Qualitative psychology at M level: A dialogue between learner and teacher

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Abstract

There are now more postgraduate programmes which include qualitative methods in psychology than ever before. This poses problems for teaching qualitative methods at M level because we still lack consistency in what qualitative methods are taught at undergraduate level. Although the British Psychological Society requires accredited undergraduate programmes to include qualitative methods, we hear very different stories from colleagues across the UK about provision and quality. In this article, we present a dialogue between learner and teacher about our own experiences of qualitative methods in psychology at M level. We report our own learning experiences of qualitative methods at undergraduate level, reflect on current methods of teaching at M level, and consider ways of moving forward. As well as focusing specifically on current practice at our institution, our discussions also branch out into wider issues around the fundamental characteristics of qualitative methods, pragmatically and philosophically, as well as our own accounts of what we enjoy most about using qualitative methods in psychology.

Keywords:
Qualitative psychology, qualitative research, learning experience, postgraduate teaching.

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(Introduction)

Qualitative methods in psychology are becoming more popular year on year and lecturers report increasing numbers of students wanting to use them in their own research projects. Qualitative methods are a requirement on undergraduate psychology programmes accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2004) however communication with colleagues indicates inconsistencies in what is taught, to what level and how. The Psychology Network of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has set up its own working group on Teaching Qualitative Research Methods at Undergraduate Level (TQRMUL). Mike Forrester and Gina Koutsopoulo conducted a project exploring the range of resources currently available at UK universities aiming to establish what would be valuable to lecturers who provide

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undergraduate teaching in qualitative research methods (Forrester & Koutsopoulo, 2006). While at the University of Leeds, Brendan Gough and colleagues conducted additional exploratory work to establish current supervision practice with students using qualitative methods in their final year projects. Following their survey and workshop with colleagues who teach qualitative methods around the UK, guidelines for the supervision of undergraduate qualitative projects were produced (Gough, Lawton, Madill & Stratton, 2003; Madill, Gough, Lawton & Stratton, 2005). More recently, the TQRMUL working group received HEA funds for a development grant to produce and make available digital recordings of research interviews for use in qualitative research practicals. Stephen Gibson at York St John University is heading up this initiative. Alongside this work, the TQRMUL team is producing a qualitative methods workbook (*Doing Qualitative Practicals in Psychology: A Student Workbook*) which will include worked up analyses of the same data using different qualitative analysis methods. This book will support both students and lecturers through their qualitative research practicals. These developments enable us to take stock and to celebrate the progress we have made in recent years. However, there remain unresolved issues regarding specific content of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Teaching materials need improvement, for example, dedicated research space for data collection and digital recording equipment. Perhaps most significant though are reported discrepancies in levels of training received by those teaching qualitative methods in psychology which inevitably impacts on the quality of teaching delivered to students.

The growing market for qualitative methods in psychology demands a wider range and higher quality of teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate level. A pertinent issue when designing postgraduate taught programmes in psychology was how to approach M level training in qualitative methods when undergraduate teaching is not standardised. In the academic session 2005-06 we introduced a suite of new postgraduate programmes at Aston University and like many other institutions have delivered qualitative methods teaching at M level for the first time. There are now a number of universities offering postgraduate taught programmes in qualitative methods, which signals great progress. For example, our own programme is an MRes in Psychological Research Methods with an optional specialism in Qualitative Methods; the University of Leeds has an MSc in Qualitative Psychology and Health; the University of the West of England has a dedicated MSc in Qualitative Methods in Psychology; and at Birkbeck there is a similar approach to Aston where qualitative methods are included within an MSc in Psychological Research Methods. Two kinds of programme are emerging as both practical and popular: a generic research programme, a contender for the ESRC 1+3 status, which includes qualitative methods as just one approach in a programme designed to give students wide ranging experience in research methods; the other model offers training that is dedicated exclusively to qualitative methods in psychology or qualitative psychology in a specified field, such as health. It is too early to know what each of these designs offers to students and who will benefit most. These are questions we will need to answer to maintain a high standard of M level teaching in qualitative methods in psychology.

This case study presents a dialogue between learner and teacher. This innovative technique enables us to illustrate the nature of our own experiences of working with qualitative methods within the learner-teacher environment and it also reveals something of our own reflective processes when thinking aloud the relevant issues. We are all psychologists based in the School of Life and Health Sciences at Aston University in Birmingham. Elizabeth Peel and Rachel Shaw both used qualitative methods in our doctorates degrees and have conducted qualitative research ever since. We both had an unconventional undergraduate experience as neither of us did a single honours psychology bachelors degree; Elizabeth studied psychology and sociology at the University of Nottingham and Rachel studied psychology of human communication at De Montfort University. Phillip Dyson volunteered to provide a learner's perspective in this dialogue. Phillip completed his bachelors degree in Human Psychology at
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Aston University and at the time the dialogue took place was enrolled on the MRes in Psychological Research Methods with the Qualitative Methods specialism. Neither Elizabeth nor Rachel taught Phillip qualitative methods at undergraduate level but Elizabeth supervised his final year project. We have both taught Phillip qualitative methods at M level. Elizabeth's field of expertise is discourse analysis and thematic analysis while Rachel specialises in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The programme also covers narrative analysis, grounded theory, semi-structured interviewing, focus groups and transcription.

What follows is an edited and annotated version of a tape-recorded conversation between Phillip Dyson, Elizabeth Peel and Rachel Shaw that took place in August 2006. We spoke about our own learning and teaching experiences of qualitative methods in psychology. We reflected on past encounters with qualitative methods at undergraduate level and considered future developments for delivering a good range and depth of qualitative methods in psychology at postgraduate level. We have organised the conversation into a series of themes which represent the different threads within the dialogue (where information is unclear we have provided clarification in square brackets).

History's legacy

The historical context of psychology as a discipline that modelled itself on the natural sciences positions qualitative methods as the subordinate cousin to hypothesis testing and experimentation within the positivist tradition. We discussed several ways in which the inherent positivism within most UK institutions has impacted on current attitudes toward and provision of qualitative methods in psychology.

EP: I think both of us have had experience with undergraduate students, in fact I know we have, where students have said "I'm anxious about doing a qualitative project because it might negatively impact on the mark that I can get".

RS: Yes.

EP: And you have situations where students are trying to meet criteria which aren't, which pay no attention to things that would be important in qualitative work, which I think creates a bit of a problem and a tension. Certainly, at undergraduate level they're [qualitative and quantitative methods] not valued in the same way, which is to do with the history of this discipline.

RS: Yeah, of course it is, yeah.

EP: It's not about individuals in particular departments necessarily, it's to do with the longer history and culture in the way that psychology has developed over time as something that models itself on the hard sciences and it's got a lot of investment in those sorts of measures and trying to find out empirical truths and universal facts about the way in which we as human beings think.

This differential status between quantitative and qualitative methods has meant that qualitative psychologists have needed to argue their case for including qualitative methods alongside the longstanding coverage of the experimental method and statistical analysis. As a result, we find that space dedicated to qualitative methods can be minimal, meaning that only a basic introduction can be covered at undergraduate level. Historically we felt that this took the form of perhaps one or two lectures about discourse analysis.

EP: It might be worth thinking about what you were exposed to at M level compared to what you were exposed to as an undergraduate in qualitative methods.

PD: I didn't really get taught that much. There was a [research methods] module in the second year which was basically [and briefly] discourse analysis is this and then it was just kind of I got to do a project and we all got into groups. We didn't get much about what was behind it, we got a bit more of that in the third year. But then masters level, might as well as started afresh because it, you got all the background and everything

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then and it made more sense. I didn't know about IPA and stuff until I did my masters. You do get a lot more detail

PD: One of the first things we were taught is that transcription takes forever and it's really boring and it was kind of like lecture one, transcription's bad.

RS: Really?

PD: Pay someone to do it if you're a researcher. That was kind of the gist so you were like right, and then go away and do it.

RS: So that kind of puts you off to start with.

EP: I remember as an undergraduate the basic message I took away from teaching was that qualitative methods are about words and quantitative methods are about numbers. And what I was taught, which wasn't very much, was things like, "it'll take longer to do qualitative research because it's more in-depth" and "you won't be able to get as big a sample as you would do in quantitative research", and "it's always useful if you don't know much about an area to do qualitative research because then you can do research which uses hypotheses on the basis of that". So it was always framed up as how can this be useful within a quantitative paradigm.

RS: I probably had quite a different undergraduate experience because there was a lot more of a human science approach to several modules that we did. And we had one particular lecturer, who was the only person in the department who knew anything about qualitative methods, but he taught two or three modules throughout the degree so right from year one, not necessarily qualitative methods, but different approaches to a positivist method. So I think I was quite lucky in that I had a very different undergraduate experience from straight psychology and I remember a particular module, Mind, Meaning and Discourse, which was all about social constructionism, discourse analysis all that kind of stuff and I remember that much more than any stats, in fact I don't really remember any stats at all.

EP: Yes I mean I remember second year Social Psychology and it was predominantly attribution theory, all that kind of stuff and then there was mention of discourse analysis and the Potter and Wetherell (1987) book. I bought that book and I read that book because it resonated and it was interesting but I think discourse analysis was one part of one lecture in one module.

These stories, especially those coming from Elizabeth and Rachel, reflect the state of play in qualitative methods at the time. Discourse analysis became the landmark method for 'new paradigm' psychology following the 'turn to language'. The early 1990s, when Elizabeth and Rachel were undergraduates, were a seminal moment for qualitative methods in psychology. New ideas were forming, publications were coming thick and fast, but on the ground there seemed to be little by way of translating this new knowledge to students.

The transition from undergraduate to postgraduate learning

More and more students are taking up the chance to study at postgraduate level for a number of reasons. This means that teachers must provide new challenges for their postgraduate students by consolidating their existing knowledge, building up a new skills base and encouraging a higher level of understanding. This highlights the need to establish further standardisation in the requirements for teaching qualitative methods in psychology at undergraduate level.

EP: In terms of actual method, what were you taught [at undergraduate level] that was qualitative, say for example data collection, what did you get exposed to in terms of that?

PD: I think we got a couple of transcripts to look at and basically it was people speaking, you can do focus groups, you can do interviews and you transcribe it, for hours, and analyse it. And that was, you read it and re-read it, re-read it for themes. And that was essentially all we were taught about physically doing it. It was kind of left up to your

own devices to do it, I mean you had a project to do and that's how you learnt, you read the book and you learnt. I enjoyed the project which is why I wanted to follow it on. It wasn't like sort of anything mind blowing about the theory or even the method, it was just I knew one thing and I thought I enjoy this far more than I do stats and questionnaires and stuff like that and that's why I stuck with that.

EP: Yeah, yeah. I mean how much would you say masters level teaching differs from the way that it's taught at undergraduate level. We would hope that you have more depth, you get more opportunity to practice skills and have group based discussion and get a deeper level exposure to the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative approaches and a wider range of abilities to discern between different kinds of analytic methods, stuff like that.

PD: I think it was a lot better to do it at masters level. I thought I could do a PhD just following on from my degree but I feel like I'm prepared now to do something like that because I've had chance to practise different methods. I'd never looked at text before so I had a chance to practise that, have a look at that. Erm I've got, because it's smaller you get more access to staff, it's a lot easier because you can just go and say look I need some help whereas undergraduate level there's a bit more of a distance, there's so many of you as well, questions are hard to ask and it's a lot better in that sense and the detail throughout the whole thing is much better. I've learnt a lot more about different types of analysis and how to do it, lots more practice in all the workshops we did something to practise, which was really good. It was a lot better that way than at undergraduate.

Prestige is one indicator of which institutions are most popular with successful students. One way institutions can gain credibility and therefore prestige is to obtain accreditation from the ESRC for the 1+3 masters and PhD route, which the Aston MRes in Psychological Research Methods now has. To achieve this, a research masters programme is required to cover a broad range of approaches as well as an opportunity to specialise. We explored how this worked when thinking around the issues of potentially integrating qualitative and quantitative methods in psychology.

EP: If you've got a situation like we have with our new MRes the way that modules are organised, they're sort of a jigsaw puzzle of different approaches, how does that work?

PD: It does have good things, I mean if you're going into a course if you don't really know what you're going to specialise in, there were a couple of people on the course saying "do I want to do qualitative", "do I not want to do qualitative". It gives an opportunity to think yes or no, so that's good. For me doing stats was good because I taught stats [to undergraduates] so it made it easier because I'd learnt more about it before because obviously you keep learning. Stats isn't the worst thing in the world! It was very separate, I could never really see it as, it never really flowed together as one big thing. It was well that's one type of, that's [stats] what I've got to do to get through the course. Whereas the qualitative that's something I want to do beyond the course so that was always my primary focus, whereas that [the stats] was kind of just getting it done, it didn't really integrate.

EP: Did it not integrate because of the way that the teaching was scheduled or was it a lack of communication between the qualitative side and the quantitative side?

PD: There's nothing really too similar about what we were doing. We were learning all about different methods of stats. That made sense in its own way because it was basically a stats module and I was just dipping into it and that made a lot of sense as far as stats went because it had a logical progression going through it. But in terms of doing both at the same time it didn't really, it didn't really fit. It's not like I learnt [how] the method of discourse analysis is going to help me kind of mix the methods, you know it's not going to really help me in any meaningful way. In terms of mixing the two I'd have no idea where to start and I'd have to sort of see as I went, there was nothing kind of there in the two sections that would be easily integrated.

RS: That's something that I want to tackle next year. As well as the MRes doing the qualitative analysis workshops the MSc in Health Psychology also did it but they had a research methodology module on top of the analysis module. [..] In that module I had a

two hour seminar charting the history of psychology, going through the philosophical background of how psychology became behaviourist, positivist, and how qualitative research came from a different place. But because in the past I've always kind of, I've done it as a critique, quite a negative criticism of positivist, quantitative stuff. What I'm trying to turn it into now is a more kind of complementary, so okay, so this is how psychology in the mainstream is, and what kind of questions that can answer, but now we have all these growing approaches, qualitative methods have been around for a long time now and these are the kinds of questions that they can answer. At the end I want to try and reflect on how the qualitative methods we've learnt about can complement quantitative approaches and possibilities for mixing the two, so that's something I'm trying to address for next year.

EP: Yeah, that makes sense if you're thinking of a masters degree as a stepping stone to a PhD or further degree.

It has taken qualitative psychologists a long time to think about possibilities for mixing complementary methods that take qualitative and quantitative approaches. This is probably due, in part, to the resistance mainstream psychology initially felt toward qualitative methods and the consequent battle qualitative psychologists faced in getting their methods recognised. Things are beginning to change and people are becoming more open to different ways of working but there are still those who prefer a purely qualitative approach. The issue here is not how we conduct our own research, it is how we teach our future generations – do students need a good grounding in a range of research methods to succeed? Reservations provoked by a more generic approach to research methods training might include the sacrifice in depth that is made to make up the breadth. The following thread indicates that understanding theory – the depth of what is at the heart of qualitative methods – is as important to this learner as practising the skills to collect and analyse data.

Theory as a route to deeper understanding

Theory was considered crucial for students to gain a deeper understanding of the purpose and function of qualitative methods in psychology.

PD: It would have been really nice to have been taught, at least enough to remember, at undergraduate level the meaning behind it more so than the method. Because trying to pick it up after you've started something even my final year project was really hard going because I kind of thought I knew how to do it sort of thing but I didn't really know what I was doing or why or anything that was behind it, not really.

RS: The thing that I found difficult teaching the M level analysis workshops was where to start, how to pitch it, not knowing with students from different universities what qualitative teaching they had had at undergraduate level. And going back to what we said earlier about trying to start M level at a higher level and covering more of the theoretical stuff, and I did purposely cover a lot of theory, so I wondered what you thought about that?

PD: That was really good because a lot of your stuff, I'd never, I'd never done IPA so it was really good to learn about it. We started in the first term, we did a little bit of qualitative stuff which was really good because that refreshed me because I'd been out [of higher education] for a year, and erm it gave everyone a chance to get some sort of level of knowledge that everyone's got this base from which you can start later on. The amount of theory was really good because you need to know the theory to be good. So you do need to know why you're doing it before you then do it. So I thought that was really good.

RS: That's good because I think people find the theory bit quite boring sometimes. I think some of them might have done looking at their faces [laughs].

PD: It's not boring if you want to do it. You know if you're open to it, I don't find it boring, but that's me, I wanted to learn about it so I was interested.

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Trying to achieve the right mix between theory and practice is a balancing act. For some, the most important aspect of teaching qualitative methods in psychology is telling the story of their 'birth' – the post-positivist movement of symbolic interactionism, the development of critical psychology, feminist research, the need to prioritise the participant, the co-construction of data, and so on. Emphasising the epistemological differences between positivist and post-positivist paradigms contextualises qualitative methods in psychology, and like Phillip said, helps you understand where they are coming from. However, others prefer to think about qualitative methods in terms of techniques that can be applied in different ways in varying situations. Our thoughts about this contest between the pragmatic and the philosophical follows.

Untangling the pragmatic from the philosophical

Qualitative methods can be seen as a toolkit of different techniques that can be adapted for different purposes. This pragmatic approach is contrasted with a more philosophically grounded approach where researchers are expected to position themselves within a particular world view, a commitment which is sometimes felt quite passionately.

EP: Particularly if you're working in funded research you have very practical, pragmatic goals, "I need to find out about x", "what's the best way of finding out about x"? I mean it [what's at the core of qualitative methods] depends doesn't it. If you view methods as a kind of tool bag, and you're adding more qualitative tools and approaches to it that you kind of pick and choose and draw on, or whether you're a paid up member of a particular way of analysing things, that you have more sympathy with. I suppose, in part, it depends on who's teaching you and how they're teaching you in terms of which kind of perspective you may adopt.

RS: If you go back to your [EP] question about what's at the core of qualitative methods, that's a really difficult question to answer. I've had this discussion in a multidisciplinary team in a research project about qualitative methods. Amongst us there was disagreement whether the philosophy and the theory is important, if it's necessary, or whether you can have like your tool kit thing. To do a good piece of qualitative research do you have to say well I'm approaching this with this particular world view, does it have to be about subjectivity and meaning and so on or can it just be a descriptive thematic analysis? Is that an equally good piece of research, do you need all that theory? And we couldn't agree.

EP: One way to look at things is that it depends on who you're speaking to, your likely audiences, I suppose in part it's a marketing, pitching exercise of the kind of knowledge you produce. So, for example, when I've written for a medical journal the analysis looks descriptive - a list of quotes to illustrate the points of the argument. It's not the kind of qualitative research that personally I'm a big fan of because I do find it a bit bland. [..] [It's the kind of write-up where] they take a quote [from a participant] and what they say means they think that - that very transparent view about what's going on with people, and that they speak with what's in their heads, that kind of thing. Whereas in other contexts there is, I think, a very strong argument for positioning yourself in relation to what you're doing and being very explicit about your theoretical framework. I've said deliberately, this analysis is not realist, this is our epistemological position as we're looking at these data, we're not treating this talk as a window to people's actual thoughts and feelings. But that wouldn't prevent someone from interpreting the analysis in that way if they so chose.

RS: But then that's your position as a discourse analyst. Whereas if I was doing research - there is a difference within qualitative methods because IPA in particular is very much more towards a realist approach, and it is about cognition, that is what it's about, it's about making sense of, and it's about those internal processes, so in that way, that's very different from discourse analysis. When I was doing that big table [of different qualitative methods in the final MRes workshop on qualitative analysis] about whether it's realist, relativist, constructivist, you know all those different things, [to PD] how did you understand that, the differences between qualitative methods?

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PD: The table was really useful as a guide to look at it, it's a lot clearer to see it all in front of you but it was really weird to see how different they were because I kind of see each one, and take IPA, well I can see it is a good way of getting to know about internal processes, and I think yes that's quite true, and then, yeah but, is it not just thoughts and feelings? And it's hard to see all of them, because of the little differences between them, it's quite hard to get a grip of and decide where you fit.

EP: And I think another difficulty is it's often very hard to unpick the nuances of theoretical perspective from journal articles. If you got a bunch of qualitative journal articles, all empirical pieces of qualitative data analysis, and they would pretty much all, more or less, look alike. They all put data into themes, they all coded text into categories, probably into higher order categories and subordinate categories erm, people use terms like discourse in very different ways. Some people will call a theme a discourse and that's the extent of their discourse analysis. I was reviewing a paper yesterday and the authors reported it was a narrative analysis, then they mentioned grounded theory and then their explanation of what they did in their method section was essentially thematic analysis. So often there's a slipperiness in the language that people use to describe what they're doing in journal articles which is probably unhelpful for students.

This problem of identifying for certain what methods people use is a recurring issue when reviewing research papers. If method sections do not clearly describe what has been done it is difficult to trust the findings. Similarly, if a researcher does not position herself within a particular framework it is difficult to interpret the findings in the way that was intended. From a learner-teacher perspective it is necessary to provide students with guidance on how to critically evaluate qualitative methods so they become equipped with their own skills to detect poorly conducted research or reports which lack transparency. More fundamental than this notion of quality are the differences between qualitative methods. By using terminology like 'qualitative research' and 'qualitative psychology' we run the risk of creating an image of a homogenised discipline. Qualitative psychology is not a unified field, as we saw discourse analysis differs from IPA, which differs from grounded theory. It is in their philosophical underpinnings that these differences become clear, and it is for that reason, together with our learner's endorsement, that we will continue to teach in-depth the theoretical influences of qualitative methods in psychology at M level.

It's like an art

Teaching qualitative methods at M level also demands dedicated hands-on time working with raw data. At Aston we decided to offer this time in workshops rather than in seminar or lecture formats, which encouraged group interaction and fostered a more practice-oriented feel.

PD: [At undergraduate level] the big onus is really on doing the reading. You can only expect so much in a lecture and with the whole positivist thing it took me ages to get what's going on with the whole, where everything is in place with each other and how it all started and how it all ties in, that was really hard going. Physically doing qualitative research was never that hard, not that I'm great at it but I think that, the more you do it the better you get, it's practice, it's like art you have to do it to learn it you can't just sit there read a book and think "oh that's how I do it", it's not like you can just pick up a manual and go how do I analyse this, not like with stats. So you pick that up by doing it more so than by reading about it, whereas you do need to learn more about the theory because you don't really pick that up.

EP: What did you get out of, did you get anything specific out of the group working, I mean you know, were there good things about what other people say, or sparking off ideas or, and that kind of stuff?

PD: Yeah, they looked at it in different ways which was good. Erm depending on who I was working with, some people didn't get it, why are we doing this and it was always

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really hard working with them because they didn't want to be there and it's kind of like, "well that's not right" and I'm like "well it kind of is", but, it was really strange working with people who didn't really want to do it. But with those that were willing to give it a go we could share ideas and look at things in different ways, people picked things out that I didn't really see and I was like that's a really good thing, and I've learnt a lot from other people as well.

EP: I mean often, the way that, certainly the way that I've often operated is you sit down with a piece of data with colleagues and you talk about it and it's bouncing off those ideas that enable you to progress your thinking around it. So I think for me one of the crucial elements of any qualitative teaching is having that group dynamic, now whether it's a pair or a three, where you're engaged with something specific, you know like a particular data extract and you're thinking about what's going on in it.

RS: Having other people to explore things with, especially when you're learning about it, it's good to hear that that's useful.

PD: Yeah, it was useful.

Sharing ideas and exploring data in a small group is a skill that is often translated into research practice, which makes it a particularly valuable component for any taught postgraduate programme. M level style teaching is much more conducive to this kind of interactive learning experience because of the smaller numbers. We also hope that postgraduate students are more willing to engage with their peers, with their teacher, and with the material they are working with in order to develop new skills and to reach a clearer understanding of the matter at hand. Nevertheless, as Phillip indicates, there are instances when group work or working with others who may not want to specialise in qualitative methods can lead to disillusion among peers which then impacts on the learning experience for the group.

Changing coverage echoing methodological development

Our own accounts have shown that in previous years discourse analysis was probably the most widely taught qualitative method, and it probably still is. This is reflected by concentrated areas of expertise in discursive methods, for example, at Loughborough University or Manchester Metropolitan University. Since the 1990s there have been a number of significant developments in qualitative psychology. For example, we have seen the introduction of a new method in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Eatough, 2006), ways of incorporating psychoanalytic principles into qualitative data collection and analysis have been proposed (Hollway & Jefferson, 2001), and psychology has revisited theories of narrative to develop new approaches to understanding the human subject (Crossley, 2001; Murray, 2003). All this means that institutions have a responsibility to cover a broader range of methods than first cited in the BPS syllabus (2004). Despite best efforts, resource limitations often discourage such innovation though, the result being that the teaching of qualitative methods in psychology does not adapt as quickly as it could.

EP: I wonder whether we should dip our toe into providing even more tasters of different methods in teaching like repertory grid analysis, erm, frame analysis, which you've [to RS] had some exposure to, other methods of qualitative data collection like using diaries, or unsolicited accounts from people and comparing those to ones that are more structured such as interviews and focus groups.

PD: One of the things that was really good was like you [RS] were saying about the Internet resources, that's something I'd love to do. I was watching a documentary the other week on Channel four it was about self harm and there was a big erm support forum on the Internet and if you can get access to that in terms of analysis you'd get so much information and to learn about different kinds of things to do would be really helpful.

RS: Yeah, I mean there is huge scope for that, that kind of discussion forum and I mean blogs are everywhere now and that's a perfect source of data if you ask me, especially for narrative analysis that'd be brilliant. So yeah, there are, and I tried to talk about those different, you know, different sources of data but the focus of the sessions was

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always the analysis wasn't it because we didn't have the space to do more data collection. So you end up teaching interview and focus groups because those are the main things that people use. I mean if there was more time it'd be really good to cover all those different things. If we did have a purely qualitative psychology masters and if we had an army of staff.

Continued technological advancements mean that opportunities for qualitative researchers are endless. It is a very exciting time for qualitative psychology, and we close with a celebration of what we each enjoy about qualitative methods.

In the thick of it – embracing the messiness of the social world

During our dialogue we remarked that the social world is a messy place but that the most exciting thing about qualitative methods is that they can embrace this messiness.

EP: I remember reading a quote somewhere or writing down a quote in an undergraduate essay about the messy swamp that is qualitative research, you know being in the thick of it. I like the fact that it's messy and it's complicated because life, you know, if you take the view of social life being very messy and complicated and complex sometimes I think with a good piece of qualitative research you're reflecting that messiness and complexity but you're also making sense of, hopefully, that messiness and complexity. It's like you say Phillip, you're engaged with it, but it throws up particular tensions. Say for example you're in an interview, like some I was doing recently, you know three hours long, lots of medical upset, lots of trauma, death, illness, heavy issues, it has an impact on you personally, which you then have to get a kind of critical distance from which you would never have from a bunch of numbers in an Excel spreadsheet, you can't possibly have that level of emotional engagement with it, which I think is a real strength of qualitative research, but it can be a weakness, you know, perhaps you sympathise with particular participants and less of others and it's them that get represented and it's them that get given the voice

RS: But again, that's about being rigorous and going back to things again and again, that's all part of the method. But the messiness sounds bad because of what psychology has done in its experiments and everything else is get rid of the mess.

EP: Yeah, well it's not mess, it's just noise.

RS: They've been trying to get rid of the mess.

PD: You don't get rid of the mess. It's like these things like with sport, and they're like we're going to put these things on you and see how you kick a ball to see if you kick it differently when you're under pressure. Well for a start, that's not natural, you need the mess. You're better off taking video cameras to people at matches to get an idea of how they kick a ball under stress. But then you get all the noise, and it's not reliable and the computer won't be as good, you won't know how many millimetres they moved. For me, you get the mess [in qualitative research], but you're doing something with it, you're not leaving it a mess, you're tidying it up, and you're saying this is what the mess means. And that's good and I think it's good to have that kind of emotional attachment to the issue.

We can see that by working with the complexities of the social world and by exploring our social interactions with each other, qualitative psychologists gain some kind of order and understanding of contemporary cultural phenomena and life events. But what is at the core of qualitative psychology?

PD: For me I enjoy so much being able to look at how people talk. I hate tick boxes, I don't see the value essentially in what you're getting. With that you can sit down, you can talk, you can think, there is that interaction between me and the data, I'm interpreting it myself, it's something to do with way I look at things. My project at the moment, my alcoholism project, when you look at the data, I've got my own beliefs, I know my beliefs change with experience and that's in the back of my mind, to have that there to know that I'm interacting with the data, rather than being this thing where you think

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right, I'll type in numbers, it's much more you're there, you're part of it, you seem to be doing something, you've not stepped away from it, you're in it.

RS: It's engaging.

PD: That's it.

RS: You're engaging with the data.

EP: For me, it's about capturing the social world, in ways that does it a bit of justice. And I don't see how by and large, and I will qualify that slightly, how quantitative approaches can do that in any sensible or faithful way. But there's loads of process elements, you know, I like going out and speaking to people. I'm nosey, I want to ask people questions about their lives and what they think and often you have really pleasant interactions because they're very intense and mutually beneficial – you're getting what you want in terms of your data but that individual is getting something out of that encounter, and you can argue, well it's a moot issue quite what those things are, but it's very rare in life to be listened to, properly listened to by another person and that's what you're providing your interviewee if you're doing something that's in-depth. So there's the actual business of actually doing it, getting your hands dirty in the world.

RS: For me, the exciting thing is engaging with people, and I think, to be a psychologist you've got to be nosey anyway, and I think basically that's it, but for me, it's through interacting with other people on an issue that you've got some kind of commitment to, because you're doing the research so there's obviously some kind of personal agenda there, whether it's to get your qualification or whether it's to find something out about yourself, you know, whatever it is. So when I'm doing a piece of research, this [current project] is the first piece of interviewing I've done in ages, and it's just reminded me of, you're finding out about other people but you're finding out about yourself and it's me engaging with them on this particular issue that's really exciting and it's having the space to explore that and be creative and think outside the box, that's what's important for me in qualitative methods.

These closing statements show that for each of us, our passion for qualitative psychology centres around engaging with people and making sense of what it means to be human.

Summary

This dialogue has been particularly useful for us in gaining learner feedback on current systems and possibilities for improvements in the future; and we would be delighted to hear if our story resonates with others. In our experience M level teaching is expected to involve a more interactive teaching style which provides students with more opportunity for practical skills development. This is particularly true for qualitative methods because of their craft-like nature which demands more apprentice-style learning rather than following procedural steps from textbook guidelines. We also recognise that a significant leap in the breadth and depth of content is expected when moving from undergraduate to postgraduate research methods teaching. Furthermore, we were keen to stress the importance of including the history of psychology as a discipline, shifts in epistemological positions, and theoretical underpinnings of different methods at M level in order to provide the context and rationale for the fundamental assumptions of qualitative psychology. We felt that this philosophical component was important in undergraduate training in order to establish the foundation on which to build at M level.

It is clear that psychology's historical attitude toward qualitative methods has had a negative impact on developments in this field. However, the tide is turning. The profile of qualitative methods in psychology has gained considerable strength in recent years. There are now a number of dedicated journals and the recently launched BPS Section of Qualitative Methods in Psychology (www.bps.org.uk/qmip) holds it Inaugural Conference in September 2008. The Section provides a much needed forum for qualitative psychologists to discuss

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methodological advancements and the future of the discipline. Publications of research using qualitative methods have risen substantially and there are growing numbers of keynote speakers at conferences who specialise in qualitative approaches. We need to consolidate the success we have experienced in a research context by now shifting our attention to training future generations to become competent and enthusiastic qualitative psychologists.

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