



Journaling in Teaching Qualitative Research Methods to Non-sociologists¹

LUCIE JARKOVSKÁ

In 2020, I was asked by the head of our department to teach a course on qualitative methodology for special education students. I was somewhat frustrated because I had been advocating a reduction in the number of research methodology courses for education majors. I believed that future teachers and special educators should focus on learning how to teach rather than delving into research. The methodology courses were not well received by students, who found them challenging and failed to see their practical relevance. Consequently, the overall level of knowledge and skills attained was low. My experience echoed the findings presented by Jonathan Firth and Saima Salehjee in “Engaging Student Teachers with Evidence: Trainers’ Perspectives of Barriers and Opportunities”, revealing that students often do not view research as integral to their teaching identity. They find it difficult, lack confidence, and struggle with both the skills and time required.

Despite my suggestion to cancel some methodology courses, a new course was introduced, and I was still assigned to teach

it. As an advocate of critical and feminist pedagogy, it was crucial for me to ensure that learning was meaningful and provided students with practical knowledge tools. I sought an alternative approach to teaching research methodology.

During that time, Martina Noskova introduced me to journaling and methods of personal writing. As Martina explained various writing techniques, I saw not only methods for self-reflection and self-development but also the potential to use these techniques to comprehend the research process. Martina and I created a team and started to use journaling for teaching the research methodology course.

The texts individuals write about themselves and their surroundings serve as valuable data. They can be analysed to develop essential research skills such as observation, attention to detail, a different perspective, and avoiding assumptions. Moreover, students can write about personal interests or problems they encounter, and the methodology course can align with their personal, academic, or professional needs.

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Using a pen and a piece of paper, students, even those not prioritising research skills, can learn experientially about concepts such as conceptualisation and triangulation, experience the steps of analysis and interpretation, ask meaningful questions, and understand the functional connection between theory, methodology, and analysis. Our focus is on an applied understanding of research to demonstrate to future special educators that research and analysis can be used in evidence-based problem solving in their profession.

Writing Sprint – A 10/15-minute writing session during which the writer does not take their eyes or pen off the paper. This exercise aims to train deep and slow thinking, focusing on the basic steps of analysis: reflection, summary, and later, interpretation.

The List of 100 Items – Students are tasked with creating a list of 100 items on an arbitrary (e.g. bucket list, 100 reasons for studying special education, 100 things I hate about my studies) or specified (e.g. what can you observe in the classroom) topic. This exercise helps develop the ability to capture detail, categorise data, and, in later stages, fosters teamwork and interpretation.

Word Trip – A list of dimensions related to the concept under investigation (e.g. write a list of everything that comes to your mind when you hear the word “success”). This exercise allows students to break down the concept into dimensions and different aspects, bringing them closer to conceptualisation and highlighting

the importance of the theoretical aspect of their work. It is followed by an exercise that focuses on asking meaningful questions.

5x Why – The student writes down a statement and asks why. They answer and ask why again. This sequence of questions is designed to build on each other, leading students to a deeper understanding, fostering curiosity, and developing the skill of asking insightful questions.

Imaginary Interview – Creating an interview scenario with questions and answers. This exercise cultivates the ability to ask questions, conduct a conversation, and empathise, fostering engagement in metaposition.

We initially implement these techniques with students individually, allowing them to choose their assignment topics. We provide several options, and concurrently, students have the flexibility to select their own topics. As the course progresses, we employ these techniques for the entire class to collectively explore a single topic, such as the barriers students face when writing undergraduate theses.

The pinnacle of the course involves a simulated case study on a chosen educational topic. We begin by discussing opinions on the selected issue and subsequently delve into it using the simulated case study approach. In recent years, our focus has been on the topic of mobile phone use by Ukrainian children. Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022, many Ukrainian children enrolled in Czech schools. There was an



assumption that staying connected with their families and keeping track of the situation necessitated considerable time on smartphones. Consequently, schools often allowed Ukrainian children unrestricted mobile phone use, while other students had to adhere to strict rules. This led to teacher complaints about the challenges in conducting classes, and Czech students felt that Ukrainian children were being prioritised and privileged.

Using a simulated case study, we aimed to find an evidence-based solution. We identified the actors in the situation and devised a research design for a deeper understanding (exploring school measures regarding Ukrainian children, teacher support, the actors involved, and their needs), all facilitated through journaling techniques.

In their feedback, students reported that, initially, they were primarily focused on defending their viewpoints in discussions. However, the simulated study transformed their perspective and understanding. The debate shifted from setting rules for smartphone use to structuring lessons that accommodate the diverse backgrounds and needs of children and teachers.

The response to this interactive, journaling-based teaching has been positive. Students stated that research no longer appears mysterious or too sophisticated to them, and they can now envision using elements of it for evidence-based problem-solving in their future careers.

Feedback from students, which we collected after each course meeting, shows

that this teaching method was successful and brought about positive changes in students' perspectives on research and its application in pedagogical practice.

EXCERPTS FROM STUDENT FEEDBACK

Feedback on the case study simulation on mobile phone use

Initially, I didn't fully grasp why anyone would be bothered by it. I held a sympathetic view of the issue and empathised with the Ukrainian children. I was convinced that we should allow them to use their phones in class and tolerate it – after all, they have gone through a very difficult situation and are still going through one. On the other hand, I did not identify with the Czech teachers and pupils because they don't really have “the same worries” as the Ukrainian pupils. In the second lesson, we were already observing mainly the surroundings and all the actors involved in the situation and their NEEDS. When I also looked at the issue from their (classmates' and teachers') perspective, I was able to understand their needs, and suddenly their comments and criticisms made sense to me. I comprehended what bothered them about the situation. My perspective changed radically after the second lesson on the basis of the data; suddenly, I was able to put myself in the shoes of the other participants and understand their reactions and needs. I recognised them as relevant and justified.



Feedback on the whole course using the interview technique

Imaginative conversation that a student has with his/her bachelor thesis (BT):

Me: You know you're a case study, as the design that we were taught about on this course?

BT: I know. And has the course helped you in any way?

Me: Yes, I learned new techniques, I gained a better understanding of how to write you, and the teachers were able to motivate me to think more deeply about you.

BT: What exactly did you reflect on more?

Me: On your meaningfulness. To make you useful and also readable. So that your content is not just a repetition of what others have already written, but that it might be of interest to someone.

BT: That sounds interesting; I can't wait to be done.

Me: You're not alone, then. You're a lot of work, and I've already made some mistakes too. It's just that I got some of the information too early, and I don't remember it any more, and some I'm just getting now, a bit too late.

BT: So you're happy with the Faculty of Education?

Me: To a certain extent, yes.

BT: And with this course?

Me: Yes, I've found that methodology can be fun and not just a nightmare.

BT: Well, yeah. I wish you the best of luck continuing on me.

Me: Thank you.

After the conclusion of the course, we conducted a survey to gather students' opinions using a questionnaire. In it, students rated the course as inspiring, significantly different from other courses, and practical. Many applied the tools they learned in the course not only in writing their bachelor's theses but also in their personal and professional lives. Therefore, I believe that we succeeded in our goal of introducing the analytical tools of the social sciences to educators through an interactive course, despite the fact that 150 students attended. The full curricula of teaching research methodology through journaling will be published in a book in 2025.

Lucie Jarkovská

Institute for Research in Inclusive Education, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University;

e-mail: jarkovska@mail.muni.cz