THE WORKSHOP AS A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH: LESSONS LEARNT FROM A "CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH WRITING" WORKSHOP

Sabreena Ahmed
Senior Lecturer, Department of English and Humanities, BRAC , University. Email:
jibon2000@hotmail.com

Ratnawati Mohd. Asraf
Professor, Kulliyyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia Email:
ratnawati@iium.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The field of engineering has workshops incorporated in its stream of study as a space for the research on and innovation of a unique idea. However, in the field of education, workshops are limited to teacher education and professional development programmes. This paper discusses the possibility of using workshops as a qualitative research approach for Educational Research. To elaborate on this concept, the authors of the paper will inform the readers of the procedures they used in conducting a series of five workshops titled, "Critical thinking through writing Workshop" with 15 pre-university students in a public university in Malaysia in the fall semester of 2017. The findings show that workshops accommodate many characteristics of a qualitative study and can be considered as a research approach for the field of education.

Keywords: *Workshops, Research method, Qualitative research, Critical thinking, English Academic, Writing*

Introduction

The qualitative approach to research has been increasingly used in the field of education and the social sciences because it reflects how reality is socially constructed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and because it allows researchers to gain insight into the meaning they give to social experience. The qualitative approach also allows researchers to obtain thick and rich descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Denzin, 2001 ; Ponterotto, 2006) on the thoughts, feelings, and views of the informants—by providing a detailed account of his or her field experience, and making explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and putting them in context (Holloway, 1997). Among the methods used by qualitative researchers are participant and non-participant observations (Patton, 2014), structured, semi-structured, narrative interviews (Stuckey, 2013) in-depth, and focus group interviews (Jamshed, 2014), and textual (Bengtsson, 2016) or visual analysis (Covert & Koro-Ljungberg, 2015). This paper discusses the possibility of including the workshop as a qualitative research approach by highlighting some of the features of a workshop that we had conducted to develop critical thinking among pre-university students. The workshop consisted of a series of higher order thinking tasks that the students were asked to complete, and write critical essays on topics associated with the tasks .

The Workshop as a Qualitative Research Approach

In the field of Education, there are not many instances of workshops being utilised for the purpose of conducting research; when it is, according to Ørngreen & Levinsen (2017), a promising tool for collecting data. We also hold the same view regarding workshops and to flesh out our claim, we extensively reviewed the literature on the potential of the workshop as a qualitative research approach and present it in the following sections.

According to Lain (2017, p.160), workshops foster "engagement"—a crucial element for their success—through collaborative discussions and "constructive feedback" between the participants and

the workshop facilitator (Spagnoletti, Spencer, Bonnema, Mcnamara,& McNeil, n.d.).. This engagement is often very intense, and can be considered as being akin to "prolonged engagement", which is regarded as being one of the primary ways of establishing the credibility of the results of a qualitative study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993; Pandey & Patnaik, 2003; Shenton, 2004), and upholding the trust between the researchers and participants (Merriam, 1998). Indeed, in a workshop, such trust can be developed by a facilitator's earnest enthusiasm in interacting with the participants—which should make them feel valued and heard", and more willing to provide rich information.

In addition to intense engagement, workshops also provide the stakeholders of different organisations with the opportunities to collaborate (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017) with one another in *learning* about a particular topic. This helps a researcher to gather data through the collaboratively shared experience. In addition, in cases where a researcher is in need of information-rich data (Creswell & Poth, 2017), workshops serve well as an avenue for the meeting of participants who have volunteered to be a part of the study. In other words, through workshops, researchers may be able to elicit rich information from the participants who are selected through the purposive sampling technique.

Workshops also allow for persistent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) observation. We agree with Lincoln & Guba (1985) that "persistent observation" allows a researcher to scrutinise the issues and concerns relevant to a particular study in "depth" (p.304) and that to carry out persistent observation, a researcher must focus on various relevant aspects of a particular study in detail for a significant and specific amount of time (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989), all of which will contribute toward establishing the credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Pandey and Patnaik, 2003) and rigour (Houghton, Casey, Shaw & Murphy, 2013) of the study.

In addition to persistent observation, workshops also allow for participant observation. According to (Bernard, 2006), participant observation is a way of creating "rapport" (p.387) with the people of a community and to also allow them to become a part of that community. Here, the researcher tries to mingle well with the community and understand people's behaviour in various contexts within the environment. Later, the researcher distances himself from the context and tries to analyse the collected data and writes about it. Additional data collection strategies such as interviewing, content analysis or surveys make the data collected through participant observation more credible. A participant observer becomes an "insider" who observes participants' behaviour in a particular context, and he or she also plays the role of an "outsider" while working on the information gathered from the observation as a researcher (Spradley, 1979). Furthermore, Spradley (1979) emphasises that a participant observer must have the skill of introspection to judge how they themselves feel in a certain context. This skill assists them in the process of being the "research instrument" (p.56). Usually, a researcher becomes a research instrument when he becomes an active participant of the study and is able to create a space of interaction for the respondents so that they feel comfortable to share their experience with him (Owens, 2006). A workshop facilitator can thus be a participant observer who is able to create a conducive environment for sharing views within the workshop and he may be a research instrument with whom other participants would love to discuss their perspectives. The whole process of such observation brings forth information-rich data for the researcher.

Finally, workshops accommodate the writing of thick and rick descriptions of field notes or rather "workshop notes", which can serve the purpose of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This means that any other researcher can conduct a similar study using the same procedure, hence contributing toward the credibility of the results.

The Workshop as an Educational Research Approach
Our review of the existing literature on the subject revealed to us that little has been written on the workshop as an *educational research approach*, although it is often used in professional development programmes. According to Bennett (2007), workshops can also be used for teaching reading, writing, and thinking; to foster the engagement of students in reading (Lain, 2017); and to promote critical thinking among students to write without the help of the teacher, as was introduced by Schultz (1990) in his "Story Workshop".

We have traced a few studies that have used the workshop as a tool for collecting data in educational research. Here, we would like to briefly describe two of those studies. The first of these is that of Sharma, Thakur, Sharma, and Mishra (2015), which attempted to find out teachers' perceptions on using open educational resources (OER) in India through four workshops consisting of facilitators' presentations, participant panel discussions, the Just-a-Minute (JAM) interactive discussion strategy, and snowballing techniques. Using observations of the workshop interaction, discussion, and activities, which the researchers video-recorded, and using the Attitude Towards OER Scale and the interview schedule as research instruments, they found that teachers had a positive attitude towards the OER. The workshops were able to provide the researchers with information-rich qualitative data, given the details that they managed to obtain from the observations, interviews, and interaction between the participants and facilitator.

The same richness of data was obtained by Wang, Lin, Spalding, and Vegas (2008), who conducted a three-week summer workshop with 32 Chinese teachers of English in a city in Southern China to explore whether workshops might affect their preconceived notions of teaching strategies and their application in teaching. The study, which employed a questionnaire that the participants filled out on the first day; teachers' accounts on the adoption of a particular teaching strategy to teach a given topic; and reflective journal entries on their thoughts about the lesson that they had to write at the completion of the workshop each day found that the long workshops served not only as a means for collecting information-rich data, but also worked as a catalyst for altering teachers' negative attitudes towards the latest teaching techniques.

On the issue of the workshop as an educational research approach, Rikke Ørngreen and Karin Levinsen (2017), point out that this can be examined from three different perspectives: a) "workshops as a means" to achieve a particular goal; b) "workshops as practice", which draw a relationship between the workshop form and its outcomes; and c) "workshops as research methodology", which serves the aim of achieving a particular purpose of a study (p.72). The authors postulated this based on their critical analysis of five studies that used video conferencing-based workshops for carrying out various research in the fields of healthcare, music, and teacher education, where they saw the tremendous potential of the workshop as a research approach. They also felt that there is a gap in the literature on the subject, which can be strengthened with an empirical orientation within a single project or in small sections of a long term project.

Lessons Learned from Conducting the "Critical Thinking Through Writing" Workshop
Using Ørngreen & Levinsen's (2017)'s work as a point of departure, we describe our "Critical Thinking Through Writing Workshop" to illustrate how workshops can be used as a qualitative, educational research approach. In this series of five workshops, we wanted to determine how the participants—fifteen undergraduate students of an English writing course at a Malaysian university—might respond to various higher order thinking tasks in the pre-writing and essay writing sessions.

As a first step in conducting the workshop, we followed the prescriptions of the Dutch facilitator, Jac Geurts, where he stated that a workshop requires "3Ps", or "Proper Prior Planning", for its successful implementation (Inmark, 2010, p.6). Firstly, we designed a poster with the details of the workshop so that announcements could be made across the university. The poster bore the following criteria: a) that the pre-university students had to be of at least pre-intermediate level and b) that they had to be willing to complete the activities of the workshops and write essays on given topics. We set the first baseline criterion to enable us to have participants with more or less the same level of proficiency and hence, those who could write essays moderately well. This was an assumption that we needed to make as the methods of teaching critical thinking through writing depended on the fact that the students share these similarities. These essays later provided us with information-rich data, collected from the participants who were selected through the purposing sampling technique.

Each of the workshop sessions consisted of showing a thought-provoking video on a particular topic, which was followed by a thinking activity such as "Plus minus interesting" (de Bono, 2010) of the video or topic or "fishbowl discussion" or "mind mapping" (see appendix for details). In the second hour, the participants were asked to use the information received from the discussions and write an essay on the given topic. The participants had given their consent to be video-taped during the discussion sessions and submit their written works for the purpose of our study.

Discussion

We compared our workshop with the features of qualitative research methodology and found that the basis for our argument—that workshops can be used as a qualitative research approach in educational research—is well supported by the literature.

Firstly, we chose our participants through purposive, criterion sampling so that we could have participants who are able to give us "information-rich data" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Secondly, as facilitators, we began the first workshop with an icebreaking session after which we conducted a mini-lesson (Bennett, 2007) where we presented a video clip followed by a thinking task. We did this in each of the workshop sessions as it gave the participants an opportunity to speak up and be heard by everyone. In this way, all of the participants were "engaged" (Lain, 2017, p.160), as were we. On the issue of "prolonged engagement" which is often used in qualitative studies to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper& Allen, 1993; Pandey & Patnaik, 2003 & Shenton, 2004), we posit that the intense engagement between the workshop facilitators and participants could be considered as being comparable as it allows researchers to obtain thick and rich data in the course of the interaction. We would like to name this engagement "workshop engagement", which involves: a) the facilitator's engagement with the participants; and b) the participants' engagement among themselves.

Another reason why we argue that the workshop can be considered as a qualitative, educational research approach is that it allows for the use of multiple modes of data collection, which also allows for triangulation—another means of establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. In our study, the workshops included "persistent observation" and "participant observation" to enable us to understand not only *how* the students were think critically, but also, with greater "depth" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.304). We became the medium through which data are collected and interpreted; or, in Spradley's (1979) words, the "research instruments" of the study (p.56). In addition to video-taping the discussion sessions, we also took field notes throughout the workshop sessions, which also helped us to modify our delivery style in the consecutive sessions. We also invited one of our colleagues, to be a second observer to the workshop sessions. The observer commented on our intonation and style of conducting the workshops to help us maintain both "facilitator's engagement" and "participants' engagement". Here, it is important to mention that an observer's degree of involvement can be placed on a scale of low to high on the basis of five types of participation such as "complete", "active", "moderate", "passive" and "nonparticipant" (Spradley, 1979, p.58). As facilitators, we were active observers while our second observer was a complete observer who made sure that the rigour and appropriateness of the data collection procedure was maintained so that it could help to address the main aim of our study. Therefore, the second observer plays a major role in establishing the credibility of the data in a study conducted using this approach.

In addition to the reasons already mentioned, workshops can be optimised as a qualitative approach for data collection by planning the activities and creating an environment such that the participants could collaborate and interact without any hesitation (Inmark, 2010), as we did so in our study. This is very important in the sense that the participants must feel that they have something to learn from the workshop and enjoy being a part of it. Otherwise, they will not be involved in it wholeheartedly, and thus would provide only poor data for the researchers.

Finally, we maximised the potential of the workshop as a qualitative approach by writing a thick, rich description of the workshop procedures so that other researchers can replicate them and conduct similar workshops. In other words, we did this is as it allowed for the transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the workshop procedures, which is one of the ways of establishing the credibility of a qualitative study (Tracy, 2010). Our workshop also had incorporated "triangulation of sources" (Pandey, Satyendra & Patnaik, 2003, p.5748), through the students' interviews, the analysis of their essays, and the participant and non-participant observations of the discussions and engagement of the students and their facilitators in the workshop as well as the students' responses to the lessons—captured in video recordings. Hence, the workshop allowed us to use multiple sources of data within the same "workshop research approach". Both the qualitative elements of transferability and triangulation of sources jointly contribute towards establishing the credibility and trustworthiness and rigour (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013) of a qualitative inquiry.

Recommendations

To maximise the utility of the workshop as a research approach, we suggest that an educational researcher keep the following aspects in mind:

- Workshops should have activities that provide a scope for the participants to interact and learn collaboratively. Otherwise, they may   not find the workshop useful and may not be engaged.

- The facilitator must create an environment where participants feel that their voices are important. He may use question prompts or cues or activities to provoke participants to respond.

- The activities of the workshop must be relevant to the main objective of the workshop.

- Ethical considerations must be taken into account, e.g. having the participants sign the informed consent form prior to the workshop. The facilitator must inform the participants that their responses will be video recorded, but not shared with anyone else.

- If it is a workshop series, the written feedback of the participants at the end of each day may help to improve the consecutive sessions.

- Detailed field notes and multiple observers should be incorporated in the workshop to raise the credibility and trustworthiness of data.

Conclusion

In this paper we discussed the possibility of workshops emerging as a qualitative research approach in the field of Education. The various possible and pertinent methods of data collection such as interviews, analysis of documents—that is, those produced during the workshop activities—and observation of the participants' responses in the workshop contribute towards increasing the credibility and trustworthiness of the data through multiple modes of data collection and transferability through the thick description of field notes. Moreover, workshops can also be used as the qualitative segment of a sequential mixed-method research design, which is usually accomplished through interviews. We believe that there is merit to the argument that workshops can be considered as a qualitative educational research approach and recommend further empirical study on the subject.

References

Bean, J.C. (1996) Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom (2nded.). San Francisco, SF: Jossy- Bass Publishers.

Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to Plan and Perform a Qualitative Study Using Content Analysis. NursingPlus Open, 2, 8-14.

Bennett, S. (2007). That workshop book: New systems and structures for classrooms that read, write, and think. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Bernard, H. Russell (2006). Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches (4th ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Covert, H.H. & Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2015). Layers of Narratives, Images and Analysis. Qualitative Research Journal, 15 (3), 306-318.

Creswell, J.W. & Poth, C.N. (2017). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches (4th ed.). Londong, LDN: Sage Publications Inc.

Denzin, N. K. (2001). Interpretive interactionism. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications Inc.

Geertz, C. (1973). The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books

Holloway, I. (1997). Basic Concepts for Qualitative Research. London, LDN: Blackwell Science.

Houghton,C., Casey, D., Shaw D. & Murphy, K.(2013). Rigour in Qualitative Case-Study Research. Nurse Researcher, 4, 12-7.

INMARK, EMF (2010). *Concept and methodology of Interactive Workshops. See also URL* [https:// cordis.europa.eu/docs/projects/cnect/4/246644/080/deliverables/001-D32Conceptandmethodology](https://cordis.europa.eu/docs/projects/cnect/4/246644/080/deliverables/001-D32Conceptandmethodology) *ofinteractiveworkshops.pdf*

Jamshed, S. (2014) *Qualitative research method-interviewing and Observation. Journal of Basic and Clinical Pharmacy, 5 (4), 87-88.*

Lain, S. (2017) *Show, Don't Tell: Reading Workshop Fosters Engagement and Success. Texas Journal of Literacy Education, 5(2), 160-167.*

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry. London, LDN: Sage Publications Inc.*

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CF: Jossey-Bass Education Series.*

Ørngreen, R., & Levinsen, K. (2017). *Workshops as a Research Methodology. Electronic Journal of E-Learning, 15 (1), 70-81.*

Owens, E. (2006). *Coversational Space and Participant Shame in Interviewing. Qualitative Inquiry, 12 (6),1160-1179*

Pandey, S.C. & Patnaik, S. (2003). *Establishing Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Inquiry: A Critical Examination. Jharkhand Journal of Development and Management Studies,12 (1), 5743-5753.*

Patton, M. Q., (2014), *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods Integrating Theory and Practice (4th ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.*

Schultz, J. (1990) *The 'Story Workshop' Basic Forms Rhetoric-Reader (Concise ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Boyton/Cook.*

Sharma, R.C., Thakur, A., Sharma, M. & Mishra, S. (2015). *Teachers' Perception of Open Educational Resources: Data Collection through Workshops (ROER4D). Paper presented at the Open Education Global Conference 2015. Calgary, AB*

Spagnoletti, C., Spencer, A., Bonnema, R., Mcnamara, M. and McNeil, M. (n.d.). *Workshop Preparation and Presentation: A Valuable Form of Scholarship for the Academic Physician [Powerpoint Slides]. See also URL https://www.aamc.org/download/358432/data/ toolkitworkshoppresentations.pdf*

Stuckey, H. L. (2013). *Three Types of Qualitative Research Methods in Social Health. Journal of Social Health and Diabetes, 1 (2), 56-59.*

Tracy, S. J. (2010). *Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. Qualitative inquiry,16 (10) 837-851.*

Wallendorf, R. & Belk, R.W. (1989). *Assessing Trustworthiness in Naturalistic Consumer Research. In Elizabeth C. & Provo Hirschman (Eds.), Interpretive Consumer Research (pp.69-84). Utah, UT: Association for Consumer Research.*

Wang, J., Lin, E. & Spalding, E. (2008). *Learning Effective Instructional Strategies in a Workshop Context: Lessons about Conceptual Change from Chinese English Teachers. International Journal of Teacher Leadership1 (1), 1-22.*

Appendix

Details of the "Critical Thinking through Writing Workshop series:

Workshop Sessions	Discussion and Activities	Essay Writing
Session 1	Sharing views on sample writings with other participants of the workshop	
Session	Watching a series of Facebook Art and interpreting the meaning (individual activity)	Writing an essay on "Negative sides of Social Media"
Session 3	Watching the short video clip on "Prisoner Community Service" and using Plus-Minus-Interesting grid in discussion session (group activity in triads)	Writing an essay on "Community services by Prisoners"
Session4	Watching a short video clip titled "What". Playing Fishbowl in the discussion session (Whole group activity) and creating a Mind Map (individual activity)	Writing an essay on "Empowerment of Women"
Session 5	See a series of three war images and try to find the underlying storyline (individual activity)	Writing an essay on the underlying theme of the picture series.

.