

Thoughts from the first conference

Clare Tagg

In February last year the first ever conference devoted to a single piece of qualitative software was hosted by the Institute of Education in London, UK. As one of those involved in organising the conference I admit to having had some misgivings. Would anyone want to come to a conference just about NUD*IST? Would the conference be more than a glorified workshop? Would contributed papers manage to look at methodological issues or would they just be descriptions about NUD*IST? Did we have time to organise a conference in two months?

In practice the conference was a big success. Over 100 people attended it from many different institutions in Britain, Europe and Australia. Some of the participants were very experienced NUD*IST users while others were novices. However this conference was different in that a basic understanding of NUD*IST and qualitative software could be assumed by speakers. This meant that instead of describing what NUD*IST is, speakers could concentrate on the issues involved in actually using NUD*IST. I have not had such interesting and detailed conversations about qualitative research since attending the international QSR Summer School in 1995.

After a welcome from Dr. Ingrid Lunt, President of the British Psychology Society, the programme kicked off with a panel session chaired by Dr. Udo Kelle on the impact of NUD*IST on research and researchers. The aim was to highlight that using qualitative software does have an impact on both and to discuss the nature of the impact. This session initiated the academic debate that was such a feature of this conference and included contributions from the floor as well as from four panelists.

Two parallel paper sessions were run with a variety of papers from the practical to the academic. I attended the session on 'Team and Longitudinal research with NUD*IST' containing three papers which discussed the difficulties and benefits of using NUD*IST for large projects with complex datasets. Julian Barr described a project on the Bangladesh flood plains involving an interdisciplinary research team. The data was collected in local language, translated and emailed to the UK for processing. Whilst NUD*IST did bring some benefits to the project there were also problems. He

highlighted the challenge of the different epistemologies when working in a team. This was an issue that Leonie Daws returned to in her study of rural women's use of email in Australia. One of the other interesting points that Leonie discussed was the difficulty in structuring the NUD*IST project to best represent the data. She hinted at the impact of the use of NVivo on this data and has since presented a paper on this topic. The remaining paper in this session (Gerda

Speller and colleagues) also raised the issue of project structuring in a longitudinal study about the relocation of residents of a mining village in North Derbyshire.

During lunch there were poster sessions and software demonstrations. The afternoon of the conference began with a session on the techniques and methodological issues in linking NUD*IST with other software (Decision Explorer, SPSS and Inspiration). The conference concluded with a demonstration of QSR's new software NVivo and an explanation from Lyn Richards of the changes in qualitative research which underpinned the development. To celebrate the launch of this software Scolaris rounded the day up with a champagne reception.



Donald Fraser, with Clare Tagg and Silvana di Gregorio, celebrating the launch of NVivo.

*"Me talking about what I call the 'coding trap' in NUD*IST (and other software of its ilk) where the structure of the software leads you to what could become unreflective coding - there being no prompt to take time out to write memos to reflect on what is emerging from the analysis. (And not being able to say yet that this is one of the problems NVivo tries to tackle by making it possible to write a reflective journal in NVivo itself with hyperlinks to bits of data that supports one's emerging understanding about what is going on.)"*

"The general enthusiasm for N4 and the anticipation about NVivo. But I think it was not until NVivo was released and N4 users started to use it did they realise how much more user-friendly NVivo is and how many more options it gives researchers to conduct analysis."

Silvana di Gregorio



Colm Crowley, conference convenor, with Leonie Daws.

*"The friendly generosity of Colm Crowley (above) and staff who cheerfully assisted this Australian waif to put together material for a poster session on the use of NUD*IST in the Rural Women and Interactive Communication Project."*

*"The lively discussion in our session on 'Team and Longitudinal research with NUD*IST' of issues arising from the use of electronically generated data (email messages in this particular instance) and the challenges such data presents for computer assisted data analysis."*

"Lyn Richards casting aside PowerPoint and using NVivo live, with great effect, to make her presentation launching this exciting new software."

"Feeling I had come home to family renewing acquaintances with other researchers and consultants that I had previously had the privilege of working with at the international QSR Summer School in Melbourne in 1995."

Leonie Daws

"The many friendly greetings received as people who'd been in email contact up to then arrived in person. There was a very upbeat buzz in the hall as we settled in our seats for the opening plenary session, and I think it was Ingrid Lunt who, in her opening words, remarked that this gathering struck her as a real community of researchers, with our shared interest and experience in use of the software."

"When NVivo was previewed, the looks of unconcealed delight throughout the hall, and people saying afterwards 'I never imagined they'd be able to do quite so much with it'."

"Everybody's enthusiasm in giving us their 'Wishes for Future Conferences' feedback, and finding from a quick peek that a next one was being eagerly awaited. I was already figuring out how I might get to more of the paper sessions..."

Colm Crowley

Lyn and Colm consolidating conference memories over dinner!



"With NVivo the tool bag gets bigger. I'm impressed by its flexibility when organising, searching and coding data. I'm prone to think more about the practices of qualitative analysis than get bogged down in them: is what I do transparent? Which coding strategies have become unquestioned habits? What else might I do with the data?"

Alan Reid

"What do I remember from the last conference?"

"How amazed I was at the difference it makes to discuss one's research with people familiar with the tools you are using. It deletes the first third, the boring third, of software presentations."

"How instantly what had seemed extraordinary, even daring - to gather people on the basis of common use of a software tool - was obvious and normal."

"Alan Reid from Bath elegantly discussing the genealogical metaphor and way it 'naturalises' theory generation in node 'families'. Proposed a culinary metaphor, likening the making of nodes to "preparation and consumption of an extended 'alphabet soup'. How could it ever have been given in a "normal", generalist conference?"

Lyn Richards