
Preface to the Second Edition

GENESIS OF THE BOOK

The seeds for the first edition of *The Qualitative Dissertation* were planted in 1980, before the term *qualitative research* had entered the mainstream discourses of educational inquiry. At that time, we, the authors, shared an interest in understanding what it would mean to do an “alternative” dissertation—one that would not follow the precepts of quasi-experimental research that was so dominant at our university back then. Because so few references were available in the educational literature to guide our thinking, we formed a dissertation study group in which to cultivate our understanding of what came to be called *qualitative research*. Since then, the study group has evolved through several generations, providing an exceptionally fertile context for our learning about the intricacies of dissertation work. In addition, our understanding has been enriched and challenged by a number of experiences including teaching a two-semester course on the nature of doctoral study, developing and teaching a research oriented master’s program for practicing teachers, teaching an introductory course on qualitative research, participating in two qualitative research discussion groups that are flourishing in Pittsburgh, participating in the growing number of qualitatively-oriented research sessions at national conferences, working with several doctoral students from Australia, and coediting a book on the dissertation experience of study group members (Garman & Piantanida, 2006). Together, these experiences serve as the context within which this second edition of *The Qualitative Dissertation* took root and grew.

Perhaps the most powerful lesson we have learned from our experiences is the capacity for some educational practitioners to embrace a life of study and scholarship. Certainly, this has not been the case for all doctoral students that we have met. Nor has it been the case for all students who have spent time with our study group. But what strikes us as remarkable is the number of teachers and administrators who have entered the group with very little understanding of what it means to do research and, through work on their dissertations, have come to embody scholarly habits of mind.

In recent years, the purpose of the dissertation within doctoral education has received renewed attention, as for example, by The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate and the American Educational Research Association. We are heartened by such deliberations,

which are reaffirming the importance of the dissertation in preparing a new generation of scholars. At the same time, however, we are troubled by assumptions that seem to perpetuate a traditional dichotomy between academic researcher/scholar and practice-based professional. Despite several decades of discourse in which practitioner-generated knowledge gained recognition and credibility, the assumption that practitioners are consumers, not producers, of knowledge still lingers. We recognize that not all practitioners embrace the identity of scholar. Yet our experience persuades us that more than a few practitioners long for an intellectual life that goes beyond compliance with federally mandated accountability measures and the efficient implementation of prepackaged instructional materials. This second edition of *The Qualitative Dissertation* arises from our desire to affirm and support those who are striving to embrace the identity of scholar-practitioner.

PURPOSE OF *THE QUALITATIVE DISSERTATION*

Internalizing the identity of scholar-practitioner requires more than the simple acquisition of specific research techniques (e.g., interviewing, content analysis). It entails re forging one's sense of self, one's way of being in the world. We believe that the dissertation can serve as a crucible within which such a transformation of self can take place. Just as alchemists sought to transmute metals into gold by burning away impurities, aspiring scholars must often burn away a number of misconceptions and dysfunctional assumptions in their quest for a scholarly identity. This is never an easy endeavor. As the subtitle of *The Qualitative Dissertation* suggests, this book is meant as a guide to this potentially transformative process.

By *guide* we do not mean an instruction manual on qualitative research methods. Nor do we mean a recipe, formula, or template for preparing dissertation-related documents (e.g., proposal, final report). Rather, we call attention to issues and questions that arise as students struggle to learn about qualitative dissertation research. Often, it seems to us, this struggle proceeds on two interconnected levels represented by the following questions:

- What does it mean to do a dissertation?
- What does it mean to do qualitative research?

There is no simple or single answer to either question. Indeed, there will be as many answers as there are individuals who struggle to make meaning of the dissertation and qualitative research. So the challenge facing aspiring practitioner-scholars is orienting themselves to the learning associated with—necessitated by—serious engagement with these overarching questions.

The prospect of this learning can be quite daunting. Where do I start? What do I read? What questions am I supposed to think about? What is expected of me? Where do I turn for help? Lying beneath these rather action-oriented concerns is a substratum of more introspective questions. Who am I as a practitioner, researcher, and scholar? Who am I striving to be? What am I bringing to this dissertation process? What do I believe about the nature of knowledge and how knowledge is generated? What role do I see for myself in this knowledge-generating enterprise? In our experience with thoughtful doctoral

students, a dynamic and productive tension seems to arise from the interplay between the two types of questions. Our purpose in *The Qualitative Dissertation* is to encourage readers to probe these tensions—using practical issues to surface issues of worldview and issues of worldview to inform the decisions associated with crafting and conducting a qualitative dissertation.

AUDIENCE FOR *THE QUALITATIVE DISSERTATION*

Clearly, we hope that *The Qualitative Dissertation* will be useful to those who are about to embark on the dissertation journey. But we recognize that students begin this journey with different professional aspirations and levels of preparation. Some, for example, may be aiming for faculty positions where they will be expected to pursue a robust research agenda, possibly teach research methods courses, and ultimately guide thesis and dissertation research. Others may also plan to pursue academic careers, but in colleges where responsibility for teaching takes precedence over research. Still others may come to doctoral study with a desire to remain in positions in public or private schools. Regardless of an individual's specific aspirations, we contend that doctoral study carries with it an obligation for scholarship. The students we meet in our doctoral-level courses often express surprise when we say this. Typically, they see themselves as practitioners who are temporarily reentering the role of student in order to enhance their knowledge and skills or to obtain a credential for career advancement. *Scholars* are the people they study. The idea that they, too, might someday be viewed as scholars can be quite startling. For readers who resonate with this sense of surprise, the book invites you to consider what it means to hold the highest degree in the land.

Students also arrive at the dissertation with varying degrees of familiarity with research methods. Some may have extensive coursework; others relatively little. Some may have worked as assistants on research projects; others may have been principal investigators on projects of their own; still others may have had no prior experience in conducting research. Given such variation in levels of preparation, it is impossible for *The Qualitative Dissertation* to meet the specific needs of all prospective readers. We do, however, believe that the dissertation represents a particular research genre that differs from large-scale, publicly or privately funded research projects as well as from casual inquiries into matters of personal or professional curiosity. Further, the dissertation is not merely a longer version of a course-based research paper. Nor is it an arbitrary (and consequently meaningless) academic hoop as it is all too often portrayed. Given this, *The Qualitative Dissertation* can be useful to readers who want to understand more clearly what it means to engage in a substantive inquiry as an unfunded, individual researcher who is, in all likelihood, also working full time in a professional capacity.

Although most of our experience has been with professionals in the field of education, we have had opportunities to work with students from other fields, including genetic counseling, health-related professions, library and information sciences, public health, and social work. Many of the dissertation issues faced by these working practitioners echo those expressed by teachers and school administrators. It is our hope, therefore, that *The Qualitative Dissertation* may be useful to readers outside the field of education.

Given the historic moment in which readers are embarking upon their dissertation journey, *The Qualitative Dissertation* may serve another important purpose. Beginning in the mid-1970s and continuing for over three decades, scholars in education (as well as many other disciplines and professions) have struggled to articulate the nature of *qualitative research* against a centuries-long backdrop of positivist science. Sometimes characterized as the *paradigm wars*, battles have been waged on many fronts—the epistemological, the methodological, the political, and the linguistic to name a few.

One might think after all of this effort, a state of clarification would have been achieved. This has not happened, nor is it likely to. So newcomers to the discourses of qualitative research can find the language quite disorienting—especially those who are trying to articulate ideas that do not conform to the precepts of postpositivism. We have encountered two variations of this struggle for language and understanding. In some instances, those with formal schooling in quantitative research methods are trying to relate what they already know to a view of research that may at times seem quite similar and at times quite foreign. In other instances, individuals with little or no previous research training may be struggling to understand new ideas against a vaguely conceived caricature of “science.” *The Qualitative Dissertation* is grounded in an interpretive view of qualitative research and, as such, offers a counterpoint to many of the dissertation books that are embedded in a postpositivist tradition. Hopefully, this difference in epistemological context will help those who are engaged in either variation of the struggle for language.

As the subtitle of the book suggests, faculty are another potential audience for *The Qualitative Dissertation*. Here again, individual readers may vary in their need for a guide to guiding dissertations. Some faculty may be in the early stages of chairing dissertations and be drawing primarily from their own experience of the dissertation writing process. If the advice and guidance they received is not proving helpful to the students whom they are now advising, they may be searching for ways through an impasse. Conversely, senior faculty who have guided many quantitative studies may be wondering what, if any, differences arise in the course of a qualitative study. Finally, as we have exchanged dissertation-advising stories with colleagues, it seems that many of us have encountered students who have trouble getting into or carrying through to the end of the dissertation process. It is our observation that impediments to progress often lie less in an understanding of method than in unspoken anxiety about what the dissertation represents. In making some of these anxieties more explicit, we hope to create spaces where students and faculty can talk about the often symbolic meanings associated with the dissertation.

OUR INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVE

Before turning to the organizational structure of *The Qualitative Dissertation*, we feel it is important to make explicit the perspective from which we view qualitative dissertation research. First, we identify most strongly with an interpretive tradition in qualitative research grounded in the arts and humanities rather than the natural or social sciences. This orientation was both foreshadowed and strengthened by our formal study of literary criticism. Second, our most intensive and productive work has been with women doctoral students who share our proclivity for interpretive ways of knowing. Third, as noted in our

opening comments, the students with whom we have worked most closely are educational practitioners, most of whom remained in practitioner roles after completing their degree. This experience has contributed to our understanding of the interplay between theory and practice as well as the role of the dissertation in nurturing a scholarly stance in practitioners. Fourth, our thinking about qualitative dissertations has been informed most deeply by our experiences in working with doctoral students as they struggle to conceptualize their dissertations. The views put forward in this book reflect, not some sweeping treatise on qualitative research writ large, but lessons we have learned as we have inhabited deliberative spaces with students.

ORGANIZATION OF *THE QUALITATIVE DISSERTATION*: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE FIRST AND SECOND EDITIONS

One decision confronting every qualitative researcher is choosing which ideas to place in the foreground and which to place in the background. These *writerly decisions* are made more manageable once one has an organizing principle for whatever text one is crafting. In the first edition of *The Qualitative Dissertation*, we used the concept *cycles of deliberation* as the organizing principle. Throughout the book, we stressed the iterative nature of the deliberative process and suggested that progress on the dissertation occurred as students move recursively through successive cycles of understanding. Although recursive deliberation remains central to our view of good dissertation research, in this second edition we wanted to bring into clearer relief the concept of *self as instrument of inquiry* and the centrality of constructing texts in interpretive inquiry.

From our interpretive perspective, research is a process of meaning-making that is embodied within the *self* of the researcher. What questions one chooses to study, what procedures one chooses to follow, what interpretations one makes of “data,” what knowledge claims one offers—every aspect of a study is constructed from the perspective of an individual self situated within a particular psycho-socio-cultural, historical, political, and epistemological context. Given this, learning to become a qualitative researcher is not simply a matter of acquiring and applying a reified set of methods or techniques. It entails cultivating oneself as an *instrument of inquiry*. In structuring the second edition of *The Qualitative Dissertation*, we have placed more emphasis on encouraging doctoral students to relate concepts of qualitative research to their own experiences, beliefs, talents, and sensibilities. This has led to several new features in the individual chapters as well as some reorganization of the book as a whole and revisions of individual chapters.

Overall Organization of the Book

First, the contents of the book have been organized into four sections. Section One, Facing the Dissertation Journey, comprises four chapters aimed at cultivating a mindset for entering into the learning and dissertation process: In Chapter 1, “Coming to *Study*,” we suggest that adopting a stance of study toward learning about qualitative research will help one prepare to engage in qualitative research. In Chapter 2, “On the Deliberative

Nature of the Dissertation,” the connection between a stance of study and deliberation is explored. Chapter 3, “Meanings of the Dissertation,” challenges the dysfunctional notion that the dissertation is simply an academic hurdle to be surmounted. Chapter 4, “Facing the Dissertation,” focuses on the shift from thinking about the dissertation in some vague way to committing oneself to the task that lies ahead.

The five chapters in Section Two, Preparing for the Dissertation Journey, focus on conceptual issues associated with one’s sense of self as an instrument of inquiry. These issues come into play throughout the dissertation process and for this reason they serve as a backdrop to the more specific planning issues that arise in the course of planning, proposing, and conducting a qualitative dissertation. In Chapter 5, “Orienting Oneself to Interpretive Inquiry,” we provide a brief orientation to different worldviews that underlie various approaches to qualitative research. Chapter 6, “Situating Oneself in the Inquiry,” looks more closely at the concept of self as instrument of inquiry. In Chapter 7, “Rethinking the Concept of Method,” we introduce the notion of *research genre* as an alternative to the more narrow conception of *method* as data collection and analysis techniques. Chapter 8, “Rethinking the Concept of Data,” presents an argument for the concept of *text* as more congruent than *data* in an interpretive approach to qualitative research. Chapter 9, “Moving From the Experiential to the Theoretic,” focuses on the crafting of “experiential text” as a way of contextualizing the phenomenon under study and the knowledge claims that will be put forward about the phenomenon.

The chapters in Section Three, Entering Into and Living Through the Dissertation Journey, call attention to more practical issues of moving through the dissertation process. Chapter 10, “Developing Ideas for the Dissertation Proposal,” revisits and elaborates issues related to honing a topic for one’s dissertation. Chapter 11, “Crafting an Interpretive Dissertation Proposal,” considers the organization of the proposal. In Chapter 12, “Proposing the Dissertation Study,” issues related to moving the proposal into a public space are addressed. Chapter 13, “Living With the Study,” is characterized as a two-part phase that is punctuated by a pivotal “aha moment” in which the researcher comes to see the central thesis that provides theoretic coherence to the dissertation. The issue of moving the dissertation document into public purview is explored in Chapter 14, “Entering Into Public Discourse: The Dissertation Meeting.” Chapter 15, “Life After the Dissertation,” offers some concluding reflections on readjusting to postdissertation life. In the Afterword we share some concluding thoughts about the meaning of the dissertation and our hope that *The Qualitative Dissertation* will help students to shape an inquiry that is personally and professionally meaningful.

Section Four contains six case studies that we discuss in relation to new features in this second edition.

New Features

Each chapter in Sections One through Three includes two features that were not present in the first edition of *The Qualitative Dissertation*. One is a list of key concepts. Our aim in the chapters is not to give definitive definitions or explanations of these concepts. Rather, we strive to orient novices to the complex and often confusing discourses that surround these important concepts. The second feature is a series of reflective interludes. Each interlude poses questions that are meant to encourage readers to relate the key

concepts to the context of their lives and their sense of self as a researcher. Hopefully, students will begin writing responses to the questions early in their doctoral program and continue to revise them periodically as their thinking evolves. (Faculty might consider using the questions as a basis for class discussion.)

As in the first edition of *The Qualitative Dissertation*, we illustrate key concepts and issues with examples drawn from the work of students. Short exemplars are interspersed throughout the chapter narratives. There are, however, six much longer examples, which we refer to at various junctures throughout the book. To facilitate ease of reference, these case examples have been consolidated into Section Four: Case Examples of Interpretive Dissertations. The following chart offers a brief orientation to these Case Examples.

<i>Example</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Phenomenon</i>	<i>Context</i>
1	Micheline Stabile	Practice-based heuristic	Educational inclusion	Planned and spontaneous encounters with professionals, parents, and individuals with disabilities
2	Lynn Richards	Personal narrative	Creative dramatics	Second-grade, public school classroom for one school year
3	Patricia McMahon	Personal narrative	Reflection and deliberation in writing	Community college composition course for one academic semester
4	Kathleen Ceroni	Literary criticism	Teacher empowerment in school reform	Pennsylvania Lead Teacher Initiative
5	Jean Konzal	Arts-based Readers Theater	Parent involvement in school reform	Public school district in New England town
6	Joan Leukhardt	Conceptual case study	Adolescent girls' interest in science	Science program for gifted adolescent females

Readers might find it useful to gain an overall sense of these case examples by reading through them before starting the chapters in Section Two and then referring to them in relation to specific issues.

Another new feature of this revised edition is the inclusion of sample reference lists that may serve as starting points for further reading on particular aspects of qualitative research (e.g., interviewing, data analysis, textual interpretation, various research genre). Rather than embedding these illustrative citations into various sentences, which makes them difficult to spot, we have listed the author's name and date of publication in boxes.

The full citation is provided in the References at the end of the book. Hopefully, this feature will make it easier for readers to locate references of potential relevance to their learning. We want to emphasize that these references serve only as starting points. The number of books and articles about qualitative research has been growing exponentially. It is virtually impossible to keep abreast of all the new publications. So in citing various sources throughout *The Qualitative Dissertation*, we have been guided by two principles. First, we have included those that have informed our thinking in particularly helpful ways. Even though some of these are older—perhaps now classic—references, they remain useful because of the power of the ideas that are presented. Second, we have included references that may be helpful in pointing readers to bodies of discourse related to their particular projects. These references are in no way exhaustive, but rather might serve as starting points for further exploration. We encourage students to establish a system for tracking newly emerging resources that can help them to shape their dissertation.

The index has also been revised so that it connects to the key concepts introduced in each chapter. We have included in the index the names of authors whose work we cite to make it easier to locate such passages. Authors whose work is referenced only in the exhibit boxes have not been included in the index. A listing of exhibit boxes is included after the table of contents to facilitate locating the list of references on particular aspects of qualitative dissertation research (e.g., genre, interviewing, interpreting text, writing).

A final change has been the elimination of a section containing “think pieces.” Information from think pieces in the first edition has been woven into the chapter narratives to better integrate the *experiential*, *discursive*, and *theoretic texts* that compose *The Qualitative Dissertation*.

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