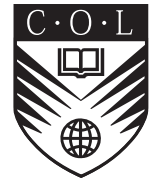


COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING



PREST

Practitioner Research and
Evaluation Skills Training in
Open and Distance Learning

Getting and analysing
qualitative data

MODULE

A4

The PREST training resources aim to help open and distance learning practitioners develop and extend their research and evaluation skills. They can be used on a self-study basis or by training providers. The resources consist of two sets of materials: a six-module foundation course in research and evaluation skills and six handbooks in specific research areas of ODL. There is an accompanying user guide. A full list appears on the back cover.

The print-based materials are freely downloadable from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) website (www.col.org/prest). Providers wishing to print and bind copies can apply for camera-ready copy which includes colour covers (info@col.org). They were developed by the International Research Foundation for Open Learning (www.irfol.ac.uk) on behalf of COL.

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Acknowledgements

We are particularly grateful to Hilary Perraton and Raj Dhanarajan who originally conceived of the PREST programme and have supported the project throughout. Among those to whom we are indebted for support, information and ideas are Honor Carter, Kate Crofts, John Daniel, Nick Gao, Jenny Glennie, Keith Harry, Colin Latchem, Lydia Meister, Roger Mills, Sanjaya Mishra, Ros Morpeth, Rod Tyrer, Paul West and Dave Wilson. In developing the materials, we have drawn inspiration from the lead provided by Roger Mitton in his handbook, Mitton, R. 1982 *Practical research in distance education*, Cambridge: International Extension College.

Handbook A4: Getting and analysing qualitative data

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info@col.org www.col.org/PREST

ISBN 1-894975-04-9

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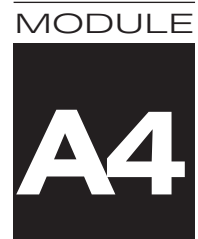
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Getting and analysing qualitative data



Module overview

If you have been studying previous modules, at this stage you should have some 'big picture' ideas about research. You will know about different 'paradigms', you will have some ideas about what kinds and varieties of research are possible and you will be familiar with some examples of the ways that different forms of research have been used in distance education.

In this module we will move from general research issues to the specific use of qualitative methods, though as you will see, there will be continuity between what you know already and what you will encounter in this module. Questions about methods are rarely simply technical but are closely related to the more general questions and issues raised previously. Qualitative research has some distinctive characteristics, but it is still research.

In this module I take the view that research methodology is primarily concerned with questions of judgement in the use and application of skills in relation to opportunities. In practice there are almost always several viable options at any point in a research study and so the task you face involves deciding on the best way of doing research in a particular circumstance at a particular time. The decisions you make are partly about feasibility (and so are essentially technical) but they also involve searching for creative solutions and making judgements about what it is best to do next.

Improving your capacity for making judgements about research projects while they are being carried out is not easily encapsulated in terms of objectives (see below). Because of the limitations created by specifying objectives in behavioural terms, this module adopts a style and approach that is process-oriented rather than outcomes-driven. Faced with decisions, questions, opportunities or difficulties as you conduct your study, you will need to have a set of possible responses to hand, and some sense of their likely consequences. As you gain experience and as you discuss your research activities with others, the range of options you will be able to draw on will extend. This module will help you to get started in increasing your repertoire of research responses to problems.

Module aims

The aims of this module are to help you to answer the following questions:

What can I expect to learn from doing small-scale qualitative research studies in education?

What kinds of research questions can qualitative research ask, and answer?

I am assuming that your interest is in carrying out, commissioning or using qualitative studies in distance education, and so the module provides:

- ▶ a practical introduction to the use of qualitative research methods in distance education projects
- ▶ a focus on **applied** research and evaluation, rather than on research within an academic discipline like psychology or sociology. (You will find that most textbooks are oriented to disciplines and not always appropriate for use in relation to applied studies)
- ▶ a guide to the key issues and problems that you are likely to encounter in carrying out qualitative research, especially if you are engaging with qualitative methods for the first time.

Module objectives

When you have worked through this module, you should be able to:

- ▶ explain the idea that using qualitative methods involves adopting an approach to research, that this involves ways of understanding and thinking about distance education and so is more than simply a technical choice between alternative methods
- ▶ recognise the importance of 'participation' and 'audience' in applied qualitative research. the simple divisions between 'researchers', 'subjects' and 'commissioners' are less clear cut in such projects and it is important to negotiate and discuss issues of role and responsibility among all those involved
- ▶ use different ways of collecting and analysing information (particularly through interviewing, observation and analysis of documents)
- ▶ solve practical problems in carrying out fieldwork
- ▶ articulate the concept of 'case study' and make informed judgements about its use.
- ▶ recognise the first steps that you can take in addressing commonly encountered problems
- ▶ identify the advantages of doing qualitative studies, what can be learnt from them, how they might be used to inform policy or to guide practice and how you might defend them in the face of sceptical critics

- ▶ be aware of what you are likely to encounter in doing small-scale qualitative studies in an applied or evaluation context and have some ideas, strategies and methods you can use to frame the study, collect and analyse the data and present the report.

Module organisation

The module is structured into this introduction and eight units, as follows.

This introduction: (1 hr)

Unit 1: Keeping a personal journal (2 hrs)

Unit 2: Methods and research roles (2 hrs)

Unit 3: Identifying your audience (2.5 hrs)

Unit 4: Case studies (1/2 hr)

Unit 5: Collecting information (10 hrs)

Unit 6: Fieldwork issues (1/2 hr)

Unit 7: Analysis, presentation and communication (1/2 hr)

Unit 8: Theory (1/2 hr)

Each unit is made up of the following components:

- ▶ an introductory paragraph or two that provide an overview of the unit, its focus and outcomes
- ▶ text for reading and reflection
- ▶ one or more activities for you to engage in, such as readings to complete and analyse, questions to answer, or problems to solve

Getting started

Throughout this module you will find a sequence of 'activities' that are designed to get you involved in **doing** qualitative research. These activities form the active core of the module and constitute the 'spine' of your work in it. They are the essential structure of the module and you need to participate actively in doing them if you are to learn about the use of qualitative methods. The tasks are central to the module and you should keep a record of these activities, and your responses to them, in a personal journal.

You will need about 20 hours to work through the module.

How to use the materials

The Module is self-contained. All the readings you will need are contained in the *Resource File* which accompanies this Module. In addition, the general

feedback provided in response to each activity is intended to keep you on track yet at the same time reinforce your own thinking and reflection.

Resources

The following resources are used in this module:

Resource	Name when referred to in our text	Location
Holly, M. 1997 <i>Keeping professional journals</i> , Geelong: Deakin University Press (extract pp 5-9)	<i>Holly</i>	<i>Resources File</i>
Brauner, C. 1974 'The first probe' in L. Smith (ed.) <i>Four evaluation examples: anthropological, economic, narrative and portrayal</i> , AERA Monograph Series on Curriculum Evaluation. Chicago: Rand McNally (extract pp 79-81)	<i>Brauner</i>	<i>Resources File</i>
Stake, R. 1995 <i>The art of case study research</i> , London: Sage (extract 1-15)	<i>Stake</i>	<i>Resources File</i>
Prosser, J. (ed.) 1999 <i>School culture</i> , London: Paul Chapman (extract pp 84-86)	<i>Prosser</i>	<i>Resources File</i>
Kemmis, S. and Robottom, I. 1981 'Principles of procedure in curriculum evaluation' in <i>Journal of Curriculum Studies</i> 13, 2 (extract 28-32)	<i>Kemmis and Robottom</i>	<i>Resources File</i>

Keeping a personal journal



Unit overview

This unit introduces you to the idea of a personal journal for use in a research study. In the process of exploring this you will spend quite a bit of time thinking about the nature of qualitative research.

In Activity 3 you will spend a few minutes collecting ideas from two or three friends or colleagues. You might like to look at that activity now so that you can begin to seek out willing participants, ready for that activity.

Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit you should be able to:

- ▶ identify the reasons why keeping a journal will be helpful to you
- ▶ make appropriate journal entries
- ▶ reflect on those entries.

Introduction

A journal is not the same as a diary and not quite the same as a log book, though it has many aspects in common with both. Here, what we mean by a journal is a book in which you write regularly in order to keep track of your ideas and to create a reflective record that you can go back and re-read as your ideas take you off in new directions.

Keeping a journal is an important part of being a researcher, as important as the 'public face' of research in reports and papers, and it is in writing your journal that you will develop your own understanding of the ideas and methods that we will discuss in the module. Journal writing is a vital habit to cultivate, and you will find that keeping a project journal is invaluable in managing any research project because it will help you to remember what happens and what is important. Also, as your project develops, your ideas will change and often you will not realise how you have made critical decisions until much later. A good journal provides you with a record of what you were thinking at the time, with what seemed most important and with the way decisions appeared to you as you became aware of the need to make them.

You can use a computer for keeping the journal, but many people prefer to handwrite the journal in a book set aside for this purpose. Whichever method you chose, make sure you date each entry, and if you are using a book, leave plenty of spaces on each page (and wide margins) so that you can add further comments at a later date.

If you want to use a computer you can use a word processing application but you might also think about using more specialist software, for example, a note-making application like 'Storyspace' (for PC users) or 'Tinderbox' (for the Mac) (both can be found at <http://eastgate.com>) or, a weblog application like Typepad, which can manage photos as well as text (which you can obtain from <http://www.typepad.org>, if you are interested to see an example you can check my research journal at <http://www.icare.typepad.com>).

Keeping a research journal is not the same as taking notes from a lecture or seminar or from reading a book. It may **include** taking notes but it is primarily a way of thinking about what you are doing, a means of tracking your own ideas as you learn, a way of giving direction, shape and purpose to your study. You will probably find that your journal contains lots of questions too, as well as diagrams and sketches.

In making the claim that keeping a journal is an essential research tool, I am making the assumption that writing in the many forms you might use it in a journal, is inextricably related to thinking. It may include making a record of salient facts, ideas and sources but it will also involve you in developing critical thinking about your own actions and ideas, in reflection, imagination and strategic planning. Your journal should be both a record and a source for you in doing research. It is a way of helping you think about how you think, and learning how you learn.

Before you move on to starting your journal, this first activity will give you a chance to read a slightly longer account of how researchers keep logs, diaries and journals.

Activity 1 10 mins



This activity is based on the reading *Holly* in the *Resources File*. You will find details of this under Resources in the overview to this module. This is an extract from a handbook originally written for distance students. It describes the journal, explains how it is different from diaries and log books and introduces the idea of the **research journal**.

Mary Lou Holly distinguishes between keeping a log and keeping a diary and suggests that a journal has some aspects of each. Here is an activity to get you started in writing your journal.

There is no feedback to this activity

Getting started

You are now ready to move on to making a start with your own journal. Activity 2 asks you to do some thinking and then to record that in your journal.

Activity 2 10 mins



Without thinking too long about it, list the key words that come to mind when you think of **qualitative research**.

Now make some notes about this in your journal.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

What are the characteristics of qualitative research?

As you start to become involved in qualitative research you will find that it is quite common for people to put some pressure on you to justify what you are doing. The conversation that follows is intended to provide the kind of supervision you (the researcher) might get from an experienced qualitative researcher (the adviser). It picks up the issues raised in the previous activity in conversational form and may provide you with some ideas for ways of describing and defending what you do.

Conversation



What are qualitative methods?

Researcher *Tell me what **qualitative methods** means, Does it mean that I can do research without having to do statistics?*

Adviser *There are some who define qualitative methods as a way of doing 'research with words, rather than research with numbers' but to do so suggests that qualitative researchers never use numbers (which is not true) and that quantitative research does not use words (equally untrue). Most researchers have a more complex view.*

Some qualitative researchers claim that the key difference is that they emphasise 'depth' of understanding rather than aiming for generalisation; that what qualitative methods researchers do is get behind the numbers in order to explain them. But, for most, the most important feature of qualitative research is that what you try to do is to see the world as it is to others.

We know that in everyday life we rarely see things exactly the same way as others do, even those who are close to us. Our manager (and our clients) do not see our job in quite the same way that we do, our partner may not see our relationship in quite the same way, our parents and our children see the family a little differently (especially if they are teenagers!). These differences in 'point of view' are not just different ways of interpreting a common reality but are an

essential part of what a social reality is. We know that having ‘objective’ assessments of these situations rarely resolves different points of view, but more often serve only to provide resources for the different arguments that people make for one view or the other.

Researcher *So is qualitative research not so much about ‘how things really are’ but how people interpret and understand the world they are in?*

Adviser *Yes, this is a very important point and defines a lot of what qualitative research ‘is’, but this in turn raises questions about where ‘reality’ lies, and to what extent what ‘is in our heads’ or in our consciousness is reality. There is a famous quote you will often find in many of the standard texts from the American sociologist W I Thomas who, more than seventy years ago, said that ‘if men define the world as real, then it will be real in its consequences’. In many situations there is a gap between objective realities and our subjective perceptions of them and in qualitative research we try to map different ways of seeing the world, and almost always we do this by observing and interviewing people (and by reading documents of various kinds). We do this, not to see who is right, but to try to understand differences in perspective and point of view. These notions, ‘perspective’ and ‘point of view’ are central to qualitative research; you might even say that they are the realities in which we deal.*

Researcher *So the reason you don’t use statistics is that these things are difficult to measure?*

Adviser *Well there are some researchers who see the task of making meaningful measures of this kind as central to the research task. But you are right in that qualitative researchers tend to focus on understanding different ways in which people perceive reality, rather than in trying to measure the frequency of their occurrence, their variation, distribution or strength,*

Researcher *Part of the problem seems to be that some of these things are by their nature difficult to measure objectively.*

Adviser *Yes, though there are some inventive ways you can measure some of them but, more fundamentally, you need to distinguish between ‘measurement’ and ‘statistics’. Measurement is about identifying characteristics and assessing their relative significance. Statistics is about variation and the distribution of these measures. To be pedantic, we could say that qualitative research does measure, but it usually measures in binaries or in approximations (Was she angry? How much did they cooperate? How far was she in control?) rather than as points on a scale. And the emphasis is often on how others perceive these things, rather than with measuring them ‘objectively’. In qualitative research, we are usually less interested in distribution and variation than we are in inter-relations and context.*

Researcher *You will have to explain this to me!*

Adviser *Sorry, I am using technical words – jargon – which is something we researchers are often criticised for doing!*

Mostly in qualitative research we are interested in using specific examples (‘cases’) to try and explain social processes. So, for example, if a distance course has a high drop out rate, we will interview a range of people (students and their families, instructors, programme managers, perhaps) to find out why the students left the course. Often this involves looking, not at single discrete factors, but at a complex of different, inter-related reasons.

Researcher *So once you have this information you can then do a survey to find out about distribution and variation: qualitative methods come before quantitative.*

Or, you could do a qualitative inquiry to find out the story behind the dropout statistics for a course? The quantitative here may not be a survey (though it

might be if, say, you were doing a survey of radio listening) but it would provide the starting point for an inquiry.

Adviser *Yes, both these mixes of method are possible but for the qualitative researcher the emphasis is always on trying to see the phenomena from the perspective of the person who is the actor. Our questions are about how people themselves see the issues. So, in studying drop out in a particular course, what we are mostly interested in is this course, not courses in general, so a survey might help you describe the case but would not be useful as the basis for a broader generalisation.*

Researcher *You gave student dropout studies as one example. Can you give me some other examples of studies in which qualitative research has been used?*

Adviser *Some examples of qualitative research studies in distance education include:*

- interviewing women about their experiences as distance learners*
- observing tutorial groups to analyse tutors' styles of interaction and students' styles of participation*
- analysing web-based communication to research student learning difficulties or teaching-learning interaction*
- identifying cultural differences in performance in programmes according to factors such as ethnicity or gender*
- analysing tutors' written feedback on assignments and students' reactions to them*
- using focus groups to assess the effectiveness of radio programmes*
- analysing how students use the activities in texts.*

Researcher *I can see that some of these topics are qualitative in the way you define it, but some also seem to have measurement aspects. For instance in the first case I can imagine you might end up being able to say that many women felt that part of the course was patronising but that some did not.*

Adviser *In each of these examples you can think of several different ways that you might design a research project – some quantitative and some qualitative, and perhaps some mixed method. This touches on one of the central aims of this module – to help you think about the judgements that need to be made in the process of research and not simply to apply methods like recipes.*

Researcher *So I think qualitative methods might be used to find out some things and perhaps even to explain the variance and distributions that quantitative methods reveal but cannot easily reach or explain.*

Adviser *You are right. Sometimes one method will give you answers that raise further questions that can only be investigated using another method. This is an important reason for looking at the research literature when you are designing a study – to see what questions remain unanswered.*

But behind this are philosophical differences behind different approaches that you need to keep in mind. There are sometimes ways that qualitative methods can be used within what is sometimes called an 'empiricist' frame, that is to say assuming that there is an 'objective' reality that lies beyond perception that can be observed, measured and validated. There are also approaches to the use of qualitative methods that are less certain about the existence of this objective reality, or may deny its significance. In these approaches perception is all and reality lies only in the convergence of perceptions.

- Researcher *Can you explain to me a little more what you mean by ‘empiricist’. I keep coming across the word in my reading but I am not sure what it means?*
- Adviser *What it means to me is that the appeal we make to truth is by locating what we say in terms of facts that we have observed. Just as measurement methods usually measure things that are recognisably objective – like the number of people in a course, or their ages and gender, so some forms of qualitative research emphasise what is objectively observable. But in some other qualitative studies, based on a less secure conception of an ‘objective reality’, the focus of the research is on other, less tangible things. For instance, what people believe, feel, take for granted about a situation. These things are less objective but just as ‘real’.*
- Researcher *I notice that objectivity keeps creeping into our discussion but I know too that this is a tricky area and perhaps not one to discuss right now! Can we stay with the practicalities and can I ask you to say a little more about how you might use qualitative methods to investigate student dropout?*
- Adviser *In one course I wrote we thought that dropout was high because the course materials might have looked too demanding, but once we realised that many of those who dropped out did so before the course materials arrived, we knew that there must be other reasons, so we used interviews to try to understand student enrolment decisions and strategies, not something we initially guessed was significant. This was information we couldn’t have got from statistical data, because it was essentially about perceptions and meanings.*
- In another instance I did some research into dropout on a programme that had four courses with different levels of dropout in courses 1 and 2 when compared with courses 3 and 4. Through telephone interviews, I found that the reasons for dropout were different in the two pairs of courses: in courses 1 and 2, most dropouts did so for personal reasons; in courses 3 and 4, where the dropout was higher, they did so for course-related reasons.*
- Researcher *So methods are not just recipes – choices to be made about on the basis of methodological preference – but are about how we conceive the research question, what we want to learn from doing research and what kind of information and understanding we want to gain?*
- Adviser *Exactly!*

Activity 3 30 mins



The perceptions people have of qualitative research

This activity asks you to re-visit Activity 2.

- 1 First, review what you wrote in your journal when you did that activity.
- 2 Now ask some other people to respond to the same question, i.e. to list the key words that come to mind when they think of the words ‘qualitative research’. Try to find two or three colleagues or friends who can spare you five or ten minutes to respond to this question. Explain that you are doing this as part of a course you are doing and that you are looking for a first response to what ‘qualitative research’ means to people, it is not a test!

- 3 If your respondents find making a list difficult you could try writing key words on cards and asking people to choose the ones that describe 'qualitative research' and then ask them to explain their choices.
- 4 Write up your response to this task in your journal.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

Summary

In relation to qualitative research I believe that it is as important to learn how to practise the methods as it is to learn **about** them.

Look back to the first entries you made in the journal and think about whether your ideas have changed or developed. If they have make some notes about this.

What you have started is a process of learning how to use qualitative methods. Engaging in this process will help you develop your skills and understanding of research and, even if you never use these methods again, you will develop some understanding of how to think like a qualitative researcher. Keeping, and using, a research journal is an important way of beginning this process.

Feedback to selected activities



Feedback to Activity 2

For many people their first response is to define qualitative research in opposition to **quantitative research**. That is, qualitative research is defined as **not** being concerned with measurement or statistics but involving words rather than figures: words used for description, for recording participant observation, open-ended interviews and sometimes pictures or video. Was this your response?

Those who have some prior knowledge of research may define qualitative research a little differently – seeing it less in terms of its data and more as having as its primary concern the attempt to see things through the eyes of others – particularly those at the receiving end of services or educational programs. That is to say, its defining characteristic is that it is primarily concerned with interpretation, and with the 'meanings' that social acts, programs or events have for those who take different roles in relation to them.

Some qualitative researchers see qualitative research as essentially 'local', rather than being concerned with generalisation in terms of theory or policy. What qualitative research does best, they argue, is describe particular

circumstances in detail, allowing the reader to 'get close' to events and think how they might react in circumstances like those described.

No hierarchy of understanding is implied here – your response is valid in itself and in its own terms. Perhaps you came up with quite different ideas.

You should note, though, that there are different ways of thinking about what qualitative research 'is', and that your views might change as you learn more about them.

Feedback to Activity 3

Did others give the same kind of response as you did? Did they provide lists that are similar, and about the same length, or were they very different? Is there any value judgement involved or implied in the lists of words? (For example, do people think that qualitative research is not as rigorous, not as scientific or not as good or as useful as measurement?) Is the order in which the words people give you significant? Are there pauses in their lists? Are these pauses at significant points in the list?

Notice that even at this very early point in the unit, you have already started doing qualitative research! This apparently simple activity has involved you in trying to understand how other people might understand 'qualitative methods', how you might interpret the information they give you and how you might interpret such 'natural' information.

You started by asking a simple question but the chances are that this question has become more complex! Notice too, that what you get from this activity is not answers so much as new questions. If you were doing this exercise as an exercise in **quantitative** research you might be looking for the frequencies and distribution of word use. What is interesting here is not so much the frequency of occurrence of words but the range of different ways you might look at the data in terms of the different meanings that it suggests.

Methods and research roles

UNIT 2

Unit overview

In the previous unit you have learnt that the use of qualitative methods is not just a matter of methodological preference but involves quite complex questions about research.

Although we did not discuss 'scientific methods', you will know, if you have read the methodological literature, that what is at stake here are different views about science and the scientific method. The commonly held idea that science is simply a question of collecting facts and using these to deduce and test hypotheses fails to hold in many areas of social science (as well as in many areas of science itself).

Tempting as it is to digress into these questions of philosophy, we need to move on, but you should be aware that we have glossed over some major questions here!

In this unit we discuss methods in relation to research roles, as we have said, methods are not simply technical, they involve different ways of understanding the world, and as we shall emphasise here, different roles within it.

Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit you should be better able to:

- ▶ choose methods that match your research project
- ▶ identify the roles that you will play in your research project.

Choosing methods

Let's start with another conversation. This time, the researcher is unsure about how to arrive at the most appropriate choice of research methods for a particular project.

Conversation



Choosing methods

Researcher *OK, so I want to understand the meaning of a situation or happening from the actors' point of view. Where do I go from here? Can I get you to start by talking about how to choose methods?*

- Adviser *The rational way to think about research methods is to see the choice of methods as following on from the identification of topics and research problems.*
- Once we know what it is that we want to research, the textbooks say, then we can choose methods that are appropriate to the task and optimise the chances of getting good data to feed into the arguments that we want to make, whether by supporting claims or refuting them.*
- Researcher *But, in the way you say this I think you are implying that the rational approach does not always work?*
- Adviser *Yes, you are right. Questions of method are as much about the judgements that the researcher makes about the situation as they are logical. What sounds a rational way to begin is not always an effective strategy in practice. If you take the rational route you may well end up with a design that is elegant but unworkable, perhaps with far too much data that cannot be adequately analysed. Before you begin any study you need to have some realistic ideas about what it is possible to achieve given the constraints you are working within.*
-

This is a good point from which we can pick up the text.

Why isn't the choice of method simply a rational choice?

There are three main reasons why a choice of research method is not just a rational choice:

- ▶ research never begins from a blank sheet
- ▶ decisions about methodology always have an ethical element
- ▶ methods are not simply technical solutions but have a life of their own.

We will discuss each of these in turn.

Research never begins from a blank sheet

From the start you will encounter a wide range of preconceived ideas about what research 'is' from almost everyone involved in the study.

All those involved in conceiving, commissioning or conducting a study will come to it with ideas about what it is they want, how this might be done, and what the outcomes will be. From the start, it is usually necessary to take time to discuss these expectations and to arrive at some resolution of the differences. Even with a research task that looks clear and among a group of people who have shared aspirations, this discussion can take some time, and more often than not it will lead to ideas that no-one had considered at the outset. The process of 'research design', sometimes thought to be primarily a technical discussion, is in fact one of the most creative aspects of research methodology and it is important to take it seriously, before decisions are made and the research process is committed to a course of action that might be difficult to reverse.

Among the inputs to the process are the possibilities and constraints that arise from methods themselves. Many research ideas that look promising are not feasible within the constraints of the particular project. Often, those who commission research have unrealistic ideas about what can be achieved within limited resources and this has to be negotiated with researchers who know what might be feasible or achievable within the given constraints. There is also an imaginative dimension to the technical problem of choosing methods. There are often surprising or unexpected ways of doing things that others may have tried that those who commission the research may not have thought about.

For example, in a study we did of e-learning, we were asked to investigate how young people use the internet. At the start of the study there was a lot of discussion and concern about 'internet safety' and the risks encountered by young people in using the internet. Rather than take these concerns at face value, we asked young people themselves about the risks they perceived and how they rated them (which we found were very different from the risks that adults perceived). When people then raised the issue of how the media influenced their views by the way they reported stories involving internet risks we did a study involving content analyses of press reporting in order to see what key narratives were used in constructing press stories. This allowed people to see how adult views formed, and were formed by, the ways in which the media constructed the stories. This provided important background information in thinking about the potentials, and dangers, of e-learning.

What is important, early on, is to develop a conversation about these issues, whether this is a conversation between a commissioning group, an external audience, potential subjects and the researcher, among a research team, or an internal conversation if you are one person combining all these roles. Decisions made at this stage in the research are critical and it is important to consider as many options as possible.

Decisions about methodology always have an ethical element

In social research, the researcher always wants information from those who are the subjects of the research. Sometimes this information is relatively innocuous, but sometimes it might be of a more sensitive kind, involving information about people or information that might threaten those in positions of power or responsibility.

The researcher always incurs an obligation to the subject and a responsibility not to take advantage of their position by misusing information. One of the commonest ways this can happen is by passing on what might seem insignificant information between those lower in a hierarchy to those higher up. This creates some problems in qualitative research, and especially when the researcher has working or social relationships with those who are providing information. It is very easy to let your vigilance slip and to pass on information that should be kept confidential, especially in the context of an organisational or social hierarchy. In this module we will not consider ethical issues in detail,

but they should always be in your mind and be in the background of every decision you make.

Methods are not simply technical solutions but have a life of their own

Researchers develop preferences and a selective expertise and they tend to look for problems that best fit their skills. It is rare to find a testing expert or survey researcher who is willing to carry out an extensive participant observation study, or a life history researcher or oral historian who will conduct a survey or a census. Most professional researchers will know a little about other approaches but usually they know just enough to know the limits of their own competence. This creates some problems for the student or the outsider, because to learn about the methods is not simply technical but involves crossing between disciplines and philosophies. To learn about survey research means much more than learning how to design and administer a questionnaire, just as learning to be a participant observer means doing more than 'just being there' and taking notes.

I like to make analogies between doing research and cooking food, so let me tell you a story from one of my students. A lecturer in hospitality, he faced the practical problem of teaching Chinese chefs, who wanted to work in western hotels, how to cook western food. The obvious way of doing this was to provide recipe books and cooking instructions. He thought it was just a question of teaching them the methods, for example in frying, boiling or scrambling eggs for a breakfast menu. What he found was, that in practice he had first to teach the chefs the aesthetics of the dishes – what should these different ways of cooking eggs taste like? What textures should they have? What colours? How should they be presented and served? Until the chefs knew this, simply following the recipe was not enough to ensure success. More often than not they over-cooked or under-cooked the eggs, left them too long before they were served or presented then in inappropriate ways. So the solution was to start with teaching them how the finished dishes should look and taste, not with methods of preparation and cooking.

Similarly in research, before you can appreciate the details of methods, you need to know what it is you are aiming to achieve, and this is both a question of practical outcomes and also of learning, practicing and perfecting an aesthetic. The chefs had to eat before they could cook! You need to read before you can write!

Activity 1 15 mins



Use the reading *Brauner* for this activity from the *Resources File*.

- 1 This activity is designed to give you a feel for what a qualitative study looks like.
- 2 Read the article and make notes in your journal on the following questions:

What kind of person do you think Charles Brauner is?

What strengths and weaknesses does he bring to this account?

What questions would you want to ask him on the basis of this extract?

There is no feedback to this activity

Methods and roles

We now move on to looking at your role – or roles – as a researcher. The issues here will, once again, be introduced through another.

Conversation



Methods and roles

- Researcher *As it happens I have worked in kitchens, so I know a little about chefs! I learned that in the kitchen you have to look ahead and make plans that are adaptable according to the ingredients that are available. In research, too, you have to plan according to circumstance, so this seems a good analogy. But also, in the kitchen, the chef has a role. To run the kitchen well, it is not just enough being able to cook and being able to plan menus, it is about who you are and how others relate to you, about having and exercising a certain authority. Is there an analogy for this in research?*
- Adviser *You have touched on something very important! 'Being a researcher' involves taking on a role, and with it comes a lot of expectations and responsibilities. Qualitative research especially involves entering multiple and contrasting roles, being an observer, being an interviewer, being an expert. These are not simply roles you have to learn to 'play' (like an actor) but roles you need to be.*
- Researcher *You spoke earlier about 'perspectives' and now you have introduced the idea that the 'role' of the researcher is important. Is there some connection here?*
- Consultant *This is a very good question and it is the kind of question that qualitative researchers need to practise! What you have just done is to pick up two critical ideas that I have introduced and then played them back to me in a non-judgemental way and asked me to explain. Very good!*

But to return to the question, there is a connection and it is important. I said earlier that a key aspect of qualitative research is that you need to pay attention to different perspectives. Qualitative methods are designed to collect and document these differences but this only works if you are able to establish yourself with people as someone they can trust. You have to be interested in people and in hearing what they think, and they have to be able to trust you not to break confidences or take what they have said and then gossip about them with others. In order to understand the perspective or point of view that someone has, you have to listen and understand, to be prepared to learn from them and to some degree this means that you have to empathise with them. This does not mean that you have to agree with them or flatter them, but you must have some degree of respect for them.

Your task is to try and put yourself inside their point of view and see things as they see them, however much this might conflict with your own personal views.

If you are serious about doing qualitative research then you need to think about what are your strengths and weaknesses, what you do well and what you find difficult to do. A degree of self-awareness and self-reflection is necessary.

Activity 2 60 mins



You as a researcher

This activity will help you to think about the abilities that you can bring to your research.

- 1 What do you see as your strengths and weaknesses in relation to the demands of qualitative research? Make notes on these in your journal.
- 2 Now ask someone you know and trust to assess them for you. Do they see you the same way? Have you over-estimated your abilities or been too modest. Have you neglected anything important?

There is no feedback to this activity

Summary

The key ideas we have introduced in this unit are that qualitative methods:

- ▶ are concerned to see the world as others know, see and understand it ('perspective' and 'point of view' are key concepts)
- ▶ involve taking on a particular research role and managing this alongside other roles you might have to play
- ▶ are not simply recipes for doing research but involve a distinctive research cuisine!
- ▶ involve judgement, especially in regard to relationships with others
- ▶ require you to have a degree of self-awareness in terms of the qualities you bring to your role as a researcher.

We have covered a lot of ground already and raised many issues that you will need to continue to think about. You may find this somewhat frustrating but one of the characteristics of qualitative research is that it tends to spiral through ideas rather than progress in a straight line! The basic ideas often appear complex because in practice they develop layers of interpretation. Often you will find yourself returning to them in a new context or from a new angle. Here we have made a start, but most of what we have discussed will return to you at different stages in some form or another.

Identifying your audience



Unit overview

You are probably puzzled to find this topic so early in the module! In standard textbooks questions about audience are normally considered at the end, rather than near the start. The usual assumption is that you conduct the research first, and only at the point of writing up, start to think about audience and readership. But in small scale, applied studies it is important to think about audience at the start of the project as well as at the end.

You will explore the reasons for this in this unit.

Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit you should be better able to:

- ▶ identify the audience for your research
- ▶ identify why the commissioners of your research have commissioned it
- ▶ identify what sorts of decisions the commissioners might wish to take as a result of the research
- ▶ identify the information needs of the commissioners.

Why start with the audience?

There are a number of reasons for considering the audience for your research at an early stage in your project. These include:

Limited time. You often have only a limited time to conduct the study and report your findings (and this is likely to be weeks rather than months or years). A clear sense of audience helps focus the project, and listening to their questions and concerns will help you avoid pursuing research answers to questions they are not asking!

The context is important. The reason for carrying out the research will often be to bring about improvement in a particular and specific project, organisation or service; knowing this context is important in planning and carrying out the study.

A specific interest group. It will often be the case that your study is commissioned or suggested by a particular group of people who have a direct

interest in it – a committee, a project management team, the executive in a college, a publishing, broadcasting or health agency.

Avoiding later difficulties. You may work for, or regularly work with, the organisation. Research always has the potential to cause turbulence in organisations; the clearer you can be from the outset about the expectations and information needs of the organisation, the less likely you are to find yourself in difficulties later.

It is clear that there are many advantages in taking time to know your audience, and if possible to involve them in the study. What are their concerns and priorities? Do they want the research project to inform their decisions, or are they, in turn, asking for a research study to help them in responding to a minister, the press or a funding agency? Often you will find that the brief that they have given you needs to be developed in discussion. Are particular findings and outcomes desired or expected? Are there consequences for people of certain kinds of information coming to light?

In most organisations, those in charge will hold back information or delay its release in order to maximise their control. Furthermore, if you take the time to talk to them, perhaps interviewing people individually, you will find that there are different perceptions about the priorities and elements of the problem and the extent to which people know or understand what the others think may be more limited than you expect. Often you will find that the 'presenting problem' masks other questions that people have, but which have somehow been lost in the committee process.

Some researchers will see dangers in this, in particular the risk that your research may lose objectivity if you become too close to your subjects. There is a risk, but in applied projects this has to be balanced against the risk that if you become too objective you may lose the capacity to inform decisions and events. It is a difficult balance you have to manage.

Reading



Example: Improving communications?

The Director of a distance education programme approaches you asking you to look at communications between him and the staff in his department and to suggest ways of modernising and improving them. Early discussions quickly reveal that what he sees as a 'communication problem', that could be improved by adopting better technical solutions, actually masks other issues that are more about the ways in which decisions are made about staffing and resources. Many of the staff (consciously or unconsciously) disrupt communication with the Director as a way of reducing interference and better managing their work.

Knowing this creates a delicate problem for the research. To simply follow the initial brief from the Director might make the situation worse rather than better, since it might bring to the surface some of the organisational problems created by his management approach. On the other hand, to re-order the research to address what seems to be the more fundamental

problem of organisation, leadership and management, would be to step beyond the brief and so also to risk exacerbating the problem. There is no obvious middle way.

Activity 1 30 mins

Think how you might respond in the situation described in the activity above.

- 1 What would you do first?
- 2 How would you try to solve this problem?
- 3 Make notes on these points in your journal.

The issues involved in this type of problem are discussed in the text below.

Why people want research

Encountering this kind of practical problem in small-scale applied research studies is common. You will encounter it in some form more often than not. 'Research' is often used by those in decision-taking positions to change circumstances to their advantage, to deflect responsibility, or to distance themselves from trouble. The term, 'research' has a neutral feel to it, but this apparent objectivity often disguises other motives! Commissioning someone to do research sounds to many managers like a modern and scientific strategy, suggesting openness on their part. Sometimes it is, but don't assume that it is! In accepting a research brief from someone in a position of influence or authority you may, without always realising it, be compromising your objectivity before you begin thinking about methods and outcomes.

Sometimes you can engage in discussion of the research brief very early on. You can explore some of the issues that might arise, recast the initial statement of the problem to allow for developing understanding and establishing a process to allow for the emergence of different perceptions or disagreements. On other occasions you will have to proceed with care and with tact, trying as best as you can to remain objective.

Essentially what I am saying is that, while 'research' (whether qualitative or quantitative) is often presented as being neutral, objective and value-free, in fact it is often used as a political resource and you need to have some awareness of this and some sense of where it may be necessary to make compromises and where you may need to draw a line. Being the researcher in this kind of situation is often uncomfortable! You may be blamed by those on both sides and you may be in an isolated position where you don't have others to talk to about the problems you encounter. But you have to be aware too that if you are too closely attuned to political motives you may run

the risk of over amplifying them, or even of imputing them where they do not exist. It is a delicate line you have to walk!

What people want from research

In addition to thinking about people's motives for commissioning research, it is also important to think about what sort of information they need from the research. This means thinking about the sorts of decisions that they might take as a result of the research, and then asking yourself what information would be useful in arriving at those decisions.

The next conversation explores this further:

Conversation



Information needs in managing projects

Researcher *I have been asked as part of my job at the College to evaluate the advisory system we have in place for students. All students are assigned a member of staff as a personal adviser; but we know that implementation and practice are very variable from one department to another. The College is looking to review the system and has asked me to conduct an evaluation of it. I am not sure what to do or how to start.*

Adviser *There are of course many different ways you could go about this task. You could survey current students, or past students, or faculty. You could do a smaller number of in-depth interviews. You might find ways to observe advising. You could try and identify cases where advising has been successful, or been unsuccessful.*

One of the things I find useful is (in my mind) to jump ahead in time and try and attempt to look back at the decision. Imagine it is now a year ahead and the project is complete. Looking back at the decision you face now, how might it look from a future standpoint?

For example, if you want to have an impact on the decisions about the advisory system, how are those people who make the decision likely to be influenced? How much information do they have already? How accurate is it? What kinds of information might challenge them?

Activity 2 60 mins



Thinking about your project

- 1 Think about a project of your own and see if you can recast the above conversation in terms of your own situation. See if you can think ahead to the completion of the project in the way that the consultant suggests.
- 2 Make notes on this in your journal.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

Study tip

Sometimes in learning materials, 'activities' are used as an informal assessment exercise. They are attached to the text as a way of checking on your understanding of the materials, or sometimes as a way of allowing you to apply and extend the materials. Here we are using activities in a different way. You will have noticed already that they sometimes appear ahead of the text, rather than after it, and that they function to link the text to your workplace and workplace concerns, rather than the other way around.

Good advice is to see the activities as a central spine to the course and to see the text as informing the activities, rather than the other way round!

Summary

The message is simple, but it is sometimes easy to overlook in the excitement of getting an applied research project started! Keep asking yourself:

Why do people want this project done?

What purpose do they have in mind?

How are they planning to use the information?

What other reasons might they have for doing it?

Sometimes people want to be able to say that they are in the process of doing an evaluation or research project to deflect criticism. ('We know there are problems but we are waiting for the evaluation report before we make any changes . . .'). Sometimes they are looking to make a course or a program more visible and plan to use the report to publicise their success. Sometimes they may be looking to allocate or deflect the blame for things going wrong.

You need also to think about how best to present the report in terms of the information needs people might have.

If the project is your idea alone it is still a good idea to ask yourself the same questions. You need too to think about how others might conceive your motives. Do they think you are doing it because you hope for promotion, to prove a point or because you think it would help everyone if you had more information?

Feedback to selected activities



Feedback to Activity 2

It is always tempting to move very quickly from the first statement of the problem to choosing a research design, but in doing so you risk losing sight of the real problem (which may not always be quite so straightforward as you are told it is). Taking time to think about the project in its social context and to explore options is not a waste of time and may prove crucial.

Before you think about what research methods to use, what sample to use and so on, ask yourself:

- ▶ Who is the research for?
- ▶ Who gets to participate and in what ways?
- ▶ Who gets to see the findings and the final report?
- ▶ How do you want the research you are doing to influence people or events, or to change things?
- ▶ What is it trying to find out?

Case studies



Unit overview

This unit provides you with a very brief introduction to case studies, largely through a reading-based activity.

Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit you should be better able to:

- ▶ explain what a case study is
- ▶ explain why case studies are important in qualitative research.

Introduction

Case studies lie at the heart of qualitative methods in much the same way as samples lie at the heart of statistical methods. In textbooks you will find case studies described in different ways, but the key idea is that of the **bounded instance**.

'Cases' can be people, organisations, villages, families, networks, courses, students, events or locations. Each case is distinctive: a school is in some ways similar to other schools, yet in other ways different from them. Part of what 'makes the case' is documenting the balance of these similarities and differences, so that the reader can recognise what is familiar and what is novel.

We say that cases are 'bounded' instances because each case is to some degree defined by a sense of boundary between what lies within the case and what lies outside. In some sense this boundary is 'natural', though often less clearly defined than we might assume. A family may be defined in terms of the people who live together, though there are many instances where parents and children might be separated. In some cultures a family might be thought of as the 'nuclear' family of parents and children, in others it might include other generations and other relations.

This is not just a pedantic argument. If you are doing research on distance education by doing case studies of students, then you have to think through which boundaries will define your cases. Is the student only a student when they are sitting in front of the course materials? Are they still a student when they are at work, at home, elsewhere in the community? Are their families

involved to any extent in their studies? Is there someone in the family who reads their work, discusses the course or provided help in other ways? Are they involved in education in other ways – as a teacher, a parent or a tutor?

In a survey these questions are rarely significant. If you want a sample of students and you can obtain class lists, then you can contact people to ask them if they will participate in a survey. In drawing your sample you might stratify the sample to ensure you include enough males and females, older and younger students, part time and full time students. In doing this you are following hunches, or previous research to ensure a spread of data but if you are doing a limited number of case studies of students, then a key question that will arise in the process of the study is, not so much about typicality but complexity. When is the student a student? What are the different ways in which people might be, or become, 'students'?

Case study research in various disciplines

Case study methods are better established (and accepted) in some disciplines than in others. Case study is well established in history. Historical events only happen once and historians are mostly content to account for the particular instances of history and reluctant to generalise from them, in terms of theorising the causes of war (for instance). Anthropologists are often drawn into debates about the origins and evolution of cultures, but most anthropological research is case-based, as is much archaeology and not a little astronomy. Across the social sciences there are areas where the study of cases is the norm, in community studies, in clinical studies, in several areas of criminology and in education. In all these fields there is of degree of debate between methodologies and in the relative merits of each.

Robert Stake, an educational testing expert turned case study advocate, summarises the character and content of these debates in a characteristically concise section of his book on case studies.

Activity 1 60 mins



This reading activity uses the *Stake* reading from your *Resource File*.

- 1 In this reading Stake discusses the nature and limitations of case study research. This is an extract that brings many new ideas into the discussion and you should make extensive use of your journal as you read it.
- 2 Think in particular of the implications of the idea of case study as Stake describes it for research in ODL.

There is no feedback to this activity

Summary

This unit provided a brief introduction to case study research and you may need to follow up the ideas in the literature. Case studies are central to qualitative methods because the issues that arise in qualitative research are often exemplified in case studies. For example, questions about samples, about reliability and validity and, more generally, the relationships between evidence and interpretation all come to a point of focus in case studies.

Case studies sometimes appear straightforward because they are essentially descriptive, being about actual courses, people or institutions and so may not appear to require detailed theoretical knowledge to be readable. As you read into the literature you will find that each of these virtues is to some degree problematic to academics, whose instinct is to mistrust common-sense and anything that is presented as self evident or obvious.

Collecting information



Unit overview

This unit introduces you to the main methods of collecting qualitative data: interviews, observation, visual evidence and documents.

For each of these methods we discuss the basis of the method, some tips on how to do it and some of its advantages and disadvantages.

Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit you should be better able to:

- ▶ identify what information you need to collect for your project
- ▶ identify appropriate ways (if any) of using interviews in your project
- ▶ plan an interview
- ▶ use an appropriate range of skills in an interview
- ▶ identify appropriate ways (if any) to use observation in your project
- ▶ use an appropriate range of observation skills
- ▶ identify appropriate ways (if any) to use visual evidence in your project
- ▶ identify documents that might be of use in your project

Introduction

We have delayed discussing how to collect information for qualitative studies because it is all too easy to rush into collecting information and then to wonder what to do with it. You might be feeling a little frustrated that we have taken so long to reach this point, but there has been a reason for delaying.

We hope you take the point of the message. If you engage in a qualitative study do not be tempted to think that the study design will look after itself so long as you collect enough information. And do not let yourself fall into the trap of thinking that taking time to think about the design of the study is wasted time – it never is.

Collecting information

At the start of any research project it will not be clear either what information you should collect or how much you should collect. The following conversation explores this problem.

Conversation



Collecting information

Researcher *My research project is to evaluate the DE drug education training program that my organisation has been running for the last few years. What information should I collect?*

Adviser *There is always more information that you could collect than you could possibly use. You need to think strategically about what kinds of information might be most useful.*

Researcher *When I started I thought I knew what kind of information I needed and how I could collect it. But the problem is that, when I started the interviews, I found a lot more there than I expected. People kept telling me things I had not known about or did not see as relevant and now I am confused and I don't know what is most useful.*

Adviser *This is a good sign. Don't panic. One of the main reasons for doing research is to find out what you did not know, and this includes finding out that your initial questions may not be the most useful or productive ones to ask.*

At the start you should begin by simply listing the kinds of information that it might be possible to collect. Normally this would include:

- *interviews*
- *observations*
- *reports*
- *other documents (meeting minutes, diaries etc)*
- *press cuttings*
- *photographs*
- *video.*

Researcher *I am surprised at how many things you have included. I thought research was mainly about surveys and interviews.*

Adviser *I would always be wary about surveys. Most small scale surveys tend to be much less useful than you expect them to be. I would look instead for information that might already be available – in reports from the Health Department or the Government, for example. Often you will find that a lot of information you might use already exists, if you can find it.*

Researcher *Are you saying I should spend more time collecting information that already exists, rather than adding to it?*

Adviser *Yes. Doing that and trying to understand and organise the material. And interviewing. Interviews that are exploratory and open-ended and will help you get a better understanding of the program, its history, structure and process.*

Four ways to collect data

This section provides a brief introduction to data collection methods in qualitative research. For more information you should look at more detailed texts, especially those identified later.

Qualitative methods are considered here in terms of four broad categories:

- 1 interviews
- 2 observation
- 3 images
- 4 document analysis.

This separation is not simply one of method, and you will find, if you look closely, that each category carries with it certain assumptions about interpretation and theory.

We shall now briefly explore each of these categories.

Interviews

Interview methods are based on asking questions and collecting answers. But this simple formulation allows for a wide range of methodological possibilities. Interviews can be more or less pre-planned and structured, can be by telephone or face-to-face and can be with individuals or with groups.

The research interview

In qualitative research we are usually concerned with a particular form of interview. This is sometimes termed the **open** or **unstructured interview**, though these names are somewhat misleading since some interviewees might find the open interview highly coercive and anything but open, and no interview is ever really 'un'-structured in the same sense that spoken language is rarely unstructured. The structure simply exists at another level.

What people mean when they use these terms is usually that the interview that may have some pre-set questions but is, to a large degree, free-flowing and, where possible, the interviewer follows the lead of the interviewee. Such interviews are usually more conversational in form (rather than made up of standardised questions and answers or initiation/response sequences) and they will typically run for 30 –60 minutes (though they may be longer).

Normally such interviews are audio-recorded (though some researchers prefer to take extensive notes, especially when interviewees feel uncomfortable about being recorded). This said, there are probably as many ways of interviewing as there are interviewers and in practice everyone has to find a way of interviewing that suits their personal style.

To an outside observer, a research interview of this kind might look deceptively conversational. The interviewer will usually guide the interviewee

through a range of topics, ask questions to clarify or extend what the interviewee says, in particular by asking for instances or examples of claims that they make, or sometimes confronting them with information that appears to contradict claims that they might have made earlier. Rather than reading the questions from a schedule, the interviewer will normally place the questions in the conversational flow, perhaps linking them to something previously said by the interviewee.

Some interviewers like to use cards or pictures as prompts, others like to collect anecdotes. Some are most interested in identifying feelings and emotions, some pursue motivations, others look to locate events in the life history of the person.

A model that many researchers start from in doing research is the journalistic interview, particularly the interviews we hear every day on TV or radio with politicians and public figures. But this model is somewhat misleading, in part because what we see is usually very staged and often heavily edited, but also because it emphasises performance – not just the performance of the interviewee but of the interviewer.

Often too, the journalist is looking to pin down the interviewee to a precise statement. In research it is rare that we want to hold people accountable for their actions in a legalistic way, even in evaluation studies, what we usually want to do is to get 'behind' such formal statements to the areas where people may feel uncertain or confused, for this is the area where thinking is necessary and where ideas live.

A predominant concern that survey researchers have, that the question is presented as a consistent stimulus and asked in the same way to everyone, is not usually a concern in qualitative research. Usually, in qualitative studies, we are not looking to make generalisable statements of the kind: '85% of those interviewed expressed a preference for blue over red'. We are looking more (to continue the analogy) for statements of the kind: 'what 'blue' means to me is being in the mountains and the colour of the sky', or, 'being in a club listening to jazz'. In other words we are looking for the range of meanings and associations, and in trying to identify points where these different meanings meet, intersect or perhaps collide, rather than in trying to identify their frequency of occurrence and distribution across categories.

From a socio-linguistic point of view open interviews of this kind are interesting phenomena in their own right, since they shade into conversation yet are very different from it. In the context of such interviews, the notion that questions and answers are themselves straightforward is somewhat problematic, because if you look closely at any conversation (between farmers at a market, doctors' consultations with the patients, in classrooms or in social conversations) you will find that (unlike most survey questionnaires) the dialogue of conversation rarely consists of clearly identifiable questions and answers and is in fact more subtle and complex than it seems. In normal social conversation questions may be asked obliquely rather than directly,

people may answer a different question from the one being asked. The 'real' question may be indicated by hesitations or pauses, or changes in posture (while we wait to see how the other responds).

All these signs and strategies are culturally specific, or more precisely, they are sub-culturally specific. Some people are better tuned to them than others, but most of us enact them without thinking about them, or even with great awareness of what we are doing. As an interviewer you will need to attend more closely to them than you might be used to doing. You need (in Anglo cultures at least) to know the difference between someone saying 'I really don't have time to do this' as a signal that they have things to say that are important to them but which need a sign of acknowledgement from you that it is OK to do so, and meaning that they need to attend another meeting and need you to stop the interview and arrange another time to meet. The differences are subtle. They are not unambiguous and may or may not be clearly indicated by body language or tone. They can only be read in context, and if you guess the meaning, you may guess wrongly. In daily life, we take the transparency of meaning in conversation for granted when in fact much of what is said, and what is heard, is embedded in coded statements or communicated indirectly (through a wide range of paralinguistic and non-verbal features).

But you don't have to be a socio-linguist to do research. The important thing to remember about the research interview is that the researcher's main concern is with meaning rather than with verbal evidence. You should be listening for what people think and believe and with trying to understand how they see the world, rather than with attending literally to only what they say. Unlike policemen and lawyers, who take what people say as baseline evidence, in research you need to listen as much to how people say things, and pay attention too to what they don't say, for omissions are in themselves often revealing (remember the Director who did not tell us exactly what the research problem was when he asked us to investigate communication between him and his staff?).

Interview skills

Being a competent research interviewer in qualitative research is a skill (or a set of skills) that you can practice and learn. Kvale identifies what some of the key skills are:

Knowledgeable: the interviewer is thoroughly familiar with the focus of the interview (pilot interviews are useful in developing this).

Structuring: gives the purpose for the interview, draws it to a conclusion, and asks if the interviewee has any questions.

Clear: asks simple, easy, short questions, jargon-free.

Gentle: lets people finish, gives them time to think, allows pauses.

- Sensitive:** listens attentively to what is said and how it is said; is empathetic to interviewee.
- Open:** responds to what is important to interviewee and is flexible.
- Steering:** knows what he or she wants to find out and gets there.
- Critical:** is prepared to challenge what is said, picking up inconsistencies.
- Remembering:** relates what is said to previous statements.
- Interpreting:** clarifies and extends meanings of interviewee's statements, but without imposing or distorting meaning.

(Kvale, 1996)

There will be occasions when you might need to break these rules but they provide you with a useful starting point. The most important thing to remember is that what the interviewer asks is probably less important than the fact that you listen carefully to what you are told.

The next activity will help you improve your listening skills. It may seem a very simple task but it is important that you do it and don't just read it. In the context of this topic, the aim is to shift your thinking about research methods out of the rather flat, narrative voice of this text into the more volatile and expressive world of oral language.

Activity 1 15 mins per



A simple experiment with oral language

This is a simple experiment – so simple that you might feel foolish doing it!

- 1 Try greeting people each morning (perhaps your family, perhaps those with whom you work) using a different intonation each day for one week. If you normally say 'Good morning', try phrasing it differently each day so as to convey different moods.
- 2 Keep a record in your journal of what you do, and what responses you receive.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

Strategic listening

One of the most difficult aspects of interviewing is listening. I have said that the research interview often takes an apparently conversational form, but there is an important sense in which it is not conversational, for in normal conversations there is a natural symmetry, a regular shift of the roles of speaker and listener between those involved. Conversation is two-sided (or multi-sided) in the way that the interview is not. In conversation everyone involved has an equal right to initiate a topic, ask a question, summarise or

make a judgement. In the research interview, however, the roles are asymmetric, the interviewer is mostly in the role of listener and questioner, and the interviewee is mostly the speaker and respondent. This specification of roles can be demanding of the interviewer as it requires considerable concentration. It also requires a sense of strategy – that is to say the interviewer has the responsibility to structure the interview – intervening at critical points to move to new topics, to seek clarification, perhaps to challenge, sometimes to summarise. As the listener, you need not only to be attentive to what the interviewee is saying at any moment, but also thinking about the conversation as a whole – with what topics have been covered, what questions have been asked (and answered), with what remains to be said, and with how to end the interview.

This asymmetry has a significant psychological affect. It frees the interviewee from the responsibility to manage the topics and the structure of the talk, which is why people may say things that they do not usually say in 'normal' conversation. But it may also create feelings of dependence in the interviewee as they allow the interviewer to direct the flow.

You may find it useful to sketch the strategy of the interview in diagrammatic form. Depicting it in a diagram, rather than as notes or in transcript, allows you to escape from linearity and to see the interview as a series of moves, each of which may have alternatives. Looking at it this way it will be clearer to you the line of argument development, the questions that were missed and the lines of enquiry that were not fully pursued.

Activity 2 1–2 hours



Interview strategies

For this activity you need to find someone who is willing to be interviewed. This could be a friend or relative or someone with whom you work. Explain that you want to ask them some questions about learning and that you are doing so as part of a course you are doing in distance education research. In this case it is not necessary to focus the questions directly on distance education, though you can if it is useful to do so. The purpose of the interview is to help you learn about interviewing.

The topic for the interview is 'learning' and what I want you to ask your interviewee is to identify a time when they faced a problem that they found difficult to overcome, and to tell you how they learnt to overcome it. This could have been a problem they faced at school, at work, in their family or elsewhere.

Get them to describe the problem as fully as they can, and to tell you how they learnt to overcome it.

Ask as many prompting or follow-up questions as you can without asking leading questions. Avoid making value judgements or offering advice.

Conduct the interview, as far as you can, as an interested listener.

You will normally find that the interview takes between 15 minutes and half an hour, but it may take longer.

Record an account of the interview process in your journal. Include a diagram that provides a strategic account of the interview.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

Other interviewing issues

There are a number of further issues you should consider in thinking about interviewing. Briefly, these include:

- **How to record interviews.** Should you use audio or video recording, take notes or rely on your memory? There are occasions when you might use one of these methods rather than another, or perhaps combinations of methods. Each has advantages and disadvantages and you might want to think about these and note them in your journal.
- **Should you have an interview protocol** and how would you use it? Protocols may be lists of questions that are quite precise and detailed, or a list of topics you want to cover. You might give these to people in advance or keep them in your head. If you want to make comparisons between what people tell you – for example if you are trying to record the different meanings people might have for ‘flexible learning’, then you might want to use a standard form of question with each person. If you want to let the person take the interview into areas of their own choosing then you would not want to restrict them to predefined questions.
- **How to determine the interview format?** Individual, group, focus group, face-to-face, telephone, email and Internet interviews each have their own characteristics, advantages and shortcomings. You might have limited choice in what you can do but you should plan ahead according to the context and form of the interview.
- **Interviewing through translators or in a second language** poses special problems, both in the interview itself and in recording it. If you are working in one language and reporting in another you will need to address issues of translation and representation. In some cases it may be useful to employ **back translation**. That is making a translation and giving it back to a native speaker to translate back into the first language to see if what emerges is close enough to the original.
- **Use of interviewers.** In some larger scale studies you may need to employ interviewers to conduct interviews at distant or at multiple sites. This creates special problems in qualitative research, where so much rests on the ability of the interviewer to identify meanings and you will need to give special attention to training the interviewers. (Most of what you will find in text books is about standardising interviews, which is a quite different problem).

Study tip

As you start to accumulate notes in your journal you will find it useful, every so often, to read back what you have written. You may want to add further comments to things you wrote earlier, which is why we suggested leaving spaces. It is a good idea to use different coloured pens (or fonts if you are using a computer) for comments added later.

Observational methods

In this section I will consider a number of ways of using observation as part of research, including the use of photographs, videos and drawings.

Observation is not just seeing things

Observation is central to qualitative research methods. By observation I mean not just seeing things, but **perceiving** them. This might sound too subtle a distinction but observation is not simply about the visual but involves researchers consciously using themselves as a research instrument. Again the key task is that of identifying the different meanings that people might have in understanding social actions, projects, places, occasions, events or phenomena.

To give an example, a woman researcher found that whenever she visited a Study Centre she found herself feeling very defensive. She found it difficult to say exactly why this was, but she was quite sure about the feelings that the people and place caused in her. Having observed this reaction in herself she started to ask other women who worked there or those who visited, what they felt and found that many of them had similar responses, though they too could not readily explain why. This became a starting point for an investigation of workplace cultures and the, often subtle, ways in which they are communicated. Pursuing the question by observing the Study Centre, many of the things she found were visual – the way rooms were laid out, where people sat (at work and in the cafeteria), the sorts of material people chose to display on the walls and around their desks. You might have encountered similarly intangible feelings about visiting particular places, dealing with certain people, teaching in different schools or different classes. Once you have identified the feeling you have then you start to see how it is invoked.

This example exemplifies a key characteristic of qualitative research that I have mentioned several times; essentially qualitative research is about 'meanings' rather than things, and this applies as much to feelings as it does to ideas, plans or projects. The 'observation' that this researcher made arose from the need to explain her own response to the situation. If she had started by systematically observing rooms and the use of space rather than with her own subjective response, then she might have missed what was significant. The research task is not just to accumulate lots of information, but to be selective in the information that is collected by relating it directly to the pursuit of what is sometimes called 'meaning-making'.

One situation where observation has been used in open and distance learning is in observing the work of local tutors and their groups at work in study centres. One particular aspect of this is the tutor's use of participative methods and methods appropriate for adult learners. Often observation reveals a mismatch between what a tutor says they do and what they actually do.

One question you could ask in such circumstances is 'What role does observation play in deciding whether or not a local learning centre is an effective one?'

Another would be 'What role does observation play in deciding whether a teacher has improved his or her teaching through the study of a distance learning course or materials?'

Activity 3 30 mins



Improving your observational skills

- 1 Identify a place you pass everyday, perhaps on your way to work or to the shops or to school. Think of a small section of this route, perhaps a section of about six buildings in a street or a village, maybe ten to fifty metres along a footpath between fields or in a forest.
- 2 You will need to observe this place each day for five days - preferably on five consecutive days.
- 3 On the first day, when you get home, draw a sketch of the place as well as you remember it.
- 4 On the second day, look above head height (roofs or upper storeys of buildings, trees). Add this additional information to your drawing.
- 5 On the third day look down at ground level, what are surfaces you travel on? Add these to the drawing.
- 6 On day four, look especially for colours, and later redraw the place with colours added.
- 7 On the fifth day looking at the place as a whole and add any remaining details to your drawing.
- 8 What you should have at the end is a set of five drawings that show your developing perception of the place.
- 9 In your journal write about the process of perceiving and recording this place.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

That activity was intended to get you to look at places that are familiar, and which you probably took for granted, as though they were unfamiliar. In this next activity, the aim is to get you to apply this insight to a work or social setting.

Activity 4 30 mins**Looking at the familiar as though it were strange - observing the workplace**

In this activity you should repeat the sequence of steps in Activity 3 but this time apply them to the place where you work.

You can try to do this to the building in which you work (the inside rather than the outside), or to an office or a section of corridor, the place where you eat lunch, the reception area or the staff room.

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

Activity 5 10 mins

You will need the *Prosser* resource for this activity in the *Resources File*.

Read the cultural inventory of the headmaster's office.

Notice that, often, a great deal can be learnt from close observation of the material environment of classrooms, offices and other formal settings. Jon Prosser provides an inventory of what is visible in the office of a secondary school head teacher's office.

There is no feedback to this activity

Being a participant observer

The last activity was intended to demonstrate a critical point about observation in social research. Observation is not just a research method: it is a role. Finding an appropriate role from which to observe social situations and social behaviour is critical to data collection and the process of research. Furthermore, what you will find as you observe more closely is that you are not just 'outside' the observation looking 'in' or 'at' a set of events, places or occasions, but that in observing, one of the things you are observing is yourself.

This may sound paradoxical. You probably see yourself as minimally intrusive and observing only what is obvious to everyone. Let's take an example. If you are observing someone teaching (or carrying out any similar professional task), you will soon become aware that you cannot observe everything. You cannot observe the teacher and the children, to any level of detail, simultaneously; you have to decide which to focus on. It is not easy to pay close attention to the content of a lesson, and the way in which the teacher sequences, links and presents each bit of knowledge **and** observe the social context in which the teaching is done (the layout of the room, where people sit, what are the rules of behaviour – both explicit and hidden).

If observation inevitably involves selection, this raises questions about how you make these selections. You may think that you are observing what is 'obvious',

but this is a way of saying that you are deliberately not paying attention to some aspects. Why? How differently might things look if you shifted your perspective?

A key issue in observation is how you establish a role for yourself in the places where you are observing, and how the perceptions that people have of this role might influence the way they behave and what they might say.

In textbooks you will usually find some discussion of observational roles in these terms. Generally a distinction is made between **participant** and **non-participant** roles. By this is meant the extent to which the observer is an active participant in the situation. Are you there primarily in another role (as a teacher in a classroom, as a member of a committee, as doctor or nurse in a clinic) but also trying to observe? Or, are you there primarily as a researcher, observing and recording interaction and behaviour, and not directly involved in the situation?

Of course, being a non-participant may mean you are not involved but this is not to claim that you are invisible. Sometimes the non-participant can be a powerful presence (as when school inspectors observe teaching in classrooms, or when journalists observe political meetings).

Research in distance education presents a particular set of problems for observation. It may be very difficult to observe students studying for example, as studying is done at a distance and away from public gaze. There are some things you can do if you want to know more about the circumstances in which people study. In the past I have asked distance students to send me photographs of the places where they normally study – an exercise that was full of surprises. I was sent pictures of the inside of cars, of a dedicated study in someone's house that was crammed full of books, inside a bus, a park bench, a pub, a beach, a garden seat, a bedroom (and a pile of books next to the bed), a public library, a kitchen table, a desk in an office, a hospital ward, a café, a laptop computer, a seat in a train, a school staff room, an art gallery and an airport terminal.

Activity 6 1 hour



Your journal as an observational instrument

You can think about your journal as way of observing yourself while you think about research. It is way of getting your thinking 'on to the page', so that you can examine it, much like you might examine a set of observational notes. This would be a good time to try and summarise your thoughts about observation and your current understanding of observation as an element of qualitative research.

There is no feedback to this activity

Using images in observation: video, film and photographs

Up to this point I have discussed observation as an entirely human skill involving what testing experts would call 'paper and pencil' exercises. If you read social science research books, you will find that it is this aspect of observation that predominates in research. But, though they are often neglected in the standard texts, there are many uses for cameras and other recording devices in qualitative research, especially with the advent of digital technologies that are easy to use and quick. The example I gave of asking students to photograph the places where they study is but one example and there is a growing interest among researchers in using visual methods.

A brief history of visual research

There is now an extensive technology for recording events and occasions – particularly in using cameras and video – that are not very intrusive, in that they do not require extra lighting, or cumbersome or noisy equipment. But, for the most part, social researchers have been slow to make use of this equipment. In part, this reluctance has historical reasons, but reasons that are amplified by the use of images in the media and in advertising which lead us to feel that cameras cannot be used for serious research purposes.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, soon after the invention of photography and with the development of equipment and photographic processes that meant that pictures could be taken relatively easily and cheaply, a tradition of documentary photography emerged that had ideals that were very close to those of social science. Photographers documented life in particular social circumstances; in the Warsaw ghetto, among the Prussian middle classes, in factories and in exotic and distant cultures. Some of these 'photo-essays' were published in sociological research journals or in books which include commentaries by social scientists. Banks (2001) is a useful reference to this research.

However, in the early part of the twentieth century, social scientists (particularly in the USA) became anxious about defending their work as being truly 'scientific' and became more concerned to develop research methods that were based on measurement than on documentary portrayal. Through a large part of the twentieth century social science concentrated its efforts on developing the methods of survey research and psychometrics and on reporting its findings as statistics, rather than on using observation and visual records.

In some respects this neglect of the visual by social science is curious, since science itself has developed its use of visual evidence to a remarkable degree, not just in terms of the use of aerial and satellite photography, but in particle physics, embryology, genetics, geology and elsewhere.

Part of the reason for social science's neglect of visual evidence lies in its suspicion that the visual is endemically open to bias and manipulation. For, in

parallel to the move of social science to measurement methods, the media and governments have ruthlessly used images for propaganda purposes. In reporting wars, famine, social uprising and revolution, pictures have been used to present ideology as much as to document events. Advertising has likewise used photographs, in increasingly sophisticated ways, to present images to the public that create gaps between ideals and realities that invite consumption.

Documentary

Despite the problems of handling visual evidence in relation to situations and events that are highly politicised, there remains a tradition of social documentary photography, film-making and video that runs parallel to social science research. Interestingly, this tradition contains within it debates that are very similar to those to be found in the social sciences – for example between realism and Marxism and between phenomenology and empiricism. You need to be aware that the issues raised throughout this course about different methodological and theoretical approaches and different research paradigms apply to images as much as to figures and words.

With this in mind it is useful to consider a particular project and to think about the role of the researcher in the project, about the issue of subjectivity/objectivity and about the relation of researcher and audience. The example I give is from Elizabeth Chaplin's book. The author writes:

The project started on 6th February 1988, and in the first months of the first year I took a photograph each day which I captioned; although I soon felt the need to add a more 'theorised' verbal monthly entry (and eventually did so. However, the activity soon seemed problematic because it showed that there are so many alternative captions which could be attached to each photograph. So I made a daily rule to be more exact. During August 1988, I took a photograph each day between 11 am and 12 noon, making as straightforwardly descriptive caption as I possibly could of each shot. At the end of the month, with all the photographs laid out in front of me., it emerged that five of these were of my computer screen, which suggested the routine of work. In September, I tightened up the rule still further, and took my daily photograph on the dot of 12 noon every day, wherever I was. Six of these turned out to be images of the computer and five others of related desk work (see Fig 26). However, the activity served to indicate that there were yet more variables to control. For example, there are countless alternative directions in which to point the camera at any one particular moment. And even in the case of the computer images, shots had carried from close-up to longer distance. Significance might be derived from even this small variation; which leads to having to decide what counts as a separate item of 'small behaviour' (to use Goffman's phrase).

Chaplin, 1994 p 225

Chaplin's method is a neat way of getting people to think about and talk about aspects of their lives. It would be useful, for example, as a way of getting distance students to document and to think about how they organise their

study time. It is simple (even simpler with digital cameras), takes very little time yet provides interesting and sometimes challenging evidence.

Practical uses of visual evidence in applied projects

There are a number of reasons why the use of visual evidence can be useful in applied projects.

- ▶ **Speeding the process of providing feedback.** Digital cameras in particular make it possible to give people almost instant feedback and this can be very useful in engaging people in the study (see, for example, the weblog of my study in India at <http://icare.typepad.com>)
- ▶ **Working in a vernacular medium.** Photographs (and increasingly video) are for most people a part of everyday life. Shown a photo people need little encouragement to talk about it and respond to it.
- ▶ **Involving people in the process.** If you show people a set of figures they will often puzzle over it until they can find a way of relating it to their own experience. Photographs draw people in to the project much more readily.
- ▶ **Keeping records.** Photographs are often most valuable as a record of what happened in the recent or distant past.

It takes a little imagination to think of projects in which visual records might be used. Here are some ideas:

- ▶ **visual diaries and calendars.** Chaplin (1994) has made imaginative use of diaries – for example taking pictures at certain times each day, or using calendars to keep a visual record of activities
- ▶ **recording events.** photographs can be useful for recording fieldtrips, conferences and meetings
- ▶ **personal records.**

The following activity will give you some practice in taking photographs as a means of observation.

Activity 7 3 hours



Taking and using photographs

In this activity you will use a still camera to record an event that is part of your work. This could be a conference, workshop, classroom, meeting, office space etc.

- 1 First tell people who might be in the pictures that you are doing this as part of a course and that you will not use the pictures for other purposes without asking them first.
- 2 Develop a plan for taking pictures. This should include photographing different phases of an event. For example if it is a conference you might want to include the beginning

and the end, formal and informal parts of the event, large groups and small group discussions. You should also aim to include some photographs taken close up and others at a distance. You might also want to ask people what they think you should include.

- 3 Once you have the pictures, show them to a range of people. Those who were there, those you work with, perhaps your family and friends. Collect the responses that people make.
- 4 You may find as you do this that some pictures stimulate more comments than others, or are more puzzling or intriguing than others. If you can identify a small number of such key pictures, then do so.
- 5 Record the outcomes of this exercise in your journal.

There is no feedback to this activity

Methods for studying documents

Studying documents as primary sources is the central method of history. Training in history involves developing skills in reading documents taking into account their context and period, in minimising the bias that the contemporary reader brings to understanding the document, and in cross-checking the evidence from study of multiple and diverse sources.

Most of us come to applied research lacking this training and these skills. What are the important things we need to keep in mind as we carry out contemporary studies and acknowledging our lack of intellectual training?

First, we should always have in mind that any situation we investigate has a history. While projects might span a limited time period and appear to exist only in the here and now, they take the form and the course that they do because of their historical circumstance and the histories that people bring to them. Part of the task of the researcher is to understand these histories. Why is it, we should keep asking ourselves, that things are as they are?

This involves doing what is sometimes called (following Michel Foucault) investigating the 'archaeology' of the project. What lies behind the project? What events led to its formation? Where did the funding come from, and for what purpose(s) was it intended? Who are the people who staff the project, and what are their histories?

It also means questioning those aspects of situations, places, people and events that normally we take for granted. Because our primary aim is to uncover and understand meaning, we need always to be asking ourselves how those things we observe might be different. What critical events and decisions that pre-date our enquiries might have been enacted differently? How might these differences have led to different histories and different biographies?

As an example, those of us who have experienced emigration know that what happens is not simply that you stop living in one place and start living in

another; but that (albeit subconsciously most of the time) your life runs in two parallel streams, one being the person you are in your new setting, the other being the person you might have been if you had not moved. Most social settings are like this too. They consist of an obvious here-and-now existence, but intertwined with this, more or less consciously are alternative histories, things that might have been, and perhaps could be in the future.

The history of a project is often used to present the project as self-evident and obvious, but once you start asking questions you will usually find that this is not so, that there were competing ideas and ideals, that compromises and concessions have been made, ideas and ambitions scaled down in order that the project can claim to have realised some outcomes in a limited time. Those who present the story as an inevitable historical evolution usually have a vested interest in securing the present as fixed and immutable, but once you start asking questions you are likely to find that other stories lie close to the surface.

The history of the UK Open University, written by its first Vice-Chancellor, Lord Perry, is one distance education history that provides a useful reference (Perry 1976).

Policy documents

Policy documents are generally written by organisations rather than by individuals. They are important because they provide a point of reference for projects and organisations that guarantee a degree of legitimacy and consensus. Such documents may be derived from government or from organisations, they may be legally approved or agreed by committees. Normally, such documents reveal a degree of consensus around values, set priorities for action and may include targets in terms of changes to be achieved within timelines. Usually, policy documents are concerned with identifying and promoting aspirations and ideals, rather than with acknowledging practicalities. Indeed, they may appear to be blind to generally acknowledged realities.

For the researcher, time spent studying policy documents is almost always time well spent, because although such documents are often written in ways, and in a style, that makes them tiresome to read, they provide an insight into the political and policy context of a project. The job of the researcher (or even of the evaluator) is not to hold projects accountable in terms of their successes and failures in relation to realising policy objectives, but it is understand how the project or organisation was formed and how it defined its objectives and outcomes.

Activity 8 1 hour



Making a first search for documents

Search the COL Knowledge Finder database (<http://www.col.org/about/search/>) at the Commonwealth of Learning.

See what existing documents are available in relation to a research project you might do.

Think about how you might use these resources.

There is no feedback to this activity

Other formal documents

Aside from policy documents, you will find around projects and organisations a wide range of formal documents. These might include committee meeting papers, internal memos, letters and emails, web sites, press releases, newsletters, newspaper articles, speeches and reports. Many of these documents will be publicly available, but some will be less obvious or even hidden.

Studying these documents will give you access to many aspects of a project's or organisation's history, to different perceptions and different priorities that are active at different points in their development, to some understanding of how these differences have been resolved (or perhaps left unresolved), and how the work of the project or organisation has been directed and managed.

As you collect formal documents it is important to try to date them. Some will have dates included (for example, committee papers), others may not. Listing them in sequence will help you get some idea of the ways in which ideas have developed and plans implemented.

Informal and personal documents

There are many other documents that are informal and personal, some of which you may create yourself. These include notes, emails and letters, diaries, journals, interviews and transcripts. These are useful in helping you can gain a personal insight into the work of a project, in what has motivated and driven individuals or led to crises or disagreements.

One significant source of documents is students' written assignments. This is an important area of research in open and distance learning.

Project task



Collecting documents

(We have not suggested a time for this activity since it is likely to be ongoing, rather than something you can immediately do and complete.)

- 1 Make a list of the local documents that are available in terms of a research project you are doing or might be doing.
- 2 Sort the documents in terms of their status, purpose and function.
- 3 Make sure they are all dated and where you can authorship is recorded.

- 4 What are the key issues that emerge for you in terms of this collection? Are there gaps you need to pursue?
- 5 Make notes in your journal on what you have found.

There is no feedback to this activity

Summary

This unit has covered a lot of ground. It has aimed to give you an overview of the methods available and some ideas you might use in your research, including both the mainstream methods of interviewing and observation and other methods such as documentary research and visual methods.

Visual methods are especially important because this is the direction that technology is taking us and because of the potential that visual methods for inviting participation and discussion, though clearly there are significant ethical issues that you need to consider if you plan to work in this area.

There may be enough here to get you started, but you will soon need to refer to more detailed sources. There is a wide range of books on research methods in education (though most are general and not aimed at distance education) and you will need to seek out those that are useful to you. Rather than make specific recommendations it is better that you look at a few and find your way to books that meet your needs, since there is a wide choice of approaches and styles. The one piece of advice I would offer is not to rely too heavily on a single source, at least not without trying several other texts first.

Further reading

Banks, M. 2001 *Visual methods in social research*, London: Sage

Chaplin, E. 1994 *Sociology and visual representation*, London: Routledge (extract pp. 223-232)

Kvale, S. 1996 *Interviews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*, Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage

Perry, W. 1976 *Open University: a personal account*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Walker, R. 2003 *Research journal: India*, at http://icare.typepad.com/research_journal_india/

Feedback to selected activities



Feedback to Activity 1

This task is based on an exercise sometimes used by actors to extend the range of meanings they are able to convey. What you will quickly discover is that, as the days pass, you will become more expressive, and use the range of intonation in your use of spoken language more effectively. You will also find that people are quick to respond to what they take to be your shifts in mood.

What you will learn is that 'how' you speak is often as important as what you say. You will also realise that doing this exercise is not the same as reading about it. Actively engaging in the task provides the basis for a way of learning that has a different character from reading and remembering. This is an important distinction in terms of the aim of this module, which is intended to help you learn how to **do** research, not simply learn **about** research.

Feedback to Activity 2

This topic was selected because it is a topic that inevitably involves the interviewee in describing their feelings. Faced with a problem in their lives, most people will experience feelings of inadequacy and perhaps of failure. How did they respond to these feelings? How did you manage the expression of feelings in the context of the interview?

Feedback to Activity 3

This task is based on an exercise that architects sometimes use to develop a detailed knowledge about a place or a building. Normally what you find is that you start out thinking that the place is familiar to you, but that as the days pass you find that there is more and more to see that you had not really noticed until you come to look more closely. The process of drawing (like the process of writing in the journal) amplifies the point and makes you concentrate harder on the task, providing you with a medium for understanding the limits of your knowledge and perceptions as well as a means for developing them.

Feedback on Activity 4

You are likely to have found this more complex than the previous task. In this situation you will know more about the history of the things you observe and will understand their meanings better. It is more difficult to be the dispassionate and objective observer. On the other hand it is often easier to interpret what you see.

Anthropologists sometimes talk about two different ways of describing a culture, for which they use the terms **emic** and **etic**. The terms derive from **phonemic** and **phonetic** as these terms are used in linguistics to distinguish ways of analysing utterances in terms of their meaning, or in terms of their

sounds. (Interestingly, Kenneth Pike, who first made the distinction, was both an ethno-linguist and a missionary. He wanted to produce phonetic descriptions of oral languages (phonetics) but did so in order to translate the bible (which meant taking account of meaning).

The spaces in which people work (whether offices, classrooms, hospitals, police offices or other) are normally carefully ordered for particular purposes and functions. Often there are spaces where the public can enter and spaces where they cannot, and often a particular place where the two kinds of space meet (a reception desk perhaps). Often there are places that 'belong' to senior management staff, perhaps guarded by secretaries. Often the desks behind which officials sit are wider (and emptier) than those occupied by minor officers. People sometimes use personal props – perhaps photographs of their children, mementoes of visits to other countries, posters and certificates, to decorate their spaces. All these objects carry some message, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not so.

Fieldwork issues



Unit overview

This unit takes a brief look at some of the issues that can arise once you start doing your fieldwork. These include ethical issues and relationships with colleagues.

Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit you should be better able to:

- ▶ anticipate possible fieldwork issues for your study
- ▶ prepare principles of procedure
- ▶ negotiate ethical problems.

Introduction

We shall introduce the issue of fieldwork by returning to our researcher's conversation. The researcher thought all was going well, but has unexpectedly run into what could be a major problem.

Conversation



Problems in the field

Adviser *What has gone wrong?*

Researcher *I thought everything was going well. I had to travel to a meeting the other day with the Head of my Department and she was asking me about the project. I told her what I was doing and the kinds of things I was learning from the interviews. I was careful not to mention any names but she seemed to be really interested in knowing more about the project and I thought it was a good opportunity to tell her. Then yesterday my friend told me that he had been in a meeting with the Head of Department, who started saying that my project was out of control and was a threat to the Department and that it should be stopped immediately. He said she was really angry, but I don't understand it. She was very nice to me and hasn't said anything to me since. Now I am really worried.*

Adviser *I know you must be worried but this is not an uncommon problem. It sounds as though you have touched on some sensitive issues and your Head of Department is worried about what kind of report might emerge from the project and that it might create problems for her. Remember, that people in administrative roles are*

not used to being put in this kind of position. Often they want to be seen to be open to criticism, but when they realise how others might use the information they can get very nervous.

Researcher *But I am worried that she might blame everything on me!*

Adviser *The better your research, the more likely this is. If your Head of Department cannot find fault with the study itself she will attack the methodology, and if that does not work she will criticise the researcher – you! I know this is difficult but you have to try and distance yourself from the evidence. Try to make the project the responsibility of the department rather than ‘your’ project. If the Head of Department is critical of the study, try to make this an issue that you all have to address. You may well have to make compromises, but when you do try and establish that it is the department that is making the compromise and is clear about what it is doing. Try to avoid this becoming a difference of view between you and the Head of Department. You have nothing to gain by personalising the issues or by painting yourself as the victim.*

Researcher *I understand what you mean but it will not be easy. She seems to be very angry with me.*

Adviser *You will have to decide whether it is better to approach her directly and see if you can defuse some of this anger, or whether it is better to wait a while. Often, I have found that resolving these situations face-to-face works. People often find it difficult to sustain their anger face-to-face and conversation can help resolve the situation. But most of my experience is as an outside consultant. It is different for you.*

Managing fieldwork relationships

It is difficult to do qualitative research from the office, the library, or without direct and perhaps continuing contact with the people in your study, indeed many researchers would argue that the main feature of qualitative research is that it involves a direct relationship with those who are the subjects of, or participants in, the research.

This is generally seen as both a major problem, and as a significant advantage. It is a problem because, in developing relationships with people you inevitably become part of the project, even if only informally, and this can easily compromise your objectivity and even become a source of bias. It is an advantage because, without some level of contact with people, it is very easy to misrepresent them, to misjudge their motivations and misread their perceptions.

It follows that a central problem for qualitative research is that of establishing and maintaining objectivity. It also follows that objectivity cannot be entirely secured through procedures, since it has to be managed in relatively close interaction with people, and the closer the interaction, the more subtle and difficult this becomes. Doing qualitative research often puts you in situations in which you are thrown back on your own social and personal resources. Procedures can guide you but they don't always provide ready made answers.

This is true of all qualitative research, but becomes a particular issue in applied studies, because in most applied studies the focus of the research is generally on activities, ideas and beliefs that are immediately important to people. Often, when the researcher defines the problem, the subject of the study is of less central significance to those who are its subjects, who may even find the researcher's preoccupations bizarre, trivial or inconsequential. But in an applied study the researcher, and those who are subjects or participants, generally have a strong interest and perhaps a lot at stake, and any evidence that may undermine credibility or performance will be perceived by most people as a threat.

So how to deal with this problem? Although guidelines are never fully adequate, first you do need to ensure that before you begin you establish procedures to deal with these problems before they arise. This will not prevent problems of the kind we have just encountered arising, but it will provide you with some agreed ways of dealing with them when they do arise.

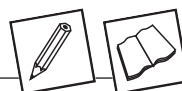
Principles and procedures

Evaluators and researchers often provide written principles and procedures as a safeguard against relationships breaking down. In some organisations this may be required, for example many universities, school systems and hospitals have ethics committees, whose role is to secure the protection of those, professionals and clients, who might be involved in research. Usually, an ethics committee will want to see guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity, to check that the research methods being used are not disruptive or inappropriate and that there are procedures for informing those who agree to take part that ensure that they are doing so fully informed and aware of their rights in relation to the study.

When you are negotiating ethics procedures think of them also as a way of protecting the research and the researchers by providing agreements about how to resolve difficulties should they occur.

These procedures have mostly evolved from health research and from the need to protect patients who may be subjected to experimental procedures (new treatments, for example). They may not lend themselves easily to qualitative research, where the procedures are less formalised and the outcomes less easily specified in advance.

One way that researchers have responded has been to establish principles of conduct rather than rely on procedures. The next activity looks at how you might develop some principles of procedure for your project.

Activity 1 2 hours**Principles and procedures**

This activity is based on the *Kemmis* and *Robottom* resource.

Kemmis and Robottom have neatly encapsulated and summarised the issues that need to be addressed in terms of the ethical procedures to be adopted in a qualitative evaluation. This is the standard text usually referred to in this area and frequently adapted for specific purposes. In some situations you will find that there are standard ethical consent forms that need to be completed. Sometimes universities or hospitals require these but generally this reading alerts you to the kinds of concerns you should consider. Most of these issues are equally appropriate to research studies, but some translation between evaluation and research might be needed.

Using the list as a starting point, develop a set of procedures that are appropriate to your study and draft a statement that you might use to inform people about the purpose of the study and their rights as contributors to it.

There is no feedback to this activity

Insider and outsider

A key issue in terms of objectivity concerns your own role and position in relation to the project or organisation you are studying. The major part of the published literature is concerned with 'outsider' studies, that is to say, studies in which the researcher is an outsider (often a university professor or professional consultant) who is commissioned to carry out the study and write a report. Being the outsider is very different from being an insider, someone within the organisation who is asked to do the study as part of their job, who may be employed by the organisation and often on a short-term contract.

The insider is often in the position of interviewing people who may be senior to them in the organisation and reporting to people who may be in a position to decide whether or not their contract will be continued. Objectivity in such circumstances is precarious and may be impossible to maintain. But there are advantages too in being inside. Certainly you can save a lot of time since some false trails are more obvious to someone who knows the organisation, a lot of the information you need is readily accessible and most people will know that they cannot bluff you with misleading information. Nevertheless, being the inside researcher is always a difficult role to maintain.

Having a set of procedures is vital. They will not always work and you will sometimes be accused to being too critical or too personal (or not critical or personal enough) but, even when the procedures seem not to work, they will provide a focus for discussion. Being able to discuss what others may see as errors on your part in terms of the procedures has the effect of deflecting some of the negative feelings they may have about you to the procedures

themselves. You may not want to enforce them as a contract but being able to say, 'this is what you agreed to' does at least objectify the discussion to a degree.

Summary

This has been a short unit but do not be deceived, the issues raised in the unit are likely to be significant in any research that you might do. Relationships with your subjects, colleagues and those who commission the research will always go up and down and you need to be prepared for things going wrong, misunderstandings arising and people being angry with you. It is always best to be honest, to apologise when you need to and to try to rebuild relationships, though you should always do so without compromising the research or blaming others. Protecting the integrity of the research study is never easy and is likely to be most threatened when the study itself is most incisive.

Analysis, presentation and communication



Unit overview

This unit is about your data and what you do with it.

Qualitative research produces lots of data, but in forms that are not easy to process or summarise. We look briefly at some of the methods that you can use to process your data.

Once you have processed your data, you will want to reach your conclusions and communicate them to others. 'Others' might just mean the organisation that commissioned your research, but it could also mean a wider public, whether lay or academic. We briefly look at how your style of writing will need to differ for each of these audiences.

Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit you should be better able to:

- ▶ decide how best to analyse your data
- ▶ decide how best to communicate what you have found, and to whom
- ▶ use an appropriate writing style for your chosen method(s) of communication.

Introduction

We shall start by listening in on the latest conversation between our researcher and the adviser. This time, the researcher is beginning to worry about what to do with all the data that is coming in.

Conversation



Processing and presenting qualitative data

Researcher *After those difficulties I had with the Head of Department, everything seemed to settle down (I think she got involved in something much more important!). I have now collected a lot of information, as you advised and now I want to know what should I do with the information?*

- Adviser *There are many ways you can approach the task of analysis, and, to some extent, which you method you choose to use will depend on your purpose. What I have found is that the methods that look easiest to use often turn out to be most difficult in practice! In particular, those methods that involve categorising data in advance of trying to analyse it tend to be very time consuming and in fact only delay the difficulties. You may need to categorise the data if you have a very large data set, but in most small scale projects you will not have the time or the resources to do this.*
- Researcher *All along I have been caught between thinking that I should not do any analysis until I have all the data collected, and then finding myself trying to analyse it as I go along. Is this a common problem?*
- Adviser *You have touched on an issue that divides qualitative researchers. Some like to keep data collection and analysis separate, arguing that this is the only way to keep their own bias at some remove from the process. Once they exit the field site they will then try to look at the data as a whole and to develop ways of trying to make sense of what they have.*
- Others though will argue that interpretation is unavoidable and that it is only by analysing evidence as they go that they are able to cross-check their emerging findings in situ. Indeed many argue that the main reason for field study is to validate interpretations and that data collection should be only a small part of the field task.*
- Researcher *So should I be thinking about going straight to analysis from the data?*
- Adviser *Everyone has to work out what works best for them in relation to the needs of the project.*
- Researcher *I think you are evading my question. Tell me what you do!*
- Adviser *I am one of those researchers who sees a major part of the field task as being about validation rather than data collection.*
- Researcher *Does that mean you have categories in mind from the start and you are categorising what you find as you are finding it?*
- Adviser *No, that is different. I try to resist the temptation to categorise and concentrate instead on identifying issues.*
- Researcher *Can you explain the difference between developing categories and identifying issues?*
- Adviser *What I find is that as I collect the data, issues arise from what people tell me and from my attempts to ask them good questions. For example, I try to build a list of the dilemmas that people at different levels in the program face. If I am looking at the issue of student dropout, for example, I would try to list the dilemmas that face students (and perhaps their colleagues and families), their tutors and the course team and to see how these dilemmas frame the issue of dropout. You will find that doing this will account for a large amount of the data you have collected and will help you compress it into a communicable form but this is not the same as setting up categories and sorting evidence into them.*
- Researcher *So, sometimes the dilemmas that arise might have little to do with the research topic?*
- Adviser *This can happen, but when it does it is often useful information. You might find, for instance, that what the course team see as the 'problem' of student dropout, might be seen very differently, and much more positively, by the students. Indeed they might not think of it as 'dropout', or use the word. They might talk instead of making 'positive moves' or 'discovering their interests'.*

- Researcher *Once I have a list of dilemmas or issues that have arisen while I collected the data, what do I do next?*
- Adviser *You should search through your data to look for the 'deviant cases'. Do you have any evidence that does not fit? If there seem to be patterns in the picture you have, what incidences and instances do not fit the pattern? Analysing deviant cases will open up your ability to interpret the project in new ways.*
- Finally, search for anecdotes and stories about the project from informants. Often you will find these reveal far more than they seem.*
- Researcher *Can you give me another example?*
- Adviser *Some years ago I was asked to evaluate a residential conference for head teachers from all the schools in a region. At the end of the three days one of the participants gave a short impromptu speech thanking the organisers, who were both senior officers in the department. At the end of his speech, he said, 'How lucky we are to have two such nice people as officers in this region!'*
- He had identified a deviant case! What he was saying, by implication, is that the headteachers expected the officers to be hostile and domineering, but that these two officers were an exception. This led me to develop an understanding of how people in linkage roles (in their case between the Education Department and the schools) have to develop the ability to move between different organisational sub-cultures and manage different sets of expectations.*
-

Analysis

One of the most commonly encountered dilemmas in doing qualitative research is realising that you have far more information than you can manage and not knowing quite what to do with it. Many inexperienced researchers spend a disproportionate amount of time collecting data in comparison to analysing it and presenting it. The temptation is always to think you can make a stronger case if you have a lot of data, but data and evidence are not quite the same. Sometimes you can establish a point with a few examples but how you reach this degree of condensation is often a problem. In measurement studies, a lot of the empirical detail can be condensed as frequencies and variations, but in qualitative studies, more often than not, you are left with boxes of discs and tapes and pages and pages of transcripts and notes.

There are software programs available which can help you conceptualise qualitative material, but they are usually not well adapted for use in small, short, one-person applied projects. They generally require extensive coding and quite lengthy periods of analysis so they don't really save any time. They may be useful in a large study, and especially one that is based in an academic discipline, but not for the kind of study we are concerned with here. So what solutions are there?

If you have your notes and transcripts available in computer files, there are quite simple things you can do as a first step in analysis. For example, in Word files you can search for strings of words or the occurrence of particular terms, you can develop an index and so get some idea of the frequency of

occurrence of particular terms, or you can search for quotes that refer to particular topics. In most cases this will probably be as much as you need.

Remember that the basic tool of analysis in qualitative research is the human brain. Basically you need to keep reading the material you have collected, listening to the tapes, thinking about what people say and trying to form some kind of pattern. This often appears when you least expect it. For me it is often when I stop thinking about the material that I start to see patterns in it. But of course it helps to spend time sorting or grouping material, trying to explain it to others, drawing diagrams, making card indexes or trying to reduce everything to one poster. But unless it is already in your memory this won't work.

Transcribing tapes is a good way to proceed but time-consuming. For example, in making close transcripts of group tutorial interaction over the telephone, five minutes of conversation can take an hour or more to transcribe if you want to identify and analyse key linguistic features, and even doing a rough transcription of an hour long interview can take several hours to do. Getting someone else to do the transcribing does not always help because it is in the process of transcribing that you learn most, since you have to listen to what was said word by word and write it down..

Listening to the tapes and writing down what was said makes you pay close attention to detail. The very process of transcription imposes a rhythm and a discipline that observing the live event doesn't. Then you may need to code the data in some way, for example, in examining the linguistic exchanges between tutor and students in tutorials, you may use a coding system, or you may simply want to classify contributions according to topic or theme.

Some sorting of the material may be helpful. Some people like to cut up transcripts and put quotes into boxes, others use cards or coloured pens. But however you approach the task you need good categories – usually no more than five or six otherwise the process gets unwieldy. Always keep one category for 'other', so that you have a place to put data that you suspect is relevant but you are not sure how or why but don't put anything in it without really being sure it doesn't fit anywhere else.

Whenever you can, try and build some categorisation into your data collection. For example, if you are studying people's perceptions of safety in public spaces, use maps to get people to say where they feel safe and where they feel at risk. In doing this you will often find that patterns emerge visually.

Presentation and communication

Project reports

Usually sponsors will want a document that they can consider in a committee and which they can circulate among their staff and perhaps clients. This requires an economical form presentation – succinct reporting of the data and a style of presentation that is more direct and authoritative and less

tentative and discursive than most academic writing. On the other hand, if your report looks too brief, people will suspect that you have not given them value for money. It is a dilemma you can't easily resolve. Give people a short report and they will ask for a long one. Give them a long one and they will often ask for it to be shorter.

Often researchers try to resolve the issue by providing a short 'executive summary' and a longer more complete report for those who want to see (or measure the length of) the full study. If you want to see examples, go to my personal web page at http://www.uea.ac.uk/care/people/RW_recent_writing/Recent_Writing.html and under *Recent writing* you will find two reports on a project called 'SIFKaL' (*Safer internet for knowing and living*). These research reports were written for the European Commission on the safety issues that arise when children and young people use the internet. One of our reports is to succinct summary, the other a collection of qualitative case studies presented in some detail.

Do not assume that writing a short report is easier than writing a long one. George Bernard Shaw, the playwright, is said to have written a letter in which he said that he apologised for writing a long letter, but did not have the time to write a short one. Writing a brief succinct summary that does not inflate the claims of the research is not easy and requires practice.

Be prepared to rewrite and re-edit the short report several times. It usually takes at least six or seven drafts to get it right.

Conferences and seminars

Often you will be asked to give oral reports. Normally these have to be even more brief and succinct than a written executive summary. In a 20-30 minute presentation you can normally only make three significant points. Try to avoid giving too much descriptive detail and focus on what you believe are the key issues. In the SIFKaL project, one of the key points I made in giving oral reports is that the notion of safety as it was understood by the program was rather different from the notion of safety as it was understood by most young people. (Most adults were worried by pornography, young people were more concerned about computer fraud and viruses.) Many of the assumptions that were made by educational projects were, I claimed, misplaced. This single point was significant but to make it stick I had to explain it several times, using different sources of data and illustrations.

With some audiences you can adopt a more interactive role. For example, in reporting data on deaths from drug abuse I have often presented a table that presents the different causes of death (e.g. heroin overdose, driving a car while drunk, deaths while under anaesthetics, tobacco-related deaths, etc) but without any figures, and then asked people to guess what they think the incidences in each cell might be. Often the estimates people make are very varied and presenting the actual figures becomes a source of discussion and debate. The point is not that some people get the right answers and others

do not, but to point up the fact that our perceptions of risk are mediated in all kinds of ways, but particularly through the media. You could make the same kind of point in relation to many contentious social issues – the incidence of crime, housing conditions, poverty, health and educational provision. Note that in doing this you may find yourself moving between quantitative and qualitative data. This is a good thing. The separations between them are in many ways arbitrary.

Journal publishing

Publishing in journals (especially academic journals) is an activity highly valued by academic institutions but often it seems, not by anyone else. You may have good reasons to publish in academic journals but you need to be aware that your readership is likely to be confined to academics. What they will want to know is how you carried out your study, what you found out and how your findings relate to current issues and debates in the field. The style of academic writing for journals is usually (but not always) rather terse, highly dependent on knowledge of a theoretical/technical literature and closely referenced to it.

If you want to publish in academic journals the best advice I can give is to identify those journals that publish in your area and study them carefully. Most journals arise from networks of researchers who share academic interests, and if you want to publish in them you need to show that you have something relevant to contribute to their field. So careful reading of the existing journals can help you locate where to place your work and save you a lot of time, effort and discouragement. If what you write is close to the interests of a journal, but they do not have room for it, or think it is better placed elsewhere, then the editors will normally help you by suggesting where you might send it. It is important not to waste people's time by submitting papers that clearly do not fit the interests, style and standard of a journal. Most journals are run on voluntary labour and people may get annoyed if they feel you are wasting their time!

The press and the media

Writing for the press and the media is a specialised skill and if at all possible find someone who knows your local media and who can help you. Perhaps if you work in a large organisation you have a media officer or press officer. Otherwise the best advice is:

Know the media source. If you are familiar with the newspaper or radio programme that a reporter or producer works for, then you can make some guesses about the slant they might put on your story. Remember, they are looking for a story line that will engage the attention of their audience, they are normally not interested in doing justice to your project or reporting your research in all its subtlety and complexity, though it might be in their interests to let you believe that this is their only motive.

Put the information first. If you are writing a press release put the most important information at the top, not the bottom. Academics normally leave the best information for the conclusion, or the last few paragraphs of the essay. Journalists will often use whole sections of a press release without editing it or changing it (the academic conventions about plagiarism do not apply here) but when they pass their piece to an editor or sub-editor this will invariably have to be cut to fit a space in the layout. (It is easier and quicker to cut than to write additional copy, so journalists are encouraged to over-write.) Routinely, sub-editors will cut from the bottom of the story. They will not edit the whole document or ask for a rewrite as this would take too long. If all your important points are at the end they will simply be cut and no-one but you will notice.

Keep paragraphs short. Most newspapers have paragraphs that are only two or three sentences long. Also, if your story is going to be edited (see 2 above) you will make the editors job easier if your paragraphs are short.

Keep sentences short. Most journalism is written in the form of sentences that are five to seven words long. Academics typically write sentences that are at least twice this length (check the length of any sentence on this page).

Thesis writing

Thesis writing requires you to present your research in a particular way and within sets of conventions (about referencing and use of sources, for example). These conventions, and the styles required have changed a great deal in education in past twenty years and they also vary a good deal from institution to institution. If you are engaged in writing a thesis the first thing you should do is to check what your university expects and what your supervisor recommends.

Study tip



Remember that writing, and the process of writing, is integral with research, not simply a medium for reporting it. Thinking about different ways in which you might write about your research is part of the research process and will help you both focus on the needs of audiences and help you think about the ideas you have and how you might present them.

Activity 1 2 hours



This activity is designed to give you some practice at different styles of writing. You can do the three parts around your proposed project or you can use any other project that you wish.

- 1 First, imagine that you are going to write a journal article about your project. Write an abstract for this article – say 200 words. (Remember, you are practising the style of an abstract, so you don't have to have all the detail precisely correct for this exercise.)
- 2 Now repeat the exercise, but this time write a press release. This should be no more than one side of A4 and should be written as suggested above in short sentences and short paragraphs with the important information first.
- 3 Finally, imagine that you were going to expand your project into a thesis. Write an abstract and an outline (i.e. chapter headings) for that thesis.

There is no feedback to this activity

Summary

In this unit we first discussed analysis. As you have seen, how you approach this and the methods that you use is, essentially, a personal choice. There is little standard methodology that has to be used.

In our second topic, presentation, there are accepted ways of reporting in different modes. Reporting to a committee requires its own style of writing, strongly focused on why they asked you to do the research in the first place. Report formats for other audiences, such as press releases, journal articles and theses all have their own conventions, which you need to adhere to.

Theory



Unit overview

This unit explores the role of theory in qualitative research.

Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit you should be better able to:

- ▶ explain how generalisation in qualitative research differs from that in quantitative research
- ▶ explain in what sense sampling is present in qualitative research
- ▶ discuss the relevance of the concepts of reliability and validity in relation to qualitative research.

The role of theory

You might wonder why theory comes so late in the unit. For many people who approach qualitative research critically or sceptically this is one of the first questions they ask. How can you generalise from single cases and on the basis of qualitative data?

I have left the issue to this point because part of my answer to the question is, that while it seems a natural question to ask, it is not a very helpful question to ask if you want to understand qualitative research. It is a question that starts from within the assumptions of another paradigm and so is in itself biased. It is better, I think, to suspend asking this question until you have some understanding of what qualitative research is and what it does.

Generalisation has a very specific meaning in the context of sampling theory. It concerns knowing the limits and the extent to which it is legitimate to apply the findings derived from the study of a sample to a wider population. But in case studies we cannot make claims of this kind with any degree of precision. All we can do is give readers access to our findings and ask that they test these findings against their own experience, and against other information they might have, some of which might be statistical.

The research task is a different task and aimed at different kinds of findings. And different forms of theory.

Conversation



Generalisation and meaning in applied, evaluative and action research

- Researcher *I gave a presentation of my study to the department last week and it seemed to go well, but during the discussion someone asked me about whether I could generalise from the study, given that the data were not scientific.*
- Consultant *This is a question that someone will always ask. One way of answering it is to explain that the intention of the study is not to generalise but to understand the project itself better. The aim is to improve the work of the department, not to tell others what they should do. And the study will almost always show that the program is distinctive and even unique, that the organisational model cannot be separated from the quality of the people involved and that the program cannot be separated from its history and context.*
- Researcher *But doesn't this imply that recognition of the significance of context is itself something that can be generalised?*
- Consultant *Exactly. That is an important insight, and if you can convey that to people you will have achieved something very important.*

Theoretical issues

Qualitative research is sometimes described as if it were merely a technical option, as though it could be substituted for measurement methods without changing the nature and character of the study. By now you should be starting to question this assumption. To do qualitative research is, in fact, to see the world differently.

Despite the tag 'hard data', most quantitative research is located in a realm of probabilities and conjectures. Statistical analysis is essentially concerned with estimating the gaps that exist between what has been measured and what can be assumed to be true. The question at the back of every quantitative researcher's mind is 'but what if we are wrong?' And the answer is usually in the form of the probability that they might be.

It follows that the kinds of theory that are most relevant to statistical studies is theory that looks for causal relations between social structures and suggests correlations between variables. This usually implies a world of 'social fact' which is animated by a view of society that is somewhat abstracted in terms of general social categories ('families', 'schools', 'religions') and the relations between them.

Qualitative researchers are more sure of their data. They know what they have seen and what they have been told. Their concern is to find the best way of getting the record straight and they tend to dismiss questions about the generalisability of their claims or the bias that stems from limited, and usually opportunistic, samples.

Qualitative researchers will also talk about social groups ('families' etc) but will do so with greater awareness of the variability within categories – with the

differences between families, for example. Furthermore, their interests in theory will often form around questions about the nature of these categories themselves. For example, if there is so much variation between families in terms of people's understanding of what a family is, then what meaning does the concept of 'family' have, and what social purpose does the category itself have?

Often, beginning researchers are tempted to suggest research designs that mix quantitative and qualitative methods, in an attempt to get the best of both approaches. Be wary of this approach. It might make sense to think of making a survey and following this with some detailed case studies, but as I have indicated, each approach leads in a different theoretical direction and unless your study is very localised and specific you might find yourself being pulled in two quite different directions.

Applied research, action research and evaluation

Within this field you may encounter discussion of the differences between different approaches. Some academics reject the idea of 'applied research in education', claiming that all research in education is by its nature 'applied', even if it might not be immediately obvious how and why this is so. Others dislike the label because it suggests another kind of educational research that is purely 'theoretical'.

Evaluators sometimes claim that the service role that they accept implies that they can claim that their studies are inherently 'useful'. Others see this as necessarily implying a loss of critical independence. Neither claim appears to hold in practice but this is, nevertheless, an area of discussion and debate.

A key tenet of action research is that you can only engage in action research on your own practice, not on someone else's. Thus you cannot go into a village, a school or an organisation and 'do' action research as an outsider; only those within can make this claim. This provides a point of distinction between evaluation and action research, though again, once engaged in a project the distinction is less clear than you might expect (quite who is a 'member' of what may be contentious, and often an outsider is needed to initiate the study or to act as 'critical friend').

Conversation



Samples, reliability and validity

Researcher *One of the problems I have encountered is about sampling. I have tried to explain to people that what I am doing involves case studies, but still they ask me questions about how representative the cases are, and how can they generalise from them.*

Consultant *You will always be asked these questions, and it is not easy to explain. The first thing you need to do is to take people back to the purpose of the study. Usually this will be to understand a particular program and to improve it. The fact that*

*your (and their) concern is with **particular** cases is important because statistical methods are limited in what they can usefully say about individual cases.*

Researcher *Can you explain this?*

Consultant *In quantitative studies the aim is usually to generalise from information that has been collected from sample cases to a wider population, and this necessarily means that the information that is collected is of a relatively limited kind. It might give you information about how variables are related, for instance, that success in the course is correlated with age, previous education or gender. Normally you will find that these correlations are relatively weak, so the claims you can make point to correlations that are partial, even when they processed into factors or indices. If you want to understand how these variables act in practice, then qualitative data can help. Perhaps age is a factor because it means that people have more time, or that others will support them while they study, or that the course materials are written in such a way that experience is an advantage? Case studies can help you understand how these factors might, or might not work.*

Generalising in quantitative studies

In quantitative studies you aim to have a relationship between the sample you study and the general population that allows you to be quite precise about the degree of uncertainty that exists when you generalise from one to the other. In qualitative studies you cannot be so sure. This is partly because the kind of information you will have is almost always less about single variables and more about connections, conjunctions and contexts.

Generalising in qualitative studies

Robert Stake claims that the kind of generalisation you can make from a case study is of a different kind – he talks about **naturalistic** generalisation. This can be seen as similar to the kind of generalisation we might make from reading a novel or watching a documentary film. There are some aspects of the account we recognise, and others we don't and we are able to treat these differently in our thinking about the case, however removed from our experience or however exotic the location. A close descriptive study of a group of distance students on a course will be both familiar and strange to readers who do not know the course or the program. There will be some aspects of the account that they will recognise as familiar, and some that remains opaque.

The conversation below continues this line of discussion:

Conversation



Researcher *So generalisation in qualitative studies is partly about giving the reader or user some familiar ground, and then leading them to areas that might be unfamiliar?*

Consultant *Yes. And sometimes it is about getting the reader to question what they take for granted about what is familiar. For instance, to consider a phenomenon they might think that they understand, like student failure, and account for it in ways that make it seem more problematic than they thought.*

Researcher *So that what you are sometimes doing is 'de-generalising'? Taking away a sense of certainty?*

Consultant *Yes. Case studies are sometimes very good ways of doing this.*

Sampling

The ideas discussed in the previous conversation are deceptively simple. Ideas about sampling that have been developed in statistical survey research, educational testing and in experimental methods are deeply ingrained in the research tradition, sometimes so deeply engrained that it is difficult to see that there may be other ways of thinking about research. To some eyes (including those of some experienced researchers and academics), case studies are not research. I do not wish to deny that the use of random sampling and the other assumptions of evidence based practice are not important considerations in research design, only to point out that sometimes they cannot be applied without distorting reality, for ethical reasons, or because the subjects under study do not lend themselves to this kind of design.

In practice we often deal with single cases (a particular programme, a student or a group of students, or a course team). Often, what we want to know about their work is specific to their context and any generalisations that might be available in the literature do not take adequate account of this context. The notion of sampling when the situation we are investigating is defined by its specific features become problematic. It is rarely possible to be able to claim, on the basis of research alone, that it is 'better' to use computer conferencing, telephone tutorials or correspondence texts (for example), the literature might provide some examples, but in the end the judgements that we have to make need to take account of context and circumstances.

Reliability

One of the criticisms sometimes made of case studies is that they lack 'reliability'. Used in this sense 'reliability' is a technical term which refers to the degree of confidence you can have that the study would provide the same results if it were to be repeated. There are different kinds of reliability, one being about the extent to which the study would be the same if it were replicated on another occasion by the same observers and another, if it were to be repeated by different observers. In making the criticism in relation to case study, people usually mean what researchers term 'inter-observer reliability', the extent to which the results depend on the observer and the degree to which using different observers would yield different results.

It is almost always the case that different observers see different things. Case study is essentially 'high inference', which is to say that the process of observation involves extensive interpretation, and interpretations will almost always be distinctive. Indeed, this is one of the things that makes case studies interesting. The interpretation that the observer brings to the study often uncovers a perspective that we may have overlooked or neglected.

This leads to the idea that the best way to respond to the issue of reliability is to try and build in to the study an element of 'triangulation'. Where possible, you should not rely on a single source or point of information, but attempt to draw on several. If your study is interview based, it is a good idea to also look for relevant sources of documentary evidence. If you have run a small survey, then do some interviews or make some observations to see if these bear out what the survey tells you

Validity

Validity refers to the degree to which the evidence you have measures what it is you are seeking to investigate. In some studies it is possible to collect findings that are derived from good samples, appear free from bias and suggest identifiable trends, but do not actually relate to the issues under investigation. This is more of a problem in measurement studies because there is a strong tendency to measure what is most easily or cleanly measured and to worry less about the validity of the measures.

Measurement specialists tend to be sceptical about what they call 'face validity', by which they mean the degree to which a measure 'seems' to be a valid indicator of the phenomenon being measured. (Think, for example, of whether IQ has 'face validity' as a measure of intelligence.) But in qualitative research, 'face validity' is taken more seriously and a large part of the investigation is usually taken up with probing and testing the extent to which the data collected provide the basis for valid interpretation. If one person tells you something, your impulse is to seek to verify this independently from other sources. 'Remember everything people tell you.' I was once advised, 'but believe none of it, until the wealth of evidence makes it difficult to deny that it is true'. In this sense, the pursuit of valid evidence in qualitative social research is a little like being inside a detective novel.

Summary

The notion of 'case study' is central to qualitative research since it raises some of the key issues of method, including sampling, reliability and validity. Qualitative research responds to these issues in different ways. Some sociologists, for instance would take a positivist view, giving quasi-measurement solutions to the problem (the often quoted approach of 'grounded theory' has many of these characteristics). Others, see qualitative methods as more distinctive and approach the issues in a quite different way (many who approach research from a historical perspective, for instance). In this unit I

have briefly summarised the idea of 'case study', which is usually seen as being at a mid-point in terms of these issues. There is a lot more to be said about case study, but this unit provides a starting point.

Module summary

'Qualitative research' is a term that covers a realm of possibilities. In part this is because it draws on numerous disciplines. There is, for instance, a set of ideas that can be drawn from social anthropology (ethnography), a similar but distinctive set of ideas from sociology, and another from social psychology. As qualitative methods have developed with educational research in the past thirty years or so, further sources of method have been exploited and appropriated. There are long standing traditions of research in history and in child development and more recent ideas in linguistics (particularly discourse analysis), in oral history (life history and life narrative) and in literature and the arts (post-modern approaches). Feminist and post-structural thinking provides yet a further tradition within which to rethink all these approaches.

This complexity makes it very difficult to provide a simple account of 'qualitative methods'. What might be routine and unproblematic to an empirically minded sociologist might be highly contentious in the reading of a post-structural feminist. Indeed, some empirical accounts (especially research degree theses) are often take up as much space for detailed discussions of method as they do in reporting evidence and interpretation.

In this module I have not entered these theoretical debates (at least explicitly), but as you read into the field you will quickly encounter them. I have tried to provide a practical starting point for those who want to begin using qualitative methods but I am aware that this is an approach that carries with it its own dangers and might be accused by some critics as naively empiricist. You should be warned that to enter this field is to enter an academic minefield. But there is one over-riding good reason for encouraging you to do so. Doing qualitative research (and especially, in my experience, to write case studies), is the best way I know to learn. Interviewing and observing leads you into direct contact with people and with their ideas and actions. You get to know what their values are, what their educational aims are and often too their ambitions. You get to see organisations exerting power and influence and you get to learn what motivates people and excites them about their work. This is a privilege and you owe them the respect of doing your best to understand and report as accurately, honestly and fairly as you can.

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