Ghania Zgheib June 13, 2012

Module 1- EDRS 797- Mixed Methods

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 It seems to me that I have been mixing methods in my research studies for a while. I have mixed quantitative and qualitative methods in both my theses for my Master’s degrees. I have also been mixing methods in a study that I am conducting with a colleague of mine. However, “mixed methods research” is a new concept for me; it is a methodology rather than a method as Sandelowski (2003) refers and I used these methods for triangulation purposes and to prove that my results are valid. Before I moved to the United States, I used to be more of a positivist and relied on numbers as the utmost truth and that is why in both my theses, I adopted a quantitative approach for data collection and analysis with minor inclusion of qualitative data. Mixing quantitative with qualitative in my studies was more of mixing methods than a methodology. However, after I have moved to the United States and lived in a less conservative culture and got used to the openness, and after I took the “Ways of Knowing” and a “Qualitative” research course readings, I have been introduced into new ways of knowing that are more qualitative. What I could describe in the past as triangulation for validity purposes has become more of using the necessary tools needed to understand a certain phenomenon (Sandelowski, 2003; Greene, 2007).

 Since my ways of knowing have undergone a paradigm shift, I have started thinking about conducting research differently or at least looking at the methodology from an open-ended lens. An evidence of my recent research experience is a current study that I have designed and conducted with a colleague of mine at the English Language Institute (ELI), GMU. Currently I teach ESL in the English language intensive program at the ELI and in the ACCESS program which is a language-supported academic program that gives the opportunity for international students who do not have the required language proficiency level to be admitted provisionally to Mason during their first year. My colleague and I have been working on a longitudinal “mixed methods” study to investigate the international students’ experience in the newly founded program ACCESS as well the faculty experiences in order to provide research-based revisions for the program and develop the necessary orientations for faculty and students prior to the ACCESS year. The study is also aimed at providing findings on academic faculty collaboration with English as second language faculty in order to provide a supportive environment for international students.

 When my colleague and I decided to conduct the study, we never discussed a mere qualitative or a mere quantitative methodology but rather we discussed methods. We were interested in obtaining answers to our research questions using the best tools and we were interested in the triangulation of the data as well. The main research question that the study aimed at answering was the following:

*How do ACCESS students’ perceptions of academic, linguistic, and cultural experiences compare with Access-affiliated faculty feedback on the experience of teaching academic content/skills across the Access disciplines*?

In order to study two different ACCESS cohorts and validate our data, we divided the study into two phases; the first phase represents the Pilot year of ACCESS 2010-2011, and the second phase represents ACCESS 2011-2012. We gathered both quantitative and qualitative data from participants as illustrated in Table 1. Initially we decided to collect data from different sources for triangulation purposes in order to validate our data.

Table 1. *Instruments* *used for* *data collection and frequency*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Data Collection** | **Number of Participants** | **Frequency of data collection** |
| Student interviews* 1st interview
* 2nd interview
* 3rd interview
 | 181416 |  |
| Faculty interviews | 4 | 1 |
| Student surveys | 6-22 | 14 |
| Faculty surveys | 3-7 | 14 |
| Classroom observations | 5 | 3-4 |
| Samples of student writing | 21 | 3 |
| Samples of faculty feedback on student writing,  | 21 | 3 |
| Student focus groups | 21 | 3 |
| Student entrance, mid-year, and exit language proficiency test scores, including R/W/L/S/G/V  | 21 | 3 |

We analyzed part of the data gathered from the tools presented in Table 1 prior to any write-up as Bem (2003) recommends. It is worth noting that we started the analysis by identifying concurrent themes from both qualitative and quantitative data, and this is where I felt that the differences that separate qualitative from qualitative are more of conflicts that lead to better understanding and clarification of some findings (Table 2.). I felt that both methodologies are dialectic and should be used to better understand a phenomenon that cannot be understood by a single methodology (Greene, 2007).

Table 2. *Sample from coded data and analysis*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Key:SI1 = Student Interview 1. Question #. SI2 = Student Interview 2. Question #SI3 = Student Interview 3. Question #SS = Student survey. Survey #. Question #. FS = Faculty survey. Survey #. Question #. FI = Faculty interview FA 2010. Question #.SF = Student Focus Groups FA 2010. Focus Group #. **THEMES**1. **English**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Date/Data information/Question** | **Response data** | **Analysis data** |
| SS1.3WEEK 2 | “The percentage of time I use English on a typical day NOW is: 20-30% but I am sure the answer will be 70-90% if there were a balance of the students who speak the same language” | **Ss: Perception of amount of time they use English in the cohort** |
| SS2.1WEEK 3 | “well…I think the only issue we have is in our history class. I think for our first semester we shouldn’t have taken such an advanced class. When I say advanced I meant in the language spoken where the pro teaches everyone by the same level. Pro. Stearns is a great teacher its just that students in the access aren’t use to this type of academic class.” | **Ss: Perceptions of English being difficult (History class)****\*cross-listed with challenges** |
| SI1WEEK 3 | * Learning new vocabulary
* grammar,
* vocabulary,
* writing style,
* practicing the language
 | **Ss: Reasons given for what has helped them increase English proficiency**  |
| SS5.5WEEK 6 | 54.5% believe that ENG 101 is helping them improve their English language proficiency | **Ss: Whether or not ENG 101 is helping them learn English?** |
| FS9.2WEEK 9 | 85.7% (6/7) of the faculty reported that students seem to use English more by week 9 of the semester. | **Fac: Students’ use of English over time** |

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The first write-up for the results of our study was published in the “Diversity Research Group” (DRG) journal that is issued on a yearly basis by this same group at GMU. It is not a scholarly journal, but its purpose is to shed the light on important research initiatives related to internationalization at Mason, and we are currently working on publishing more in-depth findings of this study in a book chapter. I will critique the existing write-up that appeared in the DRG publication as well as the current chapter that we are working on in light of the articles that we read for class.

Initially, the DRG chapter was not written to be published in a journal article and that is why the format is not traditional which begins with a literature review, followed by an identification of a gap in the literature, and then leads to a methods, results, and discussion section and this format is what Marshall and Barritt (1990) described as the rhetoric of educational research. The chapter, however, focused on important themes related to international students’ experiences at Mason that were gathered from the study (data we collected in our longitudinal study from ACCESS students) and from a follow up survey that was sent through the Office of International Students Support Services to international students at Mason. Mainly the write-up was addressed to specific audience, Mason faculty and staff. Due to the limit that we were given for the number of pages, our methods section did not elaborate on the methodology and the results. The content focused specifically on findings and analysis discussion? of results. This seems appropriate for this forum and audience.

What I would like to retain in the write-up is the inclusion of the narrative the direct quotes? in the sidebar, in a table and a diagram highlighting the participants’ actual words in addition to pie charts reporting the quantitative data despite the fact that both methods answer different research questions. Although surveys are considered qualitative quantitative? methods of inquiry, however, this survey had open-ended questions in addition to multiple choice and likert-scale type of questions. The narrative was extracted from both open-ended questions in the survey and the three interviews that were conducted with ACCESS students. I think this representation concurs with Greene’s (2007) description of a rhetoric that can be read by a wide range of audience possessing different learning styles. I believe the representation of my data is more of blending methods than mixing them as Sandelowski (2003) reported. ACCESS students spoke far more in interviews than other international students wrote in survey open-ended questions. The data gathered from interviews resulted in new themes that were not evident in surveys while it confirmed other common findings; this process which Greene (2007) considers inevitable in mixed methods research.

 As I mentioned earlier, my colleague and I are currently writing a book chapter examining the relationship between Writing Across the Curriculum and second language writing in the same program ACCESS based on the data collected and presented in Table 1. The format of this article is similar to what Bem (2003) describes about the shape of an article in the table he presents on page 4. He explains what the conceptual frame of an article should look like which conflicts with Marshall and Barritt (1990) who advocate more innovative ways of presenting research. In this chapter we included a literature review section that introduces the reader to the topic and existing theories and then moves to the current initiatives at GMU which then segues to our study. A detailed methods and results sections are absent which makes the article different from the rhetoric of the AERJ. I'm not sure exactly what you mean here. I would say that your chapter *does* have methods and results sections--"The Study" and "Data and Analysis", respectively. I would probably rename these sections.

I think that the existing write-up of the chapter[[1]](#footnote-1) of our mixed methods study is a combination of what Bem and Marshall and Barrit are advocating for, a clear presentation of the data with some creativity. Based on my understanding of the readings in class and what I believe would work for our study I would retain some things and change some other things.

In the current draft of the chapter, I like the graphical representation of statistical data which makes it easier for the audience to interpret but see my comments on the graphs and at the same time keep the narrative description of the findings grounded by the participants’ quotes that explain numbers and give examples about them. However, I think I need to synchronize the findings from both qualitative and quantitative tools since there isn’t much of a blending in the studies. True. I also like the organization of the “Data and Analysis” section where each of the research questions mentioned in the beginning of the study are answered in the order they were presented. OK.

 Although the literature review discusses at length existing research on WAC and second language, the shift to the next section which discusses Mason initiatives in this concern through the Center for International Students’ Access, I think that our voice as stakeholders in the program has been disregarded. Good point. I agree with Marshall and Barritt (1990) who suggest the importance of mentioning the researcher’s observations of a certain gap that ?. We used the passive voice throughout the chapter, but now I do see a value in being more present in the write-up since both my colleague and I teach in the program that we are studying. ☺ I think the inclusion of the “we” will add more authenticity to the research and create a conversational form of research as Marshall and Barritt suggest.

Due to the enormous sets of data that we gathered for the study, we could not look at all of them and analyze them. We figured out that the participants were tired of responding to interview questions that were redundant across all three and answering weekly surveys. If I would go back to design this same mixed methods study, I would reduce the frequency of interviews and surveys and even the methods that we used, looking for quality of data rather than quantity. Good points. However, I would stick to focus groups which uncovered new themes due to the interactive nature of the activities that the students had to carry on. Greene (2007) describes the originality of mixed methods research in creating paradoxes and conflicts which results in new information. In our study, focus groups played an important role in generating new knowledge. The narrative method encouraged students to talk freely about the addressed topics which otherwise could be time consuming to write in the survey or could be intimidating to mention in front of the interviewer. I would also stick to comparing the students’ entry and exit language proficiency test scores which are quantitative in nature but provide a measurable evaluation of the students’ language progress as a result of their enrollment in a language-supported academic program.

Ghania:

This is a very thoughtful application of the readings to the presentation of your study, although you're really discussing a lot more than "writing." In my opinion, most of the presentation in your chapter is qualitative, and the quantitative data are used mainly to supplement this. (I also don't understand most of the graphs; see my comments on the chapter.) This is an ambitious study, and I encourage you to think more about how the qualitative and quantitative data can really be integrated.

Grade: A

References

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Sandelowski, M. (2003). Tables or tableaux: The challenges of writing a reading mixed methods studies. In *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social Behavioral Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications

1. This is only the first draft of the chapter. Revision is in process. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)