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Krzysztof Konecki
University of Lodz, Poland

Introduction to the issue “Teaching Qualitative Methods”

Popularity of qualitative methods in social sciences is still on the growth. Many scholars from disciplines which prefer to count phenomena and their indices, and also statistically verify their hypothetical statements, are now interested in qualitative methods, which may help them in understanding of social phenomena. We observe such trend in management sciences and economics. If the new kinds of methods, qualitative ones, enter some disciplines, a question of teaching these methods arises. How to teach methods that are based more on understanding and emphatic insight into motives of behaviour and intersubjective empathy to describe and explain interactional phenomena?

Teaching methods is a very complicated undertaking. We teach qualitative methods to get scientific results. The expectations in the academic world are clear and very demanding. So we need to have a plain structure of the process of teaching and procedures of applying these methods. However using qualitative methods requires more than getting to know procedures and sequences of their applications. We need something more in this endeavour. We need some kind of social experience and immersion in the real life of observed and researched people. Combining technical approach to teach procedures of qualitative methods with teaching of social skills and knowledge is the main goal of the instructors. So we need to redirect our didactic process from a purely technical attitude to more diverse and “life world” oriented instructions. The practice of using methods and going to the field seems to be the solution that majority of qualitative methods teachers have undertaken. Some of them have specific tactics of teaching: using visual devices, going to the field, realising research projects, studying biographies of qualitative scientists, etc.

The role of handbooks in a didactic process of teaching qualitative methods is also interesting. Handbooks should give us more or less simple recipes how to make qualitative research. However they do not give us recipes that are ready to use without any advice from teachers and their knowledge of the society. Still direct instruction and observation of the master in practice during the research by students are the best way of transmission of knowledge on qualitative methods. Written instructions, handbooks or computer assisted data analysis are not enough to teach students what to observe and how to observe, how to analyse and what to analyse. The methods are connected with theoretical knowledge and applying theoretical thinking to a research. There is no research without concepts and explanations of the social phenomena. Methods only are not enough to make our results better and more understandable and acceptable from the evaluation of credibility or the research. Students need our knowledge, expertise and sagacity. But we need their questions, doubts and vigour in research to make data and analysis more dense and saturated. Teaching is an interactive enterprise and we can see it in our pedagogical work.

For what should we then teach methods of qualitative research? I think that we need some kind of an *a priori* structure of the process of collecting and analysing data. We need the procedures to make our research and analysis of data more intersubjective and transparent. We also need evaluation procedures. There is no evaluation without controlling and checking the way of application of methods. So we need handbooks, written instructions and computer assisted data analysis to teach students how to make qualitative research and check the results of that teaching as well as results of their research projects. Students, to start a research, need some basic structure of research undertakings and courses of methods give it to them. Courses of teaching qualitative methods are indispensable, although they should be enriched by theoretical courses and intensive field research practice.

The issue we present to you is a result of a conference "Teaching Qualitative Methods" that took place in Lodz University, Institute of Sociology on September 15 – 17, 2008. It has been organized by European Sociological Association Network of Qualitative Methods. Papers, published in the issue, are mainly concentrated on teaching of qualitative methods and its processual and pedagogical aspects. The process can change the perspectives of students on the research (paper by Barbara Kawulich, Mark W.J. Garner and Claire Wagner). Students can also learn that a qualitative research and report are a collaborative enterprise and not only a product of a mind of a brilliant scientist (paper by Izabela Wagner). Anne Ryen shows that the research in the intercultural context could be a very risky endeavor and we should try to make a research work empowering people than to make them dependant. Krzysztof T. Konecki shows that using visual materials can enrich students social empathy and also increase the sociological imagination and better understanding of the analytical procedures to generate concepts and theoretical understanding of the researched field. Ana Maria Brandão shows advantages of the early exposition of students to the field and building their experiences and personal adaptation to the future visiting the field. The last paper, by Dominika Byczkowska, shows that researchers learn a lot by doing research, also by body experiences, which makes the researcher fully engaged in the investigation.

Krzysztof T. Konecki