The Use of Qualitative Methods in Program Evaluation: Elephants can be Elegant

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Guba in 1978 described the benefits of moving away from the use of quantitative methodology in the field of program evaluation, and replacing this approach with qualitative methods to greatly enhance the information shared with decision-makers. Since that time, many professionals in the field have embraced the use of qualitative methods, however, because these designs personalize the data collection process for the respondents, they present both unique benefits and challenges.

The purpose of this paper session is to present information on the qualitative methods being used to evaluate the Modeling Instruction with Modern Information and Communication technologies Project (MIMIC) that is funded through the federal PT3 grant program and housed in the College of Education at Cleveland State University. The goal of MIMIC is to increase the integration of technology into pre-service teacher preparation courses, thus ultimately enhancing the use of technology by future teachers. Current K-12 teachers, proficient in the use of technology in the classroom, serve as mentors to university faculty and support them in learning new ways to use hardware and software as educational tools. Although there was a need to monitor this project’s activities through quantitative methods, each of the MIMIC mentor/mentee teams had an interesting story to tell about their experiences that could only be captured using a qualitative approach.

MIMIC’s qualitative data collection system will be described, consisting primarily of monthly logs and personal reflective journals. Presenters will provide an overview of the procedures followed to implement the system and discuss modifications that were made based on insights gained during the first full year of implementation. The benefits of qualitative data collection will be examined as well as the challenges faced in using this type of methodology for program evaluation.

Throughout the presentation and paper, benefits of qualitative data collection will be highlighted through the sharing and description of samples of the rich descriptive data from the MIMIC Project. These samples show the struggles and triumphs of faculty members and their classroom teacher mentors as they search out the most effective educational technologies to teach specific content and then work to integrate those technologies into teacher education courses. As noted, however, benefits did not come without challenges as the MIMIC evaluation team attempted to manage the timely flow of data from a diverse, creative, busy group of individuals. The authors will share how these challenges were met in ways that ultimately enhanced and supported the data collection process, and provided timely formative feedback to the MIMIC staff. Those attending the session will have an opportunity to read “the story of MIMIC” in a handout that shows how qualitative data can indeed provide unique insight into how technology project goals are being met.

References