Expanding Approaches for Research: Understanding and Using Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

By Norman A. Stahl and James R. King

Qualitative inquiry has recently experienced a burgeoning in the field of educational research. Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to provide researchers with process-based, narrated, storied, data that is more closely related to the human experience. One can learn so much from another's experience, and from a good story. Yet, the degree of trust one has in the person telling the tale has much to do with the degree of trust attributed to the telling. It is the same with studies conducted from a qualitative research approach. Indeed, building trust is imperative. Fortunately, there have been several attempts by qualitative methodologists to specify how trust in qualitative findings might be conveyed and enhanced for consumers. But be advised beforehand, even the construction of trustworthiness is far from an exact procedure. This column presents recommendations from several research writers for developing and relying on trust for another's research findings, with particular focus on the academic success fields of developmental education and learning assistance. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) seminal overview and organizational scheme provides the main focus, and others' work on trustworthiness is synthesized and then integrated into the mix.

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Why Worry About Trustworthiness?

Reading reports of qualitative research can be a highly variable experience. The methodologies that organize qualitative findings and the rhetorical structures that guide writing are many. Some researchers make lists; others make maps. Some writers of qualitative research use a narrative approach and tell a "good story." Others provide what has been described by Clifford Geertz (1973) as "thick description." With this term, he intends that readers would be treated to texts so rich in details that the event or the object of description is palpable. Given such variety in method, and with multiple genre that do not adhere to a single organizational structure, readers must often stake their own claims about the writers' thinking. These discourse transactions are always operating in any written communication. But readers who review a research report written about a quantitative study, such as a study of a Supplemental Instruction pod for a college algebra course, can rely on a standard structure. Readers usually know what to expect in a research report, at least in terms of organization. So where should learning assistance professionals and developmental educators as consumers of qualitative research hang their hats? Trustworthiness of the research is one of those shared realities, albeit a subjective one, wherein readers and writers might find commonality in their constructive processes.

Another characteristic of qualitative inquiry that may interfere with common interpretations is that, unlike quantitative studies, qualitative research does not seek replicability. As an example, with an investigation of a basic writing corequisite class, the events and participants are understood to create unique circumstances that the qualitative researcher documents, interprets, and writes up. On a different day, with a different researcher, in a different place, with a different writing class, consumers can and should expect different findings. Even when a given set of data is collected and shared, different writers can generate unique outcomes. This is because, for most qualitative researchers, reality is constructed. Therefore, the quantitative concept of validity is simply not a goal of qualitative research. It can't be. Rather, qualitative researchers strive for the less explicit goal of trustworthiness, which means that when readers interpret the written work, they will have a sense of confidence in what the researcher has reported. Still, even with that confidence, readers would not expect to regenerate the exact findings in their own applications of the research.

Certain research procedures in which researchers engage create trustworthiness within their research activity and in their reports. Lincoln and Guba (1985) rely on four general criteria in their approach to trustworthiness. These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. We consider each of these factors and add perspectives from others who have written on trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Credibility asks the "How congruent are the findings with reality?" As mentioned previously, this is a highly subjective question, one that relies on individual judgments. Asking about findings' congruence in qualitative research is analogous with questions about internal validity in quantitative research. One is seeking to understand how the reported findings "hang together" in that the ideas should share some relationship with each other. But unlike quantitative research, there is no expectation that all reactions to coherence credibility would result in the same answer. Credibility is a construction on the part of the reporter(s) and the subsequent reader(s).

One method of promoting credibility is through the various processes of triangulation. Roughly stated, triangulating means using several sources of information or procedure from the field to repeatedly establish identifiable patterns. Recognizing similar outcomes repeatedly through various data sources is a different phenomenon than replicability in an a priori empirical study. Multiple forms of triangulation exist. These include *Methodological triangulation*, the use of more than one method of collecting or analyzing data (i.e., in a study of reading demands in a gatekeeper course drawing upon a student survey, focus groups, and class observations); (a) *data triangulation*, the use off more than a single type of data to establish findings (i.e., data from transcript audits, test scores, protocol analyses, all focused on the same phenomenon); (b) *Investigator triangulation*, the use of multiple researchers to complete comparative analyses of individual findings (i.e., each member of a research team studying the effectiveness of an adjunct study strategy class fully evaluates the data from a source(s) and

draws conclusions to be shared and analyzed by team members); (c) *Theoretical triangulation*, the use of multiple theoretical orientations to understand findings or to direct the research (i.e., employing social constructivism, transactional theory, and poststructuralism to study the curriculum and instruction for a college reading class); and (d) *Environmental triangulation*, using more than one situation or context to study the intended focus (i.e., studying basic composition instruction at several community colleges). Triangulation is the use of multiplicity to test the credibility of one's research.

Another way to pursue credibility is to involve informants (e.g., tutees, tutors, and program coordinators from a writing center) in verifying researchers' interpretations after the fact. This has often been called member checking, where "member" refers to various participants in multiple roles within a given qualitative study. In fact, member checking from various roles and participation levels within a given study is seen as a productive research practice. Often, research participants are provided a pre-publication copy of research write-ups to solicit their feedback regarding the accuracy of data. Member checking can also occur in face-to-face interviews. However, it is important to remember the various inherent power stances of participants and researchers and how those relationships might influence sharing feedback as well as acquiescence to its recommendations. Similarly, peer debriefing with coresearchers and colleagues can provide field-based researchers with noninvolved--or even detached--reactions to initial research procedures and, subsequently, to findings. Related to peer debriefing is the habit of institutional checking on research (e.g., permissions, procedures, and findings) with supervisory personnel or direct superiors. Although one might regard IRB approval as a form of member checking, the previous suggestions are less formal than an evaluative gatekeeping relationship, and can help researchers shape practice and interpretations. Above all else, member checking of any sort should lead twoa toward trust in the researchers.

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Additional factors influence, indeed may impinge upon, the credibility of qualitative inquiry. Prolonged engagement, at least for a complete cycle in the life of the research context (e.g., an entire semester for a learning to learn class) has long been recognized as desirable. Researchers would be engaged in the site, with the participants, as well as with the external influences as these unfold within a recognized or bounded time frame, and/or recursive cycle in the context of events. It is reasonable to expect the researcher to become deeply familiar with recurring instances within a schedule. It is also important to point out that observations conducted during a complete cycle would be regular, persistent, and natural (from the point of view of the participants). During these long-term, persistent observations, researchers practice what is known as reflexive self-analysis, often facilitated through daily jottings in research logs. Indeed, researchers are relentless in questioning their own findings, providing bracketed comments on any opinions and/or evaluative comments that may have found their way into what is intended to be "thick description" or notes that include rich descriptive data. Of course, much of this learned behavior for trustworthiness, as well as that of write-ups, improves with experience. This is particularly important for the profession as graduates from the fledgling doctoral programs in the field assume the roles of neophyte researchers and translators of research to praxis. Time in the profession is an important factor in weighing trustworthiness.

Transferability in Trustworthiness

A second factor for trustworthiness offered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is transferability. This proposition is somewhat tricky, given that by design qualitative research does not (cannot) aim for replicability. Yet, qualitative researchers maintain that patterns and descriptions from one context may be applicable to another. After all, if one cannot learn from study extensions that might fit with a subsequent set of circumstances, the impact from the original study is limited. Just as it is valid and important to create new knowledge from emergent discovery-oriented qualitative research, it is also productive to seek understanding from others' systematic qualitative inquiry. It is with such intentions that an analogy to both external validity and generalizability in quantitative research might be productive. As with quantitative research, qualitative inquiry seeks to expand understanding by transferring findings from one context to another. Of course, this can't be apportioned by the researcher, but must be imputed by those who wish to compare the research with their personal contexts, as in "lessons from somewhere else." For instance, reviewing research drawn from a learning to learn class at Texas State University would be undertaken to develop greater understanding of a learning to learn course at a similar institution in Texas.

Transfer is only possible when a thick description provides a rich enough portrayal of circumstance for application to others' situations, and usually at the behest of the local constituents. Transfer applications such as these rely on the researchers' thick descriptions that would include contextual information about the field work site. Organizations and other influential participants in the original study would have been stipulated and described in detail. Likewise, any precluded membership that would have influenced data collection would be documented. Methods and time frames for the collection of data in the original study must be completely described, as well the entire duration of the field study. These factors influence the degree to which the completed research may have application to an additional site or context. The bottom line for transfer is that the lessons from one study, such as that of the student experience in a community community college site. That is, transfer in qualitative research is not a recipe, but rather a suggestion that must itself be researched for its applicability to a new context.

Dependability as part of Trustworthiness

A third perspective on trustworthiness offered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is dependability, or the trust in trustworthy. In qualitative research in which researchers, both producers and consumers, actively build their trust in the events as they unfold, there are a few concrete research practices that not only produce trust but also feel trustworthy when they are executed. Peer debriefing or peer scrutiny are solid communication habits that create trust. Using another researcher to read and react to field notes, with their embedded researcher interpretations, is a confirmation that creates a tacit reality for the researcher. At its most oblique, one can muse "I may have made this up, but somebody else saw it the same way, and that must mean something." It is like asking for participants to member-check but with peer-level members: The professional level of the peers conveys a sense of self-credibility. Also, since the scrutiny is from a peer, it provides the researcher an insider analysis and feedback before the study goes public, itself an act of trust.

Another aspect of dependability has to do with the researchers' anticipation of review by a peer (in a sense not unlike the review process for a journal like the *Journal of Developmental Education* or the *Journal of Basic Writing*). Presumably, awareness that the work and the products from the work are to be inspected by a peer would cause the researcher to be careful with what is recorded as fact and what is set aside as researchers' interpretive comments about the data. This habit of data separation into observations and interpretations is called bracketing. That such a practice as bracketing exists points to the pervasive effects of reflexive analysis and the bracketing that the analysis induces. It is not the case that the researchers' bracketed musings are devalued or in any way embarrassing, but

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that such reflexive analysis and the resulting bracketed comments reflect different processes within the research act. Part of the bracketing processes involve researchers using their bias as it exists in interpretive repertoire. Researcher bias and assumptions are always present in the research act. It is naïve to think about owning and discarding researcher bias. Qualitative research is much too subtle to be able to partition researchers' efforts. In fact, such control is not even desirable. Qualitative research needs researchers' values and passion as engagement with research. But it is also necessary for researchers to monitor the influence of their values and passions. Being immersed in the research with their values creates another level of trust, providing researchers are able to communicate their entailment in their own research. This is reflexive auditing, or who one is/was when active in an individual research project. Reflexive auditing, or describing the involvement of the researcher in the decisions made in the research processes, is most characteristic of post positive research, and it is certainly a basic requirement for an acceptable dissertation, research manuscript, or funded technical report.

Confirmability as a part of Trustworthiness

A fourth perspective on trustworthiness is confirmability, or getting as close to objective reality as qualitative research can get. Only some forms of qualitative research go there (e.g., emergent design positivism as described by Bogdan and Biklen [2003]). In order to subject one's research to auditing, there must be some objective reality present. Rather than constructing a reality in findings, qualitative researchers who believe and pursue objectivity, rely on constructs like precision and accuracy in their research practice and the involvement of other researchers. In these qualitative circumstances it makes sense to aim for noninvolvement, least researchers contaminate pristine, natural environments. As such, the use of confirmability is a small, circumscribed intent within qualitative research, especially concerning emergent design positivism.

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Final Thoughts

Those who strive to promote students' academic success realize that the world of higher education today as well as one's place in it is radically different than it was but a decade ago. Between a culture of reform and the realities of a pandemic the academic world does not rest on the foundation of bedrock once believed to exist.

With such change comes even more change, particularly for praxis. Hence, it is even more important that, throughout the coming decade, educators be focused on practices (whether chosen or mandated) in order for the profession to adopt fully a culture of research and evaluation. All forms of research, whether quantitative, naturalistic, or action oriented, have important roles to play in answering the pedagogical questions on praxis that face the field.

Indeed, each professional must adopt a research orientation either as an investigator or as a consumer. Will just any study adequately inform one's work? Robson and McCartan (2016) point out that pure intentions in conducting research do not guarantee trustworthy finds. For research to have merit it must be believable and be truthful. Although quantitative research requires researchers to adhere to the principles of internal and external validity, in this column we have focused on qualitative methods and the expectations for trustworthiness as it guides research practice and the utilization of the findings.

Researchers need not be required to employ each of the methods for promoting trustworthiness as specified throughout the column, but each investigator bears the onus of demonstrating how the qualitative or action-oriented study meets standard conventions for trustworthiness so that the work might serve the needs of those who are consumers of that research (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007).

Consumers of research should use the constructs of trustworthiness we covered as foundational criteria when evaluating whether a particular investigation might provide guidance in evaluating or revising the praxis of one's own program. The bottom line is that if a researcher or research team disseminating a qualitative or action-oriented investigation does not fully demonstrate that the work is trustworthy, it is up to the consumer to follow the age old practice of "caveat emptor" or "Let the buyer beware."

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