

Equipment for qualitative research

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I'm writing this post from the first meeting of Patricia Lather's qualitative research methods class at OSU. To take this class, I'm driving over 4 hours each way from Indiana to Ohio — every week — and it is going to be totally worth it. I've done qualitative work before, but never critiqued by someone who "thought like me" (in the sense of being poststructural) — and Dr. Lather is one of the pioneers of that paradigm in educational research, so there's no better way I could be learning.

During the first portion of the class, Dr. Lather talked about equipment that qualitative researchers should have to make their lives as easy as possible, and I think this is something others might want to know. We need to find practices (including tools) that fit us — that fit the way we want to work, the way we do our knowing and our learning and recording, so these are lists to start thinking from rather than absolutes.

- A good tape recorder. A good digital recorder might run you about \$300. I personally have the [Zoom H2](#) from music recording experiments, but have taken to recording research interviews on my digital camera or even my phone so that I can lipread the interviewee I'm transcribing. (I'm deaf, so my transcription setup and considerations will be different than most people's; in fact, part of the work I'm doing on my dissertation methodology is finding workarounds for this.)
- A foot pedal, maybe \$15 at Radio Shack.
- If you're doing phone interviews, there are devices that connect to the phone that can record phone conversations. (I can't lipread over the phone, so this will never be the case for me — however, I might want to figure out something for videochat interviews.)
- If you're doing group discussions or focus groups, you'll need the ability to mic multiple people — table mics and so forth. Those are getting more expensive, \$80 and up. Also note that group discussions are hellishly hard to transcribe; people overlap and interrupt, you need to tell whose voice is whose... (and I think: "hard to transcribe? that's why they're hard for me to *hear!*")
- Transcribing software. I still need to figure out what I want to use for this — any recommendations, or internet metabrain?

Dr. Lather wants us to transcribe our recordings — to know in our bones that every hour of interviewing is multiple hours of transcription, reams of data to work with... the course philosophy is "do more with less data," which I sorely need to learn. She also emphasises the importance of taking good notes; many people are afraid to take notes during an interview because of "losing rapport," but you need to learn how to do it because it forces you to pay attention in a different way. It's a skill that needs to be developed; sometimes interviewees actually respond well to it because it makes them feel important. Also, not everyone wants to be tape recorded; what if you can't record where you're going? That limits where and how you can collect data. Why be limited?

Rule of thumb: when you tape, transcribe within 24 hours. (Quote of the week: "If you get home and put that tape in the closet and think 'Oh, I'll transcribe it later,' that tape will have babies, and then you'll look and there'll be 10 tapes in the closet, untranscribed.")

It's fascinating as I sit here — they're talking about recording setups and the things most people

don't realize when they're novices to interviewing. For instance, "don't record in a restaurant, it'll pick up the noise and the tape will be hard to understand" is something I would never do — I can't hear in a restaurant, period! If it doesn't work well for audio recorders, it won't work well for me; conversely, the mic setups I think about for making situations understandable to me (ok, I need a table mic for remote CART for this, a lavalier mic for that, I need to set the room up this way so the acoustics will be good)... are also the same considerations for making recordings. So in a weird way, I'm ahead of that game.

Break time; I think we're mostly done talking about equipment. Other notes:

One recommended reading for our qualitative research methods course is "The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales" because of how it takes familiar fairy tales and flips our preconceptions of what fairy tales are — there's a lot of postcolonial and postmodern thinking in that children's book. Tell the story from the villain's point of view, the ugly duckling grows up to be an ugly duck, that sort of thing. A lot of qual, I think, is becoming aware of and playing with your own thinking; how can you turn other people's perceptions upside-down unless you know how to do that with yours?

Discourse analysis is the most difficult kind of analysis, apparently — compared to quantitative analysis of qualitative documents, or other kinds of qualitative content analysis that look for themes. (Oh, boy. Discourse analysis is what I'm planning on doing. Awesome.)

It's important to be there — to see reactions, to see what's happening. One researcher had an illumination moment when the subject she'd given a survey to got mad about the questions on the survey — and then that anger became the grounds for further understanding.