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Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Series 5:

Qualitative Research Methods in SoTL

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Land Acknowledgement



Art by Christi Belcourt

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cia4T9euYUu/>

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Access Check

Encourage you to check, identify, and question your learning environment for any of the following and welcome comments if there are elements that we can support to reduce barriers.

- Technology
- Resources
- Pace
- Sound



Timeline of the SoTL Series



SoTL Research
Questions

SoTL Research
Paradigms

SoTL Research
Ethics

Quantitative
Research
Methods

Qualitative
Research
Methods

Today

Learning Outcomes

After this session, participants will:

- Discuss and design effective interview and focus group protocols that ethically engage students in qualitative SoTL research.
- Explore commonly used qualitative methodologies in SoTL, including thematic analysis, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology.
- Explore the logistics and practical realities of running a qualitative SoTL research project.



Type in the chat (6 min):

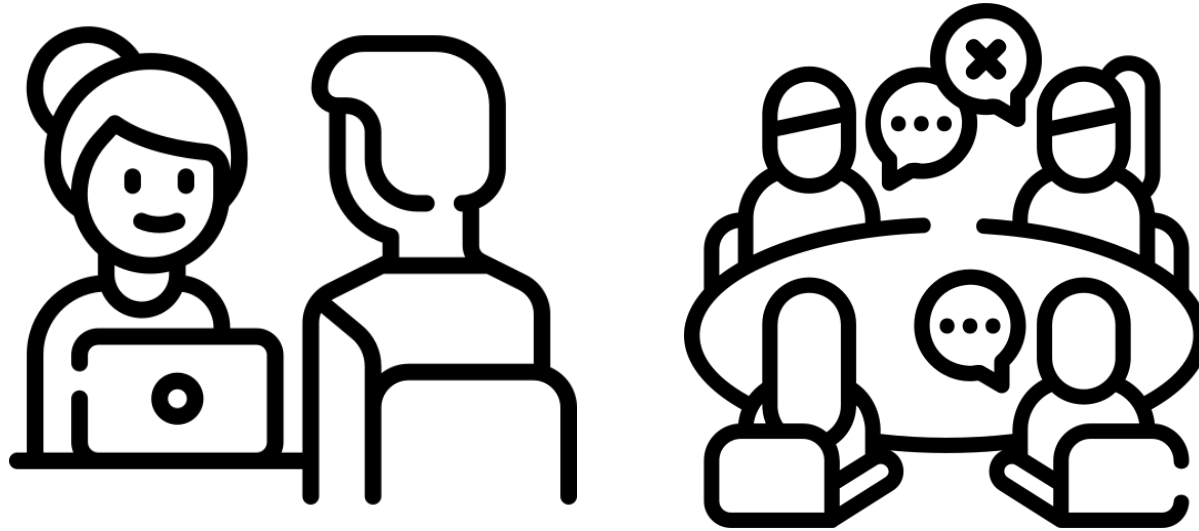
1. What's your experience with qualitative research methods?
2. What are you hoping to learn today from our conversations on qualitative research methods?



Interviews & Focus Groups

- Allow researchers to interact directly with participants and can generate rich qualitative data for SoTL projects

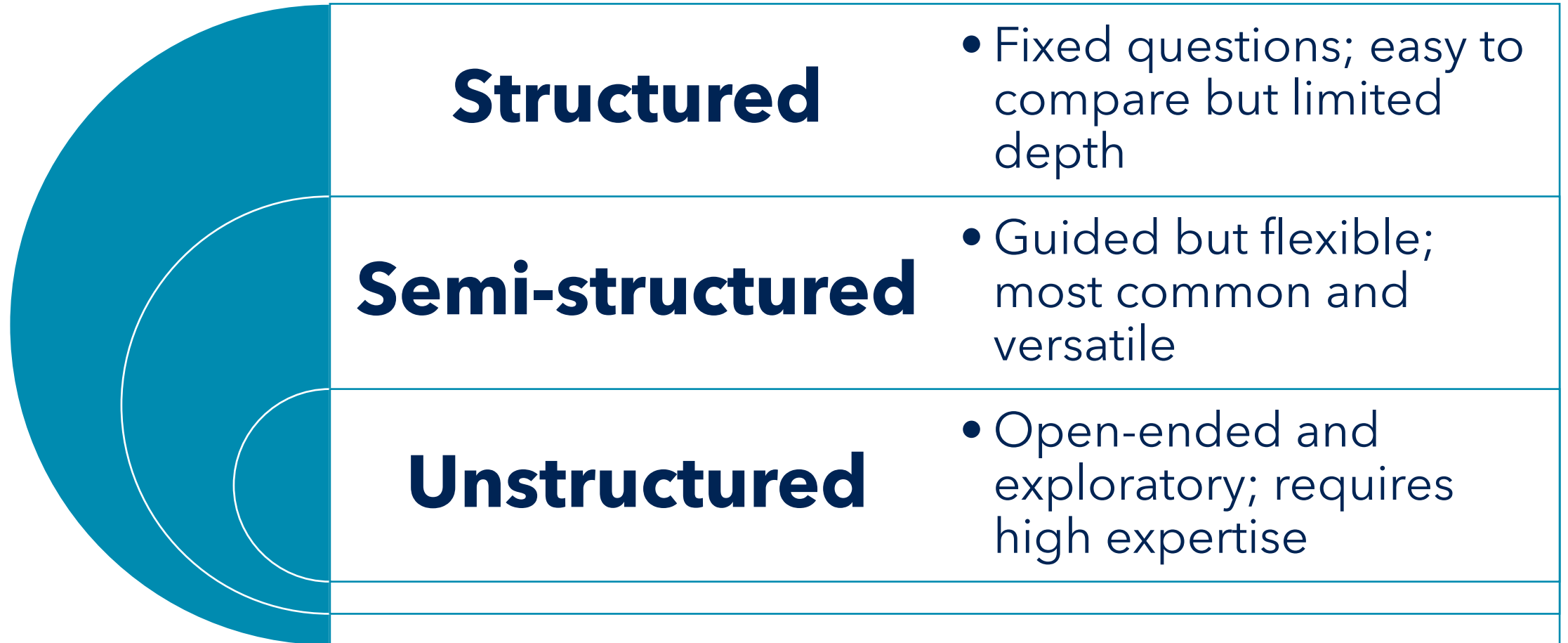
Interviews:
Provide detailed, individual perspectives; better for sensitive or personal topics; can be time-intensive



Focus Groups:
Enables interaction and idea-building among participants, but requires strong facilitation skills; risk of “group-think”

[\(pg. 70, Yeo, Miller-Young, & Manarin, 2023\)](#)

Interview Structure



([Yeo, Miller-Young, & Manarin, 2023](#))

Tips for Structuring Interview and Focus Group Questions:

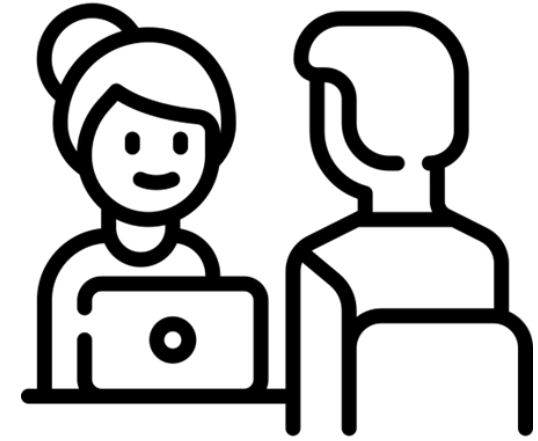
Do	Avoid
Use open-ended questions	Leading or biased questions
Keep them clear and jargon-free	Double barreled questions
Ask about experiences, feelings, opinions, behaviours	Yes/no questions

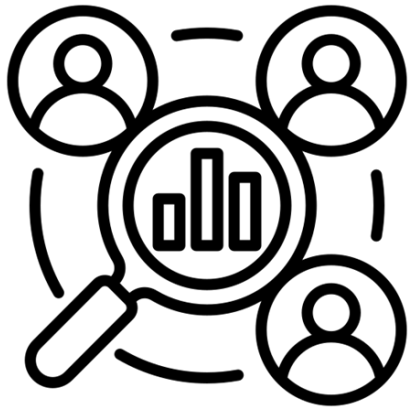
Use verbal probes for richer data elicitation:
"Can you give me an example?" "Can you tell me more about that?"

Be responsive in the interview so that it feels like a conversation;
it's okay to follow the arc of the conversation, even if it goes a bit off script.
Let participant perspectives lead the discussion and
bring it back to your list of questions when you can.

Interviews & Focus Groups

- [Braun and Clarke \(2014\)](#) note that it is important to consider the power dynamics in the interview process.
- Because the instructor holds a dual-role of instructor and researcher, it's recommended that instructors not take on the interviewer role, as it may pressure the students to participate.
 - Could have a colleague or RA conduct the interview (a third party)





Quantitative Research Methods

"A positivist orientation assumes **that reality exists "out there" and that it is observable, stable and measurable.**

Knowledge is gained through the study of this reality has been labeled "scientific"...

[\(p. 9. Merriam and Tisdell, 2016\)](#)

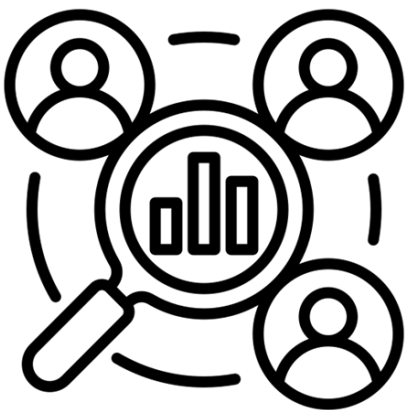
Qualitative Research Methods

"Interpretive research, which is the most common type of qualitative research, assumes **that reality is socially**

constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event. Researchers do not "find"

knowledge; they construct it."

[\(p. 9, Merriam and Tisdell, 2016\)](#)



Quant: Researcher Role

Researcher is distant/removed from the research, so as to remain objective and not introduce bias.

No reflexivity: researcher's values, beliefs and positionality are/should be independent of the phenomenon of study.

Qual: Researcher Role

Researcher is immersed within the meaning-making process through their interpretation of what is being studied.

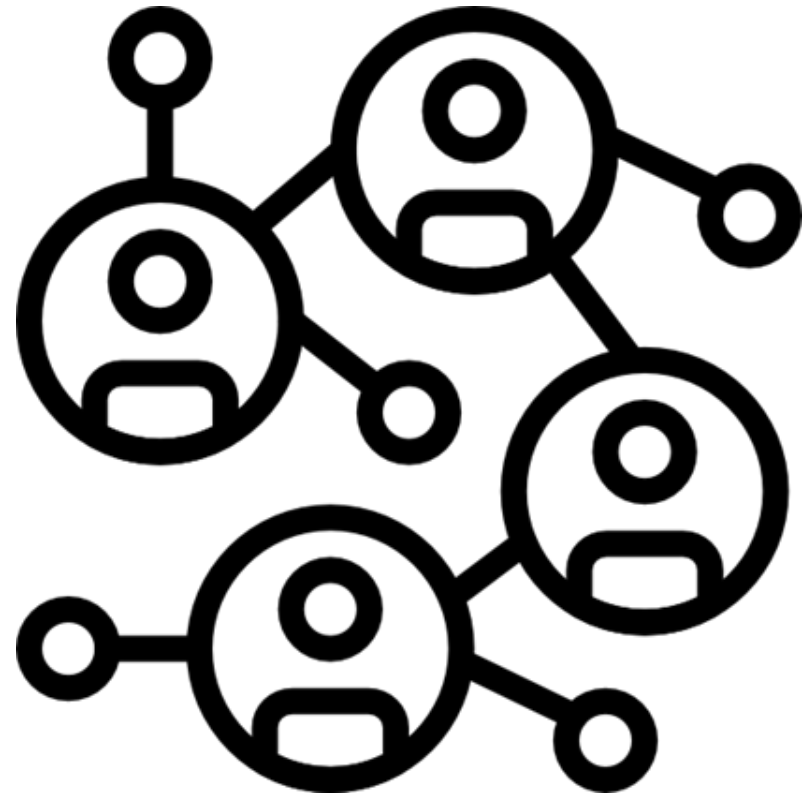
Reflexivity: understanding how values, beliefs, and positionality influence the interpretation of qualitative data.

Thematic Analysis

A method for developing, analyzing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset

It involves a system of **data coding**, for the purpose of developing **themes** (you're ultimate analytical purpose)

[\(p. 4, Braun & Clarke, 2023\)](#)



Reflexive Thematic Analysis



[Braun & Clarke's \(2006\) Using thematic analysis in psychology](#)

- Outlines thematic analysis and the process through a 6 step framework:
 - Familiarization
 - Generating Initial Codes
 - Searching for Themes
 - Reviewing Themes
 - Defining and naming themes
 - Producing the report

[Braun and Clarke's \(2023\) Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide](#)

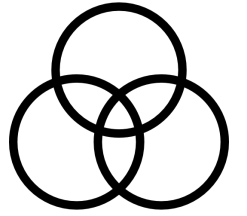
- Expands upon the this framework, and notes the importance of reflexivity in thematic analysis

Allen, M. (2026). An In-Depth Exploration of Undergraduate Computer Science Students' Perspectives on Learning Technical Writing in Community

- qualitative study investigates how undergraduate computer science (CS) students **learn, experience, and perceive technical writing**, an essential but often under-emphasized skill in CS education.
- The study addresses two main research questions:
- **RQ1:** How do students describe their experiences learning and doing technical writing with others?
- **RQ2:** What perspectives act as barriers to learning technical writing?

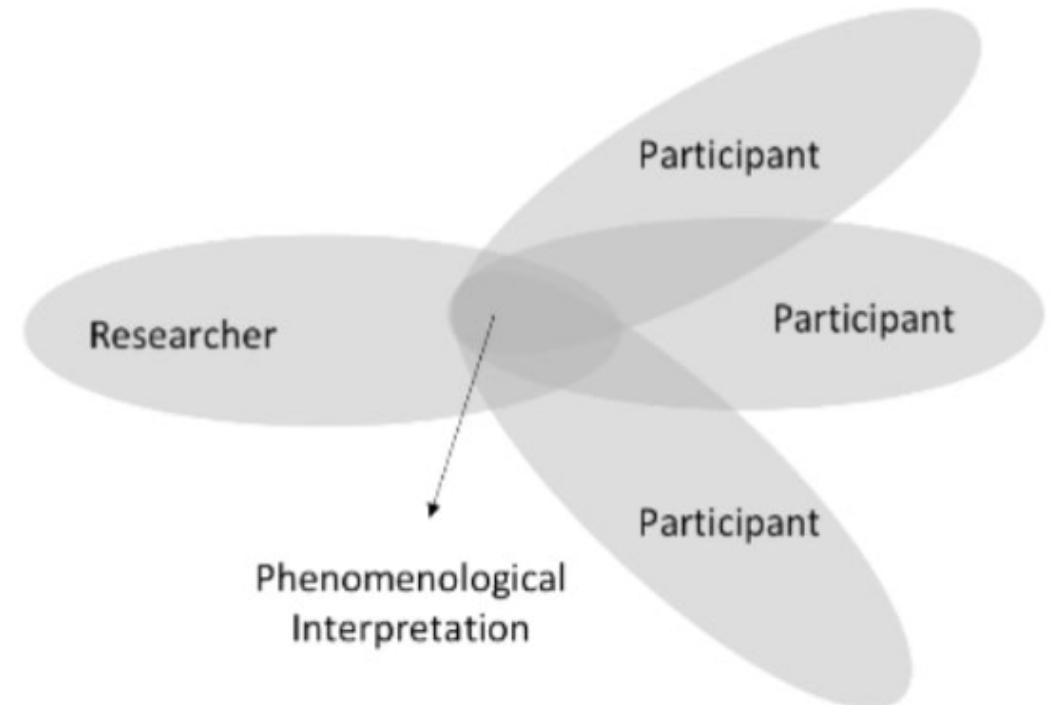
Allen, M. (2026). An In-Depth Exploration of Undergraduate Computer Science Students' Perspectives on Learning Technical Writing in Community

- **Researcher Description:** "As the researcher, and as is common in qualitative researcher, I was the primary instrument of data gathering and analysis. Therefore, my personal subjectivity, history and lived experience have been integrated into all phases of this research. I am a computer science faculty member and have more than 15 years of experience teaching and working with undergraduate students at the University of British Columbia." (p. 5-6).
- Researcher takes into consideration dual role (instructor-researcher), power relationships.



Phenomenology - Shared Experience

- Phenomenology is the study of the essence of shared human experiences
- Phenomenology is philosophical roots, and is a qualitative research method
- The central research question is: *What is it like to experience this phenomenon?*
- (e.g. what is it like for first-generation students to experience first-year at university?)



([Webb & Welsh, 2019](#))

Narrative Inquiry - Storytelling



- How participants make meaning of their lives through the stories that they tell
- Life-stories → following a person's story through time
- Data: interviews, reflective writing from participants, visual digital artifacts

“the narrative is meant to represent how the participant stories their lives, rather than the way the researcher or researcher alone makes sense of it” (pg. 171 [Yeo, Miller-Young, & Manarin, 2023](#))

Chastain, Stork, & Wang (2025)

Exploring Virtual Student-Faculty Partnerships: A Narrative Inquiry for Learning Experience Design

Research Question: How do student-faculty partnership experiences in an online graduate program shape students' learning and professional growth?

Approach: Narrative inquiry (analyzing participants' stories)

Participants: 7 students and 5 faculty

Context: Online instructional design capstone projects

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews (twice) and observations

Chastain, Stork, & Wang (2025)

Exploring Virtual Student-Faculty Partnerships: A Narrative Inquiry for Learning Experience Design

Results:

- Authentic Learning Through Real World Practice
- Development of Professional Identity
- Creation of Virtual Communities of Practice

Rather than examining themes at one time point, narrative inquiry allows for the research and participants to co-construct narrative threads (turning points, challenges, identity shifts) through participant stories over time.

Establishing Rigour in Qualitative Research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

Triangulation

- Using multiple data sources, multiple methods, multiple investigators

Member Checking

- Sharing findings, transcripts, or interpretations with participants to check if interpretation matches their experiences

Thick description

- Provides background context for readers/consumers of interpretation of data

Peer Debriefing

- Checking research analysis with colleagues

Reflexivity and Researcher Bias:

- Stating how your past experiences (personal, professional) affect your interpretation of the data



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Q/A with Professor Nelesi Rodrigues & Christina Haddad

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Question 1:

Could you provide a brief overview of the different qualitative research projects you've led or been a part of here at UTM? What kinds of data collection strategies were used in each project?



Question 2:

What are the logistics and/or practical realities of running qualitative SoTL projects?



Question 3:

Could you speak about your process of working with, and training students to do qualitative research in your SoTL projects?





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Thank you!

Please feel free to email
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