For many faculty members, entering a setting where they will sit as a peer with students is an unwelcome prospect. Finally, since both technology and questions of methodology can

be threatening to learners, we felt that a non-threatening setting and structure were also important.

In response to these criteria, we are presently piloting “NVivo Tasters,” one-on-one, hour-long sessions between faculty and trainers focused on the faculty member’s current research endeavors. The goal of the session is to allow the participant to frame the questions, and to describe their research goals at a depth sufficient to allow the trainer/consultant to offer specific examples of how the software might be put to use in storing, exploring and analyzing data. While only a small number of faculty have initially responded, feedback from the sessions has been strongly positive, and it is our expectation that even a small number of new users, particularly in academic departments where there have as yet been none, will help create a shift toward a more accepting and curious climate for QDAS.

User Group

An informal user group is held roughly monthly on campus. The group meetings are advertised to an email list of site licensees, past training participants, and the broader QRN and campus. The group attracts both faculty and graduate students of varying levels of expertise, with a typical attendance of eight to ten.

The group provides a peer consulting network. At each session, one member of the group serves as a volunteer focus for the meeting. The volunteer might present a project in progress seeking assistance with a particular issue or in order to demonstrate a technique or strategy for coding, project structure, or use of a software feature. Recent presentations have included a session on NVivo reporting functions, the use of visual data, the modeler, and the use of queries.

This activity requires very little support, drawing on the QRN's paid staff for its very minor publicity and scheduling demands, and appears to be a highly effective means of introducing users to one another and to the software. One of the most effective aspects of the user group is its flexibility in meeting needs of users at many levels of expertise. For beginners, these sessions provide brief, non-threatening opportunities to simply observe the use of the software. Advanced users often find peers in the group with whom they can discuss specific immediate challenges. As the level of expertise rises on campus, the level of sophistication of user group discussions can rise along with it, adapting far more quickly than we would be able to respond with formal higher level training.

One last, indirect benefit of the user group is that its monthly campus-wide reminder notices serve as evidence that a critical mass of NVivo users has emerged on campus and is dedicated to increasing its competence. This may provide some evidence for legitimacy to outsiders but does so without excluding, and in fact still welcoming, novices.

Open Discussion

Our public discussions of technology and qualitative analysis have created links to faculty in fields previously outside the Network's connections. A recent presentation to the QRN on visual representation and analysis of data (Grinstein, 2006) succeeded in drawing in researchers on campus who had not previously viewed the Network as a resource, and created new awareness of the possibilities of technology, and new prospects for partnership, among those who have long been involved with us. This experience has further demonstrated the power of both informal and formal connection. We all benefit

when we are able to come together in discussion of the shared problem of making meaning from data.

Self-Assessment and Other Next Steps

As we continue with these four strategies for bridging the gap between users and non-users, we continue to assess our own progress through a variety of means. Most concretely, we track the number of licenses in use and the various constituencies represented among users, the number of participants in training, and attendance at user group meetings. Other measures of our progress rest on informal communications, personal observation, and careful listening. Two questions are particularly important at this stage.

First, what change have we seen in the process of presenting NVivo analysis to non-user members of dissertation committees? Tools such as the NVivo shell (Hickey, 2005) have evolved within our campus to serve this purpose and are gaining widespread use. We continue to observe the dissertation process and to support effective tools and strategies as they emerge.

Second, to what extent is NVivo or other QDAS incorporated in the teaching of qualitative research methods? All three faculty members currently teaching graduate level methods courses now have access to teaching labs with NVivo installed at every seat. The three faculty members range from novice to expert in the use of NVivo and are working together to develop a shared approach to teaching an introductory methods course incorporating QDAS.

As we continue our efforts to act as boundary spanners on the QDAS divide, we see an evolving community of researchers, growing in its capacity to function in both

inquiry and teaching. Activity that has been gentle but intentional has been necessary to move us toward this more supportive and productive environment.

Words of Wisdom from the Battle-worn

In our two years of focused work to develop qualitative research courses on campus and support the use of qualitative research software, we have learned a couple of useful things:

- As good qualitative researchers, it behooves us to learn ‘what is’ (and to learn that in real depth)...rather than trying to live in ‘what we would like it to be.’ (Our many investigative activities uncovered many challenges and provided new ways of understanding problems.)
- Make invitations that are too good (easily accessed) and enticing (non-threatening) to refuse. (Our Nvivo tasters are a good example.)
- Be inclusive. Make qualitative research a place where people can find real collegiality—a draw in the world of higher education where competition often reigns.
- Get the ‘buzz’ going. (We went from being a total non-topic on campus, to being the envy of quantitative researchers who still haven’t figured out how to organize!)
- The transparency and portability that qualitative research software provides offers new ways to promote faculty and student sharing and learning. (Looking together at qualitative research projects through the lens of NVivo has brought faculty and students together in dynamic ways.)

- Substance is rewarding. (People continue to come back to QRN activities because it is intellectually satisfying. It is a place they can count on for stimulating interaction that gives them a professional boost.)

QRN is an oddity on our campus. It is a vibrant, grass-roots movement that has semi-entity status to many, and yet which exists without formal administrative standing—either as part of a disciplinary program or as a Center. Despite this shortcoming (and perhaps it is a secret strength), its voice is increasingly acknowledged. For instance, the QRN facilitator was invited to serve on the cross-campus Research Council and to participate as a member of the Search Committee for the Vice Provost for Research, a new position. The Office of Research Administration recently mailed copies of the QRN brochure out to new faculty, in order to alert them to this research resource.

Over the next few years QRN's mission will be to continue to develop opportunities for enlarging qualitative research methodological training on campus, in tandem with the work of supporting qualitative research software use and integrating it into faculty research and instructional activities across many fields. We are privileged to have had the chance to work to promote qualitative research use from a cross-campus perspective. For this opportunity we must give thanks to the unique leadership partnership of our Provost, John Wooding, and Associate Provost, Kristen Esterberg. Thank you John and Kristin! Long live qualitative research!

References

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