

Doubt and Excitement

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3 **Doubt and Excitement:**
4 **An Experiential Learning Approach to Teaching the Practice of Qualitative**
5 **Research**
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10 **Abstract**

11 This article diagnoses that qualitative research (QR) methods courses and literature
12 often remain silent on how to actually *do* QR and explores how practice theory can
13 improve learning and teaching the practice of QR. It develops an experiential learning
14 approach of turning experiences and emotions of doubt and excitement into a dialogical
15 process of asking creative questions, imagining new ideas, and animating a practical
16 relationship to the world. Based on data and observations of a summer school course in
17 QR methods to PhD students, we present three pedagogical practices for recognizing
18 and tolerating affective resistances to experiential learning and finding creative
19 solutions to emergent research problems.
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28 **Keywords:** practice; qualitative research; learning; teaching; sociology of knowledge
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Introduction: Learning and teaching the practice of qualitative research

Methods classes are the products of dominant disciplinary or departmental epistemic cultures. In that regard, they have been widely criticized for not equipping novice researchers with the disposition and skills to successfully design and execute a qualitative research (QR) project (Schwartz-Shea 2003; Yanow 2003; Hood 2006; Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2011; Haverland and Yanow, 2012; Stout, 2013). Even in the best of circumstances novice QRers usually face a curious combination of curiosity, excitement, anxiety and self-doubt at the start of their research (Author 2 2011a, ch. 9).¹ On the one hand, they feel ill equipped because they do not have much more than a topic and a field, while, on the other hand, they are often invested in a pet theory or method and some strong convictions (Booth et al. 1995). If this situation is not handled well, they risk diverging into several common dysfunctions: hiding behind a grand wall of theorizing, endless collection of data without analyzing them or knowing when to stop, or foregrounding a preferred method without a clear research question. Often, encouraged by dominant doctrines of the uniformity of methods in social science research, they will cling to methods as perspicuous, categorical bits of intervention that provide some illusory certainty for engaging in the contingent practice of research.

The extant literature and pedagogical practice are mainly focused on raising methodological awareness of the theory and practice of QR, particularly by clarifying the philosophical presuppositions of interpretivism, the variety in qualitative methods, and their value and dilemmas with regards to answering core questions of respective fields of study (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Haverland and Yanow 2012; Bevir 2010). We argue this is only partly helpful as it leaves the practice of QR tacit.

Publications and courses usually remain silent on how to actually *do* QR, including attention to the situational logic of particular research practices within the context of specific research questions and settings. They mainly focus on the transmission of knowledge of distinct methods and some training in how to apply them. At the level of methodological teaching doctrine, although not necessarily always at the level of methods teaching, methods are seen as general, unvarying and of one piece; bits of knowledge that are uniformly applicable across a wide range of research situations,

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3 leaving it unclear how to make such general principles specific to the situation at hand;
4 how to improvise to make the methods fit the particulars of concrete situations (Lave
5 and Wenger, 1991; Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009). The result is a rather one-sided and
6 ineffective learning and teaching process.
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11 The contribution of our article is that we take a practice approach to learning and
12 teaching QR. To clarify how a practice approach helps us understand and enhance our
13 ability to teach, and to learn to effectively engage in, QR, we especially draw on
14 experiential learning approaches part of the wider family of practice theories (Kolb,
15 1984; Healey and Jenkins, 2000; DeLyser et al. 2013). Experiential learning is
16 performative, indexical, reflective, and holistic, involving the whole person. The notion
17 of experiential learning as holistic has developed into a strong commitment to personal
18 involvement, personal responsibility for the learning process, and attention to emotion
19 as an essential element of an effective and rewarding learning experience (Keen 1996;
20 Humphreys 2006; Griffiths et al. 2005). Accordingly, we claim that teaching and
21 learning the practice of QR hinges on learning to turn experiences of doubt and
22 excitement into a dialogical process of asking creative questions, imagining new ideas,
23 and animating a practical relationship to the world. Handling in an adequate way the
24 emotional dimension of this process—both feelings of doubt, anxiety, and frustration
25 associated with experiences of failure as feelings of excitement, creativity, and mastery
26 associated with experiences of accomplishment—is conditional for its success.
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32 The broader significance of our discussion of teaching and learning QR to the wider
33 domain of the practice of researching social and political issues is twofold. First, it might
34 seem that we are advocating an interpretivist approach to QR in contrast to the
35 positivist approach that dominates the field. Indeed, that research is a practice is more
36 readily apparent and acknowledged in interpretive QR due to its emphasis on
37 reflexivity, improvisation and abduction (e.g., Hendriks 2007; Author 1 2012). However,
38 in a practice approach, *all* research, even quantitative analysis, is a practice of
39 experiential learning, of how to *do* it, including learning how to interpret surprising
40 findings, use a repertoire of techniques to tinker with data, handle emotions and
41 feelings of (in)competence, or present one's work to an audience of critical peers. While
42 this view is widely accepted in accounts of the natural sciences in the sociology of
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3 knowledge (see Hacking 1983; Pickering 1995), most positivist QR, but also a significant
4 portion of interpretivist QR, is silent on its practice. There is a widespread tendency to
5 favor a formulaic, textbook conception of QR, in which method application, neutrality
6 and control are the privileged approach to truth, certainty and scientific authority
7 (Hood 2006; Breuer and Schreier 2007; Author 2 2007). An experiential learning
8 approach to methods teaching on the other hand compels us to confront the issue of
9 how to convey the everyday activities that constitute good research practice.
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17 Second, within a practice approach to QR, doing, learning and teaching research are
18 continuous processes. Teaching QR is not just a necessary, obligatory element of the
19 work of experienced researchers, but, more fundamentally, teaching and learning are
20 homologous, reciprocal processes, as vital for students as teachers in mastering and
21 perpetuating the craft of research. From the perspective of experienced researchers,
22 learning to teach and teaching to learn are overlapping, continuous spheres within the
23 practice of QR; a fluid participatory realm where “novices” and “masters” meet to jointly
24 engage in addressing a range of practical challenges (Humphreys 2006; Noy 2015).
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32 For example, when we, demonstrate how to code an interview as the first step in
33 qualitative analysis (Charmaz 2006), more than once students react with bewilderment:
34 “How did you do *that?*”. We do not have a straightforward answer in such a situation.
35 We usually tell a story, interlaced with biographical detail, how we went about doing
36 this bit of coding, how we have gradually acquired this skill ourselves by learning from
37 experienced researchers, and how we often have the same feelings as they have when
38 we start coding—*anxiety, doubt, frustration*—but that we have learned over the years
39 not to be too dismayed by these affects but to ‘listen’ to them for cues about the
40 direction and quality of our coding. We also try to convey the excitement that is
41 involved in the ever-deeper understanding of your data in a way that a mere reading of
42 them will never achieve.
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52 Hence, we contribute to a distinctive approach to QR that puts “emphasis on
53 comprehensive understanding involving the whole person rather than ‘receiving’ a
54 body of factual knowledge about the world; on activity in and with the world; and on the
55 view that agent, activity and the world mutually constitute each other” and make each
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3 other intelligible (Lave and Wenger 1991, 33; see also Nicolini, 2012, 172). In our
4 practice approach of experiential learning, the history, practical situation, and feelings
5 of both students and instructors—their experiences in other words—are key elements
6 of the process of learning and teaching QR. This implies that the teaching situation, the
7 classroom, is not a “passive container”, but should be seen as a performative space in
8 which students acquire the requisite skills by participating with instructors in the very
9 activities that form the goal of the learning setting, or, as Noy (2015, 18) puts it, where
10 “the teaching is inseparable from the taught.”
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18 In the next section, we further elaborate on the implications of practice and experiential
19 learning theory for QR in general and teaching and learning in particular. We then
20 describe three pedagogical practices—developing the research question, using
21 heuristics, and engaging in the craft of research— that we developed through our
22 experiences with teaching an intensive one-week course on interpretive and qualitative
23 research to PhD students.
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30 **Experience, Affect and Dialogue in Practice Learning**

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33 For purposes of clarification we need to situate ourselves within the burgeoning field of
34 practice theory. Practice theory is not a singular theory but a family of approaches
35 rooted in different disciplinary and philosophical traditions and aimed at different
36 objects of inquiry (Author 2 2003; Nicolini 2012). While attempting to summarize this
37 theoretical diversity would be beyond the scope of this article, we would like to
38 highlight three core ideas. First, the main unit of analysis is practice. Social phenomena
39 are understood in terms of our being and doing in the world, i.e., the concrete, mundane
40 activities through which we participate in social situations and that we recurrently
41 enact to sustain and change a wider horizon of intelligibility. Second, practice implies an
42 alternative conception of knowledge as what we learn by intervening in concrete
43 situations and participating in its social and material texture (Hacking 1983). This
44 usually sets in motion a chain of resistances that trigger within and between actors a
45 search for accommodations and adaptations to social conventions and material
46 constraints (Pickering 1995) Third, practice is not a stable ‘thing’ produced by cognitive
47 efforts but is an emergent, dialogical, and embodied process of interacting with others,
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3 emotions, materials, know-how, discourses, culture, power, and so on (Author 2 2012).
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6 Our approach to practice originates in pragmatism (Dewey 1925; 1938; Follet 1924),
7 which has given birth both to theories of experiential learning and practice theory (Kolb
8 1984; Lave and Wenger 1991; Author 2 2011b, 2012). In contrast to common
9 conceptions, in pragmatist-inspired practice theory experience is not a private affective
10 state but straddles the interface of private subjectivity and public language and action
11 (Jay, 2005). Experience is relational in that it connects individual sensory, cognitive and
12 affective states with the larger world by encompassing the latter into the former
13 (Alexander, 1987 p. 63).
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21 In this experiential practice approach, we learn when the world 'talks back' to our
22 interventions (Pickering 1995; Author 2 2011b, 2012). We intervene because we find
23 ourselves in what pragmatists such as Follett and Dewey called a 'situation', a
24 breakdown of the conventional, the taken-for-granted, of the precarious equilibrium
25 between actor and environment (Follett 1924; Burke 1994, 29). This triggers both
26 engagement (the gradual mastery of the evaluative orientation that guides the practice)
27 and surprise; a delicate mixture that, inevitably, invokes our cognitive and emotional
28 sides (Yanow and Tsoukas 2009, 1344). Grappling with the world's backtalk often
29 generates feelings of uneasiness, anxiety, unsettledness, or doubt, but also hopefulness
30 and optimism at the prospect of enacting betterment. The 'teleo-affective complex' that
31 is thus evoked (Schatzki, 1996) elicits an urge to do something about it (Locke et al.
32 2008, 909). We can either ignore or suppress this urge (e.g., hiding behind the rules or
33 accepting "that's just the way it is"), or we can enter a learning process by temporarily
34 putting our beliefs and habits in parentheses and actively engaging with the situation at
35 hand.
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49 Experiential learning theory has famously depicted this accommodation of the
50 inevitable resistance of the environment to our interventions as a four stage, cyclical
51 process of transformation. Experience is translated through reflection into concepts,
52 which become guides for active experimentation and the generation of new
53 experiences. Learning thus requires both the conceptual grasp or representation of
54 experience and some transformation of that experience brought about by active
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3 experimentation or intervention (Kolb 1984, 42; Healey and Jenkins 2000, 186). In this
4 ongoing dual process we both immerse ourselves in the experience “using our senses
5 and feelings in a concrete way” and think abstractly using logic and reason (Healey and
6 Jenkins 2000, 187) Understanding and dealing with the affective correlates of our
7 engagement is thus an integral element of such performative, situated learning (Author
8 2 2003).
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14 Several psychological, emotional, and organizational reasons can make us hold back
15 from the experiential learning process that practice has to offer. Once we have stumbled
16 upon a situation that urges us to adapt our beliefs and activities, we often do not quite
17 know what to do differently and how. The situation suggests but does not prescribe, and
18 if we are inexperienced at our task such suggestions may be thin and hard to read. The
19 essential conundrum of practice learning is that *it requires experience to acquire*
20 *experience*. We need a minimum of embodied experience with the task at hand to act as
21 a ‘hook’ on which to hang and integrate the new insights and experiences that we obtain
22 in the learning process, or, more precisely, to be able to discern those new insights and
23 experiences in the first place. Without such a minimum experiential base, what we get
24 out of the learning process may be limited and lack meaning and depth. This is the
25 familiar phenomenon of grasping something at an intellectual level without really
26 “getting it”. So, how to encourage learning from practice if people lack the (embodied)
27 experience for engaging with the particular practice in the first place?
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40 Even if we can tolerate “not knowing”, we might still not see a way forward and learn
41 from our experience. Especially since such experiential learning takes place within real
42 world institutions that make it undesirable or unsafe to share doubts, struggles, and
43 failures. They stimulate us to interpret, reorganize, and rationalize our embodied
44 experiences in order to act and communicate, but this may mean that we transform our
45 “raw experience” into an abstraction that is of limited use when confronted with yet
46 another challenging situation. To save face, self-esteem, or career prospects, we feel
47 compelled to suppress our feelings and hunches, and stick to existing procedures and
48 vocabularies (Rein and White 1982; Author 2 2004). However, experiential learning
49 theorists posit that transformative learning is enhanced when actors are stimulated to
50 move outside their preferred learning style (Kolb 1984, 203).
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5 The challenge of practice learning, thus, is to encourage novices to enter into what to
6 them seems like a perilous learning process while its value and understanding only
7 gradually and unpredictably emerge from the experience of doing it (De Carlo 2012;
8 Noy 2015). The challenge for instructors is that they retain the sensitivity, openness and
9 flexibility that allows them to recognize students' learning styles and gently nudge them
10 to take different styles on board. However, institutionally, methodology courses are
11 often habitually designed such that they favor one learning style (viz. active, reflective,
12 or abstract), while on a personal level the instructor may feel most comfortable with
13 one particular mode of teaching. Methodology course designs tend to emphasize theory
14 and often insufficiently take students' prior experiences into account (for example,
15 because these are deemed irrelevant to the subject matter of the course) or engage in
16 skills training without the opportunity to reflect on students' experiences and emotions
17 (Author 2 2003). In addition, instructors often ignore "how we all feel insecure and
18 anxious when acquiring new skills" (Humphreys 2006, 174) and refrain from reflecting
19 with students on the affective elements of the learning process and sharing their own
20 emotions.
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33 Practice learning is not painless. Exposure to unfamiliar teaching and learning
34 processes may challenge novices' identity, confidence and self-worth (Wenger 1998), so
35 much so that it can amount to a "learning shock" involving "acute frustration, confusion
36 and anxiety" (Griffiths et al. 2005, 277). It entails identity costs (Taylor 2002), in the
37 sense that it challenges the system of relations that sustain us, give meaning to what we
38 do, and by which we define ourselves (Lave and Wenger 1991, 81). While some novice
39 researchers might have a natural talent for doing an interview or coding and theorizing,
40 those unfamiliar with such practices sometimes protect themselves from these identity
41 costs of practice learning by closing themselves off to working through the emotional
42 experiences triggered by the learning process (Weick 1989, 1). This process of closing
43 off manifests itself as *resistance*. We see resistance not as a deliberate decision to
44 impede the process of learning and teaching, but as an involuntary, and to the observer
45 sometimes puzzling, emotional reaction to defend one's identity as a (novice)
46 researcher against overwhelming doubt. And although they initially express themselves
47 in the behavior of individual students, resistances form an inevitable and integral part
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3 of the emerging, performative relationship between the student, instructor and other
4 students in the class (Humphreys 2006). We interpret resistances therefore as
5 important indicators of the state of the shared learning process (Sandler et. al. 1992,
6 118)², which, when not recognized and left unattended, may develop into an
7 insurmountable barrier to learning. Students may leave the teaching situation
8 discouraged, angry and even cynical about the potential of QR. Thus, we go on to show
9 that engaging with resistances, as well as positive affects, is central to teaching and
10 learning the practice of QR.
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18 **The Push and Pull of Learning and Teaching the Practice of Research**

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21 The situational background to this article is an intensive one-week course in qualitative
22 and interpretive research to PhD students. We realize that this is not the optimal setting
23 for the approach we profess. In the spirit of practice theory, teaching QR is ideally
24 structured as an ongoing apprenticeship. This would allow the emergence of the kind of
25 relationship between student and instructor in which processes of cooperation,
26 connection, experimentation, reflection and trust can develop that constitute
27 experiential learning. However, our course was nested within another common practice
28 in international academia, that of the summer school. Students sign up for these brief
29 courses, outside of term time, demarcated from the daily routine of teaching and
30 working on their thesis, in a setting away from their own university, to receive, mostly,
31 methodological training. We draw attention to this setting to emphasize our real-world
32 constraints. Students do not arrive 'tabula rasa' but bring their particular histories of
33 supervision and departmental culture with them, expecting to get advice about their
34 projects during the course week, after which they return to their 'academic habitat'
35 again.
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49 Our week-long course was part of the ECPR Summer School in Methods which, at the
50 time, took place in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The summer school mostly offered hard-core
51 statistics and econometrics courses and the setting was suffused with the vocabulary
52 that went with it. Ours was an exception in two ways: it was one of the few courses that
53 offered training in QR and it was not focused on a specific skill, such as "introduction to
54 generalized linear models" or "introduction to NVivo10" but on the comprehensive
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3 process of designing and engaging in a QR project. The design of the course reflected
4 two key features of experiential learning: method and theory are interwoven in the
5 execution of a research project and engaging in skill-based learning is embedded in all
6 aspects of the research process (Author 2011, 8-9; 241-242). In the practice of QR, we
7 continuously tack back and forth between theory and method and between all phases of
8 the research process. To see the phases of research as continuous and interdependent
9 is, in our experience, one of the hardest things to convey to novice researchers (ibid.).
10 The design of the course also reflected the two-pronged nature of experiential learning
11 of moving back and forth between intervention and reflection on interventions (Kolb,
12 1984, 42). For example, the course alternated active engagement with practical task
13 such as interviewing, class discussion to reflect on the students' experiences with this,
14 and lectures on QR methodology. In the spirit of engaged learning the course was
15 organized around the participants' own PhD projects, which they all presented to the
16 group and discussed in individual sessions with the instructors.
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28 Fifteen PhD students from ten different countries participated, studying topics as
29 diverse as welfare reform in Mexico, identity formation of 'New Danes', collective
30 memory in post-Soviet Georgia, and the role of women's organizations in peace building
31 processes in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Although all participants had designed a QR project,
32 as we gathered from short project summaries submitted in advance of the course, and
33 had indicated that they wanted to improve their skills in QR, we quickly became aware
34 of moments of resistance to the teaching and learning process. For instance, while
35 trying to introduce students to qualitative interviewing on the second day, we got
36 bogged down in a methodological discussion about questions such as "Can you test a
37 hypothesis with your research or not?" Initially, we were puzzled. The course brief was
38 very clear about the course's goals, organization and pedagogical approach as an
39 introduction into QR. Why then had they signed up for a course like this if they were
40 hesitant, or sometimes even reluctant, to adopt its ideas and practices? But then we
41 realized that the participants' reaction was, as is common to any intervention in
42 practice, a form of "backtalk", the capacity that the agency of people and things has to
43 unsettle our interventions (Schön and Rein 1994; Pickering 1995, 23; Yanow and
44 Tsoukas 2009). In other words, from the start we were, as instructors, immersed in a
45 good bit of experiential learning of our own. The course as a purposeful intervention in
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3 the students' lives produced its own "backtalk". Taking an (auto-ethnographic) practice
4 approach to our own situation, we asked ourselves: What kinds of resistances do the
5 students present? What do they signify about the design of the course and the quality of
6 our teaching? And how could we prompt a process of mutual inquiry to arrive at better
7 solutions?
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13 We realized that we asked a lot of the participants as we were unsettling their
14 established ideas and practices of QR, and, as we argued above, that losing your
15 established routines and beliefs can be anxiety-inducing. We therefore made it clear
16 that we were there to help them develop research practices that we hoped they would
17 find useful in range of situations. We also acknowledged that most participants
18 appreciated this combination of challenge and accommodation. The course scored an
19 average of 4 out of 5 in the overall assessment and generated a lot of energy and
20 enthusiasm during the week. For example, after the first day, one participant said that
21 she had already learned more over the past 24 hours than in the past few years.
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30 Based on a log we kept during the course, as well as our joint reflections during and
31 after the course, we used these experiences with doubt and excitement to further
32 develop our approach to teaching and learning QR into three interrelated pedagogical
33 practices, to which we turn now. We introduce each practice with an illustrative story of
34 a course participant and explain what we experienced, how we dealt with the emergent
35 resistances to, and achievements of, learning, and what the value of our approach is.
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42 **Developing the research question**

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45 Tamara³ was in the third year of her research on the participation of so-called
46 'New Danes' (young citizens with a migrant background) in voluntary
47 organizations. Even though she had already done 60 interviews, she could not
48 convincingly explain to the group what she was trying to find out. She just could
49 not get her research topic into focus. In her first assignment, she wrote that the
50 topic was:
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3 “The role of inclusionary/exclusionary mechanisms in the negotiations of
4 (national?) identity and perceptions of self among organizationally active
5 young New Danes.
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10 The negotiations of (national?) identity and perceptions of self among
11 organizationally active young New Danes and the
12 inclusionary/exclusionary mechanisms at play in these identity
13 constructions.”
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18 The group discussion was unproductive and went in circles. We then asked
19 Tamara what the real-world problem was that her research was about.⁴ This
20 question was driven by our observations in reading the pre-course assignments
21 that the real-world context of the research was often unclear and the description
22 focused almost exclusively on the theoretical literature. Tamara instantly became
23 animated and explained how she had observed that the participation of New
24 Danes in voluntary organizations affected the way they perceived themselves
25 and their place in Danish society. Voluntary organizations were seen in Denmark
26 as a favored way for immigrants to integrate in society, but in practice led to
27 many different pathways and outcomes. The goal of the research therefore was
28 to further flesh out how New Danes participate in various ways and what kind of
29 participatory practices and mechanisms are at play. This sounded so clear and
30 simple, that we just could not comprehend why formulating the research topic
31 had seemed so difficult.
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44 Tamara’s initial research summary included many abstract concepts (identity,
45 belonging, citizenship, inclusion/exclusion, empowerment). Rather than helping her to
46 get the research into focus, they turned it into an overly complex and confusing jumble.
47 But as soon as Tamara forgot about these theories and concepts for a moment and
48 started to talk about the real-world problem she was interested in, things almost
49 spontaneously fell into place. Nearly all participants started the course with a strong
50 attachment to a particular theory, concept, or literature and demonstrated an
51 impressive knowledge of these. But, whether it was role theory, strategic policy-making,
52 or transnational advocacy coalitions, one of the effects was that the initial research
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3 summaries were heavy with big abstract concepts. We do not downplay the importance
4 of theory, of course. We all need ideas and concepts to be able to discern interesting
5 issues in empirical reality in the first place (Charmaz 2006). But theory can, as in
6 Tamara's case, obscure the actual topic and sustain a vague, unanswerable research
7 question. Tamara, like many other beginning researchers, had spent a lot of time and
8 effort mastering the representation aspect of the experience of engaging in a QR project,
9 to the detriment of the operative aspect (Kolb 1984, 59). For learning to occur ideas
10 need to be extended and grounded in the external world (Ibid., 52) Theory can kill
11 curiosity.
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20 Therefore, we helped the participants to develop their research question by moving in
21 small steps from a broad interest to a researchable and relevant question (Booth et al.
22 1995) and articulating the real-world problem they were looking at (Author 2, pp. 247-
23 248). Rather than coming at it from a theoretical lens or a 'gap in the literature'
24 perspective, a real world problem or puzzle, a 'situation' in pragmatist terms, is an issue
25 surrounded by significant complexity and uncertainty, value differences, or conflicting
26 explanations, that has so far gone unresolved (Shapiro 2002, Author 2 2011, 244-248).
27 The goal is to understand what people implicated in this situation do on their own
28 terms, rather than from pre-conceived theories and assumptions. This generates new
29 hunches and, eventually, explanations and conceptualizations of the research topic. In
30 that way, the nature and relevance of theories follows from an abductive and grounded
31 process of doubting, being surprised, inquiring, and being creative with initial
32 assumptions and existing concepts (Charmaz 2006; Locke et al. 2008; Schwartz-Shea
33 and Yanow 2012, 28). The value of this pedagogic practice was reflected in the course
34 evaluation, with participants appreciating "the awareness [arising from thinking] for
35 yourself, before consulting and sticking to theories and literature too much.", "now, I
36 know how I can think about the way I can underline the significance of my research
37 question", and "how I can be much more creative".
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51 However, persuading novice researchers to look beyond their theoretical
52 preconceptions is harder than it may look. Usually they have some kind of image of the
53 problem in mind and believe they have discovered this unique link to theories (and
54 methods, although these are sometimes conveniently forgotten), which will become
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3 their original contribution to what they consider to be 'the literature'. But, as Shapiro
4 (2002) already highlighted,
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8 if a phenomenon is characterized as it is so as to vindicate a particular theory
9 rather than to illuminate a problem that is specified independently of the theory,
10 then it is unlikely that the specification will gain much purchase on what is
11 actually going on in the world (593).
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17 Novice researchers might nevertheless cling to theoretical preconceptions for a variety
18 of reasons, such as having invested in a particular approach, trying to carve out an
19 occupational niche, or, as we observed many times, because their supervisor is an
20 adherent of a particular theory (Shapiro 2002, 597-598, 602-603). But perhaps the
21 most powerful reason is that the novice researcher's early attempts at constructing
22 theoretical explanations of data in their eyes look so inept and feeble in comparison to
23 the finished theoretical products they encounter in the published literature. Bypassing
24 the 'blooming, buzzing confusion' of the empirical world means avoiding the associated
25 embodied experiences of puzzlement and not knowing (Author 2 2012; Healey and
26 Jenkins 2000). In this light, clinging to a preconceived theory serves the purpose of
27 avoiding painful feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt that are generated by learning
28 about their topic through their own experience.
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38 **Using heuristics**

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42 A presentation on the fourth day gave us the impression that a safe, creative, and
43 inquiring group dynamic had emerged. Samuel was halfway his Research
44 Masters and was still unsure what to do. He had a big, yet fascinating question:
45 why does democracy fail in Africa? While there is a considerable literature on
46 this, he had identified a dominant explanation (the role of cultural and ethnic
47 diversity). But he did not really know how to proceed from there. We agreed that
48 it was a broad topic in which he risked getting lost. One of the main pieces of
49 advice that emerged from the group discussion was not to be so fixated on
50 democracy. He should not see it as a normative ideal or something static and
51 fixed that can be achieved. What if it is not about democracy at all? Democracy is
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3 a strong Western concern, but how useful is it for how things should work in
4 Africa? One of the participants even walked up to the white board to draw a
5 quick map of a Western African region where she had worked for some time to
6 explain that people living in some areas were not concerned with democracy or
7 citizenship at all (but solely with their tribe and surviving).
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13 Samuel's story is an example of how what Abbott (2004) calls "heuristics" can empower
14 QRers to theorize themselves and gain a greater freedom to play with ideas, instead of
15 anxiously holding on to established theories (Charmaz 2006). Heuristics are not
16 methods. They do not have the algorithmic logic of methods that, when done according
17 to the rules, result in assured (although not necessarily predictable) outcomes (Author
18 2, 2012). Heuristics are "strategies of discovery" or "tested ways of broadening what
19 you are doing, ways to come up with new ideas, new methods, or new data, ways to get
20 unstuck" (Abbott 2004, 112). Even the most seasoned QRer will get stuck when the
21 world resists her research focus, interview questions, or favored theories. The story
22 about Samuel's research shows several heuristics in action: 'stopping and putting in
23 motion' (seeing democracy not as a static ideal but as a dynamic process),
24 'problematizing the obvious' (what if it is not about democracy at all?), and 'changing
25 context' (is the Western concept of democracy appropriate to Africa; if so, is it in the
26 fore- or the background in relation to tribe and survival?).
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38 Heuristics thus achieve something different than a fixation on 'methods', which are
39 often seen as the application of step-wise procedures for data collection and analysis
40 that can be learned from written instructions and guarantee objective, valid, and
41 replicable knowledge (Breuer and Schreier 2007). Even though unsettling and
42 unexpected turns are inherent to social life, qualitative researchers are usually trained
43 for rigorous and objective knowledge production rather than engaging in a practice of
44 imagination, emotion, and improvisation (Abbott 2004; Cerwonka and Malkki 2007;
45 Author 2 2011a, ch. 9; Stone 2013). Methods are only partly helpful for the practice of
46 research. While unquestionably important, if only to compel us to be systematic in what
47 we do, methods should be seen as practical skills situated in, and informed by, a broader
48 heuristic framework that embeds them in all other aspects of doing research and
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3 enables the researcher to engage with the messiness of the world with an open mind
4 (Author 2 2011a, 241-244).
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8 We encouraged the participants to employ heuristics intuitively and dialogically. By
9 asking each other a different type of question than “have you read this theory?” or “how
10 did you select your case?”, the students experienced how QR is a *social* practice and how
11 they can benefit from its dispersed form of intelligence (Lave and Wenger 1991;
12 Wenger 1998). Heuristics spark a process of joint creativity by disrupting the taken-for-
13 granted ideas and comforting categories that initially guide the formulation of the
14 research problem and the design of the project. Heuristics are constitutive of a
15 creatively productive, social research practice as they cater to a social learning process
16 that should become second nature rather than an occasional exercise (Follet, 2013a,
17 24). They help (novice) researchers to refrain from defensive discussions (“that’s not
18 what my research is about”), saving them from the identity costs of not knowing or
19 seeming lack of imagination, into creative encounters that expand mutual horizons
20 (Follet, 2013b, 303).
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32 The pull into the ‘safe haven’ of methods is quite common. While we had gradually been
33 building up a safe, creative, and inquiring atmosphere in the group, some participants
34 did not experience it that way. For example, on the last day, Jasmin suddenly withdrew
35 from doing her presentation on the role of international organizations in the
36 reconciliation process in Ruanda because she now “knew what to do” and did not think
37 that “it would be good for her” to present. This again demonstrates how the feelings of
38 insecurity and inadequacy that engaging in research practice generates are not just
39 intellectual, but have an embodied quality that can at times become overwhelming. The
40 dilemma of using heuristics is that the road to productivity is one of doubt and
41 uncertainty. The practice of research can be ungainly and messy. Gratification lies in an
42 uncertain and unpredictable future. It is downright challenging to become comfortable
43 with this. A big part of our individual meetings with participants was therefore about
44 reassuring them that feelings of confusion and vulnerability were normal, about
45 providing care and a transactional space (De Carlo 2012). Using heuristics was key to
46 our efforts to make doubt productive, reframing it from an indication of failure to an
47 invitation to be imaginative and playful in engaging with the research topic, methods,
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3 and data with others in a shared and reciprocal way, and start seeing these in a new
4 light.
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8 **Engaging in the craft of research**

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11 During the fourth and fifth day, we practiced with coding (part of) an interview
12 one of us had conducted. We briefly explained the goals and setting of the study
13 from which the interview derived. Then, rather than explaining too much about
14 how to code, we just let the participants try. Before looking at their findings, we
15 first asked them about their experiences. Their responses were: "I didn't have a
16 clue what to do", "I don't know enough about the context", "I got carried away
17 reading it", "I got distracted by the [ad verbatim] way it was transcribed", "it
18 takes time to get into", and "when is coding speculative?". We explained these
19 were all good and common experiences and emphasized the centrality and that
20 the exercise was set up to bring out the hard work of judgment and
21 interpretation in analyzing qualitative data. Then we turned to comparing some
22 of the codes they came up with for the first page. It appeared that they had
23 difficulties with determining where an "information unit" started and stopped,
24 with avoiding broad or theoretical codes, and with coming up with active codes
25 that capture what is going on. Then we asked for two volunteers to compare
26 their codes on the whiteboard. With the text projected in the middle, Tamara and
27 José both wrote their codes on each side. When discussing their codes, we
28 pointed out their strengths and similarities to emphasize that it is not all that
29 random, that there is no one right solution, and that coding is a skill that can be
30 learned.
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47 It was important for the participants to have had the experience of not knowing what to
48 do or how to make sense of the data. This might not be a pleasant experience, but it is
49 necessary to recognize and overcome fears, to relinquish the sense of control over the
50 situation (Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009, 1357), and accept the difficulty of doing this type
51 of research work. Above all, it is important to do this jointly with others, including the
52 instructors, who share the same experiences. Qualitative data analysis is at the heart of
53 QR (Author 2 2011a, ch. 9), yet doing it well requires considerable experience. So where
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3 do you begin as a novice researcher? We engaged in grounded theory analysis on the
4 second and third day of the course simultaneously with practicing qualitative
5 interviewing to demonstrate the intrinsic continuity between these two activities.
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7 Taking pains to demonstrate that we did not have the “one right answer”, we did not do
8 much more than point out just how many codes popped up in even a very small snippet
9 of interview. We hoped to demonstrate in this way the richness of good interviews,
10 what makes for good interviews, and that interviewing and coding are not clearly
11 demarcated methods but elements of a holistic research practice. The participants had
12 many intelligent observations and showed enthusiasm and appreciation of the
13 subtleties of the craft of QR.
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21 This craft can only be taught through and in practice (Breuer and Schreier 2007; Lave
22 and Wenger 1991). It involves practical skills, judgment, and creativity that cannot be
23 derived from textbooks. The best way for students to learn how to do it is by just doing
24 it. The dilemma is of course that ‘throwing them into the deep’ triggers fear and
25 uncertainty, which can become overwhelming and trigger a craving for hard-and-fast
26 methods. However, qualitative interviewing and coding turn on heuristics, or practical
27 strategies, rather than methods. Creating a research partnership with an interviewee,
28 asking for concrete examples, asking yourself “what is this an instance of?” while coding,
29 and coming up with active, evocative codes, are all practical strategies that create
30 conditions for novelty, improvisation, and judgment (Weiss 1994; Charmaz 2006;
31 Author 2 2011a, ch. 9). Knowing how to do all of this is a matter of practice, of
32 interacting with the particulars of the situation at hand, of improvisation guided by
33 earlier insights and ideas, of recognizing and acknowledging the feelings this generates,
34 and gradually accumulating a sense of what it means to do so in competent and
35 productive ways.
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48 **Conclusion**

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50 The practice of QR comes down to engaging in experiential, dialogical and holistic
51 learning processes. Learning to do QR is more than acquiring knowledge of different
52 methodologies and skill in applying certain methods. It is a social, embodied, and
53 situated performance that requires a period of apprenticeship in which the novice
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3 learns to advance from an initial topic to a feasible research question, practices
4 interviewing and observing people situated in particular contexts, tries to make sense of
5 empirical data and relate them to the extant literature, and learns how to formulate
6 compelling arguments. Such practice learning requires practical judgment, sociability,
7 imagination, being in touch with one's feelings, and a tolerance for critique and
8 setbacks—in a word, it involves the whole person.
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15 However, QR methods courses often do not provide the psychological awareness and
16 organizational support to engage in this experientially challenging learning process, and
17 may result in defensive, unproductive reactions in novice researchers, and arguably
18 senior researchers alike, limiting the quality of their research. Based on an a practice
19 approach of experiential learning, we have explicated how teaching and learning QR
20 comes down to working through embodied experiences of doubt, discontent, and
21 unsettledness to foster feelings of animation, excitement, and creativeness. As such, we
22 provide an alternative to the above-mentioned tendency in the extant literature and
23 pedagogical practice to mainly focus on raising methodological awareness. We do not
24 claim to have invented a completely new perspective on teaching and learning QR,
25 though, but, much in the spirit of practice theory, bring out what many experienced
26 QRers intuitively do in their research and teaching. In doing so, we especially affirm and
27 extend experiential approaches (Kolb, 1984; Keen 1996; Humphreys 2006; De Leyser et
28 al. 2013; Noy 2015) with a firm theoretical grounding and set of pedagogical practices.
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40 During our course we employed a number of pedagogical practices, three of which we
41 presented here. Derived from experiential learning principles (Kolb, 1984; Healey and
42 Jenkins, 2000; DeLysyer et. al, 2013) these practices offer a sophisticated and integrated
43 program of philosophical principles, a reflexive attitude, and practical assignments for
44 teaching and learning the practice of QR. Yet, we are aware that what we can achieve in
45 a one-week intensive training course is necessarily limited, particularly as practice
46 learning relies so much on continued active engagement with the issue at hand and
47 upon prior experience as fertile ground for embodied insights. After the course, we
48 wondered what would happen once students returned to the familiar “academic
49 habitat” (Haverland & Yanow 2012) of their institute or department. Learning the
50 practice of QR is a slow process of accretion, with occasional breakthroughs of mastery
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3 and insight, that takes months or even years of intensive teaching and practice.
4 Supervision and mentoring, capstone projects, writing workshops, and collaborative
5 research projects are all welcome media for fostering such an ongoing apprenticeship.
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10 We therefore conclude by encouraging QRers to engage widely in learning and teaching
11 the practice of QR and more regularly and openly share their experiences with other
12 course designs, practice approaches, pedagogical practices, and resistances and
13 achievements (see Keen 1996; Hood 2006; Humphreys 2006; De Leyser et al. 2013; and
14 Noy 2015 for good examples). This in itself may be met with doubt and resistances, but
15 we believe it will also generate excitement and enhance the productivity of QR.
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20 21 Notes

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25 ¹ We contend that experienced researchers are also familiar with these feelings. What
26 distinguishes experienced researchers from novices is their ability to make doubt
27 generative; to interpret doubt as a signal of being confronted with an interesting
28 practical and intellectual challenge and convert it into a productive intervention.
29 However, an important problem with the current managerialist academic context is that
30 the reigning vocabulary is one of control, of the research process, of one's results, of
31 one's research environment, and of one's personal career, with the result that doubt is
32 not regarded as a potentially valuable component of the research process.
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39 ² Although we are inspired by the psychoanalytic concept of resistance, our
40 interpretation deviates considerably from the traditional clinical, patient-centred
41 concept.
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44 ³ Names of participants have been changed for privacy reasons.

45 ⁴ The idea is from Deborah Stone (personal communication).
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