

# Experiencing creativity in the qualitative data analysis

A theoretical model for pedagogy

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## Abstract

In this paper, a theoretical model is proposed to understand how creativity is involved in the qualitative data analysis experience to support students' learning. It is important to ensure that students' intuitive and personal knowledge about creativity is structured in a conscious manner. To do so, they should develop ways of reflection in action enabling them to adapt their own individual creativity in the qualitative data analysis experience. In this original model, I describe the process of qualitative data analysis as a reflection-writing dialectic combined with three movements of creativity which are: inspiration, working-out and detachment. This text highlights specific skills that are required at different times of the qualitative data analysis process to encourage teachers to support these skills development among their students.

**Keywords** creativity, qualitative research, qualitative data analysis, theoretical model, pedagogy.

## Introduction

“The world is but a canvas to our imagination”. (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*)

Henry David Thoreau

As Paillé and Muchielli (2008) state it, qualitative data analysis is first an experiential transaction involving sensitivity (researcher) and experience (research participant) for the purpose of producing meaning. In this mysterious encounter, the researcher sensitivity appears decisive. I will define it as the researcher ability to detect the fine variations in the phenomenon under study while activating the theoretical or experiential elements capable to advance its understanding. Qualitative data analysis is often difficult since it cannot be reduced to a general set of strategies or research techniques. In contrast, it requires sensitive interpretive skills and creativity from the researcher (van Manen, 2014). But what is creativity? How does it manifest itself in qualitative data analysis experience?

I will define creativity as ‘the use of the imagination or original ideas, especially in the production of an artistic work’ (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014). In other words, creativity refers to intellectual skill to create something new or original. As Chinn and Kramer define it, a theory is ‘a creative and rigorous structuring of ideas that projects a tentative, purposeful, and systematic view of phenomena’ (Chinn & Kramer, 2008, 182). In this definition, creativity appears therefore inseparable from the theorization process involved in qualitative data analysis experience. Based on my experience of qualitative research in phenomenology (Ellefsen, 2010, 2013), on van Manen’s phenomenological research activities (van Manen, 1997) and a representation of the creation process in arts (Gosselin & al., 1998), I have developed a theoretical model of creativity in the context of qualitative data analysis experience. For pedagogical reasons, I will highlight specific skills that are solicited at different times in this process to encourage creativity among students in their qualitative data analysis experience.

## A theoretical model of creativity for the qualitative data analysis experience

This theoretical model is declined in a reflecting-writing dialectic combined with three movements of creativity which are: inspira-

tion, working-out and detachment. Thus, the reflecting-writing dialectic is defined as a hermeneutic process to grasp meaning of a human experience (van Manen, 1997). To uncover or isolate thematic aspects of a phenomenon in the participants' stories, the researcher can use three approaches. First, in the wholistic approach, he examines the text as a whole and asks: 'What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning of the text as a whole?' Secondly, in the selective reading approach, he listens or reads a text several times and asks: 'What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential about the experience to be described?' Finally, in the detailed reading approach, he looks at every single sentence or sentence cluster and asks: 'What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the experience being described?' (van Manen, 1997, p. 91). This hermeneutic process is expressed in the researcher's 'dialogue inside-outside' in which reflections inhabiting his interior space interacting with the text, the external representation that specifically evokes these thoughts about participants' stories. The hermeneutic process aims a match between what inhabits internally the researcher and what is gradually materializing outside (the text). As Gadamer (1996) mentions, conducting this dialogue is an art since it implies a dialogue with oneself and seeks agreement with oneself. It presupposes ignorance since not knowing or not understanding requires to be tuned in. The reflecting-writing dialectic becomes not only an act of creation but also a meaning celebration (Quintin, 2012).

This theoretical model is shown in figure 1. The reflecting-writing dialectic (in black color) is represented in a spiral manner rather than linear to illustrate its recursive nature. As it occurs in time and space, it is located within the context of the researcher in a horizontal line representing the course of time and a vertical line illustrating space. Each movement of creativity is wrapped around the spiral of reflecting-writing dialectic to highlight its dynamism. Finally, as the understanding occurs over time, the reflecting-writing dialectic takes expansion gradually with understanding. It is completed when the researcher feels satisfied with the depth of his understanding. However, he acknowledges, that this hermeneutical process is never finished (Munhall, 2007; van Manen, 1997). He then accepts his interpretation as a trace recorded over time, which recalls his experience in the world. Consequently, by the reflecting-

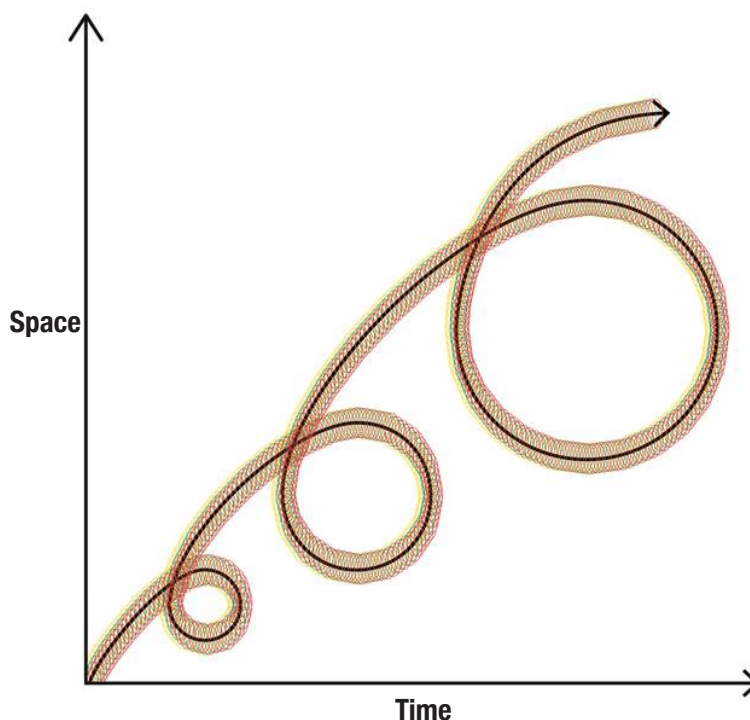


Figure 1. A theoretical model of creativity for the qualitative data analysis experience

writing dialectic, the researcher asks questions and seeks answers in order to discover links between different elements of the corpus data. Meanwhile, the reflecting-writing dialectic will be energized through the creativity movements.

### The inspiration movement

Inspiration is the first movement of the reflecting-writing dialectic. It settles in the story of each research participant. It represents the soul that animates the researcher. It is somehow the engine that drives him to action and leads him in one direction but without precise location. This movement is characterized by spontaneity, fantasy and irrationality (Gosselin and al., 1998). It is manifested particularly by fortuitous emergent ideas or images that rise from the unconscious depths and take shape in the researcher mind following reading research participants' stories. Then, inspiration offers lines of thought to emerge meaning of the phenomenon under study. I can compare inspiration to wonder. As van Manen (2014)

mentions, wonder is the antecedent to inquiry. It does not just pose a problem to be solved or a question to be answered. A good qualitative study almost always starts with wonder or passes through a phase of wonder.

Welcoming and living these blurred ideas or images, as they arise, is a special ability emerging from the inspiration movement. Indeed, in those moments, the investigator has only the power to decide to be opened or closed to them. He must therefore demonstrate responsiveness to these ideas or images emerging from the primary thinking processes, on which he has no control, and which requires release of aware mechanisms to operate. For example, the reception of these emergent ideas may result in letting himself be invaded by emotion while reading a text, or remembering a dream (Gosselin & al., 1998). Furthermore, hypnagogic states, these sleep and wakefulness moments where consciousness is half immersed in the subconscious, seem most conducive to creativity. It is not a coincidence that several creators seek to stimulate these hypnagogic states by consuming drugs and alcohol (de la Durantaye, 2012). In short, the inspiration movement could be compared to a call, such as the siren song, in which the researcher is affected in a particular way in his interiority and indulges himself, giving free rein, to emergent ideas. In the reflecting-writing dialectic, the researcher sensitivity becomes a key element for the 'inside-outside dialogue'. Indeed, it requires an experiential and theoretical sensitivity, this ability to use both his personal, subjective and intimate experience as well as his rational ability to refine his interpretation as thoughts go by (Paillé & Muchielli, 2008). In this theoretical model, I illustrated the movements of creativity by borrowing traffic lights colors to mark their pace. Thus, inspiration is characterized by yellow color to highlight the slow pace of this movement. It has 'empty' moments, these more or less long moments where emergent ideas arise to consciousness and where nothing 'seems' to happen, as the iceberg image which goes partially back to the surface. Van Manen (2014) calls these moments, the active passivity. 'Producing insights' in qualitative data analysis is not just a function of active mental processes. Like poetic words, it cannot always be forced. Thus, the researcher must develop patience towards himself and avoid 'blank page anxiety' identifying moments and inspiration-friendly activities (de la Durantaye, 2012).

### **The working-out movement**

While the inspiration seems difficult to control and is a passive state, the working-out movement is characterized by the researcher's conscious and analytical work in order to narrow the inspiration movement implied in the qualitative data analysis. Specifically, the working-out will result in a logbook in which ideas coming from the inspiration movement will be written down. Moreover, the researcher will conduct a more analytical writing and rewriting work in order to clarify his thinking and deepen his understanding (van Manen, 1997). I could compare the working-out movement to a sensor that focuses and directs energy to clarify and concretize the researcher's reflections about data. It is characterized by a willpower, rationality and conscious work, which is oriented towards a goal (Gosselin & al., 1998). In the work of qualitative data analysis, the researcher aims at providing an 'interpretive explanation' of the phenomenon under study. The thematic or conceptual links are clarified and argued in order to present them in a new way. The interpretive explanation therefore represents the farthest interpretive form from data, making it also the most complex interpretive form (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003).

Several important skills are inherent to the working-out movement. Indeed, the researcher must focus on the dialogue 'inside-outside' in the reflecting-writing dialectic to channel the creative energy towards the development and articulation of the text. He must also involve his analysis and synthesis capacities as well as his ability to treat and to transform them. This movement, which constantly appealed to the decision-making power of the researcher, requires determination and perseverance despite moments of tension and torment that inevitably accompany the reflecting-writing dialectic. In these moments where chaos (Deschamps, 1987) seems to dominate the qualitative data analysis process, the researcher must focus again on his initial interrogation. What was the original question? What was seemed important to discover and to understand? Asking the right questions can often lead to find the right answers (Paillé & Muchielli, 2008). In this theoretical model, I illustrated the working-out movement by the green traffic light to mark the very active pace of this movement in which all researcher's resources are solicited.



### The detachment movement

Finally, detachment represents the last movement of the reflecting-writing dialectic. It is defined as a movement of distance and appreciation that uses reflection, assessment, and also some wisdom (Gosselin & al., 1998). Over the course of its reflecting-writing dialectic, the researcher continually stands back and detaches himself from the interpretive explanation that he feels internally in order to facilitate its assessment. Therefore, he appreciates 'resonance' or appropriacy between thoughts that materialize gradually outside, and those inhabiting himself inside.

To begin, this verification will be done in an intuitive way. The researcher will be profoundly touched by his interpretation. Like van Manen (2014) affirms, he will feel that he produced a deeper description of the experience where reflective insights that go beyond the taken-for-granted understandings of everyday life. Then, he will check more rationally this consistency by comparing his personal estimate to the judgment of other people. Submitting an article to a scientific publication is a good example of this form of appreciation. This triangulation may give happy endings but also disappointments when assessments do not match.

Intuition is a fundamental ability of the detachment movement. The researcher must anticipate, among emergent ideas that inspire him, those that are most likely to be fecund. Sometimes, the researcher cannot feel ready to welcome a plaguing idea until he pays attention. In others words, he can feel 'bewitched' by it as the poet in Valery poem entitled *song of the master-idea* in which the creative idea without author begs him to deal with it because it is the only chance to get out of the possible world and exist in the outer reality (Gosselin & al., 1998). Also, he can anticipate the link consistency which is not immediately apparent and which makes account of the studied phenomenon in a more appropriate manner. Consequently, the researcher must create this analytical alchemy by revealing, with his intuition, a link that is already there (Paillé & Muchielli, 2008). To achieve this, the researcher should focus his reflecting-writing activity on this intuition by going back to participants' narratives for example. In these creative moments, the detachment movement requests the researcher's ability to make decisions. He must stand back in order to make good choices.

The 'let it go' ability seems also important during moments of tension that accompany the reflecting-writing dialectic. Indeed, it is sometimes preferable that the researcher moves away from his work, knowing that the latter continues to 'germinate' in his mind. Then, he allows himself moments of rest or he will vary the nature of his work (de la Durantaye, 2012). Moreover, it is often during these moments of remoteness that illuminations or 'clicks' occur, thus creating new ideas to describe the phenomena under study in a better way.

Finally, the detachment movement requires that the researcher develops an ability to reflect on the meaning of his qualitative data analysis experience. Indeed, unexpected revelations emerge throughout this reflecting-writing dialectic offering the researcher opportunities to better understand himself and understand the world in which he lives. I could tell the researcher understands himself because he understands what comes out of himself. The qualitative data analysis is akin to a play that precedes the researcher. Because there is a play, there is a player (Quintin, 2012). In this theoretical model, I illustrated the detachment movement by the red traffic light, to demonstrate 'stopping moments' required for this process.

## Conclusion

In short, a theoretical model has been developed to better understand how creativity is involved in the qualitative data analysis experience. This original model includes a reflecting-writing dialectic with three movements of creativity which are inspiration, working-out and detachment. Also, it permits to highlight certain abilities that could be usefully developed among students in order to promote creativity in the context of qualitative data analysis learning. These abilities are responsiveness, sensitivity, patience, focusing, perseverance, intuition as well as the ability to let go. Accompany students to become aware of these skills and implement strategies to improve them seems a promising educational avenue. Finally, it is recognized in the artistic domain that creativity is the expression of a certain 'inner need' (de la Durantaye, 2012). In qualitative research, I believe the discovery of meaning also meets this same need. The reflective-writing dialectic remains the centerpiece by which meaning emerge from movements of creativity.



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