

# **Helping Caribbean graduate students to become qualitative researchers: Searching for an appropriate pedagogy**

**UWI Schools of Education Biennial Conference  
St Augustine, Trinidad  
April 23-25, 2013**

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## Underlying Issue

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- ▶ Learning to do qualitative research requires becoming comfortable with thinking and producing academic work that is inductive, iterative and non –positivistic. This is often difficult for adult learners who are accustomed to learning and succeeding in Caribbean teaching cultures that still tend to be traditional, prescriptive and didactic.

# Aims of Presentation

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- ▶ This paper takes as its starting point what Lee Schulman (2004) refers to as “the wisdom of practice” - knowledge grounded in the action of teaching and learning.
- ▶ We are also writing this paper because we believe there is a need for practice-based knowledge as well as more value being placed on how qualitative research is taught to Caribbean students.
- ▶ In this presentation we will
  - ▶ identify pedagogical challenges of teaching qualitative research to Caribbean graduate students
  - ▶ describe and justify the approach and attendant strategies we have developed in response to these challenges
  - ▶ consider the implications of these strategies for how graduate students learn to become qualitative researchers in their respective fields

# Our Views about Teaching Qualitative Research

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- Learning to do qualitative research is not only about skills development but also about understanding its underlying philosophical assumptions and using these to influence construction of a disposition and commitment to being ethical and reflexive.
- Teaching qualitative research is *not* about presenting it as a competitor with quantitative research. It should aim to help students understand that qualitative research is an approach that is appropriate for exploring certain kinds of issues and problems.

# Our Ideological Assumptions

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## Usefulness of *constructivism*

good teaching is all about finding the best ways to bring about the best learning

## Importance of *modeling*

as teacher educators and qualitative researchers we have a responsibility to *model good practice*

## Importance of *engaged and critical pedagogy*

as educators we have an obligation to facilitate and nurture students in developing their Voice and to respect them.

## Belief in centrality of *andragogical* principles

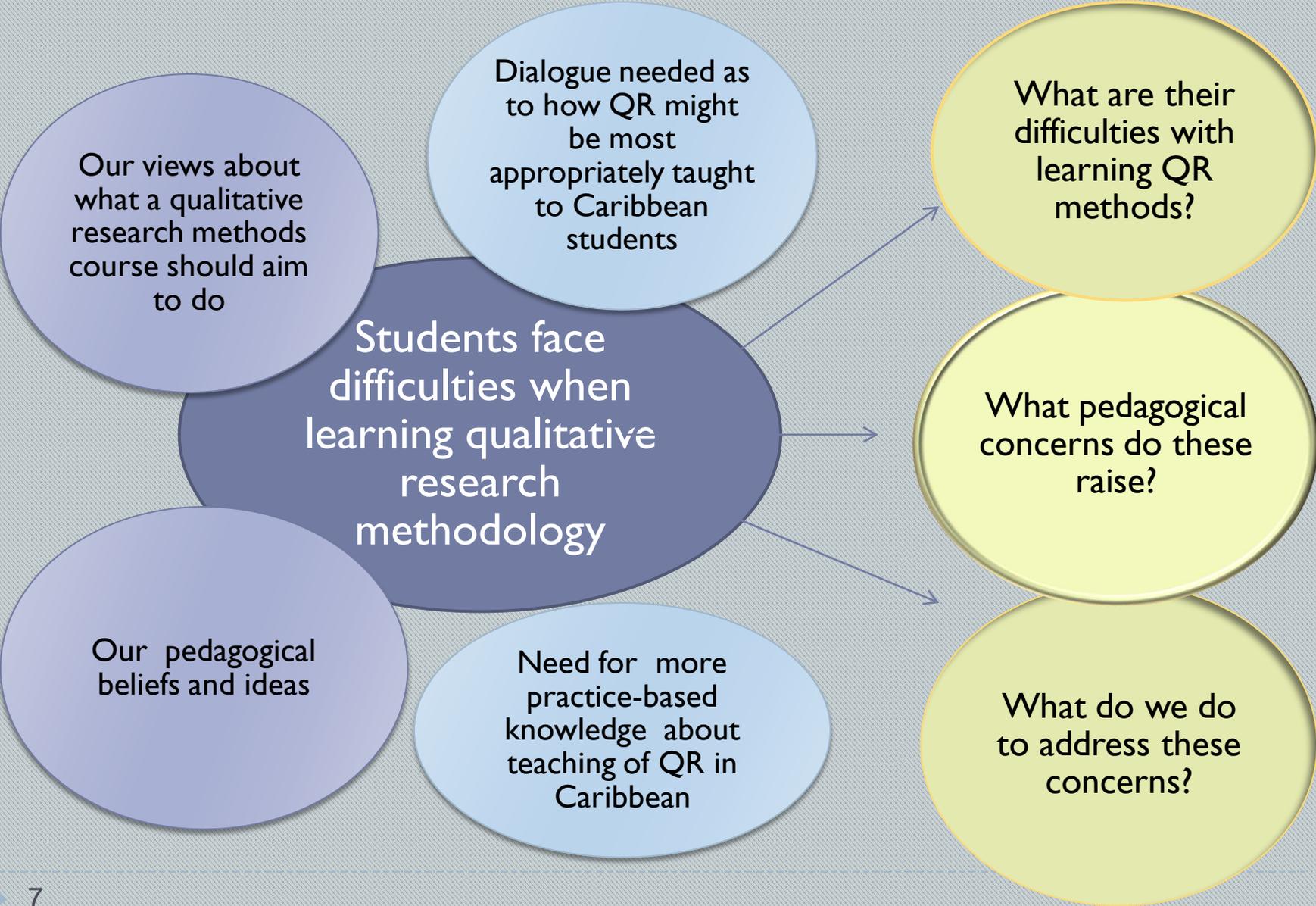
# Pedagogical Principles that Guide our Teaching

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## Our teaching

- ▶ aims to afford “learners meaningful, concrete experiences in which they can look for patterns, construct their own questions, and structure their own models, concepts, and strategies.” (Fosnot 1996)
- ▶ aims to be critically conscious of the ways we affect our students and their learning
- ▶ is guided by an ethic of care, concern and respect
- ▶ emphasizes sensitivity to our students’ diverse cognitive, disciplinary, professional and personal needs

# The Conversation



# Pedagogical Challenges

**Understand truth knowledge and research in positivistic ways**

**Privilege objectivity**

**Use a logic and a method that are pre-determined, standardised and “scientific”**

**Understand & treat theory as a legitimising tool, separate from methodology & research practice**

**Entrenched in a product-driven approach to learning and research**

Assumptions and values are questioned or disrupted leading to resistance or frustration or anxiety

The notion of subjectivity, intuitiveness & reflexivity as suspect must be ‘unlearned’ & concepts of what constitutes research rigour must be re-evaluated

Interpretive inquiry, emergent design, complex, inductive analysis & creative processes are at odds with prescriptive norms & technical, formulaic mechanisms

The integrated role of theory and its connection to methodology and practice is foreign

Re-conceptualising & experiencing learning & research with an emphasis on process can be unsettling

# Pedagogical Tensions

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1. How do we challenge learners' conventional ways of knowing and understanding without pushing them too far and alienating them?
2. How do we break habits of subjugating the intuitive, and help learners value their 'researcher's voice' and at the same time convince them of the value of qualitative research?
3. How much procedural guidance and structure should we provide in our efforts to help learners become comfortable with inductive reasoning and knowledge and develop a tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty?
4. How do we help learners understand the theory-research linkage?
5. How do we emphasise research and learning about research as process while still capitalising on their already acquired competencies and skills?
6. How do we teach an approach that is both art and science?
7. How do we facilitate the process of BECOMING a qualitative researcher for our students within a semester of thirteen weeks?



# Teacher Challenges

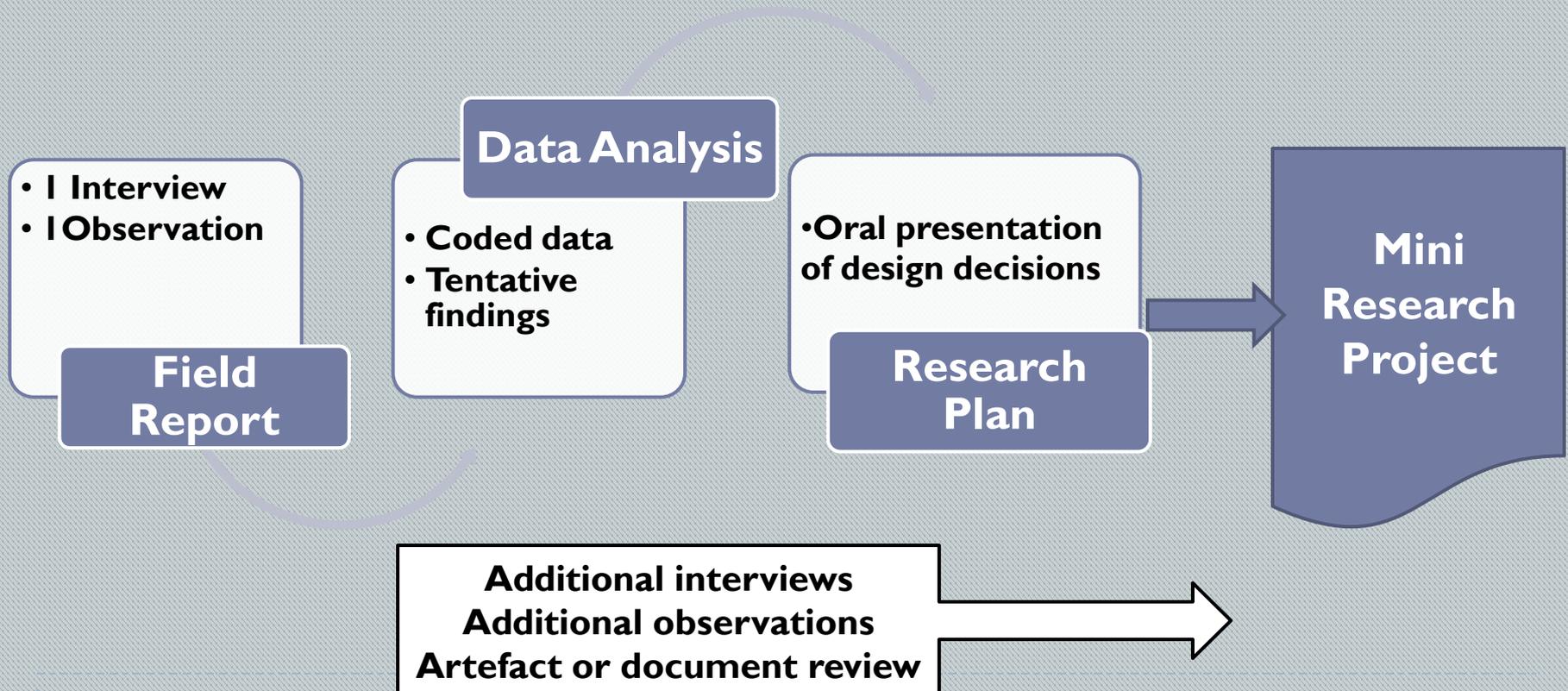
1. Managing and balancing tensions arising from pedagogical challenges within a limited time frame?
2. Learning to live with ambiguities and discomfort when contextual and “new pedagogical” issues make it challenging to “stick with the plan.”
3. Teaching a subject that is both art and science.
4. Holding to our commitment that problematising collaboratively, and reflecting is important for modifying, and continually finding better ways to facilitate students’ learning



# Managing the Challenges: Our Overarching Approach

**Building a social context  
for learning before, during  
and after fieldwork**

**Integrating structures  
that encourage non-  
traditional thinking**



# Building a social context for learning before, during and after fieldwork

- ▶ Alternating individual and interactive activities that require sharing and making public their research intentions, field-notes, experiences, data and reflections
- ▶ In-class, hands-on activities , role play and simulations that provide opportunity for immediate practice ahead of experiential activities in the field
- ▶ Analysis of case scenarios & data sets to improve learners' skills and their understanding of the research process
- ▶ Peer support , facilitator feedback and openness

## Integrating structures that facilitate non-traditional thinking

- A variety of activities and exercises that help learners to see how knowledge is socially constructed, how their culture, socialisation and experiences influence what they see, hear and observe.
- We model non-traditional teaching practices
- Formative assessment with transparency of evaluation and assessment processes
- Written and oral opportunities to construct their Voice through reflection that moves incrementally from descriptive to critically reflexive. This also builds confidence in notion of Self as one who can theorize

# Conclusion

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- ▶ **Over years we feel some measure of success**
  - ▶ Feedback and course evaluations are good
  - ▶ Students seem to have more confidence using qualitative research methods for their research projects after leaving the course
- ▶ **With each cohort we meet new and different students and challenges so we accept that no one size fits all**
  - ▶ Recognise the need to build a body of Caribbean materials to improve the product, process and practice
  - ▶ Continue to interrogate our practice and open it to critique

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**THANK YOU**