Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to give ideas and suggestions to avoid some typical problems of qualitative articles. The aim is not to debate quality in qualitative research but to indicate some practical solutions.
Design/methodology/approach – The paper discusses the design of qualitative research and the structure of a qualitative article giving some methodological suggestions to make it better for the reader and the reviewer.
Findings – The paper finds that the main criteria to getting published are that the article must be transparent regarding the process followed in the research and it must be well structured so it can be understood by readers.
Originality/value – If these guidelines are followed the review process of articles will be smoother and the number of rejected papers should decrease. The paper will benefit young researchers who can find suggestions on writing a paper for the Journal of Workplace Learning.
Keywords Qualitative research, Research methods, Quality improvement

Introduction
The discussion around what qualitative research is and how we can evaluate it is ongoing. Creswell (2007, p. 36) recently noted that “some extremely useful introductory books to qualitative research these days do not contain a definition that can be easily located”. As reported by Sandelowski and Barroso (2009), due to the different paradigms that drive researchers, the debate has not reached a definitive conclusion. Thus Rolfe (2006, p. 305), following their work, argues that:

any attempt to establish a consensus on quality criteria for qualitative research is unlikely to succeed for the simple reason that there is no unified body of theory, methodology or method that can collectively be described as qualitative research; indeed, that the very idea of qualitative research is open to question.

We do not aim to state definitely what is and what is not qualitative research but we agree with Porter (2007) when he states, analysing Rolfe’s contribution, that there are two main ways of defining qualitative research: the first refers to method (using this word to identify the kind of information that is collected and analysed), the second one refers to epistemological and ontological assumptions.

The problematic nature of qualitative research can be connected to linguistic questions as Tobin and Begley (2004, p. 389) partially uphold when they state that “due to a long history of producing important findings, quantitative research has become the language of research rather than the language of a particular paradigm”. Qualitative study has progressively gained a more accepted position in the academic world of qualitative researchers (McCracken, 1988) but there is still often a feeling of...
inferiority among qualitative researchers. Another contentious issue is what makes “the good qualitative researcher” (for an interesting treatment of the subject see the article of Brinkmann (2007) with the same title). This is a topic that involves all the questions stated above as well other issues.

Even with these discussions in mind, our aim in this paper is to indicate some guidelines for the authors who want to submit their articles to the review process to be accepted by the Journal of Workplace Learning (JWL).

Why do we need to speak about this?
To share the research results, as well as the lessons that researchers learned from reality and from their interaction with it, it is necessary to share also a way of building the discourse. This is a necessity for the reader who needs to understand how the research process has been conducted and how the researchers reached their conclusions. This background information is also a must for the decision of the reviewer who must give an evaluation of the paper.

This is the fundamental problem in qualitative research: how we can communicate clearly and in a short paper (around 5,000 words) the results and difficulties, the satisfaction and frustration of a complex process that has involved ourselves for a long time (years, in some cases)? How can we relate our changes of directions and ideas, and our mistakes and insights? We are frustrated in saying that we do not have the absolute answers (appropriate to all articles and all research questions) but we try to give here some basic indications to guide the writing.

In social sciences there is a growing interest towards qualitative research and qualitative techniques (the work of Spencer et al. (2003) is an explicit example). The growing acceptance of qualitative work in the scientific community has a counterpart in the presence of work with a weak methodological structure. This is particularly true in the world of applied social sciences, as it is not uncommon that colleagues will state that their results are more important than how they were reached. In this paper we try to take the theoretical frame and practical activity together.

Speaking about the nature of qualitative research, a schema of the phases of qualitative research can be helpful (we start from the schema of Bryman (2008) but something similar can be found in most of the methodological texts):

1. General research questions.
2. Collection of information:
   - selection of relevant case(s);
   - definition of the kind of instruments; and
   - collecting information.
3. Transformation in data.
4. Interpretation of data.
5. Conceptual and theoretical work:
   - specification of the research questions; and
   - collection of further data/information (return to point 2).
6. Writing up finding/conclusions (in some case here there is the generation of a new research question).
Following these steps is an easy way to be clear, but also the choice of the content and the way of writing are important to permit the reader to understand the process. This is a schema made available for a general research process. However, the qualitative research process is often much more iterative, while all the contents cannot be well defined at the beginning (a case study is seen to be an especially good method for areas where little is previously known). Instead, the definitions and ideas are refined throughout the process in a recursive way. In some cases, it can be interesting to relate in the report also the main phases of this recursive process. We will emphasize this point in the next part of the paper where we speak about research requirements and practical problems in more detail.

Some qualitative research requirements
First, qualitative research, as all kinds of research, needs a research question – and the same holds for qualitative research reports. In some traditions the term “problem(s)” is preferred to “question(s)”. In this work we prefer to use more general terms whenever possible. How and why something initially became a research question is a specific kind of question. Different research traditions have different ideas regarding who is the owner of the research question and how it develops. In all the traditions, we can see that it evolves from the interaction between the researcher’s goals (individual, ethical, ...) and the researcher’s theoretical frames. The researcher’s theoretical frames include all the previous research, findings or theories, existing on the topics to be studied that are mobilized by the researcher. A research question is something that, in this interaction, appears to be something where more knowledge is expected.

What makes a research question a qualitative one is precisely the nature of this combination: qualitative goals are different from quantitative ones, and qualitative questions are asked in a particular way and refer to qualitative contents. The peculiarity of qualitative goals reside in the way the question is framed – a need to describe, verify or understand. A qualitative research question must explore a qualitative argument in a qualitative way. The question has to be grounded in a qualitative argument. For example, if the researchers want to know some information about school abandonment, they can frame the question in a quantitative way, asking questions like “How often are young people abandoning school?”, searching indicators correlated with the phenomenon such as family status, age, or gender. On the other hand they can also ask the same question starting from a qualitative argument, for example trying to understand how and why people abandon a particular school.

The question has to be clearly explained. “Clearly explained” means that it is necessary to make every part of the question as explicit as possible. All the different terms and theoretical constructs used by the researchers have to be defined and explained especially if they come from new interpretational systems. This explanation is necessary to operationalise the process because the research question is the starting point from which all the next methodological choices are made. It is important to remember that the definition of the research question is often an autonomous, recursive process. In some traditions the research question does not exist at all, but we can always find a motivational engine that does the same work of directing the actions and intentions of researchers. Sometimes it is not easy to define how and when a problem becomes a research question and for some people it may seem unnatural to identify a starting point. However it is a rhetoric need to have a start and an end; to compare findings to what was supposed to be studied.
The second point considers the methodological choices: which case(s) are selected, how the information is collected, and how the kind of data analysis is chosen. Data do not exist in nature; rather it emerges from the interaction of researchers with the field. The “things” that the researchers find is information that can be transformed into data via a process of conceptualisation that involves theory, aims and the researchers.

At the beginning there should be a definition of what information is needed to respond to the research questions. It is important to make explicit why we choose to collect information on a certain subject and not on another, and why we choose to treat this case in the study and not the other. In order to gain the right to say something on a certain topic we need to collect information coherent with the questions that we are asking in the real world. There are many different strategies to identify the subject(s) but again there is not a universal rule. In the book of Creswell (2007) it is possible to find some indications on the different strategies.

In writing a paper it is fundamental that the authors do not extend their conclusion outside the sample without a sound reasoning. A good choice of a small number of subjects is often to be preferred to a wider but not clearly defined subject. Frequently the amount and the kind of subjects are defined by context characteristics or design dimensions, but this is not always a weakness of the research. An example where we can make clear conclusions could be when studying the professionalism of seven Spanish teachers in a German city of 3,000 people, which presents a great opportunity to interview all of them. Another kind of example might be that we would be carrying out an action research connected to the psychological contract in a research department, and during our work half of the employees are fired and most of them move out of town; we would easily run into problems stating anything about the department. All these choices have to be the consequences of the research question and have to be justified in relation to the research question and aims.

Making a good plan for the information to be collected means taking into account the goals, theoretical frame, and research question of the whole study. These components have to be related and coherent. In writing a report, it is important that the readers have the chance to understand the reasons of the researcher’s choices. If I choose to use images to make my subjects speak about their relational competencies used at work, then it is not enough to state “I use images as stimuli to make people speak about themselves”: I have to explain why and with which theoretical frame the method is suitable, and how I have chosen the images and how I use them. Only in this way can other researchers compare their experiences and findings with my reports.

The kind of information that can be collected is evidently different if we do an interview in person or via telephone or via computer; if we use focus groups or if we interview a single subject at a time; if we observe people behind a glass or if we sit in the middle of a room; if we participate in the work or not; if the information that we are looking for is naturally produced or induced. We discuss these more when we speak about reliability.

The way in which qualitative data was analysed has been largely undocumented in the past. The procedures of data management and analysis can often be perceived as shrouded in mystery (Hoong Sin, 2007). Nowadays it is not acceptable that a research article does not clearly describe how the authors have transformed their information in data. The readers have to be able to identify the methodological choices and the analysis process on which kind of information has been analysed and in which way.
The so-called Computer Aided/Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) helps researchers to make the process more evident. On the other hand, sometimes software is used as something of a prop as in statistics in the joke: “People commonly use statistics like a drunk uses a lamp post; for support rather than illumination” (we find this comment attributed to Mark Twain; if someone can give us a more reliable reference we will be 80 percent grateful). If software has been used, it is important to write it down, but software is an instrument like a hammer or screwdriver. It is important to explain how the information has been analysed; to use a phrase like “we use Nvivo” is not enough. “I have used it to apply a thematic coding” is a bit better, and describes the kind of work and the added value of using the software. This is more likely to satisfy the reader.

We have to bear in mind that a research process can be a recursive process in which we have progressively better definitions of the research question and also of the information needed and the subjects involved. In the context of an increasing improvement of the interpretational system the operative added value of software is clear but the conceptual difference is a completely different matter.

Some practical problems
In the qualitative fields, research questions and methodological choices involve some practical problems. First of all, it is possible to identify some coherence problems. When we speak about coherence problems in qualitative research we emphasise the bonds existing between the different steps and content of the research process. It is very important to explain how every research step is linked to the others and especially how the process starts (the research question) and finishes (the results presentation and interpretation). For example, if there is not enough space in the article to report all the results, it is better to choose just some of them and explain them clearly. As stated at the beginning of this paper this is a cause of frustration for qualitative researchers. We aim to give all the information that we have collected and explaining all the findings but there is never enough space. It is important to bear in mind the differences between a research article and a monograph on a specific topic. These two kinds of publication are managed with different rules and different limits.

Another important point in qualitative fields, strongly linked with coherence of the writing, concerns the bonds between theoretical and applied dimensions. In particular, it is imperative to fully describe the process that converts theory to application, making each step and each link made by the researcher explicit. This point is particularly important in the interpretation chapters. In fact, research that presents results and suggests some interventions without explaining how the choices are made shows a lack of bounds between theoretical and applied dimensions.

A second point concerns the validation process, including dimensions such as validity, reliability or usefulness. What are the meanings of these terms in qualitative research? Many books and articles try to define these concepts for qualitative research, and discuss their pertinence. We will not enter in the debate but just propose some definitions concerning validity, reliability or usefulness and underline their implication in practical problems.

Speaking about a validation process it is important to share a consensus around a general concept of validity. Validity has “the characteristic of being founded on truth,
accuracy, fact or law. The degree of which a test or measurement accurately measures or reflects what it purports to measure” (Vandenbos, 2007, p. 975).

Furthermore, validity can be defined as “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (Hammersley, 1990, p. 57). And it is important to consider that “Validity is context bound, however. That is, it depends on the aims of a method and the context in which this method is used” (Moret et al., 2009, p. 25).

For example, the small size of samples commonly present in a qualitative research is often used as an argument to demonstrate the low validity of a qualitative research, but “from a more empirical perspective, the labour-intensive nature of research focused on depth (including, sometimes “reflexivity”) can be evoked to justify a small sample size” (Crouch and McKenzie, 2009, p. 484). In qualitative fields validity has to be constructed step by step. This construction needs specific instruments especially to increase validity and transparency. It is possible to mention a couple of the most commonly used like triangulation or respondent validation and a couple of the less used like the analysis of the misleading cases and saturation sampling. Triangulation consists in the use of more method to collect information (or data source) in the study of a specific social phenomenon. It is important to underline that different kinds of triangulation can be done which mix methods or subjects. The respondent (or member) validation is a process in which the researchers give an account of the findings to the subjects involved in the research. That is a particularly powerful strategy especially when there is a big difference between the cultural membership of the researchers and the subjects. The analysis of misleading cases is connected to the idea that if I build a theory on a specific phenomena I have to explain all the cases (or at least most of them) and so a misleading case is much more informative than a coherent one and needs to be explained. The techniques of saturation sampling consists of a progressive sampling of the possible subjects until the information collected is the same for each new subject.

Linked with validity, it is necessary to underline the rigour of the process. Rigour means the researcher must respect research steps and internal coherence. We can say that “rigour is the means by which we demonstrate integrity and competence, a way of demonstrating the legitimacy of the research process” and “rigour is the means by which we show integrity and competence: it is about ethics and politics, regardless of the paradigm” (Tobin and Begley, 2004, p. 390).

Rigour needs integrity as a means of “locating situatedness, trustworthiness and authenticity” (Tobin and Begley, 2004, p. 391). In an article, it is important to relate ethical implication in the research’s choices, but also how and why the steps follow each other. For example, it is not enough just to report a schema of the steps of qualitative research; it is necessary to complete the content with the links and implications between them. It is not enough to write in the methodological chapter “we use participant observation” and explain what this wording means. It is also fundamental to link this choice to the theoretical frame of the study, explaining why this technique has been preferred to answer the research question and what the consequences of using this technique are for the information collected and for analysis. In this case it could be interesting to link the technique’s choice with the researcher role during the information collection and researcher implication during the analysis.

We must not forget reliability. The main point about reliability concerns the extension or reproducibility of results. In qualitative research this is an important question. How does the researcher deal with these questions? Does he/she try to
generalize improperly, for example, extending results to a large population starting from a case study, or does he/she follow all the steps of the process leading to a clear understanding of the study? If the researcher has made the process clear and transparent, the question of reproducibility can better be treated. For example, if the population’s characteristics are clearly described, it is easier to imagine how the results can be extended or reproduced in a similar population. However, it is obvious that a replication of a process that involves the same researchers should lead to same results, but in qualitative studies what is done, seen, and heard (and also what will happen) will not be precisely the same as the original information.

In the validation process it is also important to remember that different qualitative traditions have different modalities, specifics conditions or procedures to construct validity and these imply peculiar characteristics of validation.

In the qualitative field it is important to speak about the usefulness of research, and the report is a way of underlining the research process and results. The research’s usefulness can be better understood when the purposes are clearly described, when the design is exposed in detail, when the findings are simply and minutely illustrated and the interpretations are related to the research question. In addition the research limitations and research and practical implications need to be considered and discussed.

All these problems can be summarized and solved by the content and style of writing. Writing clearly and transparently without becoming vague or crammed is fundamental for the report. For example, during the writing it is important not to forget to consider the amount of information, for example, interview extracts, used to expose the research results. It is important to be careful to balance the quantity and quality of quotation for the process to be understood without becoming crammed with quotation. This means that the article should not have too many quotations, and then only clear and relevant quotations that are directly connected to the content of the text. It is not advisable to insert quotations in the conclusion because that can make the text heavy and unclear, nor to introduce new aspects without analysing them in depth.

**Brief practical summary**

If we have treated the problem more from the reviewer’s perspective now we concentrate on hints for writers.

To write an article first, you need a well-defined idea of what you want to communicate. The research article is supposed to be written at the end of the research process (or at least at the end of a phase of the research process) and when it is possible to address adequately the writing content. The first part of the article needs to introduce the content and to define the theoretical frame. In a research paper a complete review of the literature is not needed but it is better if the readers can find the indications as to the researcher’s theoretical frame. In this part the reason for the article is presented (why this work is important?). The second part may be used to present the methodology and the design of the research. The more the design, the process and the method(s) are new or peculiar the more this part needs to be developed. In this part it is important to explain how the work was done, which subjects were studied, why and how we collected the information, how the information is transformed into data. This is where the most frequent mismatch between theory and practice occurs. The third part concerns the findings of the research, better called the “main findings”. Here we have to illustrate what we have found and why it is important and here we make our interpretation of the data.
In this part it is necessary to build a connection between data and theoretical frame with the aim of demonstrating the usefulness and originality of our contribution.

**Conclusion**

Conducting qualitative research involves many and different choices for the researcher. To learn from the experience of others it is necessary to understand how an experience happened and which kind of action the person involved has performed. A research paper has the aim of sharing information and ideas with other researchers so it is necessary to make all parts of the research process transparent to the reader. It is important to remember that the research challenge is a collective one and we are all on the same side! The reviewer, the reader and the author work to produce the best knowledge and the best comprehension of reality that is possible. With this target in mind our efforts also need to be directed to producing the strongest evidence of our conclusion that is possible.

By being transparent the reader should be able to identify the main points and dimensions of the whole process such as coherence, rigour and main reasons for validity. In fact, “the procedures of qualitative data management and analysis in relation to evaluation can often be perceived as shrouded in mystery. This is unhelpful as the lack of transparency can often lead to the charge that qualitative data are not robust enough to be sued as ‘evidence’” (Hoong Sin, 2007, p. 110).

We believe that is not possible nowadays to compile a useful checklist of characteristics of a good qualitative article. It is possible to identify some criteria to assess a qualitative study as the one by Guba and Lincoln (1994), or to produce a set of criteria to evaluate a specific field of qualitative research, as done by Spencer et al. (2003) for evaluative research. We suppose that a universal set of criteria is not practically possible due to lack of time, but also due to some characteristics of research areas and also to the desire to defend some idiosyncrasies of certain fields.

We want to conclude by quoting the guidelines of JWL:

> It is expected that articles published in the Journal will be based on research, and will incorporate careful presentation of data, and thoughtful analysis and discussion, rather than comprise mere description or synthesis of existing literature, and will also cater for an international audience. All contributors are encouraged to spell out the practical implications and relevance of their work for those involved in supervising, facilitating or undertaking workplace learning.

The way the authors write their article, and what they choose to write or not to write, is inextricably connected to these indications.

**References**


Further reading


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