

Chapter 19

A Second Life in Qualitative Research: Creating Transformative Experiences

Kakali Bhattacharya
Kansas State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Many institutions of higher education do not have well-developed qualitative research methods programs. Consequently, the role of qualitative research is minimized, and its legitimacy questioned as the methodology of choice in dissertations, relegating qualitative research as second fiddle to quantitative research. In this chapter, the authors present how using a three-dimensional multiuser virtual/digital world called Second Life serves as a fertile and rigorous space for critically engaged ethnographic practices in an institution where resources for qualitative research are scant. Using information extracted from students' projects conducting mini-ethnographies in Second Life, their YouTube podcasts, students' reflections in learning key concepts in qualitative research without prior exposure to this methodology, the authors engage in a discussion of transformative learning experiences. Discussion of transformative learning experiences includes an intersection of critical dialogue of integration of digital technologies, virtual worlds in qualitative research, kind of learning and learners produced as a result, and reflections necessary for pedagogically aligned instructional design and delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research has been often painted as the softer side of research, perhaps lacking the rigor of its counterpart, quantitative research, by being un-scientific, and ultimately un-fundable

(Cannella & Lincoln, 2004). Such discourses and a history of paradigm wars between positivist and post-positivist researchers and researchers who stretch qualitative inquiry beyond post-positivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004), created a terrain of educational research

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where many graduate programs have less classes offered in qualitative research methods than in quantitative research methods (Bhattacharya, 2009). Often institutions make room for only one introductory qualitative research methods class as the required or recommended class. Some programs include a second qualitative data analysis class as a required class, or it is highly recommended to students who might be interested in using qualitative inquiry in their dissertations.

Under such restrictive conditions, instructors in qualitative methods have the daunting task of exposing the students to the terrain of qualitative inquiry without oversimplifying the concepts and yet preserving the rich nuances in a short period of time. In dealing with the challenge of preparing responsible qualitative researchers or at the very least, critical consumers of qualitative research, I have introduced students to Second Life (SL), a multi-user three-dimensional web-based virtual environment where they conduct a mini-ethnography in an introductory qualitative methods class. To demonstrate the epistemic, methodological, and pedagogical reasons for using Second Life in qualitative research, I present this chapter to invite readers to create their own entry points where digital technologies, virtual worlds in qualitative research, critical discourses about qualitative research and evidence-based inquiry, and transformative learning intersect.

Thus, in this chapter, I introduce the landscape of the terrain of qualitative inquiry in the context of scientific evidence, fundability, and academic rigor. Next, I explain the role of Second Life, a virtual environment in teaching qualitative inquiry, the ways in which Second Life was implemented in a qualitative research methods class over three years, and include examples of scaffolding, detailed project descriptions, and types of assessments used.

I argue that SL played a role in creative transformative learning experiences. Additionally, I offer justification for my arguments by extracting thematic information from various data sources

(students' projects, YouTube podcasts, instructor reflections, and interviews with former students). I critically engage with the ways in which fertile pedagogy-driven digital/virtual learning environments can be created not only for experiencing transformative learning but for offering a counter-narrative about the systematic forms of inquiry that can be performed in qualitative research, which are neither soft, nor lacking rigor of any kind.

BACKGROUND

Qualitative Research and Evidence-Based Inquiry

Any discussion of the current moment of qualitative research would be inaccurate if such a moment were to be perceived as stable, fixed, and un-evolving. Specifically, the current moment of qualitative methodology should also be grounded within some historical contexts, albeit briefly. According to Patti Lather (1992), methodology is the theory of knowledge and the interpretive frame, informing choices of methods and procedures used in a study. Michael Crotty (1998) situates methodology as a strategy, similar to a blueprint linking methods to outcomes. Like Lather, Crotty emphasizes the need for epistemological and theoretical grounding in research methodology. Using both Lather's and Crotty's notions of methodology, I offer a historical account of the key moments of qualitative inquiry.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have written extensively about the moments in qualitative research spanning academic work from early 1900s to the 2000s. The initial tracing of qualitative inquiry in the 1900s depict a traditional period, followed by a modernist phase, which ended in the 1970s. The modernist phase included works of feminism, phenomenology, critical theory, and ethnomethodology, all aiming to capture and honor the voices of those who were traditionally silenced and unheard. The third moment of qualitative research,

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