Tips on Teaching Situational Analysis

Excerpted from Adele E. Clarke, Carrie Friese & Rachel Washburn. 2017. *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory After the Interpretive Turn* (2nd ed.) (pp. 354–357). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

While we intentionally peppered the second edition of *Situational Analysis* with tips, there are a few more we want to offer and some we wish to underscore.

While little attention has been given to teaching qualitative methods in general, this is changing. For example, Waite (2014) offers a literature review and discussion of major challenges in “teaching the unteachable.” Hsiung (2016) takes up teaching qualitative research as transgressive practices. Von Unger (2016) urges reflexivity beyond IRB regulations. Hesse-Biber (2007) and Charmaz (2015) write on teaching GT, with Charmaz promoting students’ enhanced theorizing. And Strauss (1988) did a wonderful interview on teaching qualitative methods. Below are some of our own tips on issues distinctive to teaching SA.

# Teaching SA Hands-On

Having a shared working exemplar appropriate for your classroom is incredibly effective. Ideally, you can use the same exemplar as the basis for making all three kinds of maps in class. This not only elicits class participation; it also provides hands-on learning *before* students start their own project design or data collection, which is helpful. Further, if you are not able to break the class into smaller working groups, having some individuals present their versions of each kind of map also works well. In addition to the new exemplars in this book, we hope to have others on line on the SAGE SA website. If students are wondering what SA dissertations or books look like, there are lists on the SA websites (see Appendix A); for articles, see Appendices B and C.

# Teaching the Three Kinds of Mapping

The easiest maps to teach are the situational maps because it is easy to find a shared topic from your specialty area for the group to use as an exemplar and to engage students in making a mock-up map. Once some nonhuman elements have begun to be included, as well as extant discourses, you know students are beginning to grasp the broader scope of the “situation” in SA! But keep going, and draw on the list of *kinds* of elements to help prod their further contributions to the map.

Both social worlds/arenas maps and positional maps can be more challenging to teach for different reasons and in different geopolitical settings. First, social worlds/arenas maps seem to make more sense in the United States with its 50 states; complex election formats; many layers of laws; vast numbers of local, state, and federal government organizations; civic organizations; NGOs; and so on. While many in the United States lack a good grasp of “the social,” more have a grasp of the pluralist range of institutional and other organizational entities on the horizon in most situations. This helps. Interestingly, researchers exploring situations in the Global South also tend to grasp social worlds/arenas analysis well, again thanks to the diverse range of organizational entities common to such research situations often due to the plethora of “development” organizations. European scholars may find these maps more challenging.

In contrast, because of the extensive transdisciplinary uptake of Foucault and teaching of discourse analysis over recent decades across Europe, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavia, positional maps make a lot of sense there. In the United States, however, a better grasp of discourses is often requisite. Finding a strong and disciplinarily appropriate exemplar to play with in class is a great strategy, especially if the topic is hot and the positions emergent. You can use a TV show or a movie related to your shared concerns as a “public discourse” to analyze.

## Not Doing the Analysis for the Student

Perhaps the most challenging facet of teaching GT or SA or perhaps any form of qualitative analysis is asking questions to provoke students’ own analyses rather than tossing out codes or elements for them to use. One of Anselm Strauss’s greatest pedagogical gifts was making students’ analyses their very own—*not his*. He did this by actively “listening forth” to his students’ stories about their data (Clarke & Star, 1998). He would bend his head, peer over his glasses, and say to the student, “So, tell us, what is this a story of?” The heretofore mute voice of the novice analyst would then use the most familiar of narrative forms to unblock analytic paralysis: “This is a story about . . .”

The same strategy can be used with SA: So tell us, what is this a map of?

And relatedly, *for situational maps*, So tell us, what is this element? What is the relationship between these elements about?

*For social worlds/arenas maps*, Does this social world overlap with that one? Should that world be larger outside this arena you are focused on? Are there any formal organizations in these worlds? Do any of them span more than one world or arena?

*For positional maps*, How did you select that axis to analyze in your positional map? What were the debates about it that you came across? Where might you look for new data about this position that you think is missing in the data? Were there any other debates in your data?

*Not* doing the analysis is the greatest gift a teacher can give her or his qualitative students—although some students may not think so at the time.

# Memoing

As we have noted throughout this book, memoing is vital for successful SA projects. In classes or workshops for those new to qualitative analyses, we urge teachers to instruct students not only on the mapping strategies in SA but also on memo-writing techniques. Setting aside time in class or a workshop for memoing, if appropriate, can provide a nice break for reflection and serve as the basis for discussing questions and concerns that come up as students memo their SA maps. For newcomers to SA, these memos will likely also spark important questions about core assumptions and strategies in SA that will result in students gaining a deeper grasp of the method.[[1]](#endnote-1)

# What Can I Expect Participants to Learn in a One-Day Workshop?

One-day workshops are more productive when participants have some background in qualitative inquiry and have been assigned a key SA text or two and an exemplar (or better, a choice of exemplars) in advance. Fosket (2014/2015) works superbly here. Based on our collective experiences, after a one-day workshop, participants should have a basic understanding of some of the theoretical underpinnings of SA, how it extends Straussian GT around the interpretive turn, and the three main mapping strategies. Ideally, during the event, participants will have time to work on constructing a messy situational map and a memo about it.

Participants already engaged in qualitative inquiry will often find messy SA maps and social worlds/arenas maps easiest to do. Positional mapping is often more challenging because it requires a pretty solid grasp of one’s data. For this reason, it is usually best to limit mapping exercises in one-day workshops to messy SA maps, relational maps, and social worlds/arenas maps. It is important to allow ample time for questions and to remind students about the highly provisional nature of the maps. Maps constructed in workshops are intended to help students become familiar with SA, confront challenges, clarify areas of confusion, and open up their analyses.

Because participants attend workshops at different points in their research projects, it is important to probe students on what their maps are “*for*.” A messy map may be a brainstorming design exercise for a student just starting a project. Questions about theoretical sampling—how to follow up on interesting ideas in terms of data collection—could then be emphasized as an important focus for a memo to write next. In contrast, for students in the midst of their research, messy maps may be more analytic. Questions about the relationships between elements could then be emphasized as an important focus of a memo. Addressing the different degrees of development of messy maps can be helpful in terms of teaching the *process* of SA research.

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# Notes

1. On memo-writing techniques, see Chapters 4, 6, and 10, and esp. Charmaz (2014, Chap. 7). See also Glaser & Strauss (1967, pp. 105–113), Glaser (1978, pp. 83–92), Strauss (1987, pp. 109–130, pp. 184–214), Strauss & Corbin (1998, pp. 217–242), and Corbin and Strauss (2015, Chap. 6). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)