

## USING Q METHODOLOGY TO TEACH INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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**ABSTRACT:** *The purpose of this paper is to explain the procedures in using Q to provide the structure for teaching an undergraduate course in interpersonal communication.*

Over the years, I have used Q methodology in a variety of contexts. After collecting data from a large section basic communication course, I was surprised that in the course evaluation, students kept mentioning the Q sort in response to a course evaluation about "the most interesting" and the "most thought provoking" part of the course. I had taught graduate students about Q in research courses and collected data on students, but had never considered Q's potential value as a learning tool. After attending the 1987 Q conference and talking to William Stephenson and Len Barchak, Q methodology seemed viable for providing the structure for a course.

I decided to use Q as the basis for teaching an undergraduate course in interpersonal communication. Barchak had convinced me that Q could work well with undergraduate students. The use of Q with handicapped youth in another study has been diffi-

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cult, and we have been unable to collect any data using Q with mildly retarded youth because the sorting process has proven too difficult. Although there is no question whether undergraduates can complete Q sorts, I wondered how effective they might be in designing and analyzing Q data.

### *Instructional Objectives*

I structured a sophomore level interpersonal course around designing and completing three Q sorts, one for each major unit of the course. I began by giving the students a Q sort from a previous study as an example for discussion of the objectives and basic techniques of Q methodology while using the lecture-discussion format to teach about Q. The following educational objectives for using Q methodology were provided to the students:

- To allow students to test theories found in the literature. (Students were encouraged to ask questions relevant to research findings on the particular issues being discussed.)
- To encourage students to study areas of interpersonal communication in which they are interested. (The class as a group decided on the specific area within each unit to be studied through Q sorts.)
- To teach interviewing techniques. (After providing instruction on interviewing, the students interviewed people of their choice in order to collect statements for a Q concourse.)
- To stimulate interpersonal discussion with another person(s) of importance to the student. (The interviews themselves and the process of collecting data caused the students to talk with friends and family members about interpersonal communication issues.)
- To structure the student's thinking on specific interpersonal communication issues. (One of the strengths of doing a Q sort is the thinking process required. The individual must sort through ideas, compare them with his or her own ideas, determine degrees of agreement, and structure his or her thinking. Q sorting is a

somewhat complicated, but an interesting and enlightening process.)

- To compare each student and a "significant other" to classmates in order to provide insight into his or her feelings and the feelings of those students around them. (Each student was required to turn in two completed Q sorts for each assignment, one done by a "significant other." The students coded their response sheets so their responses could be anonymous.)
- To teach students a scientific method for investigating and solving problems: Q methodology. (Two students subsequently used adaptations of the technique.)

### *Instructional Technique*

The class decided to do an additional fourth Q sort during the semester because they were interested in investigating another topic, so one Q sort was developed on each of the following topics: (a) initial contact in meeting new people, (b) communication differences caused by gender, particularly relating to opposite-sex platonic friends, (c) negotiation and risk in interpersonal relationships, and (d) termination or ending of relationships.

The quality of statements students obtained increased in sophistication as they progressed, reflecting greater depth of feelings. As Barchak encouraged, people can be poetic with the right kind of probing questions. The increased number and depth of responses indicated that the students improved their interviewing techniques during the semester. The entire process included the following steps for each of the four studies:

- The students selected a topic to be studied in depth, then read about the topic and discussed the topic in class.
- Each student interviewed at least one significant other about the topic and obtained statements for the sort.
- To save time, the teacher selected statements for the Q sort and typed up the statements and answer sheet.

- Each student took the Q sort and gave the Q sort to a significant other.
- The teacher converted the data for computer analysis, determined the relevant factors, student loadings, and made copies of the results for the students.
- Each student analyzed the factor statement arrays, then wrote a summary for each factor.
- The teacher wrote a description of each factor based on the students' analyses and gave it to each student.
- Each student discussed the results with his or her significant other.
- Each student evaluated the process and learning on his or her final exam.

### *Instructional Results*

The task of compiling, printing, inputting data, and analyzing four Q sorts turned out to be enormous. If I had not hired help, I would not have completed the projects on time because the hours required far exceeded my usual teaching-planning time. It was difficult to collect and analyze data under deadlines, especially when the students wanted immediate feedback. The same process using only one or two studies and allowing more than a week at the end of the semester for discussion of the projects would have been more realistic.

During a mid-semester and final evaluation of the process, the students indicated that they considered the use of Q to be a valuable and interesting learning tool. With "10" representing the learning techniques used in the best class and "1" representing techniques of the poorest class they had had in college, the mean student response rating of Q methodology was "7." Some sample student comments included: "It produced a sense of accomplishment because the whole study--from start to finish--was our own doing.... It is a chance to sort out one's thoughts.... I really could relate to the factors that I fell into.... Made me think about my values.... Very interesting and fun.... They really did make me think.... I was involved in the process."

As the course instructor, I perceived the students to be interested and involved in the learning proc-

ess. The use of Q methodology seemed more creative and applied than more traditional teaching methods. Personally, I found the approach to be a way to experiment with Q, learn more about the technique, and keep motivated. Perhaps too ambitious for a first attempt, I plan to use a similar approach again in interpersonal and other communication courses.

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#### BOOK REVIEW

*The Social Construction of Lesbianism.* By Celia Kitzinger. London and Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987. 230 pp. \$16.50 paper.

*The Social Construction of Lesbianism* by Celia Kitzinger is a lively and intellectually engaging work which advances our knowledge of lesbian subjectivities. It is also a significant contribution to the literature of social constructionism in social science. Kitzinger's primary task in this book is to argue that liberal "gay affirmative" research toward homosexuality in general, and lesbianism in particular, advances the continued oppression of lesbians in ways equally pernicious as earlier research orientations which emphasized homosexuality as pathology. In "gay affirmative" research lesbianism fulfills the liberal humanistic goals of personal happiness, sexual fulfillment, and the achievement of better personal relationships. Understood in this way, lesbianism represents a sexual preference, an alternative lifestyle, or perhaps a route to self-actualization. According to Kitzinger, the liberal characterization of