

Project Title:

Qualitative Research Educator and Professional Identity in the Age of Generative AI

Project Purpose:

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to understand the professional identity of qualitative research educators in higher education institutions in the age of generative AI. We are interested in how generative AI, such as ChatGPT could potentially disrupt, extend, and transform the subjectivity of a qualitative researcher educator.

Background:

Generative AI is defined as a technology that produces human-like content using a machine learning model based on large amount of publicly available digital data (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). ChatGPT, a generative AI tool that is regarded as affordable and easy to use, is gaining popularity in various fields, including higher education. While Ausat et al. (2023) concluded from a literature review that ChatGPT can only be a tool and not a replacement for teacher in the classroom, the emergence of generative AI provides a unique context to explore what it means to be an educator when the contents and contexts of teaching and learning are being continuously transformed. Generative AI can be used to provide customized and adaptive learning experiences and fast and targeted feedback (Alasadi & Baiz, 2023; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2023; Su & Yang, 2023). Challenges related to the adoption of generative AI in educational settings include issues related with academic integrity, reliability and bias of AI-generated content, and ethical and safe use of AI tools (Alasadi & Baiz, 2023; Michel-Villarreal et al., 2023; Su & Yang, 2023). Generative AI is anticipated to significantly reconfigure the professional roles and responsibilities of educators. This (anticipated) change creates a space for professional identity negotiation and identity development.

In our inquiry, we are particularly interested in the professional identity of qualitative research educators in higher education. Teaching qualitative research is messy, can vary among different academic disciplines, and is subject to institutional culture and politics (Waite, 2014; Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2018). Literature on qualitative research education is relatively scarce and mainly focused on describing course content and teaching procedurals (Hein, 2004; Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011; Wanger et al., 2019). Wanger et al. (2019) reviewed literatures on teaching qualitative research between 1999 and 2013 and found that the educators frequently adopt experiential learning and practice-based material in teaching qualitative research. Regarding the relational aspect of learning, qualitative research community has long been emphasizing a strong, supportive, and non-hierarchical relationship between educators and learners to facilitate mutual learning. For example, Preissle and deMarrais (2011) proposed that “qualitative methodologists position themselves as learners and researchers, more skilled and experienced than the students, but on a similar journey to understand the world” (p. 35). Despite the growing amount literature on qualitative research pedagogy and instructional practice, there has not been a systematic investigation on professional identity in the community. In 1993, Glesne and Webb (1993) tried to answer the question: *who teaches qualitative research methods* and found that qualitative research programs were being established in higher education

institutions and faculty members were hired to teach qualitative research courses specifically. Saldaña noted in a discussion on qualitative research pedagogy that “we teach who we are” (Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016, p. 421). Thus, the identity of qualitative researcher educators can become a crucial resource for enlarging the academic space of qualitative research education as well as enabling a deeper understanding of higher education digital transformation. To expand our understanding of qualitative research education, we adopted an expansive definition where we acknowledge all instructional activity that aims to support qualitative researcher, thereby broadening our sample to include instructors, research support professionals, mentors, consultants, and more.

Professional identity is “an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences” and professional identity development is a response to not only “who I am” but also “what do I want to become” (Beijaard et al., 2003, p. 122). In academia, professional identity is complex and is subject to the influence of department, discipline, university, and societal cultures and structures (Clarke et al., 2013; Clegg, 2008; Trowler & Knight, 2000). Academics can hold multiple identities in various academic contexts and continually negotiate them as they progress in their career (Aitken, 2010; Boncori & Smith, 2020; Colbeck, 2008). Technological advancement can play a critical role in reconfiguring professional identity in higher education. Geertshuis and Liu (2022) found that in the process of adopting new learning management system (LMS), academics who prioritized different aspects of their professional identity engaged in different sense-making. Academics who prioritized their identity as lecturers were more appreciative of the benefits that LMS can offer. However, academics who perceived themselves as traditional lecturers did not perceive the utility of LMS in supporting teaching and learning. Howard (2022) explored the Kahoot! gamified practice of teaching and found that lecturers perceived Kahoot! as either enhancing or threatening their professional identity. The current study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on professional identity in the age of generative AI, with a focus on qualitative research educators.

Methodology:

In this narrative inquiry, we are interested in how generative AI interacts with qualitative educators’ sense of professional identity. Riessman (1993) described narrative inquiry as a process that serves the purpose of “systematic study of personal experiences and meaning: how events have been constructed by active subjects” (p. 70). Researchers who employ narrative inquiry are interested in understanding the phenomenon of interest, rather than seeking a scientific explanation (Kramp, 2004). Our interview questions focus on participant’s engagement with qualitative research education, evolving sense of professional identity, and use of generative AI in supporting teaching and learning. Even though generative AI is not a new phenomenon, the adoption of it in qualitative research education and its subsequent effect on professional identity is still emerging. Thus, we are also interested in how qualitative research educators speculate about the future landscape of research and education. To achieve this goal, we adopted principles from speculative methodology to enhance our research design. Speculative methodology does not aim to verify but rather “experiment and ask questions about possibilities and what if” (Koro et al., 2023, p. 3). Speculative methodology moves beyond human agency and acknowledges the

interplay between human and nonhuman actors in the inquiry process (Koro, 2022). A key element of speculative methodology is that it acts to create the future it aims to portray (Ross, 2017). To explore the future of generative AI and education, we invite ChatGPT into our inquiry process. We used ChatGPT to generate scenarios based on the prompt: *Imagine the future of qualitative research education where generative AI is seemingly integrated into it.* We included the generated scenarios into our interview protocol. We show these generated scenarios to our participants and invite them to speculate on how their professional identity might continually evolve.

Plan of Work

Jan 2024: The research team consists of Dr. Beixi Li (PI) and Dr. Ajit Bhattarai (Idaho State University). We have finished developing interview protocols and recruitment materials. We have received approval from the Western Michigan University IRB review board.

Feb 2024 – Apr 2024: This study will use purposeful sampling. Sampling criteria include (1) engagement with qualitative research education, (2) adoption of generative AI in support teaching/learning or interested in adopting, and (3) considering qualitative research educator to be an aspect of their professional identity. This study aims to recruit 6-8 participants. Recruitment strategies include social media posts (LinkedIn, Facebook groups, Reddit), outreach to professional associations (e.g., AERA), and direct contact with key informants. A consent letter (Qualtrics survey) will be sent to participants prior to interview. All interviews will be recorded using Zoom. Participants will receive a 20-dollar Amazon Gift Card as research incentive.

Apr 2024 – June 2024: Interview data will be transcribed and uploaded to Nvivo for analysis. Data analysis techniques will include thematic analysis and narrative analysis (re-storying). We will submit our manuscript to *Learning, Media, and Technology (Special Issue: Transforming methodologies: Reconsidering the tools and logics of educational research in the digital era)* by the end of June.

Anticipated Outcomes and Plans for Continuing Research:

Generative AI is fundamentally reshaping the landscape of research across various disciplines. How we educate researchers in higher education today will define the future of academy and society. The current project marks the first step of creating a pedagogical culture of qualitative research by investigating one of the key stakeholders involved – qualitative research educators. The results of this study have practical and theoretical implications. Professional identity of qualitative research educator is a under theorizing research area. At the end of the project, we will learn the meaning-making process qualitative research educators engage in to sustain and transform their professional identity. The findings can be used to curate learning resources and create organizational infrastructure to support qualitative research educator's professional identity development. In addition, our use of speculative methodology demonstrates an innovative use of ChatGPT in qualitative research. The proposed project holds significant promise to enhance our prospects for securing external funding in the future. The long-term goal of this line of inquiry is to create a framework and resources to support educators, learners, and

research professionals in navigating philosophical, methodological, and ethically complexities. External funding opportunities we are interested in pursuing include Spencer Foundation (The Small Research Grants on Education Program) and National Center for Education Research (Postsecondary and Adult Education).

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