

Using Annotation for Transparent Inquiry (ATI) to Teach Qualitative Research Methods

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Introduction

The early 2000s saw the beginning of a renaissance in qualitative research methods in the discipline of political science (e.g., Collier and Brady 2004, George and Bennett 2005). This renaissance has included the development of more systematic and analytically explicit approaches to using qualitative evidence for descriptive and causal inference.

Unfortunately, however, the *teaching* of qualitative research methods has not kept pace with their development. In particular, a recent study of the methods curriculum in 25 top political science doctoral programs between 2010 and 2015 found that qualitative methods instruction tends to take a passive rather than an active form: in marked contrast to the teaching of quantitative research methods, students rarely learn qualitative analytic methods by practicing their use on data generated and shared by other researchers

(Emmons and Moravcsik 2019, 4). While not necessarily representative of the broader discipline, these findings suggest an important gap in the instruction of qualitative methods at the graduate level.

In this brief piece, we discuss a novel approach to teaching qualitative methods that employs more “active learning”: through students engaging with scholarship that has been annotated using [Annotation for Transparent Inquiry](#) (ATI). ATI is a new approach to achieving transparency in qualitative and multi-method research that allows authors to annotate specific passages in a digital publication in order to clarify methodological challenges and choices, add detail about evidence or analysis, or link to data sources that underlie claims. Learning methods through engagement with annotated articles allows students to interact with original data and to better understand, evaluate, and critique how authors collected, analyzed, and used those data to draw inferences and develop arguments. Compared with traditional pedagogical techniques, this approach thus leads students to *learn* research methods in a way that more closely approximates how they will use those methods in their own research.

Our discussion in this essay is somewhat speculative. To date, few of the teaching strategies that we propose have been used in practice, for reasons we discuss below. Nonetheless, case studies we present in this piece demonstrate that initial efforts to employ these techniques have yielded promising pedagogical outcomes. These results, in tandem with the broad consensus in the education literature on the value of active-learning techniques, recommend continuing to develop ATI-oriented teaching strategies. We hope this essay catalyzes further exploration and experimentation.

We begin by offering a few observations on qualitative methods instruction in political science. We elaborate in particular on how infrequently methods for analyzing qualitative data are taught via active learning with data generated and shared by other researchers. We then briefly describe ATI and its potential to facilitate the active learning of qualitative analytic methods, illustrating that potential using the experiences of three methods instructors. We conclude with a short discussion of some limits of this pedagogical approach.

The Status Quo and the Challenge

Active learning – the use of “instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (Bonwell and Eison 1991, 2) – is widely considered to be an effective pedagogical technique that facilitates skills acquisition and generates student interest (Hmelo-Silver & Rehak, 2017; National Research Council, 2000). While active learning techniques are often used to teach strategies for *collecting* qualitative data (e.g., archival research, interviewing, and ethnography), recent research suggests that it is unusual for students to learn qualitative *analytic* methods through practicing their use on data that other scholars generated and shared (Emmons and Moravcsik 2019, 4).¹ This marks a notable contrast with the instruction of quantitative methods, in which students often analyze shared datasets to complete exercises and problem sets, or seek to reproduce the findings of research articles with open data and materials using computational methods (Janz 2016; King 2006).

Two factors likely contribute to this gap in qualitative methods instruction. First, in contrast with the dozens of textbooks treating quantitative analytic methods, the books most often used in the instruction of qualitative analytic methods tend to focus on the epistemological underpinnings and inferential logics of those methods rather than the practical steps involved in using them. Moreover, few such books include problem sets or other practical exercises.² Second, practicing using analytic methods with data gathered and shared by other scholars is limited by the paucity of shared qualitative data. Relatedly, qualitative data sets specifically created for teaching are practically non-existent.

To date, then, few graduate students have had the opportunity to learn qualitative analytic methods by practicing their use on shared data. Conditions for employing this promising teaching practice are beginning to improve, however, as scholars are developing new strategies to share their qualitative data in ethical, legal, and meaningful ways

¹ Teaching qualitative analytic methods using shared data will often be preferable to having students practice analytic methods using data they generated themselves since the former approach allows the instructor to select data that are optimally suited for, or to tailor the data to, the particular analytic method being taught. Also, teaching with shared data allows students to learn collaboratively and/or compare inferences from the same data (see National Research Council 2000 on the benefits thereof).

² Notable exceptions include “SAGE ResearchMethods” (a subscription based online database with video tutorials, short courses, practice datasets, and case examples) and Cambridge University Press’s “Method for Social Inquiry” book series; see also Collier (2011).

(Kapiszewski and Karcher 2020). In the remainder of this piece, we suggest a set of pedagogical strategies that capitalize on these developments and should enhance the instruction of qualitative analytic methods.

A Solution: Annotated Scholarship as a Teaching Tool

In order to make the teaching of qualitative analytic methods more active, we propose that instructors invite their students to engage with scholarship that has been annotated using ATI.³ ATI, developed by the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR, qdr.syr.edu) and the software non-profit Hypothesis, is an innovative approach to achieving transparency in qualitative and multi-method research. Authors who use ATI digitally annotate empirical claims or conclusions in their manuscripts. ATI employs open web annotation, which allows for the generation, sharing, and discovery of digital annotations across the web. Annotations may include full citations to underlying data sources; “analytic notes” clarifying how the author generated or analyzed their data and/or how the data support inferences or interpretations; excerpts from data sources; and links to the data sources themselves when they can be shared ethically and legally. Annotations, in other words, surface the “analytic scaffolding” and evidentiary underpinnings that are rarely included in published qualitative work due to space constraints. Annotations are displayed on the same web page as the digitally published article or book that they accompany; they and underlying data sources are curated and preserved by a data repository (see Figure 1).⁴

We highlight three overarching strategies that instructors of qualitative analytic methods might use to integrate scholarship that has been annotated with ATI into their teaching.⁵ One strategy entails students examining the analytic scaffolding that ATI reveals; a second involves them engaging in re-analysis and analytic extensions. Both of these approaches rely on scholarship that has been annotated using ATI, and work best when the

³ ATI is similar to “Active Citation” (Moravcsik 2010), an earlier approach to achieving transparency in qualitative inquiry; the two differ in that ATI leverages open annotation technology and emphasizes the importance of linking to underlying data.

⁴ See also Karcher and Weber (2019) and the materials on QDR’s website, qdr.syr.edu/ati.

⁵ A list of published ATI projects can be found at <https://qdr.syr.edu/ati/ati-models>.

annotations include links to a rich set of underlying qualitative data. A third strategy calls on students, typically advanced graduate students, to annotate their own work using ATI.

Published Article

Any digitally published manuscript can be annotated using ATI; here O'Mahoney (2019)

ATI Annotation

- Displayed alongside publisher's digital manuscript
- Created by authors
- Curated and preserved by a data repository
- Hosted and served by Hypothesis

Any passage in the text can be annotated using ATI

Conditioning of Policy Decision on Action

Prior to the Mujib-Heath meeting on 8 January 1972, only two states, India and Bhutan, had recognized the state of Bangladesh, and no states had done so since the end of the fighting and the ceasefire declaration on 17 December 1971.⁸⁸ There were four categories of reasons given to British officials for why recognition of Bangladesh might be a problem.⁸⁹ One was that recognition might negatively affect the state's relations with Pakistan, and for some states, like Portugal and Hungary, this was their only stated concern. However, many states conditioned their recognition decision on an action related to Indian troop withdrawal and gave three different types of reasons for doing so. States also differed in the extent of

legitimizing aggression, is

Minister Oscar Rabasa who reported that the Mexican president had decided not to recognize Bangladesh because, "since the Mexicans, like many Latin Americans, refuse to condone territorial aggrandizement as a result of war, they would prefer to wait on the withdrawal of Indian troops as the sign of true independence."⁹⁰

This statement also appeals to "true independence." Self-determination is another important value expressed by the Mexican representative and is the second type of reason commonly appealed to as justifying recognition as Bangladesh. For

88. See Figure 2.
89. A frequent concern was that states had to recognize in a group, or on the same day as multiple other states. Moreover, some officials for minor consideration emphasize this in and of itself cannot enable the

ATI Annotation Elements

One or more of the following:

- Analytic note
- Source excerpt
- Source excerpt translation
- Link to data source hosted by repository
- Full citation

Figure 1: ATI at a Glance: How a passage in the text of an article annotated with ATI appears to readers

Instructors might employ the first strategy – using ATI to show students the mechanics of qualitative inference in action – to introduce a particular qualitative method. In this approach, instructors draw on annotations that elaborate on the analysis of qualitative data, in tandem with materials⁶ and data shared by the author, to highlight and discuss with their students the logic of inquiry and details of the type of analysis that underlies the exemplars. Students thus learn qualitative research methods by retracing and examining an author's analytical steps (and, potentially, missteps). For instance, students can see how authors identified and deployed causal process observations (CPOs) to advance

⁶ We use the term “materials” to describe any documentation that demonstrates how empirical research was conducted, e.g., interview questionnaires, focus group guides and visual cues, and archive logs.

narrative process tracing; learn about the mechanics of Bayesian process tracing from annotations that discuss how prior probabilities were assigned and posterior estimates progressively updated; or gain insight into the conceptualization and coding that underlie the process of calibration in Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA).

In the second pedagogical approach, instructors devise a set of structured exercises that call on students to actively engage with an author's analysis through the annotations provided in a publication. Such exercises are somewhat akin to the reproducibility exercises commonly used in quantitative methods instruction. For instance, students can reanalyze the supporting data provided in ATI annotations, using the same method the author used, in order to evaluate the strength of particular claims made in the text of a publication, or regenerate and validate its tables and figures.

A final teaching strategy involves translating active learning into active research. In this approach, students who are developing their own empirical work use annotation to be more explicit and detailed about their analytical choices, i.e., how they generated, analyzed, and deployed evidence to support their claims.

Examples of Teaching with ATI

One of us (Jacobs) piloted an ATI-supported exercise using the first two strategies mentioned above in a graduate qualitative methods class in the fall of 2019. Focusing on annotated portions of one of two pieces of scholarship (either Saunders [2011, Chapter 4] or O'Mahoney [2017]), students selected individual CPOs for which an annotation provided either excerpts or reproductions of source materials. In the assignment writeup, students first retraced the author's steps, summarizing how the author sought to link the observation to an empirical implication of the article's or book's theoretical argument. Second, students critically evaluated the inferences the author drew from the evidence, as presented in or linked to from the annotation. Here the annotations allowed students to more thoroughly assess the original inferential reasoning, or provide more plausible alternative explanations, than they could have done from the article text alone. By engaging with the more complete evidentiary record, students gained insight into how authors had selected observations from their source materials, and how the meaning of a statement or observation might depend on

the context in which it appears. Moreover, reanalyzing the data presented in the article and found in the source material helped demonstrate the different inferences that might be drawn from a given observation, depending in part on assumptions that the analyst made and readings of the context in which the observation arises.

In a similar exercise used over multiple semesters in an upper-level undergraduate course focused on primary source-based inquiry, Robert Adcock (American University) asked students to assess the annotated evidence in the Saunders chapter just mentioned. Students evaluated the accuracy and precision of the summary or use in the chapter's text of the shared source materials, and the sufficiency of the evidence as support for claims.⁷ Students were also asked to think about whether, in aggregate (given their number, type, and authoritativeness), the sources could plausibly be considered representative of the broader set of potential sources, in particular given the growing variety and number of primary sources available online (discussed earlier in the course). The goal of the exercise was for students to acquire, via actively engaging with Saunders' meticulous use of primary sources, a working model of what they should aspire to in using and presenting primary source evidence as they drafted their own research papers in subsequent weeks of the course.

Juan Masullo (Oxford University and Leiden University) has integrated ATI into his instruction of process tracing using the first strategy described above.⁸ In one exercise,⁹ Masullo leads students to discover process tracing's architecture by asking them to read passages of an article annotated using ATI *without* the annotations *before* class, identifying evidentiary and analytic weaknesses, gaps, or silences; he and the students then re-read those passages *with* the annotations together in class, assessing how well the annotations address the pre-identified issues and contextualize and characterize the value of evidence.

One can easily imagine useful extensions of the exercises discussed to this point. For instance, students might be asked to re-analyze data shared in ATI annotations using a

⁷ Personal correspondence, Robert Adcock to the authors, January 20-25, 2021, see also the description in Karcher (2016). Adcock's written instructions for this exercise are included in this article's supplementary material.

⁸ In preparation, students read three pieces on process tracing tests and three on Bayesian approaches to process tracing. Masullo's description of his exercise is included in this article's supplementary material.

⁹ Masullo often uses his own work (e.g., Masullo 2020) for this exercise, which facilitates more in-depth discussion with students of the general logic of, and specific justification for, annotation.

different analytic method from the one the author used to see if they arrive at the same results (e.g., they could apply formal Bayesian process tracing to an article that analyzed evidence informally).

Finally, in an exercise employing the third pedagogical strategy mentioned above, Masullo encourages graduate students working on their dissertations to annotate them with ATI in order to reveal the analytic architecture of their research. In correspondence with us about this exercise, Masullo emphasized the importance of guiding students to annotate with purpose, for instance, to justify citing evidence or discuss its probative value; to describe analytically relevant aspects of interview respondents' profiles; or to make more explicit the logic of process tracing tests or Bayesian analysis.¹⁰

In sum, the growing availability of ATI-based publications enables more active forms of learning qualitative analytic methods. Active learning of these methods can generate better understanding of how scholars draw descriptive and causal inferences from qualitative evidence, making students more sophisticated consumers of qualitative research. Moreover, active engagement with shared research data helps students learn to use qualitative methods by applying them.

Conclusion

In this article, we have described some general strategies for introducing active learning elements into qualitative methods instruction using ATI. We discussed the experiences of three instructors who used ATI in the classroom, recounting their impressions of how using this teaching technique improved learning outcomes. All three continue to employ and refine their approach. As more articles annotated with ATI are published, instructors will be able to use that scholarship in teaching a broader range of analytic methods.¹¹

We note that there are similarities between the logic of teaching qualitative methods with ATI and the logic of teaching quantitative methods via reproduction exercises. The

¹⁰ Personal correspondence, Juan Masullo to the authors, January 21-24, 2021.

¹¹ We are aware, for example, of annotated manuscripts based on QCA, Bayesian process tracing, and ethnographic research; see Kapiszewski and Karcher (2021).

usefulness of reanalysis exercises using ATI, however, does not hinge on that parallel. When authors use ATI, students *can* assess authors' findings by seeing if those findings can be reproduced from the data made available. Yet because most qualitative analysis involves some degree of subjective interpretation, different qualitative analysts might reasonably draw different inferences even when using the same methods to analyze the same data. In addition, some qualitative methodologies, particularly those operating within an interpretivist paradigm, eschew empiricist notions of researcher-independent objectivity. In these research traditions, reproducibility is itself incoherent as an evaluative standard. Even where analytical imprecision or epistemological premises make reproducing findings implausible or meaningless, however, students are likely to arrive at a better understanding of the logic and practice of different methods if they have the opportunity to apply them to sources or evidence underlying a publication, and compare their reasoning and findings to those presented by the original authors.

Even within a replicationist paradigm, learning qualitative methods with ATI has limits. First, not all work annotated with ATI is equally suitable for teaching. The initial experiences of teaching with ATI described here suggest that annotated publications that provide at least some associated primary material will be most useful pedagogically. Likewise, annotations that effectively lift the curtain on the research process – e.g., by discussing the evidentiary value of data cited in the text, commenting on how to adjudicate between contradictory pieces of evidence, and highlighting choices made during data collection – can be particularly enlightening for students. At the same time, we emphasize that even the most robustly annotated work cannot offer visibility into every choice authors made when selecting sources or data from all the information they encountered or collected. Moreover, the sharing of evidence is always partial: just as quantitative replication datasets typically include only those data used to generate the reported results, annotations typically only include the observations and materials referenced in the text, leaving out the potentially large set of sources and evidence consulted but not referenced.

Instructors of qualitative methods will also need to assess the time required to effectively teach with ATI. Adcock, Jacobs, and Masullo all found that engagement with ATI could be readily integrated into lessons on core topics such as comparative historical analysis or process tracing, and report that students needed very little time to acquaint

themselves with ATI itself. In the context of a course dedicated to qualitative methods, especially one intended to empower students to use such methods themselves, we believe ATI can be used in instruction without sacrificing other material. When course design allows less time for teaching qualitative methods, such as in a general research methods class, the time required to set up an effective lesson using ATI might be prohibitive.

Finally and more broadly, although the initial experiences recounted here are encouraging, we have limited evidence to date on the efficacy of using ATI to teach qualitative methods. We hope that this article encourages more instructors of qualitative research methods to bring ATI into their classrooms so we can all continue to develop, assess, and capitalize on its pedagogical promise.

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