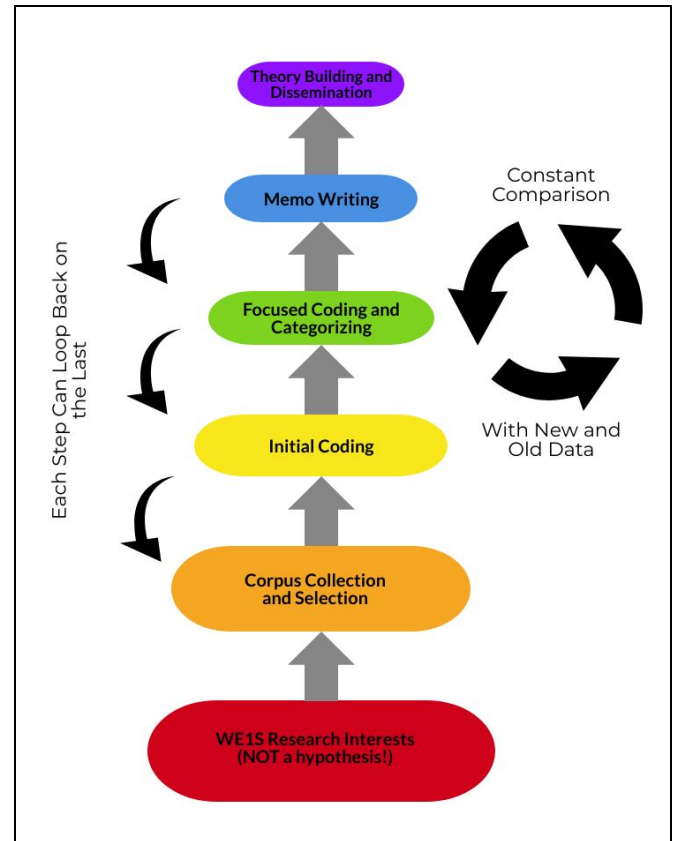


Back to Basics: Constructivist Grounded Theory and Hand-Coding as “Human-Scale Topic Modeling”

Every scholar working within an interdisciplinary field like the digital humanities, eventually runs up against the snarly question of qualitative vs. quantitative data. Any meaning a person assigns to a book, an article, or a cultural pattern is necessarily *subjective*--meaning that it comes from a *subject*, an individual human mind. But that doesn't mean “anything goes”. The humanities, like any branch of science, relies on data (textual evidence), carefully constructed arguments (logical outcomes), and a clearly articulated context (extant knowledge) to draw its conclusions.

But how do we bridge gaps and translate knowledge between the humanities and the social sciences? Just as our project relies on an [Interpretation Protocol](#) for reading topic models, which visualize many millions of articles, we use a modified “[Grounded Theory](#)” approach to “hand code” (or hand *label*) articles on a smaller scale.

In Grounded Theory, you begin by making note of general ideas in a given article--“Jobs”, or “Student Life” are examples of initial codes. As you keep reading, you begin to notice the same sorts of concerns coming up again and again. When you finish this initial coding, you begin focused coding, or re-coding your codes looking for recurrent patterns: “Funding”, and “K-12” are examples of specific codes that tended to come up in our corpus. Based on these “focused” codes, you record observations, hypotheses, and ideas as “memos” to yourself. Other readers can then take your suggested codes and repeat the process, gradually and iteratively refining until you have a stable set of labels, a “codebook”.



Our modified version of Constructivist Grounded theory consists of a series of iterative steps, which are not linear but tend to loop back on themselves and one another as necessary.

Note that researchers do not begin from the top, but rather from the “ground” up!

This chart has been adapted from Kathy Charmaz's *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed (2014).

Resources

Completed WE1s Codebook: [WE1S Codebook Blog Post](#)

Kathy Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory textbook in [WE1S bibliography](#)

Recommended Article:

Charmaz, Kathy. “[Constructivist Grounded Theory for Critical Inquiry](#)” (2016)