

# Assessing the Authentic Knower Through Contemplative Arts-Based Pedagogies In Qualitative Inquiry

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*In this paper the authors explore the role of contemplative, arts-based practices and pedagogies in a doctoral level qualitative research class to create an understanding of self, self in relation to others, and understanding social structures of oppression as manifested through un/earned privileges. The intent of the class was to activate the authentic inquirer within and to frame a deep awareness of researcher positionality in qualitative inquiry. The authors (instructor and student in the class) discuss how creating a self-portrait and engaging in a duoethnography project cultivated the authentic inquirer. Using differentiated, formative, developmental, and honor-based assessment practices, the authors explore how interrelatedness of being became the key cornerstone of the learning experiences which were extended beyond the classroom.*

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**T**his paper is in response to the call made to inquire “how varying intentions for using contemplative practices in higher education affect the design and implementation of methods for assessing their effectiveness” (Bergman, 2015). To respond to the call, we present a contemplative arts-based teaching and learning experience in a doctoral level qualitative research class at a land grant public research university in Kansas. The contemplative pedagogies used in this class were also coupled with arts-based approaches to qualitative inquiry and deep introspection. Arts-based approaches in qualitative research refer to the use of creativity for inquiry, data collection, data analysis, and representation (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Barone & Eisner, 2012). Although arts-based approaches can be used in all stages of qualitative inquiry, it is not necessary, nor mandated that one uses these approaches in a certain way or in all stages. Therefore, it falls upon the researcher to offer justifications for using creative modalities of inquiry in whatever ways that seem relevant to the project.

The paper contains the perspective of teaching and assessment of the first author, who was the instructor of record for an introductory level qualitative research class for doctoral students, in addition to a student’s reflection of the experience, who is the second author of the paper. Due to the nature of qualitative research and contemplative practices, parts of the paper will be presented in

first person narratives of the authors. The intention to integrate contemplative and arts-based approaches in qualitative inquiry was driven by a need to trigger the authentic inquirer within. In order for such triggering to occur, there needed to be a safe space, opportunities to make mistake without penalty, but with possibilities for growth and reflection with adequate balance of support and challenge for transformative learning experiences to occur. Yet, at the same time, there was an obligation to teach content mastery, to assess that mastery, while asking students to be vulnerable, explore within, conduct deep introspective inquiry, and bring to bear such inquiry in tangible empirical research. Assessment could honor the effort, but assessment had to also consider how closely the effort matched learning the content and the student's substantive and methodological knowledge of qualitative inquiry. Thus, in this paper we explore certain design elements of the course, the process of experiencing and executing those design elements, assessment approaches, and the effectiveness of the design and implementation of contemplative and arts-based approaches in qualitative research.

### **Background and Context of the Course and Instructor<sup>1</sup>**

I have taught Introduction to Qualitative Research for the last 10 years to various students in social sciences, although the primary population of my students belonged to the College of Education. Initially I had used a constructivist pedagogy (Airasian & Walsh, 1997; Piaget, 1985; Prawat & Flodden, 1994) bearing in mind that I was to create experiences through which students will construct their own meanings. These meanings would then be assessed against their pre-existing schemas (Bhattacharya & Han, 2001). Usually, this assessment process of new schemas involves assimilation with existing schemas or modification of existing schemas to accommodate the new information. Eventually, the disequilibrium and cognitive dissonance caused by the new information is either neutralized or brought to equilibrium once the mind somehow incorporates the new schema into the existing ones. In cases where this is impossible, the new schema is rejected completely. I have tried to cultivate learning environments where new schemas are accommodated rather than completely dismissed.

And even though one can argue that my efforts were reflected in my course evaluations, which have been in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile when ranked against similar courses, for the past four or five years I did not feel authentic teaching the introductory qualitative methods course. My epistemic, ontological, and pedagogical thinking have been heavily informed by de/colonizing discourses (Mohanty, 2004; Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Smith, 1999/2012) and I kept that outside of teaching

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<sup>1</sup> The first person narrative of this section of the paper refers to the experience of the first author.

qualitative research. Additionally, I kept my own interest and alignment in and with contemplative pedagogies and arts-based approaches outside of the qualitative classes.

Consequently, over the years, there was a chasm between who I was authentically and the kinds of options I was presenting to students for conducting qualitative inquiry. At the end of the semester, in December 2014, I sat with this separation and the dissonance it created within to see what arose. It was then that I realized that if I were to create authentic learners, then I had to be brave enough to bring my authenticity to the classroom. This posed some significant dangers for me as a female scholar of color, teaching in a predominantly White institution. Bringing de/colonizing epistemologies and methodologies to the classroom meant that I would have to open up conversations about race, nation states, and un/interrogated privileges to people who enjoy these privileges and may or may not be aware of such enjoyment. I was aware of the in/formal discussion (Dottin, 1999; McIntyre, 1997) amongst scholars of color and White allies, where they highlight how challenging it is to expose students to these conversations without creating oppositional positions that give rise to defensive reactions. Additionally, inserting contemplative and arts-based approaches to the learning environment could feel like I am presenting things from the margin, the fringe elements of qualitative inquiry that would only have minimal appeal to similarly situated students, while alienating most students. Was I going to deny the students a more traditional, mainstream experience of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1987a, 1987b; Wolcott, 2008)?

As I sat with these concerns without a need to solve or resist them, but just with the intention of accepting them and making friends with these dissonant thoughts, I realized that my epistemology, ontology, and pedagogies were already intersected with various dominant, oppressive, and resistant discourses simultaneously. On one hand, mainstream qualitative research presents itself in innocuous ways without mentioning the colonizing structure of research and how destructive research has been to certain groups of people. For example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999/2012), a Maori scholar from New Zealand, reminds us that research is linked to European imperialism and colonialism. Further, to indigenous people and people of color, research is a dirty word. Smith elaborates:

Just knowing that someone measured our 'faculties' by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are. It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. (Smith, 1999/2012, p. 1)

I was aware of the colonizing structure of research, the messiness of conducting fieldwork in qualitative inquiry, the ethical issues that arise when a cultural outsider presumes to extract and generalize “objective” knowledge from a group that appears to be exotic to the Western gaze, and yet I was uncomfortable bringing these issues to light for my students because of three reasons. First, I learned these things on my own, through agentic inquiries, outside of the classroom. Second, I was unsure of my ability to fully embrace what might emerge from a space created to discuss inequities, which could involve hurt, angry feelings, feelings of alienation and isolation, and tension in the classroom. Third, I did not fully trust that the students would take on deep inner, creative, introspective journeys while reflecting on their un/earned privileges and manifestations of social structures of inequities.

Given that my disposition about qualitative research was informed by contemplative practices, arts-based approaches, and de/colonizing epistemologies, if I did not bring these ideas to the classroom then I was not giving permission to myself to be authentic, and therefore, I could not inspire the authentic inquirer within each student, which was my intent. An authentic inquirer, the way I conceptualized it, was someone who was pursuing a line of inquiry that was purposeful beyond getting an academic degree, had personal meaning and agency for the inquirer, and that inspired the inquirer to do work in this world that addressed a social issue of importance to the inquirer. My reflections made me realize that I taught the dominant narrative about research to my students while in my own practice, I was agentic, liberatory, and resistant against oppressive frameworks in knowledge construction. Therefore, I needed to bridge this gap between who I was inside and outside the classroom. That was when I decided that for me to remain in integrity, I have to bring my authentic self to the classroom so that the students can mirror back in authenticity.

To do so, I decided to integrate contemplative practices more actively in my class. These practices included silent sitting, meditative writing, meditative art making, deep listening, and storytelling. Additionally, the required readings involved readings about qualitative methodology, de/colonizing methodologies, and arts-based approaches in education. The assessments were developmental in nature. In other words, students had multiple opportunities to return to an assignment, to strengthen the merit of the assignment after receiving a formative grade with detailed feedback. At the end of the class, they had opportunities to revise all assignments and submit them for a final grade. No formative grades assigned to students’ work in the earlier part of the semester were formally recorded. Students knew those formative grades and feedback were for opening up a dialogue so that they reflect on their learning, identify areas of struggle, and

engage in developing their understanding further. Class discussions often involved integration of creative activities, self-expression, discussing differing perspectives, engaging in contemplative practices, and using embodied performances to discuss the assigned readings. It was extremely rare for the students to be assigned to groups to simply discuss readings by exploring key questions without a creative, embodied, or reflective element. Authentic inquiry required creating a space for deeper engagement so that meaningful dialoguing could occur. While it would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all assignments and associated pedagogical moves, in the next section I will discuss two key assignments, the intent, design, and execution, followed by a reflective narrative from the second author, who was a student in the class.

### **Intent, Design, and Execution of Two Arts-Based Assignments**

The intent of the course was to cultivate the authentic inquirer within for each student while they learned about qualitative research. In doing so, it was critical that they learned about themselves, their un/earned privileges, in relation to other people whose lived realities might differ. This is an important part of learning qualitative research because conducting qualitative inquiry requires developing rapport with participants, understanding their stories of their lived realities, and then co-constructing a narrative with the participants about the ways in which they make meaning of their lived realities (Bhattacharya, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). One cannot tell anyone else's stories in any level of depth, if one has not traveled deeply within to understand one's own stories. And in understanding one's own stories deeply, one can then extend the same depth of inquiry to the participants' stories, understand self in relation to Other, and cultivate a sense of compassion, empathy, and understand interrelatedness of being (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott, & Bai, 2014; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010).

Qualitative researchers tend to develop rich, thick, descriptive context-driven narratives, while honoring multiple, contradictory truths simultaneously (Bhattacharya, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative inquiry is often used in conducting social justice research with people who occupy various axes of differences such as race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, etc. Therefore, it is critical that students understand their positionality in relation to what they study and who they work with, instead of posturing as a colonizing, supposedly objective inquirer, which is neither accurate, nor authentic or respectful. The goal of qualitative research is not to offer generalizable and replicable truths. Instead, the goal of qualitative research is to offer the context in which certain truths are created, understood, and internalized by people. These contexts are then mapped against the broader socio-political local, national, and global landscape as relevant

to the issues highlighted in the inquiry. Readers are then encouraged to create their entry points and extract from the research that which is transferable to their own contexts of learning, researching, or living. Therefore, below, I present narratives that allowed for understanding and interrogating of privileges and informed how students performed on two key assignments.

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A new group of students walk into my Introduction to Qualitative Methods class. Most of them have no prior background in qualitative methods. After discussing the syllabus, I tell the students that I have a paper throwing project for them. Each of them will have one crumpled ball of paper. They will have to make five baskets, by throwing their crumbled balls in the trash bin within five minutes. Those who can make the five baskets will be able to earn 2 percent bonus points. As expected, the students perk up, as we live in the grade-obsessed culture of higher education.

I invite the students to the front of the class, where they pick up a small folded piece of paper that will determine their placement relative to the trash bin. Once they open the paper, some students discover that they have a red dot marked on the paper and others have a blue dot. I ask the seven students who have red dots to sit at a table located at the front of the class. Thirteen students with blue dots sit at the tables in the middle and back row. I move the trash bin from the corner of the class and place it close to the students sitting at the front, making it exceedingly easy for them to make their baskets. I tell the class that when I say, “Go” they will have 5 minutes to make the baskets as a whole class from their individual positions<sup>2</sup>. Immediately, people with blue dots start asking questions:

“We have to sit here? We cannot move? It’s too far.”

“That’s not fair. The red dots have an advantage.”

The students at the front begin a dialogue with those in the middle and back rows.

“Well it isn’t that you’re that far, really.”

“I am sure if you try, you can get your five baskets in here.”

“I am not sure if it is all that easy for us, either.”

“Maybe after we are done with our five baskets, you guys can switch seats with us?”

They turn and look at me.

“Can we do that? Can we change seats?”

“You can subvert my structure under one condition. Whatever you do, you have to agree to all the modified rules together as a group.”

What ensues next is an engaged discussion about who has what advantages from what position, and why, and how some of the advantages could be equalized.

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2 This chaotic set up was intentional so that the students could problematize the rules and come up with more sensible rules that were responsive to their desires.

I smile and observe, as they negotiate and consider multiple options, an organic scene unfolding before me. Finally the students decide that first they are to empty the trash bin. Then one student will collect four paper balls from all the other students, so that she will have five paper balls in her hand (her own ball + four people's paper balls). She will be the closest to the basket. She will dunk the paper balls, thereby making her five baskets. Then the student behind the first student will turn the basket over, collect the five paper balls, stand the trash bin upright, and put the five paper balls in the basket to get her points. Then she will move away and the person next in line will repeat the pattern. The people who got the red dots would go first before the rest of the class. Once I ensure that the entire class is in full agreement, I say, "Go," and start timing them and warn them that they have only 5 minutes. The students finish the entire activity in 3.5 minutes. They go around the room congratulating each other, jumping up to high five each other, extremely proud of their accomplishment. A community forms.

"Is this what you wanted?" One student asks me.

"Maybe" I smile. "Let's talk about what happened. What did the people do to earn the red dots?"

"Nothing, they were just lucky." One of the blue dot holders chimes in.

"Okay, what did the red dot mean for these students initially?"

"That they had an advantage." Yet another blue dot holder shares his insight.

"Excellent! So would you say that the red dot people were oppressing you because they had the advantage?"

"No, they were not oppressing us, but they had a leg up, that's for sure. But they knew they had an advantage and were willing to work something out with the rest of us so that we were not as disadvantaged."

"Besides, the red dot people were few and we were many. And they would have to deal with us for the rest of the semester. So it was in their best interest to be good team players."

"I see. So they had to value being good team players more than their advantage to earning extra points?"

"Yes, but we made sure we went first, just in case." One of the red dot holders confesses.

"So, even though they valued being good team members, they did not really sacrifice their advantage, did they? What does this remind you of?"

"Society and privileges." A red dot holder answers.

We engage in deep discussion about privileges, earned and unearned, and how even an earned privilege such as education is connected to unearned privileges of access, location, race, class, gender, etc., and while conducting qualitative inquiry we have to interrogate our privileges while trying to understand someone else's experiences that are different from our own.

I do not feel scared to handle the volatility of whatever might unfold. I realize the red-dot-blue-dot exercise allows us to talk about intense issues of inequities with intellectual honesty, openness, without the defensiveness and discomfort I have felt earlier and observed amongst students. At the end of the discussion, through a contemplative, free writing exercise, I ask students to identify five of their unearned privileges from which they continue to benefit. Once the students complete their writing, I invite them to share, if inspired to do so. One by one, students begin to share and relate with each other. Soon it becomes clear that one student's unearned privilege is another student's earned privilege, leading to different lived experiences of successes and challenges. And yet there is an interrelatedness of these privileges, how they function as a social discourse, sometimes in extremely polarized oppositional discourses, and how they culminate in this moment, where we are gathered here to conceptualize research projects informed by qualitative inquiry.

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The students in my Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods were assigned a bag-portrait project that will contribute towards their subjectivity performance (see Appendix A) assignment and an abbreviated duoethnography project (see Appendix B). Duoethnography is a collaborative research methodology where two or more researchers explore each other's life histories surrounding a phenomenon (Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012). This dialectical process allows for a recursive meaning making where both parties understand their life histories in relation to each other's and begin to see the interrelatedness in their similarities and differences. I gave students a brown paper bag (see Figure 1) to create a self-portrait which would later be part of the duoethnography project.



Figure 1. Brown bag for subjectivity and duoethnography project.

The instructions were driven by the ways in which I extended Goffman's (1959, 1997) conceptualization of front- and backstage performances in my dissertation (Bhattacharya, 2009). On one side of the bag the students were to represent their views, beliefs, values, assumptions, milestones, or un/earned privileges in any way they chose to, including doodles, pictures, collage, art, or something else. On the other side of the bag, they were to demonstrate what they keep hidden or do not readily share about themselves with the world, but which still influences their connection to their research topic. They would never have to reveal the backside side of their bag to anyone if they chose not to. Inside the bag, they were to put objects, pictures, paraphernalia, artifacts that demonstrate the discursive effect on the choices they have made thus far that brought them to the current moment of qualitative inquiry and to their specific research interest for their dissertation. I told them that they would not be assessed in terms of the aesthetic value of their work, but they would be assessed for critical, reflexive, and contemplative engagement that demonstrates a depth of understanding. They were also to partner with someone else in class to conduct a semester-long abbreviated duoethnography project. In this project, students were to use the bag self-portrait to elicit conversations with each other through informal semi-structured in-depth interviews. The focus of the interviews was to explore a person's life histories that shape him/her in the current moment of his/her academic journey and how the person understands, integrates, rejects, resists, and accommodates with and against these life history elements when considering his/her dissertation topic. The partnership was randomly assigned by drawing names from a bowl.

Two days were reserved for students to present their subjectivities to their peers. They were told that there was no penalty for what they presented as long as they were mindful of the rubric criteria for the presentation. They knew if they missed any criterion, they would get a chance to address the criterion orally or in writing, and therefore, the assessment was honor-based and not punitive. I was surprised that almost all of the students shared the backside of their bags<sup>3</sup> that were supposed to contain information that they do not reveal to the world readily, yet have an awareness of how such information connects to their research interest. The performances were rich, detailed, and engaging (see Figures 2, 3, and 4). Students began to draw connections between each other's work, life histories, and research interests. The sense of community was strengthened at the end of the performances.

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3 All images shared are done through an approved IRB and informed consent from the student participants.

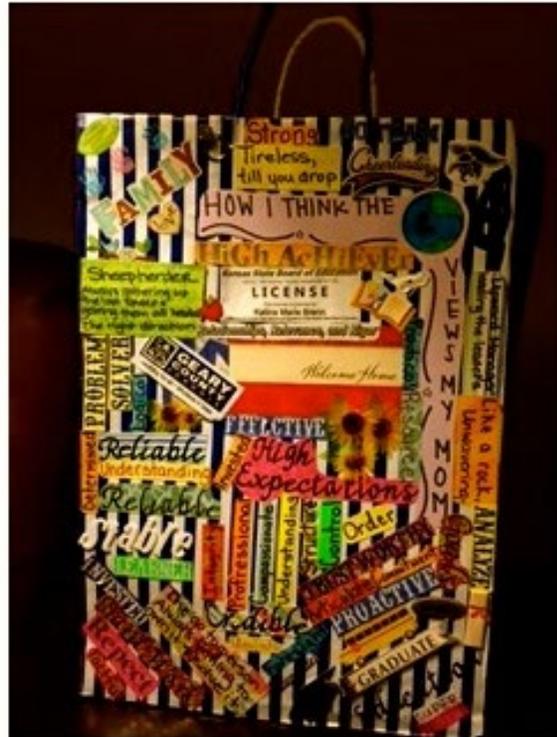


Figure 2. Bag portrait of a student in Educational Leadership.

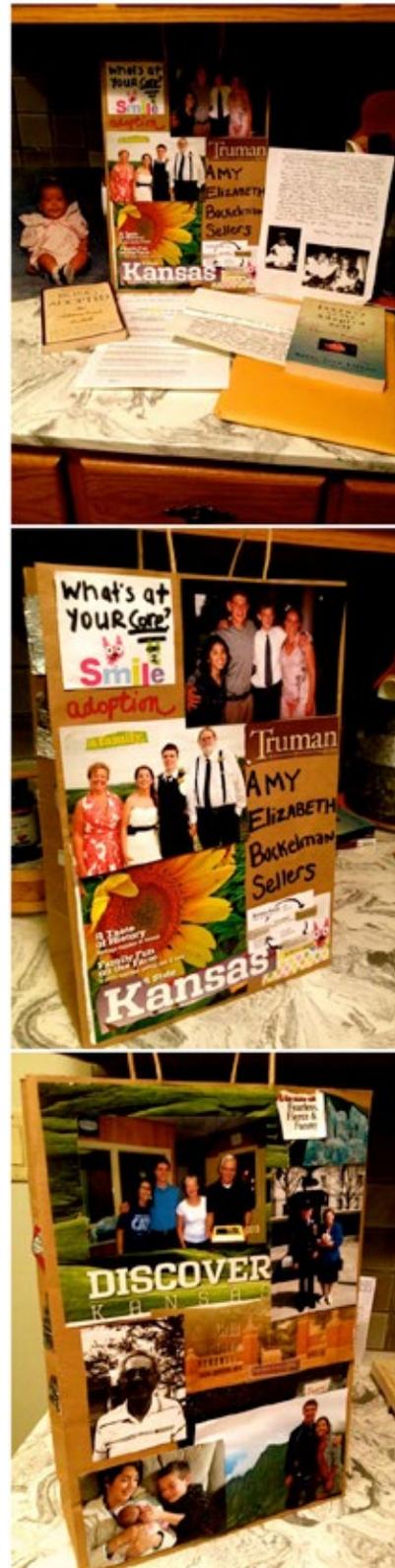


Figure 3 (left). Bag portrait of a student in Music Education.  
Figure 4 (right). Bag portrait of a student in Student Affairs.

During class discussions, introverted students revealed that if this were a traditional interview, they would not have opened up as much as they did. Other students revealed how deeply they understood the responsibility of protecting their peers when they had to re-present their peers' stories for their final projects. Discussions about ethics of care and compassion became a key part of regular conversation coupled with what might be one's due diligence in research.

Students were taught two different types of data analysis techniques to analyze their interview data. The first technique they used was a contemplative arts-based technique where they used principles of mixed medium art making to layer excerpts from the interview texts, pictures of the objects, and their ways of understanding and relating to the participants' stories. Students were encouraged to develop personal symbols (iconography) that metaphorically represented the ways in which the stories were unfolding for them. These exercises were conducted in silence, while there was some background music playing, holding space for students as they navigated through the layering of their data.

In mixed medium art making the artist has to pay attention to the positive and negative spaces on the canvas. Students had to contemplate how they would fill those spaces, how the positive and the negative spaces would relate to each other, and if the negative spaces should be opaque, transparent, or translucent. In doing so, they had to use discernment and work with what arose within if they tried to render parts of their partner's stories invisible (opaque), partially visible (translucent), or completely visible (transparent). With each decision there were tensions and contradictions that invited discussions about ethics of care, deep self-awareness, and trustworthy relationships when conducting research.

The second technique of data analysis that students learned was the traditional inductive data analysis technique used in qualitative research where students code, categorize, and thematize data (LeCompte, 2000). For their final assignment, students were expected to present their findings in any way they saw fit using any analytical technique that they considered to be reasonable. Every student incorporated an arts-based contemplative element in their findings and some students presented their entire work through some creative modality such as a documentary, photo essay, live painting, or even a performance.

I conducted a contemplative reflective writing exercise with the students at the end of the class. What surprised me was the ease with which students could discuss states of being (ontology), how they come to know their worlds and that which they oppose (epistemology of self and the other), how their values, beliefs, assumptions, motivate, inform, and frame the purpose of their research (subjectivities, theoretical framing), and how they were able to see both the diversity and the connectivity of each other's work by bearing witness to how their peers presented their bag portraits (interrelatedness) earlier in the class. Traditionally, these were

difficult and abstract concepts for students to write and discuss. In their recursive reflections (a required part of the duoethnography project) almost every student mentioned that even though their partnership was randomly assigned, they felt that somehow they were meant to be together because of the ways in which they began to understand and internalize interrelatedness. This became even more poignant especially when the classroom consisted of several military students, a Muslim student from Indonesia who attended class in full hijab, conservative upper middle class White students, and students who struggled with poverty for a large part of their lives. In the next section, the second author's perspective is presented as a student in the class who experienced the bag self-portrait and duoethnography project.

### **Assessing the Authentic Knower: A Student's Perspective<sup>4</sup>**

I never imagined forming a deep awareness and appreciation for my truths and the truths of the world around me simply by participating in an introductory qualitative research course during my time as a doctoral student. Exploring my own truths, however, has led me to a deeper level of understanding of what it means, in qualitative inquiry, to explore the truth that takes shape in the lived experiences of oneself and others.

Two key projects which were assigned to better acquaint students with qualitative inquiry included a bag portrait subjectivity performance and duoethnography project. These projects allowed us to develop our understanding of self, privileges, values, beliefs, and assumptions that informed our possible interest in a topic worthy of a dissertation. Delving first into our own lived experiences through a self-portrait subjectivity performance allowed for an immediate sense of community within the classroom, as we created individual bag portraits that showed sides of ourselves that we display to the world around us, along with sides of ourselves that we tend to keep hidden from others' view. Sharing the hidden views, although we were not required to do so, provided us with an opportunity to breathe life into the truth of our stories that we often tend to suppress or completely conceal from the world.

Secondly, a duoethnography project allowed for a paired exploration of students' individual and shared narratives, in which we were both researcher and participant as we took turns interviewing and analyzing one another's lived experiences using the bag portrait as conversation triggers.

Participating in these projects provided the opportunity to create a space of trust and openness within the classroom setting, ultimately transforming our classroom into a community of friends and supporters rather than merely peers

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<sup>4</sup> The first person narrative of this section of the paper refers to the experience of the second author.

and acquaintances. The typical levels of competition or pettiness that often occur within higher education were nonexistent. Despite obvious differences in our individual realities, we rallied together in support of one another. As such, engaged discussion ensued regarding what it means to have earned or unearned privileges, delving into personal beliefs based upon cultural assumptions and looking at the de/construction of our own identities. The presence of reflective and contemplative practices allowed us to explore our differences while simultaneously growing in community with one another. The mutual vulnerability and authenticity that was presented in sharing and receiving truths with others has been more powerful than anything else I have experienced during my time in higher education.

Becoming vulnerable within a sacred space and de/constructing our own subjectivities by recalling lived experiences provided a source of great intrigue for my classmates and myself, as it was something that we had never before been asked to do. I was especially surprised by the ways in which I was able to seemingly open up almost immediately to my classmates who, in essence, were strangers, with backgrounds completely unlike my own. Initially, I had no previous interactions or friendships with any of the students enrolled in the course. Additionally, my classmates were neither cultural insiders to my lived experiences, nor did they understand the ways in which a life lived among rural poverty had affected my own plight as a researcher, which inspires me to explore the experiences of homeless students in public education. Despite our differences, however, I was deeply invested not only in the recollections of my narrative, but in my classmates' shared recollections of their narratives.

### **Exploring Hidden Curriculum through Healing**

As the course progressed, I found an opportunity to open up to my classmates and the instructor regarding memories of my childhood that evoked painful emotions, in a way in which I had never previously opened up publicly before. Sharing my own lived experiences especially regarding memories of my childhood in a rural, impoverished Appalachian community provided an opportunity for deep-seated wounds to heal and a greater level of self-awareness and understanding to occur. It was especially moving to see the ways in which one student's unearned privilege paralleled that of another student's earned privilege, across race, class, gender, nationality, abilities, etc. As such, one person's seemingly effortless advantage helped to shed light on another's plight towards the same advantage. This provided a space for us to share the ways in which privilege has and will continue to shape our lives in and outside of the classroom.

We learned how some students had been ashamed of their backgrounds or were shunned due to a lifestyle or life choice that was not accepted by their cultural group. For some, sharing these types of personal experiences was both unfam-

miliar and frightening, as they had rarely, if ever, done so before. As classmates we found ourselves becoming genuinely invested in one another's shared un/earned privileges, differing cultures, and lived experiences. As our own truths emerged, this provided an even greater level of reflection and healing, allowing trust, compassion, and friendship to emerge within our learning community.

During this time of healing, a hidden curriculum surfaced within our classroom, providing an opportunity for a contemplative, self-reflective approach to learning about one another, ourselves, our position in world, and our position as future researcher on topics of social justice that required understanding, dialoguing, and working across differences. Because we took great care in the recollection and retelling of our own stories, our classroom became a space of both compassion and creativity—allowing for even the most reserved of students to feel at ease in sharing portions of their lives with the class in a way that told the truths of their own lived experiences, in whichever manner was most comfortable for them. Due to the sensitive nature of openly sharing one's lived experiences, in assessing our efforts, it would have been unfair and unkind for our instructor to utilize traditional methods of assessment. Promoting a contemplative approach to assessment, however, allowed us to reflect on areas of our work in which we could continue to explore, rather than penalize us for not getting things right the first time we ventured into vulnerable, unfamiliar spaces.

Although there was initial apprehension towards the developmental nature of assignments and assessment practices, students soon opened themselves up to this newfound way of thinking and engagement with the course content. I recall clearly one student being visibly upset at the beginning of the course—noting that she felt she was not being true to herself in exploring contemplative and arts-based practices, and rather craved a more traditional approach that she was used to. This student at the end of the course voluntarily chose to present her duoethnographic findings through a juxtaposition of poem and painting. She wrote a poem using interview excerpts and recorded a performance of the poem. During her presentation, she allowed the poem to be a voiceover narrative, while she immersed herself in the moment, and painted to the poem, bringing out findings from her data in colors, images, bold and soft strokes, curves, and splatters. Bearing witness to this transformation was powerful in addition to bearing witness to my peers' growth through this class.

During the course, we understood that we would have multiple opportunities to revise our work and dialogue with our instructor to improve the quality of our work. Feedback was not punitive, but developmental, inviting us to contemplate the ways in which we could deepen our understanding of the subject matter. Most written assignments required us to be reflective about our learning experiences and our reading discussions were always engaging with embodied performances,

creative expressions, and humor. The formative nature of the assessment alleviated student anxiety and provided a means through which creative and compassionate expression was encouraged. By not being restricted to traditional assignment and assessment practices, we were able to create projects that demonstrated understanding of our positionalities as researchers, how we framed the world, how this framing was challenged, remodified as a result of engaging in this project, and how we understood our connection with our partner, with the class, and with the world at large. The projects undoubtedly triggered meaningful parts of us that are all too often silenced by traditional means of education. It is not often that one is able to creatively express one's life story in graduate work without fear of judgment or ridicule from others. This deep exploration was not just about self-understanding, but it allowed us to understand how to work with data, how to honor participants, how to handle ethical crossroads in qualitative data, and the messiness of discernment when conducting data analysis and making decisions about representing findings. We postured humbly as future researchers instead of as researchers with a right to know about others' lived experiences just because it was possible.

### **Making Meaning Outside of Pass or Fail**

Prior to completing my first introductory course in qualitative research, I had never before encountered a type of assessment that was developmental in nature. As a majority of my classmates echoed this sentiment, it was initially somewhat daunting for each of us to realize that we would not be evaluated in a traditional manner, but rather, in a way that would allow for us to continue to grow and adapt to our own learning experiences as we made meaning through our subjectivities, shared personal narratives, and resulting research interests. While the material was challenging, the support offered encouraged us to work beyond the challenge and stretch out of our comfort zones.

Additionally, as a licensed middle and secondary level educator and a current doctoral student, I have not often been faced with evaluative practices that extend beyond letter grades or simply marks of pass or fail. Despite my initial fears of an unfamiliar evaluative practice, preparing to be assessed in this manner was actually a liberating experience. To recognize that each assignment offered an opportunity for continued development and reflection allowed for an alleviation of the typical types of stressors most often associated with traditional evaluation and grading practices. Engaging with the course content in a more contemplative manner allowed me to form both a deeper understanding and deeper level of engagement with my own narratives, passions, and resulting research interests. I was able to articulate clearly how I saw my stories, my un/earned privileges, and my research interests intersected. No longer did I have to pretend that my reason for pursuing

my research agenda was simply driven by the literature and somehow separate from my humanity and experiences.

According to our instructor, the key purpose of our assigned duoethnographic project was to explore the ways in which a person's life histories shape him/her in the current moment of his/her academic journey and how the person explores, integrates, rejects, resists, and accommodates with and against these life history elements when considering his/her research projects. Contemplative and arts-based data collection techniques (elicited conversations based on the artwork on the bag and paraphernalia inside the bag) allowed us to explore the ways in which various elements of our bag portraits and duoethnography projects were inter-related. In addition, we created personal iconography in class, after engaging in a short sitting silent meditation, then listening to Tibetan singing bowl music, and then working in silence. Personal iconographies were icons that metaphorically represented the participants' lived experiences as we understood them, which allowed us to become both self-reflective and counter-reflective of the lived experiences of one another.

Reflecting back, I appreciated the value of a sacred, trusting, shared space in addition to assessment that was supportive and developmental, while challenging my learning experiences. Even though the instructor did not emphasize any learning measured by passing or failing the course, I became aware of a series of questions that arose as I moved through the course. To what extent do I want to engage in my work to make my work matter? To what extent do I want to understand data collection, analysis, and representation in qualitative research to make my work rigorous and ethical? To what extent do I engage in building and sustaining a trusting relationship with my participant so that I honor our relationship instead of perceiving the participant as an information repository, from whom I just extract what I need for my academic agenda? What theoretical, methodological, contemplative, arts-based discourses will allow me to do the work that I need to do with homelessness in public education in rural communities in the U.S.? I cannot claim that I have the answers to these questions, but I can claim that these were critical questions that arose from the contemplative engagement with the content of the class. Had I been focused on simply completing assignments and obtaining a grade, I would not have been invested as deeply as I was, and these questions would most likely have been buried somewhere deep in my consciousness, away from my explicit awareness.

On the last day of class, as students presented their projects and their recursive reflections, several students discussed how the class was a healing experience for them. Each presentation was rich, engaging, and thought provoking. Instead of the nervousness of presenting final projects that were worth a large part of the final grade (institutional mandate), the classroom was celebratory. We knew that

our performances were a culmination of our investment in our learning process throughout the semester. Nevertheless, it is uncommon for students to be this minimally concerned about grades at the end of the semester. We discussed our process of data analysis, data representation, and ethical dilemmas. And everyone discussed how relatable the shared experiences were despite our individual axes of differences. And in that moment I knew that as we assessed our learning experiences and were being assessed, the ways in which we worked in this class and the class worked on us extended beyond the four walls and beyond one semester. This was an illumination. Paths were highlighted. Invitations were made to what could lie ahead in our doctoral education journeys.

### **Intention, Meaningful Learning, and Assessment in Qualitative Research**

The field of contemplative approaches and practices has been informed by a group of interdisciplinary scholars, including economists, physicists, sociologists, neurologists, and humanists (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Tang, Hölzel, & Posner, 2015; Zajonc, 2009). Palmer and Zajonc (2010) state that a deep inner journey could reflect on the ontology of experience that can be rigorously developed, carefully studied, and used as a mental instrument for investigation leading to significant scholarly work in higher education. The outcome of such inner journeys in qualitative research could be reflective of depth, authenticity, compassion, and a socially just way of conducting and reporting qualitative research.

Within the context of this paper, the instructor (Kakali) designed a qualitative research course with the realization that she has to be authentic and vulnerable if she expects to trigger the authentic inquirer within each doctoral student in her qualitative research class. Therefore, a sacred learning space needed to be created that honored students where they were and accepted their vulnerabilities as they navigated through challenging and unfamiliar terrains. The learning environment needed to be developmental and formative in nature, with the understanding that we are always a work in progress. Assignments for the course were evaluated with feedback and formative grades that were not documented but used as invitation for dialogue and deeper learning. Students were offered repeated opportunities to revise and resubmit their work to help them understand that learning is a continuous process and the pace of learning varies, encouraging deep self-awareness of the agentic roles they wanted play in their learning.

Evaluating effectiveness is always a challenging process, because it is difficult to avoid the positivist nature of effectiveness in the neoliberal culture of higher education where evidence-based inquiry is limited to certain kinds of evidence that marginalizes first person knowledge, native understandings, and alternate ways of knowledge construction that do not always fit the dominant paradigm of knowledge that is considered scientific or fundable. Qualitative researchers have posed ample criticism to such privileging of knowledge (Cannella & Lincoln, 2004).

Therefore, for this class, a recursive reflective piece was added as part of the student's final duoethnographic assignment (see Appendix B) where the students reflected on the learning experience both in terms of self-awareness, researcher positionality, and learning qualitative inquiry.

The goal was to explore if students were able to speak to these ideas at the end of the course with some level of depth and engagement. Most importantly, recursive reflections were created for students to identify the ways in which they understood interrelatedness of being in terms of who they were, how they related to the world, their participants, their un/earned privileges, and the social justice issues that can be inquired using qualitative research. Additionally, there were reflective writing and dialoguing sessions held in class where students provided their feedback on a regular basis about their learning experiences. There was time reserved at the end of each class for closing comments and each student spoke to what arose for them in that class, what ideas, experiences stayed with them, and what created resistance. No student was challenged or penalized for sharing their perspectives. Instead, every student was heard and acknowledged and, where necessary, tweaks, accommodations, and modifications were made in subsequent classes to meet the students' needs.

Due to the varied demographic structure of the class as well as the implication of qualitative research, where the students in their future research projects could engage with participants who could be situated differently in terms of their un/earned privileges, self-awareness and understanding of un/earned privileges was critical. Additionally, understanding that others might not have similar privileges, and therefore could experience a different lived experience, was critical to becoming an ethical qualitative researcher. And yet, even in differences there existed a shared humanity, an interconnectivity which was perhaps the key intent of the course, which became evident in students' projects and in written and verbal reflections. As a result of this class, students volunteered to create two sister organizations, "Contemplative Practices in Higher Education" and "Qualitative Research for Doctoral Students." Every student in the class signed up for one or both of these organizations. While this was an unintended outcome of the class, this outcome certainly indicates that what was learned within the classroom was valuable enough to the students to sustain an engagement beyond the classroom, beyond grades, and beyond the calendar date of the end of a semester.

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**APPENDIX A:  
RUBRIC FOR BAG PORTRAIT SUBJECTIVITY PERFORMANCE**

You will be given a paper bag on which you will create a portrait of yourself. On one side of the bag will be a reflection of you that you project to the world. On the other side will be a reflection of you that you perhaps keep hidden from the world. Inside the bag you will keep objects, items, memorabilia, pictures, or anything else you deem relevant that connects you to your study, inspires you to do what you do, and informs your values, beliefs, and assumptions. This will be an ongoing project throughout the semester so keep returning to your self-portrait bag as the semester goes on. For the purpose of this project, you will be expected to present your self-portrait bag to the class for 5 minutes to discuss:

Criteria	Points	Your Points
Description of topic that you are interested in studying with sufficient details about the topic	1	
Describe/display your journey to this topic. How did you come across this topic? What are the milestones? What are the landmarks? What were your personal experiences? How did it make you feel? What conclusions were you able to draw? What privileges do you identify with that are earned and/or unearned?	1.5	
Why does this study matter to you? What are your motivations? What are your personal and professional investments?	1.5	
What assumptions do you bring to this topic? What kind of outcomes do you expect out of this research?	1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	

**Instructor remarks:**

**APPENDIX B:  
RUBRIC FOR DUOETHNOGRAPHY PROJECT**

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Submit an in-depth duoethnography project no longer than 20 pages including references and supporting materials in the appendix.

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which a person's life histories shape him/her in the current moment of his/her academic journey and how the person explores, integrates, rejects, resists, and accommodates with and against these life history elements when considering his/her research projects. Guiding questions for these projects could include:

1. In what ways does the participant's life histories shape the participant's current lived experiences as a scholar in training? In what ways does attending to the participant's life histories inform, shape, influence, and disrupt the researcher's understanding of his/her life experiences related to his/her academic journey?
2. What are some perspectives that the participant and researcher share about their life histories and academic journeys?
3. Where might be some differences between the participant and the researcher's life histories and academic journeys?
4. What transformative role, if any, does duoethnography play in informing the researcher about qualitative research, one's own project, and one's own relationship with said project?

	<b>Criteria for Grading</b>	<b>Possible Points</b>	<b>Your Points</b>
<b>Introduction to the project</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Description of the project</li> <li>• What were the research purpose and questions?</li> <li>• What was particularly intriguing about this issue?</li> <li>• What was already known about duoethnography as a methodological approach?</li> </ul> <p>Preferred – start with an engaging introduction</p>	<b>3</b>	

<b>Data Collection Methods</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did you collect data?</li> <li>• How long did you participate in data collection?</li> <li>• What were the different types of data that you collected?</li> <li>• Offer examples of each kind blended in the narrative.</li> </ul>	<b>6</b>	
<b>Outline &amp; Preliminary Analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain your process of data analysis that allowed you to identify preliminary findings</li> <li>• Provide visual examples generously as you describe your process of data analysis</li> <li>• Provide a final visual representation of findings and connections you made</li> </ul>	<b>4</b>	
<b>Data Representation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present your findings in any way that is consistent with your preliminary analysis. This could be a visual narrative, a play, a story, etc. with integrated examples from your data</li> </ul>	<b>3</b>	
<b>Recursive Reflection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What went well for you in this project?</li> <li>• How did you understand your life histories, subjectivity, and positionality as a result of this study?</li> <li>• How do the differences in life histories inform you?</li> <li>• What role did duoethnography play in informing you about qualitative inquiry?</li> <li>• What role did the bag portrait play in informing your understanding about the intersection of your life histories and research interest and in engaging with your partner's life histories and research interest?</li> <li>• What would you like to improve for next time? What do you need to be more aware of?</li> <li>• Provide specific examples from the data to illustrate your point.</li> </ul>	<b>6</b>	
<b>Writing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear organization and structure, fluent and accurate writing and citations where needed.</li> </ul>	<b>3</b>	
	<b>Total Points</b>	<b>25</b>	