



Qualitative research in action: what it can tell us and what it can't.

Liz Armitage-Chan VetMB PhD DipACVAA FHEA MRCVS
Professor of Higher Education

An example

Research question: **How are the engagement and learning outcomes of distance learning students who are in work affected by personal, social and course influences?**

Methods:

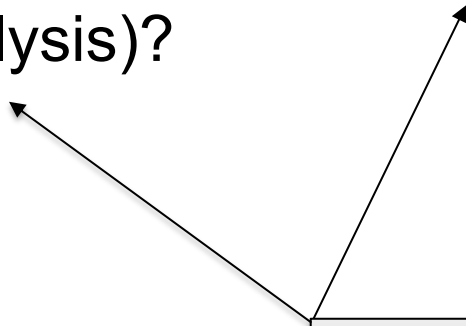
- 10 semi-structured interviews
- In-depth phenomenological study (understanding personal experience) using a social constructivist approach to data analysis and interpretation

How do we design this study?

1. Positivist or constructivist/ interpretivist?
2. Quantitative or qualitative?
3. Approach to data collection (interview questions and analysis)?

How do we design this study?

1. Positivist or constructivist/ interpretivist?
2. Quantitative or qualitative?
3. Approach to data collection (interview questions and analysis)?

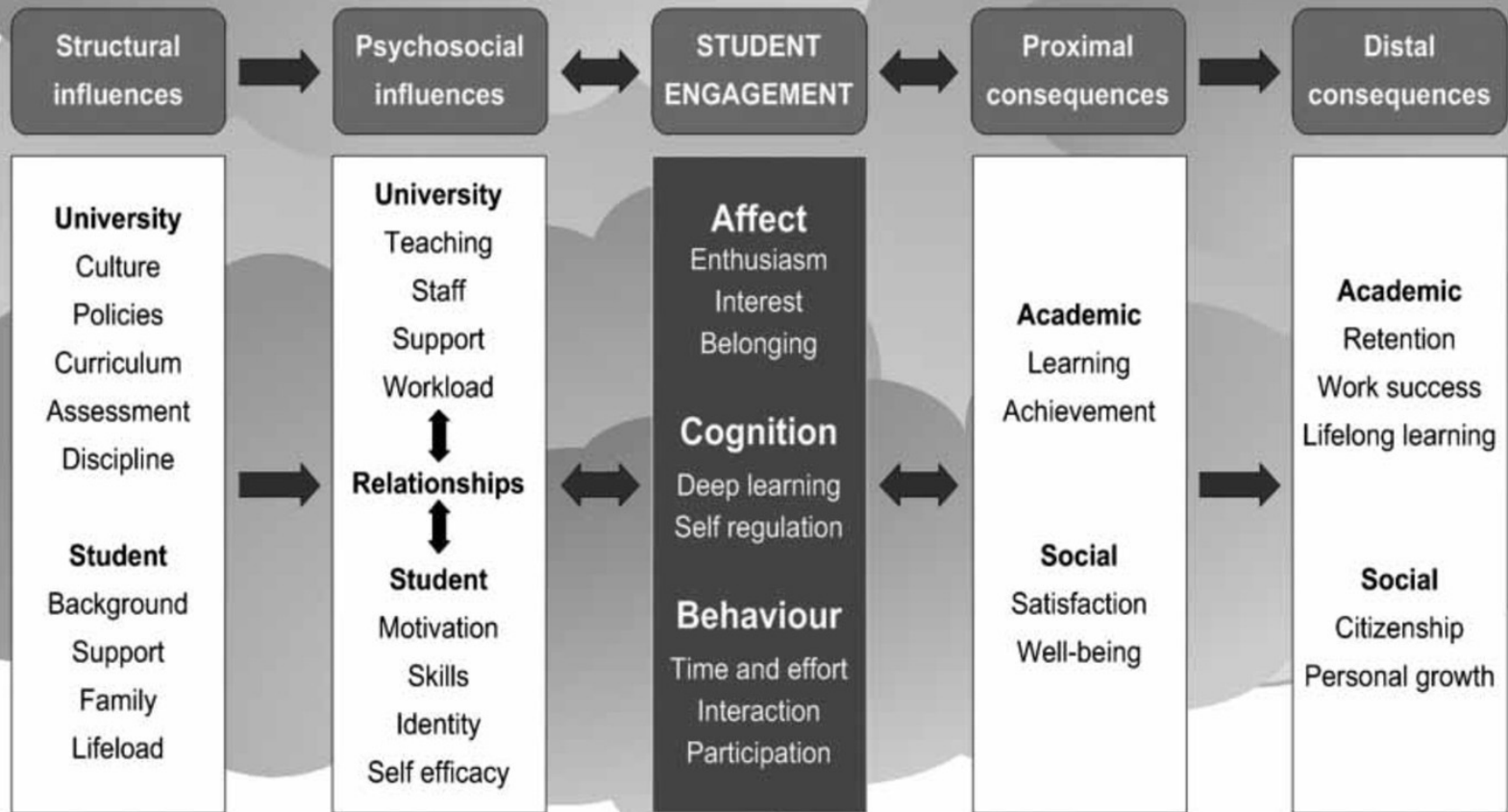


Theoretical framework:

- What questions should we ask?
- What do we look for in the responses?

Sociocultural Influences

Political and Social Environment: Culture, power, policy, economics



Interview schedule: experiential, grounded in the theoretical framework

- *In general, what was your experience of the course like?*
 - *Which activities did you engage in most/least?*
 - *Which activities did you enjoy most/least?*
 - *Which activities did you find most challenging and useful for driving your learning?*
 - *Can you provide specific examples relating to above?*
- *Tell me about your experience of interacting and learning with PGCert staff (including tutors) and peers*
 - *Can you provide examples of particularly memorable/useful interactions?*

Data analysis: a highly iterative process

1. Researcher 1 reads transcripts several times to look for themes in responses, which are coded
2. Discussed with researcher 2: tried to fit themes to framework; evolution of themes with some identified that don't fit framework
3. Researchers 1 and 3 examine themes in the context of the research questions; further refinement and evolution of themes that answer the questions
4. Themes presented to researcher 2
5. Researcher 1 returns to transcripts to look at quotes, and verify that nothing has been missed or misinterpreted
6. Final construction of paper: further refinement and revision of themes

What have we achieved?

- An in-depth understanding of experience of a population of interest that has been achieved through:
 - Careful grounding of the questions and analysis in theory
 - Exploration of individual experiences
 - Collaborative co-construction of interpretations and understanding, taking place over multiple lengthy processes

What haven't we achieved?

> Generalisation:

- We never set out to describe the patterns of engagement and outcomes of distance learners or of the Vet Ed programme in general
- We weren't trying to define all of the challenges of distance learners or non-traditional/ mature learners

So what?

Are our findings valid, useful and transferable?

- We have identified key differences amongst our participants, with respect to their in-work culture, autonomy in work practices, and ability to practice what we are teaching.
- This will help us to better identify and support some of the students who will struggle to engage with our programmes
- This may benefit other educators who are teaching professional practice qualifications to adult, in-work learners, but we are not trying to make recommendations for all distance learning/ online courses, or all adult learners

Key messages

- Think about the question you want to ask, who it is going to be important for, and why it is going to be important
- Consider which approach is going to work best to answer your question in the most useful way
- Identify frameworks that will help you to collect and understand your data
- Make sure everything links up:
 - Don't claim "in depth", "understanding of experience" or defining of a population if your methods don't support this
 - If you have claimed to use a framework, think about how you have used it and why
- Don't forget the "so what"!!!