



What is Qualitative Assessment?

Often when working with statistics the focus is on numbers and measurements, or quantitative data. But what about qualitative data? Qualitative methods allow us to look at data in a much deeper sense. Qualitative data can come from interviews, observation, focus groups, and written documents. Qualitative data also often involves a much smaller sample size compared to quantitative data, because qualitative data contains a wealth of information.

Choosing a Data Analysis Technique

While coding and rubrics are two of the most common techniques for data analysis in assessment, there may be a time when you want to use the raw data responses instead. The merit here is, although lengthy, the actual responses from participants allow others to make their own interpretations, and they can view a completely honest response. However, if the evaluator or researcher has limited experience in assessment, it may be better to start with basic coding and rubrics to ensure data is represented in a trustworthy fashion.

Coding is process where you review data and draw common themes or categories from it. Coding is especially useful when approaching a data set where you are not quite sure what you will find, or you do not already have a framework in mind to organize the data through.

Rubrics are different from coding in that rubrics provide a lens, or framework, from which to view the data. For example, if you were looking at your data from a specific viewpoint (e.g., a specific learning outcome, student development theory, or leadership development model) a rubric allows you to analyze the data using that lens.

Raw Data differs from coding and rubrics, in that raw data makes no attempt at summarizing the data. Because this data tends to be lengthy, it is best to only use it in situations where there is a small amount of data that is going to be shared with an audience close to the program, issue, or topic. An example where raw data could be useful is if only 10 people attended a presentation and only the presenter needed to see their evaluations of the presentation.

Source: (Successful Assessment for Student Affairs: A How-To Guide, 2013)

Use Caution with Word Clouding

One of the many wonderful tools created to help evaluators work with data is something called word clouding software. This software is great in the sense that it pulls common themes from qualitative data, saving the evaluator time and potentially money.

However, because this software simply pulls themes without your input, it is likely these programs are only counting most frequently used words or phrases, which leaves you with data that is limited in use. For example, someone may refer to something negatively, but the software would only group one of the negative terms. Undoubtedly, this software can be helpful, but use it with caution.

