



## Teaching ‘Qualitative Research Methodology’ Course to Quantitatively Oriented PhD Students: A Practical Action Research Study

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### ABSTRACT

This practical action research study reports how the doctoral-level Qualitative Research Methodology course offered by a Vietnamese university evolved over four years. Since the students were quantitatively oriented and of mixed disciplinary backgrounds, they struggled with the course immensely. In particular, they were highly skeptical of the qualitative research methodology. By assigning more discipline-appropriate reading materials and changing the material assignment mechanism over four intervention cycles, the students responded increasingly positively to the course and gradually overcame their prejudice against it. In addition, popular press books seemed to create a meaningful common space between the students and the instructor. While the interventions brought about more positive student learning experiences, the instructor found them painful, and some students remained skeptical of the course. This study is useful for those professors who teach research methods courses in Ph.D. programs, especially when the students struggle with the courses.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A lot has been written about doctoral education in general, especially about Ph.D. students' well-being (Barry et al, 2018; Byrom et al., 2022; Gin et al. 2021; Levecque et al. 2017; Pappa et al., 2020; Usher & McCormack, 2021), their graduate teaching experience (Twinley & Letherby, 2022; Usher & McCormack, 2021; Glorieux et al., 2024), and supervisor-Ph.D. student relationships (Le et al, 2021; Lindsay, 2015; Phan, 2024; Wollast, 2023). However, little scholarship on teaching doctoral students from professors' perspectives has been found in the literature (Coronel Llamas & Boza, 2011). It is even rarer in the context of Vietnam, where doctoral education has recently witnessed a slight surge thanks to the incentive policies of the Vietnamese government (Decision 89/QĐ-Ttg, 2019; Document 1943/BGDĐT-GDĐH, 2021). It is generally acknowledged that doctoral education is concerned primarily with research training rather than knowledge transmission (Coronel Llamas & Boza, 2011). However, the fact is that Ph.D. students in most academic programs are expected to take research methods and other foundation courses before working on their theses (Nguyen, 2021). Therefore, teaching, especially the teaching of research methods courses, is still an essential part of doctoral education (Humphreys, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016; Pruss et al., 2024). Therefore, scholarship in teaching doctoral-level research methods courses is a huge gap that needs filling, especially in the Vietnamese context.

In 2021, I was invited by a Vietnamese university to develop and teach a course about qualitative research methodology to a group of Ph.D. students from four different programs. Since then, this course has been offered yearly as part of the university's efforts to promote its Ph.D. students' epistemological diversity (Pallas, 2001). I taught this course in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. This course is special in that the participating students had mixed disciplinary backgrounds, which were also different from mine, and more importantly, all of them were quantitatively

oriented. Before taking this course, they had no experience with or knowledge of qualitative research methodology. Even worse, most of them were rather skeptical of qualitative research methodology. As the instructor of this course for four consecutive years, I found myself in a very challenging pedagogical situation: teaching a course to those with doubts about it and without any intention of implementing it in their research work.

I did not give up but tried different strategies to improve the course. This paper reports the four cycles of intervention I implemented on four groups of PhD students over four years. Through personal observation, reflective journals, informal interviews, and focus group discussions, I reflected upon my pedagogical interventions and the students' responses. The findings from this study are hoped to inform and inspire other instructors who may find themselves in similar pedagogical situations. This study answers the following questions: (1) What were the major challenges of the course?; (2) How effective were the interventions?; (3) How did the students and the instructor respond to the interventions?; (4) What challenges remained unsolved?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Quantitative vs qualitative research*

The two primary research traditions in the social sciences are quantitative and qualitative research, based on two different epistemologies (Creswell & Clark, 2017). While the former is based on post-positivism, the latter interpretivism and constructivism. Post-positivism assumes that knowledge derives from sensory experience, is interpreted through reason and logic, allows independent verification, is independent of the researcher, and is value-free (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Research in this tradition emphasizes objectivity, generalizability, and measurement. In contrast, interpretivists and constructivists believe that knowledge and knowledge production are not value-free, but are contingent on the researcher's lens and the socio-cultural contexts (Small & Calarco, 2022). These two epistemologies are incompatible and have brought about an irreconcilable divide between them in academia for over 50 years.

### *'Paradigm wars'*

There has existed a so-called 'paradigm war' in academia in the past 50 years, especially in, but not limited to, educational research (Donmoyer, 2024; Maxwell, 2021; Mir & Mir, 2002; Munoz-Najar, 2021). In this war, those in the quantitative camp tend to dismiss qualitative research as weak (Galdas, 2017; Pegues, 2007; Staller, 2013). On the contrary, those in the qualitative camp consider quantitative research too limited since not all human phenomena are measurable. A solution proposed by many is to combine these two paradigms in a meaningful way, leading to the so-called 'mixed-methods research' (Garner et al, 2016; Given, 2017; Hindley et al, 2022; Mingers, 2004; Mulisa, 2022; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Polio, 2012; Staller, 2013). For example, Creswell and Clark (2017) put forward six mixed-methods designs, including (1) the convergent parallel design, (2) the explanatory sequential design, (3) the exploratory sequential design, (4) the embedded design, (5) the transformative design, and (6) the multiphase design. While this sounds like a perfect combination, there are a few criticisms against it. For example, some scholars argue that since quantitative research and qualitative research are based on two contradictory philosophical foundations, they cannot co-exist in the same study (Bergman, 2011). Another argument against mixed methods research is concerned with the terminology. According to this argument, 'mixed' should be replaced by 'blended', 'combined', or 'meshed' because these words better reflect what is done in mixed methods research (Dawadi et al., 2021).

### *Teaching research methods*

It is generally agreed that research methods pedagogy has been ignored in the literature (Wagner et al, 2011; Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016). Mostly, the rare literature on research methods pedagogy draws a clear distinction between teaching methods to undergraduate and graduate students. The former tends to introduce different pedagogical strategies and approaches, such as the psychogeographic approach (Hindley et al, 2022), active learning (Lundahl, 2008), case study (Pfeffer & Rogalin, 2012), community-based research (Pruss et al, 2024), "methods lab" approach (Sullivan & De Bruin, 2023), etc. On the other hand, the latter explores the dilemmas and challenges in delivering research methods courses to graduate students (Coronel Llamas & Boza, 2011; Garner et al, 2016) and how to help graduate students overcome the 'paradigm wars' (Humphreys, 2006; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). While some of these studies also point out how hard it is to convince Ph.D. students of the value of qualitative research in a quantitatively dominated academic culture, none has been done in the context of Vietnam, especially when the students are of mixed backgrounds, which are also different from the instructor's disciplinary background.

### *Impact of pedagogy on student learning*

The impact of an instructor's pedagogical skills on student learning is not rare in the literature, especially in the discipline of higher education. Pedagogical skills may include a range of different techniques and approaches, such as contemplative pedagogy (Grace, 2011; Gardner, 2021), narrative pedagogy (McAllister et al., 2009), e-learning materials (Alenezi, 2020), learner-centered pedagogy (Schweisfurth, 2015; Connell et al., 2016), etc. However, most of these studies are set in high school or undergraduate class settings and generally do not discuss the relevancy of reading materials in response to mixed classes. Therefore, this current study, which is focused on reading materials adjustment for a Ph.D. course in the context of Vietnam, fills in the gap in the literature.

## **3. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### *Practical action research*

The qualitative method of practical action research was used for this study. Practical action research is a form of action research whereby the researcher and the practitioner/ instructor are one (myself). The main purpose of practical action research in education is to improve the educational practice in a specific classroom setting by implementing several cycles of interventions (Schmuck, 2009). Traditionally, an action research study is conducted on one group of participating students for an extended period with several intervention cycles (Burns, 2010). However, the current action research study was set in a special classroom setting where the investigation of one single group of students for one semester would not yield significant results. Moreover, the prolonged study (up to four years) gave the instructor enough time to deeply reflect and figure out meaningful adjustments in instructional strategies for each academic year.

### *About the course*

The qualitative methods course in question is offered every spring semester for doctoral students of mixed backgrounds (except for TESOL). Its overall structure has been stable in the past four years. First, it covers the philosophical foundation of qualitative research (Week 1), which explores the epistemological assumptions of qualitative and quantitative research. It then introduces seven qualitative methods/approaches suggested by Creswell and Poth (2017), including *case study*, *ethnography*, *narrative inquiry*, *grounded theory*, *phenomenology*, *action research*, and *mixed methods* (weeks 2-8). These seven methods/ approaches are the backbone of this course, and sample research papers are used to illustrate each method/approach. The course then moves on to data collection and analysis (using NVIVO or equivalents), research ethics, and finally standards of qualitative research (weeks 9-11). As per the assessment, students are expected to do group presentations, where basic concepts about each method/approach are presented and 2-3 sample research articles are summarized for illustration. They each also have to submit an individual mini-proposal four weeks after the completion of the course, which is about a research problem in their respective areas. As a norm at this institution, the reading materials and lecture slides are in English, but the medium of instruction is in Vietnamese. With their entry English proficiency level of IELTS 5.5 or equivalents, the students in my classes did not seem to have any difficulty reading the materials.

### *About the course instructor*

I (the course instructor) earned my M.A. in TESOL and then a Ph.D. in curriculum theories. I am working as a full-time lecturer at the Department of English at a university in Vietnam. I also have an affiliate lecturer position at another Vietnamese university where this study was conducted. Before receiving the invitation to develop and teach this course, I had taught a similar course at the same institution, but for Ph.D. students in TESOL, which was more relevant to my academic background. The teaching of this TESOL course, which will be narrated elsewhere, had some impact on the instruction of the course in question, especially in the first cycle. I have solid academic training in qualitative and post-qualitative research, and my publications are qualitatively oriented. However, I consider myself a pluralist methodologist, who believes that the selected method(ology) has to be appropriate to the research problem. I do not think the qualitative methodology is superior, or inferior, to the quantitative one, but the key is 'appropriacy'. In retrospect, I was quite hesitant to accept the invitation to teach this course in 2021. I had assumed that the subject matter would to some extent matter in a research methodology class, although I also believed in knowledge transferability. For different reasons, I taught this course for four consecutive years.

### *About the students*

This action research study involved four separate groups of non-TESOL PhD students in four consecutive but different years: 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. Although these groups had many differences, they also shared one thing:

they were quantitatively oriented. As briefly described above, this course was intended for PhD students of mixed disciplinary backgrounds (except for TESOL), including: business administration, finance, economics, and construction. The students had a four-hour face-to-face class meeting every week, and each course lasted for 11 weeks (45 class hours). The students in their early 30s to late 40s came from southern and central provinces and cities of Vietnam. All of them worked full-time and only went to school at the weekend. About half were university lecturers, while the other half worked for government agencies. Generally, they were more familiar with quantitative research methodology and tended to equate academic research with quantitative research. A few had limited experience with interviews and questionnaires as add-ons to quantitative designs but had no formal training in qualitative research methodology. In particular, most of them expressed varying levels of prejudice against qualitative research. More information about the students can be found in Table 1.

#### *About the interventions*

*Table 1. A summary of participating students and pedagogical interventions. Information in bold indicates new interventions in each cycle*

<b>Year (cycle)</b>	<b>Number of students</b>	<b>Disciplinary areas</b>	<b>Pedagogical interventions</b>
Cycle 1 (Spring 2021)	15	business administration (7 students); finance (3); economics (3); construction (2);	Two textbooks about general qualitative research: Creswell & Poth (2017) and Maxwell (2012); 24 sample qualitative research papers on language education (assigned by the instructor); Lecture-based
Cycle 2 (Spring 2022)	15	business administration (6 students); finance (3); economics (3); construction (3);	Two textbooks about general qualitative research: Creswell & Poth (2017) and Maxwell (2012); Sample qualitative research papers on language education (assigned by the instructor); Students applying qualitative research methods into their fields;
Cycle 3 (Spring 2023)	14	business administration (7); finance (2); economics (2); construction (3);	One textbook about general qualitative research: Creswell & Poth (2017); One textbook about qualitative research in business: Myers (2019); Sample qualitative research papers in students' professional fields (assigned by the instructor). Students applying qualitative research methods into their fields;
Cycle 4 (Spring 2024)	35	business administration (20); finance (6); economics (6); construction (3);	One (new) textbook about qualitative research in business: De Sorti (2024); One popular press book using qualitative research method: Hodge (2013); Sample qualitative research papers in students' professional fields (nominated by the students, or assigned by the instructor). Students applying qualitative research methods into their fields; Students might choose not to go to class.

**Cycle 1:** In 2021, the students were assigned two textbooks about general qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017 and Maxwell, 2012) and 24 sample research articles on language education. I was familiar with these materials,

which had been used in my previous qualitative methods course for Ph.D. students in TESOL. Another reason was that I believed the sample articles did not have to be about the students' areas of study, since knowledge could be transferable. After all, this class was about qualitative research methods, not about the subject matter of language education. I gave formal lectures for the most part.

**Cycle 2:** In 2022, I re-used all the reading materials of Cycle 1. However, the students were required to give oral presentations, followed by my mini-lectures. In particular, I had them brainstorm research topics in their areas using qualitative methods in each class meeting.

**Cycle 3:** In 2023, I re-used Creswell & Poth (2017) but replaced Maxwell (2012) with Myers (2019) because the latter was written specifically for business students. I replaced all research articles on language education with new articles on business administration, finance, economics, and construction. Of the twenty new articles, 12 were about business administration, 3 human resources management, 2 finance, 2 economics, and 1 construction management. As in Cycle 2, the students were requested to brainstorm research problems in their disciplinary areas using each newly acquired qualitative method/approach.

**Cycle 4:** In 2024, some drastic changes were made to the course. I replaced Myers (2019) with De Sordi (2024), the latest textbook on qualitative research for business students. I also replaced Creswell & Poth (2017) with Hodge (2013), a popular press book about social transformation in Ladakh (India), which created a common space between the students and myself. In our informal conversations, the students of different disciplines expressed their interest in some social matters, such as globalization, cultural preservation, etc. Hodge (2013) seemed to meet this requirement, and in particular, I loved this book. More importantly, I had the students nominate research articles in their disciplines, share them with me for approval, and then share them with their classmates. Alternatively, if they could not find articles in their fields, they could use the old articles assigned in Cycle 3. Finally, they were allowed to choose to skip the class meetings but fulfill the assessment tasks.

#### ***Data collection instruments***

- *In-class observation:* The observation was done by the instructor during class hours for four semesters when the course was delivered (Spring 2021, Spring 2022, Spring 2023, and Spring 2024). The observation was focused on how the students responded to the lectures, how they reacted to the reading materials, how they presented the articles, and how they brainstormed research problems in their fields. The students' questions were noted because they helped me to understand what they were struggling with and the effectiveness of my interventions. The observation was done informally without concrete observation forms. However, the observation was done almost continuously since, despite the generally defined structure of the course, the assigned readings for one week depended partially on the students' reactions in the preceding week. *I wrote memos at the end of each class meeting.*

- *Reflective journal:* According to Creswell & Poth (2017), the reflective journal is one of the essential tools in action research. A reflective journal normally accompanies in-class observation. While observation notes and memos helped me to document the factual information about the observed, reflective journals went beyond mere facts by digging deep into what I thought about my observations. Reflective journals necessitated many long hours of deep reflection, which connected my observations to educational theories and other related issues. I did not develop a fixed schedule for writing reflective journals, but I usually wrote a journal entry after noticing a significant moment or event in class. There were 20 reflective journal entries within the four cycles of intervention, each of which was about one page long. See a reflective journal sample in the Appendix.

- *Informal conversations:* Action research also depends very much on informal, casual conversations/interviews with the students (Schmuck, 2009; Burns 2010). In the first meeting of each class, I said upfront to the students that I was treating them like my colleagues, not students in the traditional sense of the word. I added that I expected them to co-construct the course with me through their feedback on reading materials and class activities to make the course work for them. Indeed, I talked with them like colleagues and hung out with them like friends during break hours, when we had a lot of small talks and exchanges about qualitative research methodology. Quite a few adjustments were made as a result of these casual conversations. For example, some students said during the coffee breaks that they did not believe in qualitative research methodology, which motivated me to sharpen my articulation skills in explaining the epistemology underlying qualitative research. Another example is that they complained about how hard it was to read sample papers irrelevant to their professional backgrounds, so I decided to let them select the reading materials related to their disciplines. Searching for qualitative research articles in their disciplines was a new



experience for them because they had assumed there would be no qualitative papers in their fields. Although our informal conversations were not audio-recorded, these exchanges were incorporated into my reflective journals.

- *Focus group discussion:* I organized two focus group discussions for each class, the first in Week 5, and the second in Week 11. There was a total of 8 focus group discussions, which were audio-recorded. Focus group discussions were the opportunities for me and the students to reflect on the course, confirming or negating my observations during the course. Generally speaking, the students were open and straightforward in the focus group discussions. The focus group discussions revolved around these questions: (1) How do you make sense of the qualitative research methodology at this point in this course?; (2) In what aspects do you agree or disagree with the qualitative research methodology?; (3) Are you struggling with the course? If yes, in what ways?; (4) What do you think about our textbook(s) and other reading materials?; (5) What additional support do you expect from me?; (6) Do you have any recommendations about the course design, delivery, and reading materials?; (7) What are the most important things you have obtained so far?

### *Data analysis*

Content analysis was used to analyze the data. The students received and signed consent forms at the beginning of each course. The conversations were anonymous, and confidentiality was practiced during research and publication.

Content analysis was conducted in three coding phases: open, axial, and selective (Williams and Moser, 2019). In the open coding phase, I quickly read through all the field notes, memos, and reflective journals, and listened to all focus group discussions, to have an overall impression of the content. The audio recordings were not transcribed but were listened to multiple times until meaningful codes emerged. I also took the first steps in mapping these overall impressions with the four research questions. My data analysis was not a linear process but it was mingled with data collection. Data collection and analysis had a reciprocal relationship (Maxwell, 2012). My data collection was adjusted many times during the open coding phase. For example, the open coding after Cycle 2 made me add 'the instructor's responses' to the original second research question: 'How did the students respond to the interventions?'. I realized my cognitive and emotional responses were not as simple as anticipated, and that they would matter to the readers. Additionally, after the third intervention cycle, I tried open coding, during which I realized I would need another intervention cycle to obtain more in-depth data. As narrated above, I changed the textbook and allowed the students to select the reading materials relevant to their disciplines in Cycle 4.

In the axial coding period, which was done after Cycle 4, I carefully re-read all the notes, memos, and journals, listened to all the recordings again, and identified the relevant codes corresponding to the four research questions. Like open coding, axial coding was done manually because the data was not too rich, and I was the only researcher in this study. There were 52 axial codes. As expected, many of these codes overlapped to varying degrees, but I kept them intact because I was unsure which ones to delete at that point. Again, this axial coding phase was not a straightforward process but was done several times until I believed the codes were saturated.

After I was sure that all the potential axial codes had been drawn out, I started the selective coding phase, when the axial codes were scrutinized again and grouped into several main codes/themes relevant to the four research questions. These main codes/themes are presented in the Findings section below.

### *Trustworthiness*

This study fulfills all the four pillars of qualitative research proposed by Ahmed (2024), especially credibility and dependability. First, I engaged in this study for a prolonged period (four years), with up to four intervention cycles. Second, as mentioned earlier, the study foregrounded the instructor's reflexivity, where I transparently shared my background and the lens through which I made sense of the course in question. I self-identified as a pluralist methodologist and did not hide my personal experiences and responses during the research/teaching process. In fact, my responses to the interventions were included in the third research question. Third, the data was collected through four channels (in-class observation, reflection, informal conversations, and focus group discussions), fulfilling the triangulation requirement. Finally, I am transparent in my decisions regarding my research methodology, fulfilling the requirements of methodological documentation and audit trails (Ahmed, 2024).

## **4. FINDINGS**

### *Major challenges of the course*

The challenges confronting the instructor and students were highly complicated and evolved over four years. First, there was a marked discrepancy between my and the students' disciplinary backgrounds. While I specialized in language education and curriculum theories, the students specialized in business administration, finance, economics, and construction. Although the course was about research methods, not the subject matter, this gap made the instruction challenging. Second, the students were of mixed professional backgrounds. While most students came from the business administration program, others came from finance, economics, and construction programs. Because of this diversity in student background, the reading materials in one area might be inaccessible to those in other areas. Third, the biggest challenge was the students' prejudice against qualitative research methodology. This challenge placed me on a tricky pedagogical mission: persuading quantitatively oriented students to buy into the qualitative research methodology.

#### *Students' and instructor's responses to the intervention cycles*

The interventions' effectiveness and the responses from the students and the instructor are not separable. Therefore, RQ2 and RQ3 are jointly addressed below.

**Cycle 1:** In the first cycle (Spring 2021), the students struggled immensely with qualitative research and demonstrated a strong prejudice against it. The assigned textbooks and articles about language education made them feel like strangers in class. In the focus group discussion at the end of the course, one student said, *"The article simply did not make any sense to me. We all have experience in learning English as a foreign language, but reading specialized articles about language education is a different story"*. It was hard for them to absorb the new subject matter and research methodology simultaneously. In particular, they tended to believe that academic research meant post-positivistic, quantitative research. It took them a long time to accept the existence of an alternative epistemology out there. Some students even could not accept it at the end of the course. Student G said this in the last week of Cycle 1, *"Dr. C, I think I now quite understand the basic assumptions of qualitative research, but honestly I can't accept the fact that research findings are not generalizable. What is the point of research if the findings are not generalizable?"*. This reaction was not only heard in the first cycle but was repeatedly heard in the remaining three cycles.

At first, I was profoundly shocked by the students' attitudes and questions. Their strong reactions made me realize I was in a very tough pedagogical position and needed to do something about it. A quote from my journal entry after my initial class meeting in Cycle 1, *"Exhausted and burnt out. A terrible experience in class today. My authority was challenged. I should not have accepted the invitation to teach this course"*.

**Cycle 2:** In the second cycle (Spring 2022), the students struggled with qualitative research methodology and expectedly expressed their prejudice against it, especially at the beginning of the course. With the new intervention when they were required to brainstorm qualitative problems in their fields, they seemed to develop an initial awareness of different epistemologies. They gradually realized that they also had their epistemological assumptions about research, and these assumptions were not universally accepted. In other words, they developed an awareness of the research methodology they had taken for granted for years (quantitative, post-positivist) when exposed to qualitative research methodology. Three students said they had never thought about their hidden assumptions but simply followed what had been instructed. Post-positivism, they began to realize, was not the only worldview in the social sciences. Despite their hesitance in accepting interpretivism and constructivism, many began to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each tradition. One student shared, *"Before this class, I simply did research on an auto-pilot mode. I did publish a lot but was unaware of my philosophical assumptions. Although I disagree with interpretivism and constructivism, at least I now know about its existence and why some people go for it"*. Some students even showed their appreciation for the new research methodology. A, a 45-year-old student, said that after several weeks into the course (Cycle 2) he felt that he was still struggling with the reading articles, but managed to visualize the overall research landscape and the relationship between the research traditions.

With the anticipation of the students' critical questions, I gradually learned how to sharpen my articulation skills and justify my stance more convincingly. In other words, I developed my academic resilience. I was no longer able to take qualitative research methodology for granted. I gradually realized that while the course was a huge pedagogical challenge, it was also a perfect opportunity to deepen my specialized knowledge and pedagogical skills. A journal entry at the end of the second year, *"Where else can I have such a compelling intellectual conversation?"*. In retrospect, this was why I kept teaching the course for four consecutive years. I found a similar comment from some students in the fourth group. Student F, for instance, said she enjoyed the class because she had the chance to engage in difficult

but highly intellectual conversations. However, I struggled with the students' qualitative research problems in their fields. They had to explain them to me in great detail. Somehow, I began to feel like a stranger in my class.

**Cycle 3:** In this cycle, the students still showed their prejudice against qualitative research at first. However, with the new intervention (more appropriate reading materials), the prejudice did not last long among many students. They responded positively to the newly assigned reading materials related to their professional fields. Some felt "at home" immediately. Others felt positive about the materials but still struggled with the new methodology. Thanks to the relevant materials and my sharpened articulation skills, they were quickly aware of their philosophical assumptions and an initial sympathy with interpretivism and constructivism. When asked about the materials at the end of the course, one student replied, "*I don't think the methods should be separate from the subject matter, especially for novice researchers like us. The familiar subject matter was like a bridge connecting us to the new research methodology. I loved the new articles.*"

While I was thrilled to assign new reading materials for the course, I had to do much homework every week. To some extent, I had to step out of my comfort zone and again and again felt like a stranger in my classroom. Indeed, the class was still about qualitative research methodology, but all in-class discussions were about business, finance, economics, or construction. I felt tired and alienated. While most students were comfortable with the new reading materials, the class was seriously fragmented. Everyone had to travel back and forth between different topics and disciplines. There was very little common space that bonded them together. A student informally shared this with me after the class was over, "*I felt tired. I found myself wandering all over the place. I did not have a focus, a home where I could feel comfortable.*"

**Cycle 4:** As anticipated, this year's students also expressed their doubts about the qualitative research methodology in the first few weeks. As in Cycle 3, their prejudice did not last long thanks to the new materials and my sharpened articulation skills. They gradually developed an awareness of their philosophical assumptions and started to explore and appreciate the new ones. To varying extents, most students began to identify with qualitative research methods in their home disciplines, especially when they were encouraged to find and present their papers to the class. They felt more comfortable discussing articles that reflected the latest developments in their respective fields. D, for example, said that he loved the article he selected for Week 8 of the fourth cycle, and argued that the article's theme (innovation in construction) was very dear to him. He felt very confident explaining it to his peers. In particular, the students loved the popular press book on social transformation in Ladakh (Hodge, 2013) that I added to this cycle. One student said in the second focus group discussion: "*While I love the academic readings about our disciplines, what has stayed with me is the Ladakh book*". She further explained that the book was easy to read and inspirational. She added that she learned more about ethnography from this book than the regular textbook.

On the one hand, I had a very tough time digesting the new book (De Sordi, 2024) and the student-nominated articles. As in Cycle 3, I had to do tons of homework every week. While I found it interesting to step out of my comfort zone and explore new horizons, I was exhausted. Again, I felt like a stranger in my home. The new class attendance policy (no attendance requirement) also caused chaos in the class. Many students did not show up anymore, despite my new interventions. My journal entry dated March 20, 2024 read, "*So disappointed! Only 15 out of 35 students showed up. No appreciation felt.*". However, I also gradually learned to let go of my ego and made the class more student-centered. After all, I was the one who proposed this new policy. As painful as it was, the class was in the right direction. The Ladakh book by Hodge (2013) was a magical remedy for me. I always loved this book and the discussion around it. Fortunately, the students also loved it. I considered this book, and possibly other popular press books, as a beautiful consensus for this course. Perhaps it would be one of the ways out of this course.

A summary of students and instructor's responses can be found in the table below:

*Table 2. A summary of student and instructor's responses to pedagogical interventions*

	Students' responses	Instructor's responses
<b>Cycle 1 (2021)</b>	Showed consistent prejudice against qualitative methodology; Struggled with qualitative methodology.	Felt shocked by students' attitudes and questions.
<b>Cycle 2 (2022)</b>	Showed less prejudice against qualitative methodology; Developed an initial awareness of different epistemologies;	Sharpened articulation and defense skills;



	Felt some initial connection to qualitative research.	Appreciated intellectual conversations; Struggled with students' research topics & problems.
<b>Cycle 3 (2023)</b>	Showed initial prejudice against qualitative methodology; Developed an initial awareness of different epistemologies; Felt comfortable with qualitative research; Struggled with class fragmentation.	Struggled with new reading materials beyond my comfort zone; Struggled with class fragmentation.
<b>Cycle 4 (2024)</b>	Showcased initial prejudice against qualitative methodology; Developed an awareness of different epistemologies; Identified with qualitative research; Loved the popular press book.	Struggled with the new textbook; Felt threatened; Reached a consensus.

### *Unsolved challenges*

With four intervention cycles in four years, the course seemed to improve significantly. However, some problems remained unsolved or only partially solved. First, the differences in disciplinary areas between the students, and between the students and the instructor, were unsolved. Teaching this course was a rewarding learning curve for me, but it was also highly labor-intensive and painful. Second, the fact that several students did not need qualitative research methods posed an insurmountable challenge to the course. One student shared with me at the end of the fourth year, “*I came to the class out of my respect for you, but I am pretty sure that I am not going to use it [qualitative methodology] in my academic career.*”. Finally, several students never seemed to overcome their deep-rooted prejudice against qualitative research methodology, regardless of my pedagogical interventions.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What is special about this study is that practical action research, a qualitative research method, was used to investigate the delivery of a course on qualitative research methodology to PhD students over an extended period. It could be concluded that the four intervention cycles were relatively effective, and the course seemed to be in the right direction. While this course was a huge pedagogical challenge, it motivated me to sharpen my professional knowledge, pedagogical skills, and academic resilience. This points to the important roles of relevant reading materials and the compatibility between the instructor's and the student's disciplinary backgrounds. While the course improved, the instructor's and the student's experiences could have been much better if they had been in the same disciplinary area. Knowledge transferability could be correct in many cases, but it did not seem to work in this course. The experiences of all involved are probably another takeaway of the study. A successful course is concerned with not only the students but also the instructor's well-being. I was relieved that the popular press book on Ladakh was a perfect bridge between me and the students. It created a common space where we both parties felt comfortable. This leads to another point regarding reading materials for research methods courses. A good coursebook for a qualitative research methods course is not necessarily a textbook per se but could be a popular press book, which may bring about more pleasant academic experiences for the students and the instructor than regular textbooks. And most importantly, it is hard to change PhD students' mindsets and epistemologies. While the interventions seemed successful in raising the students' awareness about epistemological diversity, they did not seem to change their mindsets in practice, due to different academic and cultural norms.

Although this study looked into how the pedagogical interventions affected PhD students' methodologies and epistemologies, it relates to another common problem in education: teaching mixed classes. The classes in this study were mixed in different aspects such as age groups, academic backgrounds, etc. The implemented interventions were aligned with a technique called ‘differentiated instruction’. According to Tomlinson (2017: p.1), differentiated instruction means “shaking up” the classroom so that students have different options for absorbing knowledge, processing ideas, and expressing their understanding. The interventions, intended to help students understand and appreciate qualitative research methodology, also fixed the typical problems of mixed classes.

This study was contextualized in a particular setting and conducted by one single researcher/practitioner with his personal beliefs, experiences, and commitments. Therefore, it is hard, if not impossible, to be duplicated and/or confirmed by anyone else, and the findings are not directly applicable to other instructors or academic settings. However, it is hoped that instructors of qualitative research methods courses, especially in Ph.D. programs, can somehow benefit from this study. Finally, this action research study was conducted on four student groups with different demographic backgrounds. Therefore, the continuity of the study could be questionable, which may affect its trustworthiness. However, given the special contexts of the course, the involvement of four different student groups seemed to be the best option.

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## APPENDIX

### REFLECTIVE JOURNAL SAMPLE

Dated: Saturday, March 13, 2021

*Exhausted and burnt out. A horrible teaching day/experience in class. My authority was challenged! I should not have accepted the invitation to teach this course. Today was a special day for me since I was severely challenged by the students in my qualitative research class. I had prepared for this class for over a year—all the reading, thinking, and preparation. I was very nervous teaching this course because the students are all adult learners, meaning they could be university lecturers or government officials with many years of working experience. I was especially nervous because I had no idea about their professional backgrounds, despite my reading at home before class. Indeed, they challenged me. They expressed their explicit skepticism about the qualitative research methodology, which is so dear to me. This is the first time I have ever received such a confrontational attitude from the students. Since most of the students are from business administration, I wonder why they did not invite a professor from this program to teach the course. Why did I agree to teach this course? In retrospect, I guess it was because I wanted to explore a new horizon, believing that I would learn new stuff from the students. I did not expect this much challenge and confrontation.*

*On second thought, this may be the opportunity for me to be humble and learn new things. I have always been a prince in my classroom, where students deeply respect, even adore, me. But this may have prevented me from growing—professionally, personally, cognitively, and emotionally. I guess it is time to strengthen my ‘academic resilience’, defined as the capability to deal efficiently with academic setbacks, anxiety, and study pressure. Academic resilience usually refers to minority students or professors who try to overcome their disadvantaged circumstances and achieve success. This term is not completely appropriate to my situation, but I still like to use it to describe myself. I don’t want to give up on this class. I will continue to fight, to make this class a success. The students were indeed straightforward but at least they were honest, and they knew what they were talking about. I could learn something from them as well. Isn’t this what motivated me to say yes to the invitation in the first place? If everything were smooth, I would learn nothing new from the course.*

*How should I handle this class then? A difficult task awaiting me is to convince the students of the validity of qualitative research. It is no surprise they are more familiar with post-positivism, because this is the norm in Vietnam, especially in their fields. I have taken interpretivism for granted and ignored the fact that it is not universally accepted. I must learn the art of justification. I must step back and learn more about qualitative research methodology and especially how to present it effectively. This reminds me of TPACK, a concept proposed by Lee Shulman and modified by Punya Mishra, both at Michigan State University. Indeed, content knowledge alone is not enough to make a successful classroom/course. I also need pedagogical content knowledge. I need to read Mishra more.*