Measuring the Intangibles We Care About
Using Qualitative Methodology

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss the adaption of qualitative research techniques to assessment of student development outcomes and summarize some common techniques that could be used for qualitative assessment.

The selection of an assessment methodology must fit the phenomenon one is measuring. The phenomenon of human development is evolving at this time. Old assumptions about the nature of development are changing to include a view of development that has multiple pathways and is holistic, fluid, individualistic, and impacted by generational cohorts. It is clear, at this time, that much is still unknown about student development. This situation is calling for a shift in our assessment methods.

Quantitative research is useful when we know more about the subject, or if the phenomenon being studied can be manipulated in a laboratory (Borg & Gall, 1983). Neither of these are true with the assessment of development. Instead, student development lends itself to qualitative assessment for a variety of reasons.

First of all, we need to try and discover as much as possible about this phenomenon. Qualitative assessment will generate a rich database on a phenomenon of which little is presently known. It fits because we can't narrow down something that we don't understand yet. Surveys don't work as effectively with these new findings because we don't know enough to form the content of the questions.

Wolf and Tymitz (1976-1977) suggest that qualitative or naturalistic inquiry is aimed at understanding "actualities, social realities, and human perceptions that exist untainted by the obtrusiveness of formal measurement or preconceived questions. It is a process geared to the uncovering of many idiosyncratic but nonetheless important stories told by real people, about real events, in real and natural ways. The more general the provocation, the more these stories will reflect what respondents view as salient issues, the meaningful evidence, and the appropriate inferences . . . Naturalistic inquiry attempts to present 'slice-of-life' episodes documented through natural language and representing as closely as possible how people feel, what they know, and what their concerns, beliefs, perceptions, and understandings are" (p. 6).

I am suggesting that this kind of slice-of-life picture may be a valuable and valid way of assessing student development in light of recent findings. What follows is a smorgasbord of techniques and methods that qualitative researchers use. Our job in assessment is to adapt these methods to our work.

Evaluator as the Instrument: In qualitative research, the human being is seen as a valid instrument. The human brings an ability to respond to the interview or situation. If the questions that were initially developed don't seem to fit, the human instrument can adjust and respond to what's occurring. This is very different than a survey or structured instrument whose strength is in the objectivity of its format.

However, if development is non-linear in nature, than our traditional formats may not really give us the information we are searching. Seeing ourselves as instruments of assessment may be one way to gain both knowledge of development and an understanding of how it is uniquely understood to individuals.

Interviewing: This is a general category that includes a variety of methods of gathering data on either the process or outcomes of a student's development. Here are a few examples. I have defined these methods in context of assessing student development.

1. Focus Groups: This is when a group of either heterogeneous or homogeneous students are gathered to talk about a given subject. The topics could range from identifying critical incidents that have affected their development as a person to what's it like to be a black student on this campus. The former question would give the assessor information on what is triggering development in their environment. The later question would help assessors understand the experience of being a black student, as well as information on the level of multi-culturalism and appreciation of diversity on campus.

    a. Implementation: These focus groups would be taped (video and/or audio), as well as observed by either one or a team of interviewers. Some campuses have involved faculty and staff as interviewers. It has created a lot of excitement and support for the assessment project. Field notes would also be taken and then these notes, plus the transcribed tapes, would be used to identify themes and patterns. This method generates a large amount of contextual data quickly. Having a team of interviewers/observers can help in the analysis of data.   Weaknesses of this collection technique include misinterpretation due to cultural differences, it depends on the honesty and cooperation of the interviewees, and the data is subject to observer effects.

2. Elite Interviewing: This involves interviewing a particular type of respondent. These interviews can be done in groups but are usually done individually. An example would be to interview a percentage of freshmen during the spring semester to gather information on their experience of the college, learning outcomes, perceptions, satisfaction level, etc.

    a. Implementation: Implementation is similar to the focus group interviewing.   The interviewees could be taped or if a semi-structured interview format was used, notes could be taken on a standardized form. Depending on the sample size, a team of interviewers could be used with each interviewer talking to X number of students.

3. Ethnographic Interviewing: The purpose of an ethnographic interview is to gather cultural data. The interviewer asks questions and encourages subjects to expand their responses. An example of an ethnographic interview would be to discover what it is like to live in a residence hall, or how people experience Greek life. When trying to understand culture, the interviewer needs to get at the perceived reasons behind various behaviors and the symbolic meaning of various rituals.

4. Life Story: This is an in-depth interview that asks the interviewee to share their life story with you. There are variations of this technique. Some examples would be to ask a senior to share their life story at college. This would give a rich amount of data on significant marker events as perceived by the student. It would help assessors to see what developmental changes have taken place in the student as seen through their eyes. Data about how these changes occur would also be surfaced.

5. Methodology Issues in Interviewing:
   a. Covert Versus Overt Interviewing: Covert interviewing takes place when students do not know they are being interviewed or when they do not know the true purpose of the interview.
   b. Structured and Unstructured Formats: A structured interview is one in which the interviewer defines the problem and the questions. This presents a more orderly set of data but may inadvertently bias the information one receives by narrowing the boundaries. Unstructured formats usually begin with one central question and lets the interviewee lead from there.

In-depth interviews taken in the field with a human instrument is an excellent way to gather both quantity and quality of information. This type of information is needed to see what this phenomenon of student development is all about. A human instrument is the only one sensitive enough to respond to the complexities in the field (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Knowledge and understanding emerges out of the interviews and the interactive experience.

Observation: This is the second main type of qualitative research that may have application to the assessment process.

1. Participant Observation: This methodology has the assessor directly observing a situation as well as having social relationships with the members of the group. Some examples of how participant observation could be used in assessment are in assessing how specific experiences, like membership in the student senate or the debate club, effect development outcomes.

2. Informant Interviewing: This is when the assessor identifies an "informant" who reports information, observations, and or translate cultural mysteries to the assessor. A key informant gives the assessor information about events that they do not witness. Interviewing the informant is the way the assessor receives the information. One example of a key informant would be if you found an aware and articulate student of

color who could share the experience of what it is like to attend your university. Another example would be to find a student who could articulate the mysteries and meaning for them of extra-curricular activities.

The third type of qualitative methodology are classified as non-verbal communications. They include kinesics (communication through body movement), proxemics (communication through spatial relationships), and synchrony (communication through rhymical relationships of sender and receiver). These have less transferability for assessment. However, the observation of proxemics, and kinesics in the student union or cafeteria of various ethnic groups may give a researcher some assessment of how their program on multi-cultural awareness is going.

The purpose of this paper is limited. It does not intend to cover all the training, ethical, validity, and data analysis issues involved in qualitative research. Rather, it is to tease the assessor into thinking how qualitative research methodology could be used to measure student development. I have enclosed a partial bibliography and reference section to facilitate further reading and understanding of these techniques.

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