Understanding Qualitative Research as a Constituent to University Appraisal: A Textual Analysis of *Using Qualitative Methods in Institutional Assessment*

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*Using Qualitative Methods in Institutional Assessment* supports the application of qualitative research methods across the spectrum of higher education, including the areas of assessing academic success, student retention, minority students, student learning, and teaching effectiveness. The book covers specific areas of interest to higher education professionals in colleges and universities across the United States including the following qualitative assessment paradigms: (a) incorporating student learning assessments into curriculum, (b) assessing student trajectory, (c) assessing student support services, and (d) assessing teaching effectiveness. The edited chapters in the book provide the reader with the opportunity to investigate addressing institutional assessment needs by way of qualitative research, illustrating that it will be insufficient for higher education institutions to rely solely on quantitative measures to appraise institutional effectiveness. Key Words: Student Learning, Student Support Services, Student Trajectory, and Teaching Effectiveness

Many institutions of higher learning have become accustomed to the utilization of quantitative research methods for decades in order to preserve the integrity of institutional advancement. However, as time has progressed, college and university administrators have come to realize the true uniqueness of rich, thick data made available by using qualitative research approaches. *Using Qualitative Methods in Institutional Assessment*, edited by Shaun R. Harper and Samuel D. Museus (2007), supports the application of qualitative research methods across the spectrum of higher education, including the areas of assessing academic success, student retention, minority students, student learning, and teaching effectiveness. The edited chapters in the book provide the reader with the opportunity to investigate addressing institutional assessment needs by way of qualitative research and illustrate that it will be insufficient for higher education institutions to rely solely on quantitative measures to appraise institutional effectiveness. This reviewer explores the many strengths of the book as well as some of the text’s weaknesses. I also discuss those audiences that would benefit from reading the text.

**Relevant Points for Consideration**

The book includes various chapters that allow the reader to explore qualitative methods of assessment that differ from assessment methods that have been common in higher education over the last few decades. The authors’ purpose is to provide higher
education administrators with the tools needed to implement institutional assessment practices and other resources to direct executive action where needed. Some of the strengths of the book include the following qualitative assessment paradigms: (a) incorporating student learning assessments into curriculum, (b) assessing student trajectory, (c) assessing student support services, and (d) assessing teaching effectiveness.

**Incorporating Student Learning Assessments into Curriculum**

Probably the most unique application of qualitative research presented in the text is the approach for institutional integration of qualitative student learning assessments into the curriculum. From student self-assessments to the implementation of portfolios and writing projects as a means of qualitative reflection in the classroom, Contreras-McGavin and Kezar (2007) provide the reader with the idea of how to place students in the driver’s seat of their education.

Most policy efforts have traditionally been grounded in quantitative measurements that emphasize percentages and benchmarks because they are easy to collect, interpret, and distribute. However, leaders in the assessment arena suggest that qualitative approaches such as portfolios are more mature means to assess student learning and best support efforts to improve learning. (Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996, as cited in Contreras-McGavin & Kezar, 2007, p. 70)

Quantitative measures tend to only grasp the mathematical interpretations of student learning, failing to provide institutions with the thick, rich data available through qualitative means (Creswell, 2007). Students serving as catalysts in their own learning provide colleges or universities with the qualitative data necessary to truly understand the breadth and depth of student scholarship.

Other unique trends and/or innovations related to student assessment from a qualitative perspective include student evaluations and writing assignments. Evaluations allow the learner to identify what he or she has learned and give students the opportunity to set goals based on their additional learning needs. In addition, many higher education classrooms have incorporated writing assessments into their curriculum. This practice goes beyond the traditional research paper or essays as a means for qualitative assessment. Outside-the-box institutions are using writing projects such as journals or diaries to evaluate student learning over a period of time to assess trends or patterns in their learning (Contreras-McGavin & Kezar, 2007).

A final common trend in qualitative student assessment at the post-secondary level relates to electronic portfolios, or e-portfolios. E-portfolios serve the colleges and universities in a variety of ways. These assessments allow the institutions to qualitatively evaluate student learning over a period of time and assist with goal setting for the students, similar to the writing projects. Along the same lines, e-portfolios allow both the student and instructor(s) to assess the data/information at any time and any place, which also reduces the need for physical storage or paper waste (Contreras-McGavin & Kezar, 2007). Such e-portfolios function as a cumulative assessment or evaluation of student need and learning over a period of several classes.
Assessing Student Trajectory

Harper (2007) investigated student performance from the qualitative perspective to understand what is really important to college students and what makes them succeed. He suggests that colleges and universities should conduct trajectory analysis in order to ask questions about student experiences related to all aspects of student life including living arrangements, social activities, and academics. Investigating from a phenomenological approach can provide the institutions with the thick, personal descriptions so common with qualitative exploration. “Trajectory analyses involve these sorts of questions and capture key turning points, make known those influential others, and in some instances offer compelling insights into how students transcended odds and managed to persist” (Harper, 2007, p. 58).

Harper (2007) proceeds throughout the chapter to focus on African-American male students (as a response to previous quantitative studies) and how trajectory analysis can be useful to higher learning institutions in identifying factors that relate to retaining a particular population of students at the undergraduate level. The author conducted the largest investigation on Black undergraduate males to date in an effort to explore the positive experiences and programs in higher education that assisted them in overcoming adversity. The goal of his study was to determine what recipe institutions might follow to ensure the success of the African-American male, using the lived experiences of successful Black male students to discover key ingredients for that recipe.

Results of his analysis included a need for institutions to partner with more pre-college programs in order to open additional opportunities to low-income populations and more minority students. In addition, his trajectory found that student support services played a major role in the success of his participants, both from an academic and social perspective. Although his study provides just one viewpoint of these lived experiences, Harper (2007) was able to extract a “snapshot” from each of his participants in order to provide institutions of higher learning with common threads for success found among successful African-American undergraduate students.

Assessing Student Support Services

A healthy portion of the text is reserved for institutional assessment focused specifically on student support services for experiences primarily outside of the classroom. For this type of assessment, the authors suggest institutions must move beyond surveys and other quantitative methods in order to observe, interview, and conduct focus groups with current students. Doing so, they observe, will allow the institutions to know if certain programs are working or not along with the strengths and weaknesses of the programs. In addition, qualitative methods can more easily ascertain the students using such student support services and why those who need to use them may not be using the services (Chism & Banta, 2007). These are student responses that are not easily retrievable through quantitative measurements.

One university mentioned in the text utilizes structured interviews with first-year students as a means to “…assess some of their noncognitive abilities, including initiative, persistence, creativity, planning skills, critical thinking, self-confidence, and leadership
skills” (Student Potential Assessed, 1989, as cited in Chism & Banta, 2007, p. 21). At the conclusion of these interviews, college or university administrators offer support services to the students in areas where they may need additional support. This can arguably provide many first-year students with the foundation needed to start off their higher education experience in a positive way. This type of qualitative approach provides one with a clearer, yet detailed description of student needs and how various support services can play a role in student development.

Assessing Teaching Effectiveness

A final strength worth discussing from the text is the presentation of the assessment of teaching effectiveness. As one might imagine, the quality of faculty members is one of the distinct differences that distinguish one university from another. The higher the caliber of faculty members, typically the better known and respected a university can become. This portion of the text focuses on methods for assessment of faculty members other than traditional quantitative evaluation methods.

Latucca and Domagal-Goldman (2007) argue for the need to implement teaching portfolios at more colleges and universities across the United States. These portfolios serve as “…a collection of carefully selected artifacts accompanied by explanatory narrative statements, which together provide evidence of teaching effectiveness” (pp. 83-84). This type of teaching assessment, coupled with periodic peer reviews, provide institutions with a well-rounded conception of faculty performance. It indicates how in tune a faculty member is with his or her students and how receptive he or she is to peer feedback and critique.

The authors also suggest that colleges and universities consider the implementation of review committees made up of external reviewers (Latucca & Domagal-Goldman, 2007). Doing so allows someone from the outside to look in and offer constructive criticism on teaching performances. These external reviewers can assess teaching portfolios to ensure that faculty/student interaction is appropriate for student learning outcomes. In fact, this type of assessment is becoming increasingly more essential as institutions seek reaccreditation and as professional accrediting agencies are more centered on evidence of student outcomes as a means for evaluating academic programs.

Weaknesses within the Text

Although a well-constructed text with various chapters complete with quality material, Using Qualitative Methods in Institutional Assessment contains a few minor limitations. One of the most significant issues within the text was the continuous defense of the practice of qualitative research as a means for institutional assessment. An entire chapter, although well written, focused completely on the assumption that the reader wanted to know about myths and misconceptions of qualitative research. Instead, the chapter could have introduced a new and exciting way that qualitative research has transformed the research platform in higher education and how results from qualitative analyses have impacted student performance.
Another drawback to the book was the consistent comparison of qualitative research with quantitative assessment. It is easy to understand that most institutions have utilized quantitative methods of assessment over the past few decades, but the academic literature shows that the use of qualitative measures is becoming increasingly more common (Creswell, 2007). Comparing the two differing forms of research could leave the reader with the feeling that qualitative analysis is somewhat inferior to quantitative analysis, which is an erroneous suggestion. Instead of focusing on the differences between the two or how one is more effective than the other, the book could have spent more time detailing the process of qualitative methods of assessment for novice researchers interested in their own investigations.

Conclusion

This well-written account of various qualitative research investigations at the college or university level offers a novel approach to institutional advancement. It is straightforward in regards to the intended audience, which would consist of college and university administrators, faculty members, and governing boards. Although there are a few weaknesses easily identifiable, the book as a whole provides the reader with a breadth and depth of knowledge related to institutional assessment that can truly impact the future of higher education.

References


Author Note

Daniel W. Turner III received a Doctor of Education from Nova Southeastern University in June, 2007. He continues to pursue qualitative research in the areas of institutional advancement and retention, particularly in non-traditional student offerings.
Previously, Dr. Turner worked as the Assistant Director of Student Engagement for the Student Educational Centers at Nova Southeastern University utilizing previous research to implement social programs and academic offerings to off-campus, non-traditional students and assess student outcomes. In addition, he served as the Advisor to various student organizations including the Student Government Association. Currently, Dr. Turner serves as a Field Associate for the Doctor of Education program at the Fischler School of Education and Human Services at Nova Southeastern University where he is accountable for student success and retention initiatives within these programs. He can be contacted at the Orlando Student Educational Center, Nova Southeastern University, 4850 Millenia Boulevard, Orlando, FL 32839; Voice: 407-758-5060; Fax: 407-264-5656. Email: daniturn@nova.edu.

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Article Citation

Qualitative research is used to understand how people experience the world. While there are many approaches to qualitative research, they tend to be flexible and focus on retaining rich meaning when interpreting data. Common approaches include grounded theory, ethnography, action research, phenomenological research, and narrative research. Isabela Fairclough (University of Central Lancashire). Chapter 13. Textual Analysis

1. This chapter is concerned with ways of analysing political discourse, as instantiated in texts of various sorts. We understand ‘texts’ here in a broad way, to include written texts (e.g. policy documents) as well as various forms of interactional analysis. The essence of the political as a particular institutional domain is to be found therefore in the system of deontic reasons that political institutions provide as (external, desire-independent) motives for action. For instance, the Qualitative Data Analysis Methods are Big 5. There are many different types of Qualitative Data Analyses, all of which serve different purposes and have unique strengths and weaknesses. So, how do you choose the right one? Well, selecting the right analysis largely depends on your research question. For example, you can use narrative analysis to explore whether HOW something is being said is important. Some research bypasses this problem by using two or more of these methodologies (a technique known as triangulation), but this is, of course, quite time-consuming. These approaches might all use similar coding and theme-generating techniques, but the intent and approach of each differ meaningfully. The most frequently used qualitative research methods are one-on-one interviews, focus groups, ethnographic research, case study research, record keeping, and qualitative observation. One-on-one interviews. Conducting one-on-one interviews is one of the most common qualitative research methods. This method uses already existing reliable documents and similar sources of information as a data source. Qualitative observation. Qualitative research requires a labor-intensive analysis process such as categorization, recoding, etc. Similarly, qualitative research requires well-experienced marketers to obtain the needed data from a group of respondents. It’s difficult to investigate causality.