

The benefits and pitfalls of qualitative data

This paper evaluates the challenges facing the researcher in collecting and analysing qualitative data. It is drawn from an interpretive PhD that aims to explore and to attempt to understand the meaning that people ascribe to a socially-constructed phenomenon: the bibliographic universe. Participants in the research were secondary school students, recordkeepers, teachers, and web content managers who are all active readers and library users, and a group of expert practitioners: librarians from academic, public, and special libraries (two cataloguers, and three reference librarians).

Qualitative data have been collected through participant interviews and card sorting, but also from practitioners. Card sorting involved the grouping of physical cards representing bibliographic entities (e.g., fiction books, movie DVDs, articles, dissertation) in order to determine which entities were most frequently grouped together, the names of the resulting categories, and any relationships between categories (Hudson, 2013).

Five in-depth interviews were conducted with the expert practitioners before the start of the main data collection phase. This gave a practitioner perspective on the research aims and the questions that would be asked in the participant interviews, and feedback on the cards for the card sorting activity. Such perspectives are valuable not only in clarifying the researcher's understanding of the current situation at the coal face, but also when coding and analysing the data. The 10 students were interviewed in three groups (of three, three, and four students respectively) and 19 individual interviews were conducted with adults.

Two qualitative research methodologies are used with the qualitative data: phenomenography and grounded theory method. Neither fit exactly the research objective which is the development of participants' mental models of the bibliographic universe. Phenomenography (Bowden 1994; Marton, 1986) aims to determine the various ways in which people experience, understand or conceptualise a phenomenon (here, the bibliographic universe) while grounded theory method aims to develop a theory that is grounded in and arises from the data. Grounded theory method is being approached as a research tool (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2011; Pickard, 2007), but draws on approaches presented by Charmaz (2000), Morse *et al.* (2009), and Urquhart (2007).

It has been argued (Limberg (2000) among others) that studies of mental models involve first order perspectives while phenomenography involves second order perspectives and thus excludes mental models; hence, both approaches are used. This raises issues for the kinds of questions asked in interviews, the levels of analysis and coding that are applied to the data, and the comparison of findings generated by the interview data versus the card sorting data.

The paper identifies some of the main pitfalls and benefits of qualitative data collection and analysis, and the ways in which the practitioner perspectives, along with the card sort data, provide additional insight into participant interview data. Issues covered include managing the requirements imposed by particular methods, accuracy of transcription, the complexity of developing codes and categories, the way the researcher's understanding of the data is developed, and selecting significant findings from the data. Some conclusions are drawn about ways to manage the pitfalls of qualitative data analysis in particular.

Keywords

Qualitative data
Phenomenography
Grounded theory method
Practitioner engagement

References

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